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# ACTING IN AN ANTIFOUNDATIONAL WORLD: CONVERSATION, POETIC REDESCRIPTION, AND SOLIDARITY

Hem Paudel

Clemson University, hemsharmap@gmail.com

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ACTING IN AN ANTIFOUNDATIONAL WORLD:  
CONVERSATION, POETIC REDESCRIPTION, AND SOLIDARITY

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
Professional Communication

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by  
Hem Sharma Paudel  
May 2010

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Martin J. Jacobi, Committee Chair  
Dr. Susan Hilligoss  
Dr. Huiling Ding

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a central question that human beings face in an antifoundational world: If discourse communities create not only vocabularies but competing ways of seeing, how might we in general and professional communicators in particular act in a reasonable way? It suggests answers to this question by discussing Rorty's theory of language and truth. Rorty sets aside the foundationalist notion of metaphysical certainty with consensus beliefs achieved through conversation, which determines the utility of those beliefs to the community. Thus, Rorty changes the focus from what is right to what is helpful and changes the focus from what can be "proven" to what "works." In case conversation becomes less useful, in Rorty's scheme, poetic redescription can offer new alternatives (vocabularies) to solve the problems that the existing vocabulary fails to overcome. The validity of the new vocabularies lies not in their correspondence to reality, but in their utility to point us towards reducing human suffering and immiseration, thereby building human solidarity. Hence, the use of Rorty provides a useful way of responding to the choices we confront in our lives and jobs because his emphasis on utility when considering differing "perceptions" and his emphasis on conversation, poetic redescription, and solidarity provides means of understanding and operating in the world. If the triad of conversation, poetic redescription, and solidarity can help us in general navigate the postmodern world, then this triad should also be able to help us as professional communication professionals. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of Rorty's ideas for professional communication theory and practice.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother. She is an epitome of selfless love and unflinching determination.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I cannot claim the authorship of this thesis without acknowledging the invaluable guidance and support from Dr. Martin Jacobi. It is a product of my conversation with and an inspiration from him. He not only provided me insightful feedback and thoughtful critique, but also helped me refine my writing skills. I don't have any words to express my gratitude to him for his scholarly guidance and warm guardianship. This thesis could not have been written without him. Thank you, Dr. Jacobi.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The debate about foundationalism and antifoundationalism, even if these terms have not always been used, began with the debate between Plato and the Sophists. After Plato, foundationalism became so influential that the Sophists were almost completely neglected; in our time, however, Richard Rorty has taken up this debate and sides with the Sophists. The purpose of this thesis is to situate Rorty in the debate and to show how his antifoundationalist theory of language and truth can be useful in matters of “knowing” what is good and bad and determining how to act in the world where traditional foundations have almost crumbled. In general, Rorty has been studied with reference to or as a severe critic of analytical philosophers; I will contextualize his theory by linking him to the Sophistic tradition and also by contrasting his theory with Platonism. I will further discuss how modern foundationalists, including foundational Leftists, interpret Rorty as ineffective because of his rejection of any secure foundations. I will instead show how Rorty’s antifoundationalism overcomes the problems of radical subjectivism or relativism by focusing on three contingent tools for action: conversation, poetic redescription, and solidarity—none of which have metaphysical ground but all of which have utility for human happiness and freedom.

It is useful to offer brief functional definitions<sup>1</sup> of the terms I will be using repeatedly in this thesis: “foundationalism,” “antifoundationalism,” “conversation,”

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<sup>1</sup> These definitions are not intended to offer the essence about any concept or terminologies, an attempt which goes against the pragmatist tendency of avoiding questions about definition, like what is pain? or



“poetic redescription,” and “solidarity.” The two terms foundationalism and antifoundationalism will be further discussed in terms of classical rhetorical theories in Chapter Two and modern pragmatic theory in Chapter Three and Chapter Four. I will take up other three terms in Chapter Four where I will discuss how Rorty suggest we can act in an antifoundational world.

In this thesis, foundationalism will be used as a tendency to validate truth claims in terms of any absolute standards. It refers to both the ontological belief that certain absolute ideas or forms exist and the epistemological form that assumes the possibility of knowing such absolute ideas or truths through some fixed methods or foundations. As Patricia Bizzell says, foundationalism is a belief that “an absolute standard for the judgment of truth can be found, and that employment of this standard in evaluating knowledge enables the individual mind to transcend personal emotions, social circumstances, and larger historical conditions and to reflect critically on them” (39). This tendency of invoking absolute standards goes back at least to Plato in his notion of immutable forms or ideas and continues through the rationalist-empiricist tradition in modern times where either the senses or reason is taken as the surest ways to knowledge of objective truth. So, it is also used synonymously with Platonism as and representationalism. It can take different forms like belief in universal reason, essential human nature, transcendental ideas, and divine authority. Whatever the form it takes, the basic understanding is that there is an absolute standard for the judgment of truth and

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What do we mean by injustice? When we offer definitions, these are always provisional and functional for the purpose of making the discussion clear.

certain absolute foundation(s) upon which we can build our system of knowledge and theories of ethics.

Anti-foundationalism, as is explicitly suggested by its name, is the rejection of all beliefs in the certainty and the possibility of knowing absolute or objective reality. It also subverts the representationalist belief that the human mind or that language is capable of mirroring reality. This antirepresentationalism paves a path for antifoundationalists to set aside the idea of “discovering” preexisting truth and to propose the notion that truth is a human invention in that the language we use is our invention, not the language that the world or reality speaks. These antifoundationalists also believe that we are bound by many contingent factors, such as historical and cultural contexts. So, what we believe to be true is always contingent or contextual, including our belief in the contingency of language and truth. So, as Jon Levison says, antifoundationalism is “consciously abandoning the pretense of philosophy to discover a secure basis, from which we might construct an independent, absolute, objective criterion for truth” (48).

Richard Rorty’s antifoundationalist notion is that what we believe to be true is the upshot of the conversation among the members of a language game or discourse community. I will be using the term “conversation” to refer to Rorty’s notion that interaction among human beings determines what is true. Rorty believes that in the absence of any basis for the certainty of knowledge or truth, we need to depend on inter-subjective agreement to justify what is true. So, Rorty would not differentiate between “truth” and “justified belief” since truth itself is justified not by its connection to non-human reality, but by its utility to human beings. This idea of “conversation” is similar to

Habermas's notion of "communicative rationality," the form of reason that is socially constructed. However, I'll distinguish Habermas's "communicative rationality" from Rorty's conversation in terms of the possibility of establishing universal validity in Habermas and its rejection in Rorty. Rorty's notion of conversation is based on rational argumentation or what we normally call logos. But this logos is not a universal principle, but rather a contextual logic. In Chapter Four I will discuss its role as a basis for human action.

In addition to conversation, Rorty highlights the importance of poetic appeal in the act of communication. Rorty thinks that rational argumentation should not be kept separated from imaginative vision but that they complement each other. Rorty uses terms like "new vocabulary," "imaginative redescription," and "poetic redescription" synonymously. In this thesis I will primarily use the term poetic redescription to refer to what Rorty means by it. As Rorty is an ironist, one who is "a nominalist and a historicist," every new vocabulary that replaces the old ones is a poetic redescription (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (74).<sup>2</sup> Strong poets are important because when they think that the old vocabularies do not work, they offer redescriptions that show some weaknesses of the old vocabularies and offer solutions. The strong poets' redescriptions are "dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present. She [the strong poet] thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria" (*CIS* 77). So, poetic redescriptions offer

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<sup>2</sup> I will be using *CIS* for this book hereafter.

new perspectives on reality or the world around us, and, insofar as they are successful, they offer perspectives that are accepted. Here the focus is on innovative ideas and invention. For Rorty, the purpose of such poetic re-descriptions is to expose injustices and the sufferings of human beings and to offer a picture of a world that can avoid the problems faced by us in the present; in other words, the purpose is to create solidarity among people by reducing pain and suffering and inspiring hope for the better future. So, poetic re-descriptions are used to instill hope in people to act for betterment.

The third ground that Rorty offers for acting is “solidarity.” Rorty’s notion of solidarity has its basis in his rejection of “objectivity” and his conviction to “liberalism.” For liberals, “cruelty is the worst thing they do” (*CIS* 74). When one believes in the possibility of understanding objective reality or universally right or wrong things, the criteria for responsible and ethical actions become “objective” and “universal” standards. But as Rorty discards the notions of objectivity and universal validity, his basis for responsible and ethical behaviors and actions becomes the reduction of “cruelty” and the expansion of human “solidarity.” Unlike in Platonic and Cartesian schemes where solidarity is achieved through universal rationality, in the pragmatic scheme solidarity is achieved through imaginative identification:

In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away “prejudice” or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but

created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of the other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, “They do not feel it as *we* would,” or “There must always be suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?” (*CIS* xiv)

Solidarity is something that is based on a belief that people can feel pain even if we cannot define with certainty what “pain” is. So, solidarity is a harmonious relationship among people, not only those who believe and act like us, but also those whom we call “others.”

The second task of this introduction is to offer a brief review of the literature on Rorty’s theory of language and truth, which will begin the task I take up in the thesis, to situate Rorty in the intellectual traditions of the West and to show the usefulness of his ideas.

Some foundationalist philosophers like Simon Blackburn, Bernard Williams, Michael Lynch, and George Bragues carry some residue of Platonism in their belief that some absolute truths exist and that we should try to discover those truths. They challenge Rorty’s rejection of the correspondence theory of language. Though they do not make explicit absolutist claims that objective and universal truths are completely accessible through rational or any other kind of investigation, they still do not discard the idea. In

making a claim that we can discover some kind of objective reality (minimally objective or partially objective<sup>3</sup>), they turn foundationalist.

Blackburn thinks that the Sophistic notion of “relativism” or Rorty’s notion of the “contingency of truth” would lead to nihilism and complete relativism because of the absence of any objective criteria. He uses map making to talk about standards determining whether representations are true or not. He says that the “landscape dictates” something about the map that “can be correct or incorrect” in terms of a given “set of conventions” (157). And Blackburn contends that some maps can be truer than others in terms of how accurate they are in representing the landscape, “the things . . . [that] give them [words] their truth” (170). He further says that Rorty’s notion of irony is unnecessary:

“Irony, in Rorty’s teaching, is supposed to follow on the realization that your vocabulary is always provisional, that better ways of saying things—more useful ways, at least to our descendents—might come along one day. But why on earth should this beget irony? Unless you are the victim of an *après-truth* cartographer, you do very well to take the map seriously when it says there are cliffs, even if you foresee future maps that do not bother about them. The hill-walker who finds this thought destabilizing, and takes an ironic detachment towards his map, is likely to do worse. (167)

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<sup>3</sup> While discussing the difference between justified belief and true belief, Michael Lynch says, “All it [a belief] requires is the minimum objectivity that comes along with any account worth calling an account of ‘truth’: namely, that a belief is true when things are as that belief says they are, and not because, say, nine out of ten people recommend it” (173-74). But what we can say is that the things *look* as “that belief says,” not that the things *are* as that belief says. We cannot be sure about the objectivity of that belief; we can only say whether that belief is supported with certain contingent “facts.” To know that whether something is partially objective, we should know the completely true belief beforehand.

One serious mistake Blackburn is making here is confusing truth with reality, confusing statements about reality with reality itself. Blackburn is saying that if one can reach Atlanta, Georgia, from Greenville, South Carolina, by means of a highway map, the highway map accurately or truly represents the way between Greenville and Atlanta. Rorty does not deny that the map is useful to reach Atlanta. But he would say that the map just works at a certain time in history but does not represent the way between Greenville and Atlanta as it is. And being ironic does not mean denying that Greenville or Atlanta or anything in between them exists; it means being aware that whatever map we use to “describe” the landscape may sometimes become less useful than other ones available. However, the ones which are more useful are not truer than the one being used. So, Rorty would say that it’s not a profitable topic to talk about representation. The landscape and the description of it are not the same thing.

In other words, what Rorty would say about Blackburn’s idea of map is that this “set of conventions” are locally determined and that certain conventions are used in place of others because they are more useful. So, Rorty refuses to agree with Blackburn that maps represent the landscape and at the same time refuses the charge of relativism because we do not have ‘objective’ standards to determine how true one vocabulary is in comparison to other vocabularies.

Michael Lynch’s position is similar to that of Blackburn. As Blackburn says that merely agreeing that a map is true does not mean that it is true, Lynch says that there is a difference between true beliefs and justified beliefs. Lynch contends: “In short, the conclusion of Rorty’s argument doesn’t follow from the premises. Even if there is no

direct practical difference between aiming at truth and aiming at justification, it doesn't follow from this fact alone that there is no difference at all. Having truth as a goal of inquiry is what explains why we bother to justify our beliefs in the first place" (73). Lynch has misinterpreted Rorty, in that Rorty does not claim that there is no difference between "justified belief" and "true belief." What Rorty would say is that we cannot know for sure whether a belief is *true* or not. The justified belief may be or may not be true. So, Rorty's point is that since we cannot know whether some belief is objectively true, it's not useful for us to argue whether something is true or not and whether justified belief is true or not. Whatever we call true is not *true* because we have captured what it is in itself, but because it seems true to us due to some warrants. So, it's not useful to make any such distinction in terms of being *true* and being *justified*.

Habermas is another figure who does not discard Platonism despite, like Rorty, rejecting subject-centered reason<sup>4</sup> and being liberal. Habermas agrees with Rorty that reason is a social construct, that what we believe to be reasonable depends on what cultural and historical warrants we have. Habermas replaces subject-centered reason with communicative rationality or domination-free communication. And his notion of domination-free communication is similar to Rorty's notion of conversation. But Habermas believes that domination-free communication can transcend social and cultural boundaries and establish universal ground for action: "The transcendent moment of *universal* validity bursts every provinciality asunder" (Habermas, "Alternative Way")

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<sup>4</sup> By subject-centered reason, Habermas means the inbuilt ability in the human mind that can determine what is right and what is wrong. It is a universal principle, as believed by Plato and Descartes. See Habermas's "Alternative Way."



585). Rorty believes that such communication is not possible because of the lack of any common criteria among people of different vocabularies to determine the nature of justice and truth. So, Rorty offers poetry as a means to encourage us to consider an eloquently stated alternative. And conversation then “validates” this alternative and produces solidarity. Here, Habermas disagrees with Rorty; he says that we do not need poetic appeal, because it may lead to Fascism. Rorty’s idea is that belief in poetry is not belief in a single transcendental truth but trust in the plurality of beliefs, and those who believe in poetry do not believe a single poet as true and the others as false, as do the metaphysicians or the fundamentalist followers of religion. I will take up this debate in Chapter Four.

There are some Leftist critics who find Rorty’s pragmatism problematic. For instance, Lynn Baker believes that Rorty’s antifoundationalism makes his pragmatism ineffective. Baker believes that a Leftist idea of social change is not possible without some secure foundations. Because of the lack of any such secure foundation, Baker contends, Rorty’s emphasis on prophetic vision (poetic vision) becomes useless:

Indeed, an anti-foundationalist conception of social change as evolution may dilute both the prophet’s belief in her own vision and her motivation to effect social change. It is one thing to believe, as a prophet by definition does, that the status quo is neither necessary nor the best possible state of affairs; but it is quite another to believe that the better world one envisions and would work towards achieving is also a contingency, a mere resting point in a larger evolution. (Baker 714)

Baker's point is that one can inspire people and make them act towards achieving one's vision when he/she has some metaphysical ground, something he/she can claim to be true and just in itself. And in the absence of any such metaphysical ground, an anti-foundationalist prophet cannot inspire people for social change. The way an antifoundationalist prophet will also be effective is that she presents something that seems to be metaphysically grounded, or that leads us to consider that it must be so; once we are all "on board," we can then use the boring, uninspiring, pragmatic "conversation" to determine whether this vision is worth keeping.

Cornell West also raises a similar point about Rorty's pragmatism. Even if Michel Foucault does not directly respond to Rorty, West's critique of Rorty resembles the Foucauldian notion of discourse analysis. Here, West appreciates Rorty for exposing the problems of foundationalist discourses. But, for West, Rorty fails to contribute to the politics of the oppressed by not relating those foundationalist discourses to the politics of power:

Neopragmatism only kicks the philosophic props from under liberal bourgeois capitalist societies; it requires no change in our cultural and political practices. What then are the ethical and political consequences of his neopragmatism? .... To undermine the privileged philosophic notions of necessity, universality, rationality, objectivity, and transcendentalism without acknowledging and accenting the oppressive deeds done under the ideological aegis of these notions is to write an intellectual and homogeneous history, a history which fervently attacks epistemological

privilege but remains relatively silent about forms of political, economic, racial, and sexual privilege. (West 206-208)

West believes that even if Rorty speaks for historicizing, it is very immaterial. Rorty, according to West, fails to reveal the underlying realities of oppression. In denying the responsibility of unraveling the structures of power and of grounding his theory of social change in the notion of different forms of oppression, Rorty's pragmatism lacks any concrete ground for social action. However, Rorty believes that we do not need to define what is "oppression" or what are the "structures of power" to end injustices and oppressions. We can inspire people with a hope in a better future by offering them a vision of the world that can be achieved if we act towards that vision.

This brief review of literature shows that there are some issues around which both the foundationalists (Platonists) and the Leftists raise several questions, with the major issue being the possibility of acting in a responsible and reasonable way. In other words, these critics question how Rorty's antifoundationalism can offer any grounds for knowing what is good and what is bad and for acting for the good of the society.

So, the research questions I will concentrate on in this thesis are these: If we follow anti-representationalism/anti-foundationalism/social construction and if discourse communities create not only vocabularies but competing ways of seeing, then how might we as human beings in general and professional communicators in particular best act in such a world? That is, when Aristotle says that sophistry is determined not by ability but by intentions and goals, and when we assume that an academic degree in professional

communication will develop our ability, then what might we need to know about “correct intentions and goals”?

These research questions are significant because in programs like Clemson’s MAPC, anti-foundationalism and social construction are “givens.” What is not given, though, is *how* we know and *how* we should act. Also, Aristotle says that “sophistry is not a matter of ability but of deliberate choice [of specious arguments]” Kennedy 35). If programs like the MAPC provide the “ability,” I want to explore how Rorty can help with the “deliberate choice” of what is “good” and “bad.” How *should* MAPC students/professional communicators learn to employ the knowledge and skills they acquire so that their skills won’t be, as Plato thinks, knives in the hands of “madmen”? (*Theaetetus* 201)

Rorty provides a pragmatic method for acting, a method of use generally and for professional communicators particularly. Rorty changes the focus from what is right to what is helpful; he changes the focus from what can be “proven” to what “works”; he changes the emphasis from *logos* to *pathos*. Hence, Rorty offers us a very useful method by which we can live and act in the world. In other words, the use of Rorty provides a useful way of responding to the choices we confront in our lives and jobs because his emphasis on utility when considering differing “perceptions” and his emphasis on strong poets provides means of understanding and operating in the world.

In discussing how Rorty offers useful ways to operate in the world, I will contextualize his theory of language and truth in the debate between foundationalism and antifoundationalism since the classical period. Chapter Two will lay out the nature and

differences between foundationalism and antifoundationalism, and in it I will discuss these two tendencies in terms of the theories of Plato and the Sophists. The main reason behind discussing Plato and the Sophists is to situate the modern foundational/antifoundational debate and demonstrate how modern foundationalist theories of philosophers like Blackburn and Habermas and the antifoundationalism of Rorty are connected to the classical debate. This discussion prepares the ground for asking two research questions: In an anti-representational world, how can we know, and how should we act?

Chapter Three will discuss how Rorty subverts the foundationalist epistemological tradition based on the idea of human mind and human language as mirrors of reality. In other words, Rorty rejects the correspondence theory of language and offers an anti-foundationalist way of knowing based on conversation. After discussing Rorty's theory, this chapter will discuss how foundationalists and Leftists (Radical and Spectatorial) respond to it and how Rorty would defend his position. The focus will be on showing how Rorty's position is theoretically sound and practically useful. Rorty's way of "knowing" shifts the discussion from Right to Helpful and from Proof to Utility, to make it a way of acting. As he says to Olson<sup>5</sup>, he is less interested in theory than in the theory's application, a point that William James<sup>6</sup> makes as well.

Chapter Four deals with Rorty's way of acting based on his way of knowing discussed in the previous chapter. The three contingent grounds Rorty offers for acting

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<sup>5</sup> See Gary Olson's "Social Construction and Composition Theory: A Conversation with Richard Rorty."

<sup>6</sup> See William James's "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" in his book *Pragmatism: A New name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*.

are “conversation,” “poetic redescription,” and “solidarity.” The basis for offering these three grounds is not their metaphysical validity but their utility. This chapter will also show how Rorty’s ideas of “utility” and “hope” are more valuable than the “abstract theorization” of the “Spectatorial Left” and how his focus on “campaigns” in place of the Radical Left’s focus on “movement” offer more practical ways for social change. I will also relate Rorty to Kenneth Burke while discussing the ways to avoid “mere relativism.”

The final chapter, Chapter Five, will offer some suggestions for how Rorty’s ideas could be useful to the field of professional communication. These ideas can have significant implications to both the theories and practices of professional communication. Rorty’s notions of conversation (negotiation), poetic invention, and solidarity will be important tools for professional communicators for taking actions in different rhetorical situations.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SOPHISTS AND PLATO:

#### A CLASSICAL DEBATE AROUND FOUNDATIONALISM

This chapter lays out a functional distinction between foundationalism and antifoundationalism and gives an account of Platonic foundationalism and Sophistic antifoundationalism. The concept of foundationalism/antifoundationalism was first discussed by Richard Rorty in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* while offering his criticism of analytic philosophy. He argues that the whole western tradition up to the rise of analytic philosophy has sought to establish notions of truth and reality in terms of some epistemological foundations. He primarily focuses on the legacy of the seventeenth century empiricism of Locke and Hume, the rationalism of Descartes, and the synthesis of these two tendencies in Kant. Philosophers like Locke and Descartes believe that there are certain epistemological grounds from which objective truths can be achieved. Empiricists like Locke believe that senses provide such ground for the possibility of understanding objective truth. Descartes believes that *cogito* is the basis for certainty of knowledge. His dictum that “I think therefore I am” has influenced the whole enlightenment tradition of the West. Rockmore says: “Although the term ‘foundationalism’ does not occur, Descartes’s view is widely regarded as the paradigm of foundationalism, which, in his thought, takes the form of the rigorous deduction of an entire theory from an initial principle known to be true, more precisely in his position

from the *cogito* that cannot be doubted.<sup>7</sup> A similar tendency also appears in Kant's synthesis of empiricism and rationalism, i.e., in his belief in the possibility of acquiring universal knowledge on the basis of sensory perception and its processing by pre-existing mental categories (echoing Aristotle). This tendency of taking what reason dictates or what senses perceive as universal truth is what Rorty calls foundational.

After Rorty's use, the term foundationalism has received different meanings. In general, "we will understand 'foundationalism' to mean the assumption that 'there are secure foundations, that is a firm, unshakable basis, on which to erect any edifice of knowledge'" (Rockmore 6). Here, knowledge is built like a structure on a strong base or foundation. This base can be anything, as I have mentioned before, like reason, senses, intuition, or the command of the gods. In other words, the foundationalists often have a "theory of knowledge" or epistemology, which claims the possibility of acquiring knowledge of unmediated, objective truth through some method. Similarly, the foundationalists have a firm belief in the existence of objective and universal truths and these immutable truths are made standards to judge the truth value of human representations. And foundationalism has taken different forms, from Platonic idealism to scientific objectivism.

Rorty counters such positions by developing a theory of the contingency of truth and knowledge, which he calls antifoundationalism. He rejects foundationalist claims of "certain truths" and stable "foundations." He also rejects "representationalist" claims that

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<sup>7</sup> I will discuss Rorty's position in a greater detail in the next chapter where the primary focus will be to show Rorty's anti-foundationalism with reference to foundationalist positions and leftist criticisms of Rorty.



there is a direct correspondence between the human mind and the natural world outside the human mind. So, in Rorty, antifoundationalism also takes a form of “anti-representationalism.”<sup>8</sup> After Rorty used the term “antifoundationalism,” many others have discussed it and now it has become a catch phrase to refer to almost all postmodern theories and stand points.

As Rorty’s use of the term antifoundationalism suggests, it can be characterized as “any effort to validate knowledge claims without appealing to an absolute or ultimate basis known with certainty, whether the latter is held to be unattainable or the model of knowledge as a unified structure resting on a foundation of certainty is rejected in principle” (Rockmore 8). It rejects any belief on secure foundations for acquiring knowledge. Similarly, these philosophers, in general, neither claim that absolute truth exists, nor do they claim the opposite, that they do not. Their point is that such absolutes are not accessible to humans even if they exist.

The foundationalism/antifoundationalism debate is not new. Both the tendencies have been around for a long time, since the beginning of philosophical investigations. What Roderick Chisholm says is very apt here: “Most of the problems and issues of the ‘theory of knowledge’ were discussed in detail by Plato and Aristotle and by the Greek skeptics. There is some justification, I am afraid, for saying that the subject has made very little progress in the past two thousand years” (qtd. in Polansky 41). Therefore, it will be appropriate to see the contribution made by ancient philosophers in the debate

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<sup>8</sup> I will discuss Rorty’s position in a greater detail in the next chapter where the primary focus will be to show Rorty’s anti-foundationalism with reference to foundationalist positions and leftist criticisms of Rorty.

about foundationalism. I believe the modern form of antifoundationalism and its consequences can be understood well if we can situate it in the history of the debate from its earliest times. This approach makes it easier to see how these tendencies have developed over time. Similarly, when Rorty discusses foundationalism, he often uses the term “Platonism” as its earliest version. He also traces the roots of antifoundationalism to Sophistic rhetoric. Therefore, I now want to discuss Plato and the Sophists in terms of foundationalism and antifoundationalism. This will lead me to situate Rorty in the debate that began with the master philosophers.

My interest here is not to try to prove the Sophists as flat relativists advocating radical subjectivism and Plato as an arch-foundationalist preaching a secular religion of the absolutes. Instead, I will discuss the Sophistic rhetoric as it relates to antifoundationalism and how it has been interpreted variously. Similarly, my discussion of Plato will present complexities and nuances in Platonic texts in general. I will then primarily focus on common perceptions of Platonic theory, which Rorty calls “Platonism” or the “Platonic Principle.” This Platonism is what makes Plato a foundationalist philosopher. And this Platonic tendency, the tendency of seeking truth or authority in some extra-human world or power, continues in the Western metaphysical tradition even today.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Sophists and Antifoundationalism**

Any claim that characterizes the Sophists as antifoundationalist assumes that there are certain similarities in the ideas developed by different Sophists. There has been a

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<sup>9</sup> I will discuss the modern variations in Simon Blackburn, Michael Lynch, Bernard Williams, and Jurgan Habermas in the next chapter.

debate in recent times about whether we can have a general definition of Sophistic rhetoric or not. It basically surfaces in the debate between neo-Sophists like Poulakos and Schiappa. Though they charge each other with being foundationalist in certain senses, both of them share an outlook that we can call antifoundationalist. The debate begins with Poulakos's formulation of the Sophistic definition on the basis of the fragments available from the Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias. He defines Sophistic rhetoric as "the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible. Very briefly, this definition intimates that rhetoric is an artistic undertaking which concerns itself with the how, the when, and the what of expression and understands the why of purpose" (36). According to Poulakos, unlike the Aristotelian definition, which focuses on the actual, Sophistic rhetoric emphasizes the possible. The reason why it does so is that the present, at that time, was the moment of suffering and chaos and the people of Athens were seeking to establish a world free of these problems, which is "the possible." Schiappa's concern here is not on what the definition says and whether he agrees with the components of Sophistic rhetoric that Poulakos talks about; rather, he criticizes the *tendency* to reduce heterogeneity to homogeneity. Schiappa says, "I want to make the case that "Sophistic rhetoric" is, for the most part, a mirage—something we see because we want and need to see it—which vaporizes once carefully scrutinized. My position is that we are unlikely to come up with a historically defensible definition of "Sophistic rhetoric" that is nontrivial and uniquely valuable" (Schiappa, "Sophistic Rhetoric" 5). Schiappa does not find any significant commonalities in different Sophists. However, Poulakos's point is, instead, to develop a

functional definition to counter the marginalization of Sophistic rhetoric by the Aristotelian systematization of rhetoric. Poulakos develops a functional and provisional definition of Sophistic rhetoric to demonstrate the fact that it was not merely a knack or a stylistic extravaganza. It's a question of how much generalization/specialization we need or we can make. In the following discussion, Poulakos's position is relevant because the Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias share some qualities that can be called antifoundationalist. The following quote from Poulakos identifies some common features:

With a few exceptions, the Sophists conceived of man's relation to Being uniformly. Of their common assumptions, the following three are particularly relevant to this study. (1) Being is not a fixed but a continuously unfolding entity whose most notable trait is its capacity for self-manifestation and self-concealment. Therefore, some of its aspects are apparent and the rest hidden. (2) Man has access to Being by means of his senses, his language, and his thought. The complex relations between perception, speech, and thought aside, man's experience in and of the world does not consist solely of positive identifications; more accurately, it is a mixture of presences and absences, sounds and silence, the known and the unknown. (3) Being has no intrinsic meaning or value; both are supplied by man. As the famous Protagorean dictum suggests, man is the creator and criterion of Being. In more contemporary terms, Being is not an in-itself (or if it is, we have absolutely no access to it) but a for-me;

more precisely, it is a for-me the moment I encounter it as such. (“Sophists and the Possible” 219)

### *Protagoras*

Protagoras was a major voice in Sophistic rhetoric. Of all his extant writings, the fragment “Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not” (O’Neill 18) is perhaps the most controversial and most meaningful. Due to the loss of the book in which this claim was made, it is very difficult to provide a single acceptable interpretation of it. The several interpretations of this statement can be grouped into two categories: one, as an expression of complete/flat relativism, and the other, as an expression of contextual and humanistic nature of truth or reality. The former interpretation takes the form of ridicule, as evidenced in Plato’s

### *Theaetetus:*

Socrates: I’m perfectly happy with the general theory, that what appears to each person is for that person; but the beginning of the argument puzzles me. Why didn’t he start *The Truth* off by saying, “Pig is the measure of all things,” or “Baboon,” or any sentient creature, however, outlandish? That would have been a magnificently haughty beginning, showing that although we regard his wisdom as remarkable and almost divine, yet he is in fact no better off intellectually than a tadpole, let alone another human being. (18)

This comment by Socrates, however, is a caricature of the Protagorean dictum, although we cannot say that this interpretation is completely invalid. The loss of Protagoras’s texts

and the unavailability of his explanation of this statement make it a fertile ground for any type of interpretation. So, in a vulgar Platonic sense, since everyone has his/her own truth and own version of justice or right and wrong, what is the value of going to wise ones to receive knowledge: why go to any school? What's the difference between what a baboon or a tadpole perceives and what a "wise" man like Socrates or Protagoras thinks? In this sense, Protagorean theory leads to complete relativism where anything is as good as any other thing. There are no standards to judge what is right and what is wrong. This is a picture of a world where there are no right and wrong things, but a perpetual state of error, if we call it so. Thus, in this interpretation, Protagorean theory leads to a radical subjectivism:

For example, Bury wrote that Protagoras' human-measure statement implies that "falsehood has no meaning," hence "objective truth" and "the possibility of knowledge" were rejected by Protagoras. Guthrie described Protagoras' position as "extreme subjectivism" which "logically" led to "moral and political anarchy," and Untersteiner at one point described the doctrine of Protagoras as phenomenalism, a relatively recent philosophical theory that reduces material objects to *sense*—that which is sensed.

(Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos* 129-130)

For two thousand years or more, this is how Protagoras has been understood. But there are other interpretations that try to take Protagoras in a more positive way, advocating his ideas as humanistic and democratic. Here, the Greek Sophist becomes a champion of pluralism and democracy.

In this second kind of interpretation, the use of the term “man” does not mean an individual human being; it suggests humanity in general. While interpreting the dictum this way, Gibson understands it as a shift of focus in Greek philosophy from nature to human beings, instead of taking it as an expression of “mere relativism”:

The sentence has rightly been judged as a huge step forward in early Greek philosophy. Instead of looking for fundamental elements in the outside world (e.g., water, fire) for his explanation of reality, Protagoras turned inside to human beings. It was a move from object to subject, a radical shift of attention. If things are, then they are because people say they are, and if people say nothing at all about them, then they are not. The importance of speech, language, rhetoric becomes abruptly crucial. And the viewpoint needs not imply chaos; it does not have to follow that we can do anything with words, call an elephant a rhinoceros or whatever. By “man” Protagoras surely means the whole human race, where each individual lives within the constraints of her or his society. (287)

Here, two things are to be noted, that human understandings are social or communal, and that Protagoras’s dictum should be understood in the context of philosophical trends before him. Regarding “man” as representing human beings in general, Schiappa makes a very good observation: “A better, though more cumbersome, translation is: ‘Of everything and anything the measure [truly-is] human(ity)’ ” (*Protagoras and Logos*120).

In contextualizing Protagoras’ theory, Havelok takes Protagoras’ dictum as a break from “the Homeric state of mind” or the mythic-poetic tradition, to the rationalistic

tradition (qtd. in Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos* 123). These two traditions appear in different forms in other interpretations too. Gibson's idea that an "individual lives within the constraints of her or his society" is similar to what Schiappa calls "frame of reference." To clarify Protagoras' notion of frame of reference, Schiappa relates a story told by Plutarch:

A young man, Epitimus of Pharsalus, was killed accidentally with a javelin. Pericles and Protagoras supposedly spent an entire day trying to decide whether one should regard the cause of death as the javelin, the man who threw it, or the supervisor in charge of the grounds. According to Giuseppe Rensi, "In fact the answer to the problem could be any one of the three and be always right according to the point of view—and so according to the person to whom the problem has been submitted." To a doctor answer (*orthos logos*) would be the javelin; to a judge in a law court the best answer would be the person who threw it; and to an administrator the best answer would be the supervisor. No single answer can be judged correct in any abstract or absolute sense but only relative to the needs and interests of people directly involved in the experience. The answer is not arbitrary nor merely conventional; it is "objectively correct" according to each frame of reference. (*Protagoras and Logos* 126)

The above passage indicates a few things about Protagoras and his influence on modern rhetorical theory. First, he believes in relativity of truth/belief, that it exists in relation to "someone, or ... something or towards something" but not as "a thing as either being or



becoming or becoming anything just in and by itself” (Plato, *Theaetetus* 160 b-c; qtd in Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos* 128). This means that Protagoras, like all antifoundationalist philosophers, does not believe in “things-in-themselves” as being accessible to human beings. Second, this notion of Protagoras leads to a question of whether he believes in absolute relativism/radical subjectivism or the possibility of some frame of reference. Regarding this problem, Plutarch’s story about Protagoras is revealing: that what we believe as true or false is determined by our frame of reference; as the story shows, doctors have a different frame of reference from supervisors or judges. For doctors, or for priests for that matter, the case is not relative; rather, as Schiappa says, it is objective. However, this notion of objectivity does not mean a scientific notion of objectivity in which being objective means being universal. This notion of “frame of reference,” though Protagoras did not use the term, resonates in the modern use of the phrase, “discourse producing truth and regulating it” or Rorty’s notion of “vocabulary”. In this version of Protagorean theory, even Plato’s treatment of Protagoras is taken to suggest the notion of frame of reference: “The most thorough exposition of Protagoras’ conception of frame of reference is found in Plato’s dialogues. Plato’s accounts of Protagoras’ relativism imply that Protagoras believed the ‘things’ of the world ‘are’ only *relative* to particular frames of reference” (Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos* 126).

The three other fragments of Protagoras help us to understand his theory comprehensively and his “man the measure” argument more clearly. These fragments are:

“Concerning the Gods I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much to prevent one’s knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man’s life” (O’Neill 20).

“On every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other” (O’Neill 21).

“Making the weaker argument stronger” (O’Neill 21).

The “Concerning the Gods” fragment ties well into the “Man the Measure” argument. In this fragment, he clearly rejects any certainty about absolute truth or the existence of extra-human entity. What he means is that we cannot say whether the Gods (absolute truths for Plato) exist or not. He would say, as Rorty would, that he does not know whether “Truth” exists. But he definitely claims that we cannot know it for sure. The next two fragments are also closely linked with the idea of the “Man the Measure” and “Concerning the Gods” fragments as they clearly indicate that there are different accounts of the same issue.

The two-*logoi* fragment is interpreted in different ways. George Kennedy takes it to mean that we can debate on every issue. His paraphrase clearly demonstrates that idea: “Something can be said on both sides of every question” (31). Similarly, Edward Schiappa’s interpretation assigns philosophical content to the fragment. He appreciates Kerferd’s translation: “There are two *logoi*, or accounts, to be given about everything” (qtd. in Schiappa *Protagoras and Logos* 91). Schiappa understands it as Protagoras’ theorization of “the relationship between language and the things of reality” (*Protagoras and Logos* 98). Hence, Protagoras was one of the early Greek philosophers to question the representationalist notion of language, words as having direct correspondence to

things. This fragment becomes important as it relates to the oral culture of the Greek society and the importance of democratic practice. In this context, it is relevant to discuss the third fragment cited above, “making the weaker argument stronger.”

This notion of “making the weaker argument stronger” has been often used to defame the Sophists as opportunistic and unethical. It is also pejoratively translated as “making the worse appear the better cause” (Cooper, qtd. in Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos* 103). Plato, Aristotle, and their followers have denounced the Sophists for allegedly making any argument that can benefit their narrow individual interest. Jarratt rightly sums up what they take it to be: “that it provides a logical basis for opportunistically taking any side in an argument, for making the weaker case the stronger” (49). This pejorative interpretation originated in the dominance of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. Schiappa even says that the translation of Protagoras’ fragment as “making the worse appear the better case” is questionable. Taking the fragment positively, “worse” or “weaker” could be understood as referring to ethical positions, or they could be understood to refer to evidentiary positions: with the latter, a case is “weaker” or “worse” because the warrants that would make it stronger and better have not yet been identified, articulated, and accepted.

The positive interpretation sees this fragment in the context of Greek society of the time and the whole framework of Protagorean theory. In this interpretation, “making the weaker argument stronger” is taken as a sequel to the two-*logoi* fragment. When there are always two sides of an argument (things), one is the dominant and the other is the dominated. In a society where everyone had to argue for his/her own case, the art of

making an argument that looks weaker strong was of paramount importance. Many critics like Schiappa construe the above expression as reflecting Protagoras' conviction to democratic practice. On a similar note, relating the expression with Protagoras' relativistic epistemology, John Scenters-Zapico cites Cole: "Cole, discussing the skills Protagoras taught, believes that 'Protagoras's technique of 'making the worse argument better (80 B 6b) can only have involved—assuming a consistently relativistic understanding of 'better' and 'worse'—teaching a student to think, and make others think, about situations in ways that were better rather than worse for him" (359). Protagoras's own claim also supports the positive interpretation of the fragment: "the wise and good orators make what is beneficial to the cities, not what is harmful (to them), appear just" (qtd in Poulakos, "Sophists and the Possible" 221).

From these fragments and their interpretations, we can infer a few things that present Protagoras as an antifoundationalist philosopher/theorist. First, he rejects any claim about universal and absolute truth. For him, truth is relative to the community or the frame of reference with which an individual approaches something. So, he dismisses the possibility of a direct correspondence between human representations and the non-human world. Second, the measure for what is right and wrong about any statement rests on the agreement between the interlocutors or the participants in a discourse. Some of these major tenets of Protagoras's theory can also be detected in Gorgias, another important Sophist.

### *Gorgias*

Gorgias is another Sophist like Protagoras to have an immense influence in modern philosophy and rhetorical theory. His major contribution is his characterization of language (rhetoric) as epistemic, though he did not use that vocabulary. His rejection of representationalism and his antithetical style make him resemble Protagoras in his “two-*logoi*” and “man the measure” arguments. To explain Gorgias’s antifoundationalist standpoint, we need to examine “Gorgias’ on the Non-Existent or on Nature” and his “Encomium of Helen.”

His three-part statement—“first and foremost, that nothing exists; second, that even if it exists it is inapprehensible to man; third, that even if it is apprehensible, still it is without a doubt incapable of being expressed or explained to the next man”—makes his antifoundationalism clear with his rejection of the existence of a universal and absolute truth/reality and his notion of communication through language (Kennedy, “Gorgias” 42). Though this statement is often taken to characterize Gorgias as a “philosophical nihilist” (Enos 46), when we read it with close attention to his other writings and in light of his belief in the changeability of human opinion and reality, which he derives from Heraclitus, it comes closer to what Sophists like Protagoras believe. It undermines the Platonic notion of capital “T” Truth and advocates local and contextual truths.

His idea that nothing exists and even if it exists, it is inapprehensible is quite similar to Protagoras’ idea that everything exists “in relation to” something or someone. He is denying the Platonic idea of the existence of an ideal world and the possibility of having access to it. Scenters-Zapico cites Freeman in this regard: “Keeping in mind the aforementioned discussion of human opinion and changeability, we need to consider

further the Sophists' belief that pure truth is impossible, at least the capital "T" Truth that Plato advocated" (361). This is similar to what Protagoras says about the gods (which is similar to the Platonic notion of truth).

Perhaps the most important contribution of Gorgias to modern rhetorical theory is his idea that there is no direct correspondence between speech (language) and reality, or word and thing. Gorgias anticipated the modern theory of language of "Nietzsche, Saussure, and Derrida" even if he "didn't go quite so far as to locate all meaning in language" (Jarrett 55). Gorgias does not see the complete indeterminacy of meaning as poststructuralists like Derrida did. He believed that the indeterminacy of meaning created by the lack of one-on-one correspondence between word and thing is checked by *kairos* or the existing reality: "existence is not manifest if it does not involve opinion, and opinion is unreliable if it does not involve existence" (Kennedy, "Gorgias" 66). This idea is his awareness that there are limitations rather than infinite possibilities of interpretation of linguistic reality/opinion. In Gorgias's scheme of ideas, the infinite regress of meaning is checked by certain existential constraints or contextual evidences (Kairos). This position would be similar to Stanley Fish's notion that meaning is not completely indeterminate due to the limitations set by the values of an "interpretative community" (*Text in This Class* 14). In other words, even if Gorgias's three-point statement seems to suggest a Derridian notion of linguistic indeterminacy, when we place this statement in the context of his overall framework, especially his focus on *kairos*, it becomes apparent that he tries to avoid radical subjectivism and complete incommunicability. His idea about language and its meaning can also be connected to the interpretation of

Protagoras's "making the weaker stronger" argument where the weaker becomes one with insufficient evidence or warrants. Here, what we believe to be right or true meaning is determined by the existence of factors external to surrounding language use.

Gorgias's notion of language has come under fire from Platonists as they understand it as a mask for hiding the intention to lie and deceive. Gorgias himself also sees the possibility of dangerous effects of language as he says that opinions can be "a most untrustworthy thing" (Kennedy 60), and that "speeches can, like a drug, bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion" (Kennedy 53). But at the same time, he has shown how language makes us aware of its own destructive character. Here lies the importance of the Sophistic rhetoric. This is similar to what Scenters-Zapico says: the "use of *antithesis*, one *logoi* or more to counterbalance or outweigh another, combined with *kairos* could cause a hearer to come to a different belief on virtually any topic. Gorgias's 'Helen' is an example *par excellence*" (Scenters-Zapico 363). And Gorgias's and Protagoras's antithetical styles or *logoi*, by bringing completely new perspectives on some aspects of existing reality, anticipate Burke's perspective by incongruity and Rorty's redescription. As Scenters-Zapico says, Gorgias's "Helen" is an excellent example of "perspective by incongruity" or "redescription." Gorgias's "Helen" or his *logoi* in "Helen" "suggest Paris should be guilty, by default, of the crime he committed against Helen, and the Greeks. From our enlightened vantage point, we feel Helen is innocent. Those who have not read Gorgias's or Isocrates' 'Helen' have not heard the new *logoi* and perhaps still feel she is guilty, reinforcing the Sophists' paradoxical view. .

.” (Scenters-Zapico 363). This is what Protagoras means in his two-*logoi* and “making weaker stronger” arguments.

In this context, what is dangerous, instead, is the belief that language has a direct correspondence to truth, not the one that questions it, because the latter makes us always self-conscious about the use of language; this is what the Sophists taught. The notion of deception itself becomes meaningless as “deception is a function of any discourse event” (Jarrett 56). In Gorgias’s view of rhetoric, the Platonic charge of deception or lying does not have any meaning as it assumes the possibility of using neutral and non-deceptive or truthful language, which he clearly rejects. The most important thing that determines deceptions and non-deceptions is the audience, the community. This is what Jarrett means here: “The positive value Gorgias assigns to ‘deception’ draws attention to the importance of the audience’s reception of a discursive performance; their mental participation and, eventually, their assent is required for any discourse to have the force of knowledge” (56). However, this interpretation of deception does not mean that there are no lies and deceptions in language. For Gorgias, a “lie” has to do with saying not what is not necessarily true but rather what the speaker understands to be in error. That is, for instance, while I do not know that I cannot fly, if I tell someone that I can in order to get some benefit for myself at the person’s expense, this could be lying. This is similar to what Aristotle’s assertion that Sophistry is to be understood as having to do with intentions. But I do not mean that Aristotle’s characterization of Sophistry as lying is right.



This discussion of Protagoras and Gorgias reveals that they have certain commonalities. They do not claim the existence of an immutable truth or absolute “being” of something (ontological antifoundationalism), nor do they believe in the possibility for humans to have an access to such objective and universal reality, even if it exists. This means truth for them is contextual and mutable and language does not have any direct correspondence to things or reality. Their belief that there are no foundations for claiming the certainty of any knowledge is what sets them apart from Plato and the Platonists, which I will discuss in the next section.

### **Platonic Principle: A Version of Ancient Foundationalism**

In this section I will present Platonic foundationalism, although without reducing the complexities and contradictions in his project. Platonic foundationalism can be discussed in terms of his epistemological methods and his belief in the existence of absolute truth. First, I will discuss his methods of investigation, as seen both in his practice and his theorization. Then I will connect his epistemology with his ontology.

The Platonic method of investigation as used in his dialogs is called the Socratic Method or *elenchus*. It presents a weak version of foundationalism as it does not have a foundation on any self-evident principles. Even if his conviction that dialectic is the surest way to truth suggests a strong form of foundationalism, his practice of it seems to betray it.

Plato makes a distinction between dialectic and rhetoric and advocates the former for its use in grasping truth. In many places, he condemns rhetoric for doing exactly the opposite of what dialectic does. By making a distinction between the two, dialectic and

rhetoric, one as a means to truth and the other as a path away from truth, he establishes himself as a foundationalist or an essentialist philosopher. This distinction is evident in his treatises “*Phaedrus*,” *Theaetetus*, and “*Gorgias*,” even if there are some nuances.

The famous Socratic Method in general presents a weak form of foundationalism. In the Platonic dialogs I have mentioned, Plato makes Socrates use what is commonly known as Socratic elenchus or cross-examination. Socrates first asks a question about a certain concept or thing to the interlocutor who claims to know about that concept or the thing. After he answers, Socrates starts asking him further questions that lead the interlocutor to contradict his earlier answer or conviction and refute himself. Then Socrates offers his version of belief which both the interlocutor and Socrates find justifiable.

Good examples of this method can be found in *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, and *Theaetetus*. *Ion* begins with Socrates’ appreciation of Ion, the rhapsodist, for his superbly enchanting performance. Then, he asks Ion what poetry is and what kind of poetry is the best. Ion says that he knows what good poetry is and claims Homer to be the best poet. But when Socrates asks for Ion’s reason to characterize Homer’s poetry as the best, Ion fails to provide any answer as he does not know anything about what “poetry” is. For Socrates, the failure of Ion to compare and contrast Homer with other poets is evidence of his ignorance about the true nature of poetry. One should be able to compare and contrast poets and should have some criteria to determine what good poetry is. If one knows about who the best poet is, by the same token he/she also knows about the bad poets. But the rhapsodist works by heart, not by head: he is possessed when he performs; he is out of

mind. So, he does not have an authentic “knowledge” of poetry. When Ion admits that he cannot speak of poets other than Homer, Socrates says:

The reason, my friend, is obvious. No one can fail to see that you speak of Homer without any art or knowledge. If you were able to speak of him by rules of art, you would have been able to speak of all other poets; for poetry is a whole. (Plato, *Ion* 14)

Socrates also shows how poets also do not act by any art or knowledge, but by inspiration:

Many are the noble words in which poets speak concerning the actions of men; but like yourself when speaking about Homer, they do not speak of them by any rules of art: they are simply inspired to utter that to which the Muse impels them, and that only; and when inspired, one of them will make dithyrambs, another hymns of praise, another choral strains, another epic or iambic verses- and he who is good at one is not good at any other kind of verse: for not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine. Had he learned by rules of art, he would have known how to speak not of one theme only, but of all; and therefore God takes away the minds of poets . . . . (Plato, *Ion* 14)

Then Ion agrees with what Socrates says:

Yes, indeed, Socrates, I feel that you are; for your words touch my soul, and I am persuaded that good poets by a divine inspiration interpret the things of the Gods to us. (Plato, *Ion* 14)

The above description of the Socratic Method and some instances of Platonic dialog demonstrate the complexity in characterizing his method as foundational. My interest here is not to analyze how Plato defines poetry. I am rather interested in the way Plato (by means of Socrates) dismisses Ion's earlier view and, through his focus on a certain methodology, arrives at the truth of what a poet is.

My central question is how does Socrates validate his notion about poetry (or anything for that matter)? What epistemological foundation does he have, for instance, like the senses for Locke or rational investigation for Descartes? Roland Polansky offers an explanation about what justifies Socrates' claim to knowledge acquired through Socratic method:

One possibility is that they are endoxic beliefs, that is, opinions that are reputable because held by everyone or by the wise. Another is that as part of the belief set of the interlocutor they are acceptable to him and so in need of no further justification. Another is that they are also part of Socrates' belief set, built up over time through much experience of elenctic confrontations, and thus inductively established. Whichever way it is that the beliefs Socrates uses in the elenchus are supposed justified, it seems clear that they hardly have the status of self-certainty and no appeal is made to such status. Consequently, at play here could only be some weak form of foundationalism. Yet even this is suspect when Socrates' general project is considered. (42-43).

I think Polansky is largely right because Socrates does not seem to have any strong foundation upon which he bases the truth value of his claim or rejects the truth value of the interlocutor's claim. The only justification seems to be agreement between Socrates and the interlocutor about what they arrive at through their discussion. This may sound quite like what Rorty says about antifoundationalist certainty: "Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons rather than a matter of interaction with non-human reality" (*Philosophy and Mirror* 157). Where lies the difference then? It lies in Plato's belief that a rational approach (comparison and contrast in *Ion*) can lead to the immutable concepts about mutable things. In other words, his practice (of method) tends to present him as largely antifoundationalist, but his theory and belief make him foundational. However, Platonic conversation is slightly different. Socratic method, as Polansky says, is "on 'the way to,'" even if it is "not from' first principles" (43). Here, Socratic method, though it does not begin with the certainty of some justified beliefs, leads to "certain principles." This is one way that makes his belief on epistemological method foundational. He claims that the dialectical method is the surest way to truth. We can here relate Plato's notion of dialectic and rhetoric/writing in *Phaedrus*.

*Phaedrus* is a discussion on the nature of love and a method of investigation for truth. Even if love is apparently the central theme, Plato tries to demonstrate his idea about how good dialectic/rhetoric works through a discussion between Socrates and Phaedrus. He contrasts his notion of good rhetoric with Sophistic rhetoric, which is bad rhetoric. The way he defines love in his conversation with Phaedrus practically demonstrates his theory of knowing or his method of investigating the nature of

knowledge. As always, he begins with asking his interlocutor to define love, which Phaedrus does by means of a speech about the lover and the non-lover. The speech of Lysias on love that he recites talks about love in a non-systematic way. He does not define it, nor does he break the concept of love to smaller parts and synthesize it at the end. This means that Lysias's speech about love is whimsical, emotional, and bombastic. Then Socrates starts defining love, the nature of the soul, and divine lovers and fleshly ones. He clarifies his concept of the true lover (love) and the false lover (physical lover) by using an allegory of a charioteer and two horses. Here he defines the concept, distinguishes the good from the bad (division), and at the end relates that to his earlier discussion. Thus, he follows what he means by true discourse or dialectic: "unless a man take account of the characters of his hearers and is able to divide things by classes and to comprehend particulars under a general idea, he will never attain the highest human perfection in the art of speech" (165). Socrates says:

Now I myself, Phaedrus, am a lover of these processes of division and bringing together, as aids to speech and thought; and if I think any other man is able to see things that can naturally be collected into one and divided into many, him I follow after and "walk in his footsteps as if he were a god." And whether the name I give to those who can do this is right or wrong, God knows, but I have called them hitherto dialecticians. (160)

The above quotation clearly presents Plato's strong conviction that dialecticians are close to God in their capacity to delve deep into the nature of things and detect true ideas. In other words, dialectic for him is a method that ensures an access to immutable ideas.

Unlike dialectic, rhetoric is concerned with persuasion in any way possible. He charges the Sophists with proving the same thing true at a time and proving it false at another. Socrates believes that rhetoricians do not care about truth or justice; for them what counts is whether they can convince the audience or not. Here is what Socrates says about rhetoric:

Very well. They say that there is no need of treating these matters with such gravity and carrying them back so far to first principles with many words; for, as we said in the beginning of this discussion, he who is to be a competent rhetorician need have nothing at all to do, they say, with truth in considering things which are just or good, or men who are so, whether by nature or by education. For in the courts, they say, nobody cares for truth about these matters, but for that which is convincing; and that is probability, so that he who is to be an artist in speech must fix his attention upon probability. (164)

So, he distinguishes dialectic from rhetoric in terms of their concern for truth and probability respectively. However, Plato does not completely discount the importance of rhetoric; he is aware of the helplessness of dialectic in persuading all people. That's why he endorses a certain kind of rhetoric that follows the dialectical method. He says that "a rhetorician must know the various forms of soul . . . , various classes of speeches" as "men of a certain sort are easily persuaded by speeches of a certain sort." (163). When he acquires this knowledge, he "has added thereto a knowledge of the times for speaking and for keeping silence, and has also distinguished the favorable occasions for brief

speech or pitiful speech or intensity and all the classes of speech which he has learned, then, and not till then, will his art be fully and completely finished” (163). This definition of rhetoric sounds positive.

Now the question is: how is Plato foundational in his method? His discussion of rhetoric in terms of different types of souls and different types of speeches, and his idea of understanding the timing for the speeches and audience, seem quite similar to Poulakos’s definition of Sophistic rhetoric: “*Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible* (36). Plato, like the way Poulakos defines rhetoric, defines good rhetoric as an art. Like Sophistic rhetoric, a successful rhetoric for Plato is also aware of the kinds and natures of audiences and of appropriate style and timing. Richard Weaver’s characterization of Platonic rhetoric demonstrates how Plato’s notion of rhetoric in *Phaedrus* seems quite similar to that of the Sophists: “the discourse of the noble rhetorician . . . will be about real potentiality or possible actuality, whereas that of the mere exaggerator is about unreal potentiality” (1368). Similarly, when one addresses different audiences differently, can he/she maintain the same “Truth”? This is a big question. In this regard, Bernard K. Duffy and Martin Jacobi say: “Since if rhetoric consists of truth plus something else, the ‘something else’ must be other than truth. In effect, this definition of rhetoric separates dialectic from presentation and opens the door to abuses of and through rhetoric” (111). So, even if Plato believes in the existence and the possibility of transferring “absolute” truth, his belief that it has to be “manipulated” in terms of the nature and kind of the audience makes it difficult for us to believe in the



possibility of knowing or also expressing the “Truth” with a capital T. Here, what makes Plato foundationalist in his treatment of rhetoric is his notion that even if rhetoric is useful and necessary, it is merely an addition to dialectic, rather than being an independent enterprise. Rhetoric, in other words, is useful if the speaker already has a grasp of truth. So, Plato’s foundationalism in his treatment of rhetoric is complicated. A similar case can be seen in his treatment of writing in “Phaedrus.”

Plato privileges speech over writing, primarily dialog over monolog. This privileging has to do with his trust in dialectic and his distrust of rhetoric and other poetic arts. He seems to believe in conversation and interaction, not only between minds, but also within a single mind. And the purpose of this interaction is to continue looking for Truth. Then it might seem that Plato is like the sophists in that he admits he currently does not have the Truth; worse, he seems to admit that he needs to look for it “perpetually,” that he may *never* get it. So, he sounds like a fool, saying that he is going to spend his life looking for what he may not, and probably will not, ever find. How, then, is he a foundationalist? He is a foundationalist in this scenario because of his faith that there is a foundation, and because of his belief, based on this faith, that we should spend our lives looking for it even though we know we may never find it.

As we have seen, questioning is the basic spirit of Plato’s method of investigation. Then, for Plato, what happens when we write? First, it adversely affects our memory and induces forgetfulness; it makes our mind passive: “For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their

memory. . . . You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom . . .” (165).

Writing, besides weakening memory, imposes closure instead of opening up dialog and conversation. Here, Plato sounds like a postmodern/poststructural critic advocating constant change and experimentation. Here is what Socrates says: “Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with the written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing” (166). This sounds like Protagoras’ arguments in the *two-logoi*, and the “making weaker argument stronger” fragments and like Gorgias’s antithetical style. So, his view about writing also creates a problem in characterizing him as a foundationalist.

Thus, this discussion of the Socratic method and Plato’s definition of dialectic and rhetoric place him in an odd situation in the debate between foundationalism and antifoundationalism. His foundationalism gets weakened and moves closer to sophism. However, when we closely analyze these ideas in relation to his overall beliefs, we find that there is a clearly recognizable, if not a strong, form of foundationalism.

First, his belief that dialectic is the surest way to truth is as foundational as that of Descartes when he says “*Cogito Ergo Sum.*” It is similar to what Rorty calls the foundationalism of the seventeenth century empiricists like John Locke and David Hume. However, a question may arise, as I had already indicated: how can Plato’s belief in

dialectic and questioning be foundational? One important point we should not forget about Plato is that his questions are always aimed at perceptions and opinions of the general public or those whose ideas he does not trust. These people include artists, rhapsodists, politicians, orators, and rhetoricians. Now, his point becomes clear: he wants to question people's conviction of things which are supposedly true and intends to make them aware of the ideas and concepts that are universal and really true. His dialogues take his interlocutors and the readers of his treatises from what they perceive to be true to what really is true, in the Platonic sense. So, the whole process of cross-questioning and dialectic is aimed at proving what is generally perceived to be true as false and establishing Plato's notion that the only things that are true are "kinds," "ideas," and "forms. And Plato believes that such "ideas" or "forms" do exist. It is his faith that such immutable "ideas" exist that makes him a foundationalist.

Second, a subtle point that supports his foundational position is the disempowering of the interlocutor other than Socrates in almost all his dialogs. This is what Polansky says: "none of the principles offered by the interlocutors resists Socratic refutation" (43). Socrates has always the upper hand. So, even if he speaks of dialectic and dialog as a discussion among equal parties, Plato's Socrates does not practice it in reality. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates completely fails as a dialectician to convince his interlocutors. He "silences" them "without, however, persuading" them (Kastely 97). This silencing makes James L. Kastely question even the direct correspondence between what the character Socrates says in his dialogs and what Plato intends to say. Kastely argues that Plato's intention in making Socrates fail to convince his interlocutors through

dialectic is to show the lameness of dialectic without rhetoric: “Nor can Socrates’ inability to convince any of the rhetors simply be accepted with regret at the inadequacy of those with whom he talks. Rather, his ineffectiveness signals a major failure in the dialogue. He ends the exchange, not victorious, but isolated – no one will talk with him. This is not how a character who values dialectic wants to end up” (Kastely 98). Kastely’s interpretation helps us understand the difference in Plato’s attitude towards rhetoric as expressed in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*. Whatever the case is, whether what Socrates says is what Plato intends to mean or not, the case of dialectic in the *Gorgias* also shows how dialectic works as a monolog rather than a Socratic dialog. Similarly, in many of his treatises like “Phaedrus” Socrates has long speeches resembling great orators. So, the Platonic insistence on the importance of dialog and questioning does not make him antifoundationalist.

Third, and equally important, is that his questions are always directed against particular beliefs and his intention is to get people to “kinds,” and “classes” of things or ideas. This is what he does in “Ion” when he asks Ion about what poetry is and what components make it good or bad. This is what he does also in “Phaedrus” when he says that the rhetorician should know the “various forms of soul” and “acquire a proper knowledge of these classes [of speech] and be able to follow them accurately” (163). These kinds or forms are, for Plato, universal and immutable. The whole discussion of Plato now ties into the idea that he questions perceptions and advocates the universals. His notion of universality leads to his metaphysics.

Plato's metaphysics offers a very strong form of foundationalism. He justifies notions of truth, reality, and justice in terms of his theory of metaphysics. Unlike the Sophists, he believes in the existence of universal ideas and absolute truths. But he locates them in the ideal realm beyond the physical world and material existence. So, it is appropriate here to discuss his division between perception and knowledge and to connect it to his method. And, as I have said earlier, his notions of truth come from his faith in the existence of the immutable "ideas" or "forms".

The analysis of Plato's method of investigation demonstrates a weak form of foundationalism. On the one hand the conclusion of the dialog is not based normally on any self-evident principles; on the other hand, the nature of investigation itself poses some problems for calling it strongly foundationalist. Even if his epistemological foundationalism seems weak, his ontological form of foundational theory is strong. And when we see his discussion about what is truth and what is illusion, we can connect it to his preference for dialectic over rhetoric. His division of perception and knowledge in the *Theaetetus* requires some analysis to detect his foundationalist belief.

There are two views about the *Theaetetus*: that it undermines or at least contradicts the Platonic theory of forms, and that it does not. The traditional/standard reading is the latter. In this reading, Plato's major purpose is to show what knowledge is not instead of demonstrating what it is. Towards this purpose, he condemns the Sophists for their relativism and their belief that what we believe to be true is largely dependent on our perception. So, the whole *Theaetetus* deals primarily with a Protagorean/Heraclitian theory of perception/knowledge. Socrates asks Theaetetus a question about what

knowledge is and Theaetetus's answer is "Knowledge is perception." Then Socrates directly associates this definition with the Protagorean dictum "man is the measure of all things." Here is an often quoted paragraph from *Theaetetus* that I have already quoted while discussing sophism:

I'm perfectly happy with the general theory, that what appears to each person is for that person; but the beginning of the argument puzzles me. Why didn't he start *The Truth* off by saying, 'Pig is the measure of all things,' or 'Baboon', or any sentient creature, however, outlandish? That would have been a magnificently haughty beginning, showing that although we regard his wisdom as remarkable and almost divine, yet he is in fact no better off intellectually than a tadpole, let alone another human being. (18)

Here, Socrates agrees with Protagoras that human perceptions are different from one person to the other. This is not strange as Plato believes that most of us live in the world of illusion/perception. So, what we should note here is Plato's distinction between perception and truth or knowledge of truth. For Plato, everyone cannot be a measure of truth. The point is that there is no standard in Protagorean theory to distinguish a true belief from a false one. It seems like anything is as true as any other thing. So, Socrates seems to characterize sophism as flat relativism. Everyone seems to be as wise as everyone else. However, this interpretation is, I think, a caricature of Protagoras's theory rather than a fair representation of it. Socrates himself shows how Protagoras would defend himself:

When you talk about pigs and baboons, you're not only behaving like a pig yourself, but you are also inducing your audience to behave likewise towards writings, and that's a despicable thing to do. I claim that the truth is as I have written: each of us is the measure of the things that are and are not. However, there is a great deal of inequality among people, precisely because there is so much variety in the things that are and appear to different people. In other words, so far from denying the existence of expertise and clever people, I actually define wisdom as the ability to make good things appear and be for someone instead of bad things.

Here, even Socrates' Protagoras makes it clear that Protagoras does not mean that a tadpole is as wise as Socrates. He does not mean that a layman knows as much as a doctor regarding medication. However, he does not want to make any claim about one being wise (as knowing truth) and the other ignorant (not knowing truth). Protagoras' concern is about making the worse better, where better does not mean truer: "What we're after is a change from one state to the other, because one state is better than the other," that being well is better than being sick. This is how Socrates thinks Protagoras would defend himself:

'It's the same in education too: what we're after is change from one state to the better one. The only difference is that a doctor uses medicines to bring about the change, while a Sophist uses words. But it is never the case that a change is effected from earlier false belief to later true belief: it is impossible to believe something which is not the case—one can only

believe what one is experiencing, and this is always true. What is possible, however, in my opinion, is that someone who is in an unsound mental state and whose beliefs are cognate with it can be made to think differently. Now these impressions are naively called “true”, but what I am saying is that although they are better than the others, they are not more true at all.

‘I certainly do not equate wise people with frogs, my dear Socrates. On the contrary, I claim that each sphere of operation has its wise practitioners: there are doctors for bodies, farmers for plants . . .; and I claim that politicians who are wise and good at their job substitute sound for unsound ethical notions in their communities. . . . By the same token, a Sophist, since he is capable of guiding his pupils in the same way, is wise and deserves to be paid a lot by his pupils. (57-58)

Thus, Socrates’ Protagoras defends his position by making a distinction between truer and better. Here, Protagoras’ response is quite similar to modern antifoundationalists in that his concern is not with what is true or false but with what is more useful. So, for him, being wise does not mean knowing the truth but having the capacity in a certain field to make the worse the better. Even if what Protagoras says in this dialog is what Plato would think Protagoras would say, he becomes able to clarify his position about his argument regarding making weaker argument stronger. But Socrates takes this argument about being wiser to make his claim that knowledge is different from perception, and that



everyone is not the measure of things, but that the wiser is. Socrates tries to equate being wiser with having truer knowledge:

It follows, then, that it would be perfectly reasonable for us to tell your master that he has no choice but to go further than the concession that some people are wiser than others, and also concede that while these people are ‘measures’, there is nothing at all to make me, with my ignorance, a measure, though the argument we came up with in his defense a short while ago tried to make me one, whether I liked it or not.

(77)

Theaetetus provides two other answers to the question “what is knowledge?” but Socrates demonstrates them to be unjustifiable. However, Socrates himself does not provide any correct answer to the question. This omission primarily shows “the impossibility of a successful account of knowledge that does not invoke the Forms” (Stanford Encyclopedia). Polansky also has a similar opinion: “The *Theaetetus* confirms the restriction of knowledge to kinds. . . . Socrates contrasts those practitioners of oratory who must concern themselves with particulars with philosophical orators who seek to know what man as such is or what justice or happiness is. . .” (50).

The idea that truth for Plato can be found in the realm of “forms” or his attitude towards perception can be seen in the *Republic*. His “Allegory of the Cave” is an excellent example where he presents sensory perception as a barrier for the understanding of “the good.” Regarding Plato’s foundationalism as expressed in the *Republic*, Polansky says: “It seems clear that the *Republic* formulates a foundationalist conception of

knowledge in which wisdom depends upon an unhypothesized highest principle, the good” (48). According to the allegory, the people living inside the cave are those who have been living the life of the senses and their journey out of the cave to the world of the sun is a journey of knowledge towards the realm of the intelligible, the world of ultimate truths:

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed. (Plato, *The Republic* 414)

For Plato, only the philosophers have access to that ultimate knowledge or truth. Here, knowledge is not the knowledge of the material world, which for Plato is the world of shadows or illusion. For him the Sophists like Protagoras wander in this world advocating what is merely an illusion as true. The idea that the world we live in is the world of

shadows is also presented in the Book X of the *Republic*. Here, we can find Plato's metaphysics, his notion of Forms or Ideas, clearly presented.<sup>10</sup>

Here, forms/ideas are the general ideas that Plato believes to be universal and immutable. All other things and ideas in this world are reflections or imitations of the original ideas. So, he believes that all forms of arts deal with imitation or reflection of the true ideas or forms. This notion of imitation makes it clear why Plato condemns rhetoric/poetry and glorifies philosophy; the former deals with imitation whereas philosophy deals with the immutable ideas and forms: "All poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them." (Plato, *Republic* 574). And he thinks true knowledge is knowledge of the forms. Of the objects or things in this world, there are only one corresponding forms or ideas: "But there are only two ideas or forms of them --one the idea of a bed, the other of a table" (Plato, *Republic* 576).

In this scheme of ideas, everything has to be judged against the immutable ideas or forms. Poetry, rhetoric, painting, tragedy, or any form of art does not have any authentic knowledge as it does not deal with the forms, but with the imperfect reflections of those ideas or forms. This view of arts makes it clear why Plato advocates dialectic in "Phaedrus" and "Gorgias." In almost all of his dialogues he moves from the discussion of particulars to generals, from individual instance to the kinds as a way to move away from the mutable to the immutable, from shadows to the real. This Platonic theory of Forms makes it clear that his method of cross-questioning, or dialectic, is but a tool to move

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<sup>10</sup> What makes him different from the Sophists like Gorgias is that he chooses to believe that there are foundational truths, while Gorgias says we cannot know whether or not they exist.

away from the particulars to the generals. So, his method is a tool to establish his foundational beliefs.

To wrap up Plato's method of investigation and his theory of knowledge, we can say that his every discussion, directly or indirectly, rests on the idea that immutable and absolute ideas exist, but they exist only in the world outside of our capacity to perceive them through senses. So, when we judge the truth value of anything, our attempt should be on determining the general ideas. Plato's foundationalism lies primarily in his conviction that there are immutable ideas and rational investigation can acquaint us with these ideas. That is why he privileges philosophy over rhetoric and poetry: only the philosophers (who use dialectic) can have an access to truths. His methodological foundationalism seems weak; however, when we relate it to his ontological foundationalism, it becomes clear that his method is also foundational. His dialog/conversation is not to appreciate pluralism; rather it is used as a means to arrive at fixed ideas.

### **Sophistic Antifoundationalism and Platonic Foundationalism: A Conclusion**

This discussion of foundationalism/antifoundationalism in classical Greece has shown how the present debate around this topic has been a perennial one. Even if antifoundationalism has almost completely overshadowed foundationalist positions in recent days, the questions that Plato raised against the Sophists seem still relevant and have also been raised by people like Simon Blackburn and Jurgan Habermas. It seems to be a unique challenge in the antifoundationalist world to distinguish a tadpole from Protagoras. We saw how Protagoras would defend the antifoundationalist position by

emphasizing what is better to the society/humanity instead of invoking a connection to truth. In modern philosophy/rhetorical theory, Rorty's case that offers a better alternative to foundationalism is worth considering here. His ideas show a continuation of Sophistic approach. So, let me conclude this chapter with how Rorty connects the debate around foundationalism and antifoundationalism with classical debate between the Sophists and Plato:

Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality. So, we shall not see a difference in kind between "necessary" and "contingent" truths. At most, we shall see differences in degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs. We shall, in short, be where the Sophists were before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented "philosophical thinking": we shall be looking for an airtight case rather than an unshakable foundation. We shall be in what Sellers calls "the logical space of reasons" rather than that of causal relations to objects. (Rorty, *Philosophy and Mirror* 157)

## CHAPTER THREE

### RORTY'S ANTIFOUNDATIONALIST WAY OF KNOWING:

#### FROM EPISTEMOLOGY TO HERMENEUTICS

“There are no facts, only interpretations.”

—Nietzsche

In the previous chapter we discussed classical versions of foundationalism and antifoundationalism. The sophistic rhetoric offered a way of knowing that accounted for the importance of social/historical context for understanding reality. Unlike Sophistic rhetoricians, Plato advocated a theory in which social/historical contexts do not matter in determining truth or falsity. In this chapter we will discuss Richard Rorty's view about foundationalism and his preference for an antifoundationalist approach to knowledge. We will also try to examine modern foundationalist positions and show how they are untenable. At the end we will contrast Rorty's antifoundationalism with Marxist epistemology.

In the previous chapter, some important questions were “How do we know what we know?” “Are there any absolute Truths that we can access through any methods?” “Do we need any foundations to be sure about our knowledge?” The discussion in this chapter will also revolve around the same questions as they are taken up by Richard Rorty. The major problem that Rorty finds in the foundational theories is the insistence that we need to have secure foundations for operating in the world. They continue asking the same question: “How can we say that something is right or wrong if we do not have any foundation that is universal? Rorty's counter question is, “How can we prove the

truth value of any foundation?” No such attempt to prove any foundations as pre-existing and true has been successful. Such questions force foundationalists to say that “this is what the Bible says” or “this is what Plato says” or “this is what our reason says,” and so on. But it is only a matter of belief rather than being a valid proof. That is why, Rorty says, it is a better idea to get rid of any attempt to prove the truth value of any propositions and to start replacing the idea of what is true by what is useful for the human community. Rorty does not offer any epistemological method; instead, he prefers to replace epistemology with hermeneutics. An epistemology seeks to discover knowledge of some immutable “Truths.” In Rorty’s scheme of ideas, such attempts at knowledge are bound to fail since what we can know is always governed by the kind of language we use and the historical situation we occupy. Therefore, he follows Nietzsche’s path where “there are no facts, only interpretations.” The question then becomes, How do we choose from among the various interpretations of reality? Rorty’s notion is that we should choose the pragmatic option, the one that is useful for human community. However, how do we know that something is useful? Is the idea of being useful or practical transhistorical and universal? Refusing the positive answer that would make him another foundationalist, Rorty instead says that it is determined by what we need at a particular time in history at a particular place.

### **Necessary Truths versus Consensual Belief**

Richard Rorty maps out the entire history of philosophy in terms of foundationalists and antifoundationalists. The first group covers various philosophers from Plato to analytic philosophers, “all of whom employed static ontologies, detached

epistemological perspectives that copy ontology like a mirror of nature, and then call those copies ‘knowledge.’ In the second group are William James, John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, all of whom saw past the mirror paradigm and into a more intersubjective and relational universe of language” (Abrams 228). In the foundationalist tradition, Rorty detects a tendency of invoking “foundations” to legitimize any knowledge claims. And these foundations are mental processes through which “Truth” is accessed. The central tenet of such foundationalist approaches is to see the human mind as a “mirror” of nature. In other words, reality can be seen or understood without any mental distortion. Rorty says: “Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in a study of man-as-knower, of the ‘mental processes’ or the ‘activity of representations’ which make knowledge possible” (*Philosophy and Mirror* 3).<sup>11</sup>

Rorty challenges the foundationalist idea that mind is a mirror of nature. Our mind, as it has been traditionally understood, and especially from seventeenth century empiricists like John Locke, is thought to work as a clear and unproblematic medium for acquiring knowledge. And Rorty’s idea is to set aside any such “theory of knowledge’ based on an understanding of ‘mental processes’ (*PM* 3). Locke, Descartes, and Kant all held this position: Locke with his “notion of ‘the mind’ as a separate entity in which ‘processes’ occur to the same period, Descartes with his ‘notion of philosophy as a

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<sup>11</sup> I will use *PM* for this book hereafter.



tribunal of pure reason,' and Kant with his 'assent to Lockean notions of mental processes and Cartesian notion of mental substance' (*PM* 4). Their followers were philosophers like Russell and Husserl "who were concerned to keep philosophy 'rigorous' and 'scientific'" (*PM* 4).

All of these philosophers understand knowledge as accurate representation, and Rorty, following Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, wants to set aside this understanding. Rorty is against "a permanent, neutral framework for inquiry, and thus for all of culture" (*PM* 8). Rorty says: "The notion that there could be such a thing as 'foundations of knowledge' . . . or a 'theory of representation' . . . depends on the assumption that there is some such a priori constraint" (*PM* 9). Here, Rorty rejects any theories that uphold the notion of transcendental and ahistorical "Truth." He finds a connection between analytic philosophy and Cartesian principles thus: "One way to see how analytic philosophy fits within the traditional Cartesian-Kantian pattern is to see traditional philosophy as an attempt to escape from history—an attempt to find nonhistorical conditions of any possible historical development" (*PM* 9). So, Rorty is a historicist, believing that all knowledge is local and contextual, and his project is to challenge the Western philosophical tradition up to analytic philosophy, which he traces back to Platonism.

Plato's emphasis on rational investigation and his notion that the validity of truth or reality lies in "concepts" or "ideas" is much like the position of the modern foundationalist philosophers. It was Plato who initiated the representationalist tradition by developing a theory in which the truth value of anything lies in its correspondence to

the immutable ideas. As discussed in chapter two, he makes a clear distinction between necessary truths and contingent truths. For him, sensory perception provides contingent truth whereas concepts are the source of knowledge for necessary truths. As Rorty says, “Plato, in my view, did not discover the distinction between two kinds of entities, either inner or outer. Rather, as I have remarked earlier, he was the first to articulate what George Pitcher has called the “Platonic Principle”—that differences in certainty must correspond to differences in the objects known. This principle is a natural consequence of the attempt to model knowledge on perception and to treat “knowledge of” as grounding “knowledge that”” (*PM* 156). And Rorty believes that this Platonic principle--or Platonism--is still prevalent in different forms. He calls it the foundationalist tradition and contrasts it with pragmatic philosophy, which is antifoundationalist.

The primary difference between the foundationalist philosophy and antifoundationalism of pragmatism is their focus on causal explanation and rational arguments respectively. For Plato, the certainty of any propositions about reality is determined by whether they have a “causal” relation to the original ideas or their prototypes. We referred to this dichotomy between reality and appearance while discussing Plato’s division of the ideal and the sensory worlds in the *Republic*. The truths that correspond to “ideas” are necessary truths for Plato. But for him, so called truths achieved through senses are contingent truths:

The major point I wish to make about the necessary-contingent distinction is that the notion of “foundations of knowledge”—truths which are certain because of their causes rather than because of the arguments given for

them—is the fruit of the Greek (and specifically Platonic) analogy between perceiving and knowing. The essential feature of the analogy is that knowing a proposition to be true is to be identified with being caused to do something by an object. The object which the proposition is about *imposes* the proposition's truth. The idea of “necessary truth” is just the idea of a proposition which is believed because the “grips” of the object upon us is ineluctable. Such a truth is necessary in the sense in which it is sometimes necessary to believe that what is before our eyes looks red—there is a power, not ourselves, which compels us. The objects of mathematical truths will not let themselves be misjudged or misreported.

(Rorty, *PM* 157-58)

Rorty does not believe in such immutable “necessary truths.” For him, there is no way we can establish such causal certainty. Rather, the certainty we should depend on is the one determined by arguments or consensus in arguments. He says: “think of ‘rational certainty’ as a matter of victory in argument rather than of relation to an object known,” in which case, “we shall look toward our interlocutors rather than to our faculties for the explanation of the phenomenon. . .” (*PM* 157).

Here, we cannot be sure of anything in terms of any “mental processes” or any correspondence with the “objects” or “ideas” that caused our representation. Rorty's idea is to avoid basing our knowledge on any foundation or any idea of “correspondence to truth” or “objective reality,” which, as the Platonic principle dictates, grounds certainty

on the harmony between our representations and the pre-existing concepts. However, for Rorty,

Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality. So we shall not see a difference in kind between ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent’ truths. At most, we shall see differences in degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs. We shall, in short, be where the Sophists were before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented “philosophical thinking’: we shall be looking for an airtight case rather than an unshakable foundation. We shall be in what Sellars calls “the logical space of reasons” rather than that of causal relations to objects. (*PM* 157)

This notion of conversation as the determiner of certainty--what we call truth or beliefs--is exactly what the Sophists like Protagoras said. Following the Sophistic line, Rorty prefers to use “justified beliefs” in place of “Truths.” This means that he wants to get rid of any claims to knowledge as ahistorical and universal, having a one-to-one correspondence to “objects” or reality. Rorty offers the Deweyan position as an alternative: “If we have a Deweyan conception of knowledge, as what we are justified in believing, then we will not imagine that there are enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge, since we will see ‘justification’ as a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between ‘the knowing subject’ and ‘reality’ (*PM* 9).

Rorty says:

I want to enlarge on the point that the idea of “foundations of knowledge” is a product of the choice of perceptual metaphors. To recapitulate, we can think of knowledge as a relation to propositions, and thus of justification as a relation between the proposition in question and other propositions from which the former may be inferred. Or we may think of both knowledge and justification as privileged relations to the objects those propositions are about. If we think in the first way, we will see no need to end the potentially infinite regress of propositions-brought-forward-in-defense-of-other-propositions. It would be foolish to keep conversation on the subject going once everyone, or the majority, or the wise, are satisfied, but of course we can. If we think of knowledge in the second way, we will want to get behind reasons to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would be not just silly but impossible, for anyone gripped by the object in the required way will be unable to doubt or to see an alternative. To reach that point is to reach the foundations of knowledge. For Plato, that point was reached by escaping from the senses and opening up the faculty of reason—the Eye of the Soul—to the World of Being. For Descartes, it was a matter of turning the Eye of the Mind from the confused inner representations to the clear and distinct ones. With Locke, it was a matter of reversing Descartes’ directions and seeing “singular presentations to sense” as what should “grip” us—what we cannot and should not wish to escape from. (*PM* 159)

The above passage shows Rorty's shift from the Platonic notion of absolute truth to the Sophistic notion of consensual belief. Here, for a foundationalist, what is important is the accurate representation of the "really real" whereas what matters most for the antifoundationalist is whether the ideas hang together. For antifoundationalists, whether new ideas correspond to the world outside is not important as they do not believe that there is any way we can verify such correspondence. This rejection of the correspondence theory of language leads to Rorty's theory of the contingency of language.

### **Correspondence Theory versus Contingency of Language**

Rorty's idea is that we cannot verify any truth claim by showing its correspondence to what exists outside us in the world. The world does not speak its own language and we come to understand it only through human language. Following Nietzsche in this matter, Rorty takes language or linguistic representation as description rather than "accurate representation of the way the world is in itself" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 4). In this regard, Rorty shows a weakness of the Kant-Hegel tradition: "What was needed, and what the idealists were unable to envisage, was a repudiation of the very idea of anything—mind or matter, self or world—having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented. For the idealists confused the idea that nothing has such a nature with the idea that space and time are unreal, that human beings cause the spatiotemporal world to exist" (*CIS* 4).

So, what we can know is the description of the world, not the world as it is in itself. In this case, what we call truth is not a property of the world but that of language

use or what Rorty calls sentences. Therefore, Rorty says that truth is made rather than “discovered” or “found”:

We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot.” (CIS 5)

This is similar to Kenneth Burke’s idea about reality being an interpretation/criticism of the world rather than the world itself. He says that we interpret the world in terms of the language (terministic screens) we have:

We have now moved one step further along. Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, *many of the “observations” are but interpretations of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.* In brief, much that we take as

observations about “reality” may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms. (Burke, *Language as Symbolic* 1341)

Here, what we call our neutral observation is our interpretation of reality, or what Rorty calls a “description of the world.” And for Burke, as for Rorty, human beings are symbol users and they interpret reality by using the symbols they choose to use. Burke further says that we not only interpret the world, we also interpret our interpretations: “Though all organisms are critics in the sense that they interpret the signs about them, the experimental, speculative technique made available by speech would seem to single out the human species as the only one possessing an equipment for going beyond the criticism of experience to a criticism of criticism. We not only interpret the character of events . . . we may also interpret our interpretations” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 6). This is to say that we see the world through language and what we understand or perceive is an interpretation of what is out there.

From Burke and Rorty’s perspective, language is not a “medium” of representation or expression. The treatment of language as “medium” assumes that language is a mirror that reflects reality. This tendency is similar to earlier tendencies of seeing the mind as a mirror. But Rorty believes that language does not provide such an access to the world/things, because the world does not have its own language that we can discover.

Some people may ask why we cannot determine whether a sentence like “The child fell from the roof” is true or not by locating its correspondence to what happened,



because an event would seem to make such an event true (or false). But, we can see some problems with that approach when we move from individual sentences/descriptions to vocabularies. “The Child fell from the roof” is a way of describing in one vocabulary, and when we observe another vocabulary, we may find a different way of describing the same event. This is what Rorty says here,

When we consider examples of alternative language games—the vocabulary of ancient Athenian politics versus Jefferson’s, the moral vocabulary of Saint Paul versus Freud’s, the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle, the idiom of Blake versus that of Dryden—it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these better than another, of the world as deciding between them. When the notion of “description of the world” is moved from the level of criterion-governed sentences within language games to language games as wholes, games which we do not choose between by reference to criteria, the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense. (*CIS* 5)

We may find that the way one vocabulary describes the world is more useful than another, but this does not mean that the world speaks that vocabulary. Nor does this mean that that any vocabulary makes an accurate representation of the world it describes. As Rorty says, “The world does not speak. Only we do. ... It cannot propose a language for us to speak” (*CIS* 6). The idea here is that we see the world differently and describe it differently in terms of our vocabularies, orientations, or terministic screens. And these vocabularies are not fixed; they are contingent.

Now, when there are different ways by which we interpret reality, what happens to the notion of “objective criteria” to judge the value of any representation? The point is that when we discard the idea of the “essential nature” of the world or self, the notion of objective criteria for choosing what is right becomes useless. We cannot have a set of criteria that is valid across vocabularies. We cannot use the criteria of one vocabulary to judge another vocabulary. The notion of criteria itself is the product of essentialist thinking. So, we need to discard the notion of “objective criteria” or “subjective criteria.” When we discard such terms, we come to a realization that “truth is made rather than found,” “that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences” (*CIS 7*). Similarly, when we realize that truth is made, not found, the traditional notion of truth becomes useless and we stop thinking of truth as waiting to be discovered. That’s why we need to set aside the idea of truth:

To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or ‘true’ as a term which repays ‘analysis.’ ‘The nature of truth’ is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect ‘the nature of man’ and ‘the nature of God,’ and differing from ‘the nature of positron,’ and ‘the nature of Oedipal fixation. (*CIS 8*)

He is neither claiming that there is no truth out there nor claiming that we have already found it so that the pursuit of truth is now useless (*CIS* 194). His only suggestion is that since we cannot discover truth, such attempts to find truth will be unprofitable.

Rorty's emphasis on "setting aside" is important to note here because he does not want to argue against old vocabularies. He does not want to claim that the old vocabularies were false. To call any vocabulary false, you should have a clear understanding of what is true. So, such claim would turn his antifoundationalism into foundationalism. When one finds an old vocabulary to be useless, an alternative is to offer a new vocabulary in an interesting way instead of offering arguments from the common vocabulary. For a new vocabulary, no old criteria would work: "Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics" (*CIS* 9). It is better to think of "intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (*CIS* 9).

So, the shift here is from the idea of "correspondence" to "utility," from finding resemblance to reality to solution to problems. For this purpose, we need to drop the idea of language as a medium of expression or representation and adopt the Davidsonian notion of language games as tools, which is neither "reductionist nor expansionist"; "it does not, as analytical philosophers sometimes have, purport to give reductive definition of semantical notions like 'truth' or 'intentionality' or 'reference.'" Nor does it resemble

Heidegger's attempt to make language into a kind of divinity, something of which human beings are emanations" (*CIS* 11).

In order to clarify his notion of language and to contrast it with a representationalist notion of language as a medium of expression or representation, Rorty uses the analogies of "tools" and "bits of a jigsaw puzzle" (*CIS* 11). The traditionalists try to evaluate language games in terms of whether they could identify all the items in the jigsaw puzzle. Here, their attempt in their use of language is to get as close as possible to identifying all the bits and pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. But a Rortian pragmatist would try to see whether the language game as a tool is useful or not. So, in this scheme, developing a new vocabulary is like replacing the old tool with the new more useful one: "The proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools. To come up with such a vocabulary is more like discarding the lever and the chock because one has envisaged the pulley, or like discarding gesso and tempera because one has now figured out how to size canvas properly" (*CIS* 12). Here, questions often asked by the traditionalists--"Does this language accurately represent the reality?" or "Is this language an adequate medium for representing reality or expressing meanings?"--are discarded as these questions assume an essential nonlinguistic nature of reality that can be expressed or represented by language. Rorty drops both the positivist notion of language as reflection and the Romanticist notion of language as expression of inner truth and adopts the Davidsonian characterization of language as a tool.

In this Davidsonian view of language, the history of ideas is the history of metaphors: "To see the history of language, and thus of the arts, the sciences, and the

moral sense, as the history of metaphor is to drop the picture of the human mind, or human languages, becoming better and better suited to the purposes for which God or Nature designed them, for example, able to express more and more meanings or to represent more and more facts. The idea that language has a purpose goes once the idea of language as medium goes” (*CIS* 16). Here, a change of vocabularies is similar to a change of metaphors when the old ones become literal. In this perspective, new scientific revolutions do not reveal the nature of truth or offer us a closer look at the nature of nature; rather they are merely metaphoric redescriptions. But here, Rorty’s understanding of the metaphoric nature of language games is different from how metaphors are understood by the Platonists/positivists and the Romanticists. The Platonists/positivists “think that the point of language is to represent a hidden reality which lies outside us” and the Romanticists think “its purpose is to express a hidden reality which lies within us” (*CIS* 19). But Rorty takes new metaphors as new tools that happen to work. So, Rorty and the pragmatists believe in the sheer contingency of language that parallels Darwin’s theory of evolution.

To summarize, Rorty’s antifoundationalist ways of knowing is against all traditional theories of knowing, which is to say, against the whole epistemological tradition of the West. He is shifting the focus of philosophy from epistemological questions about how to “know,” to how to find solutions to problems. He seeks to replace epistemology with hermeneutics, from a search for knowledge of the underlying patterns of reality to the interpretations that offer an understanding that is useful for the community at a particular moment in history. In this Rortian scheme, we need to discard

the traditional notion of language as a medium of representation or expression. We need instead to adopt language as a tool to cope with the new situations. Here, language does not provide an access to nonlinguistic “facts”; rather, it simply describes the world. What we understand as truth is not the property of the world, but rather the product of language: “Only if we do that can we fully accept the argument I offered earlier—the argument that since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths” (CIS 21). Therefore, what we try to see is not whether words correspond to the world; rather it is to see whether “words” (ideas) hang together or not. Our focus, thus, is on agreement or consensus between the interlocutors rather than on the correspondence of their ideas to an objective “reality.”

### **Foundationalist Criticisms of Rorty’s Notions of Truth and Language**

Rorty’s rejection of the notions of correspondence or representation and objective reality has been challenged by some modern foundationalist philosophers. These philosophers denounce Rorty for trivializing the serious projects of philosophy to inquire about the nature of truth and reality. Though they do not make the absolutist claim that objective and universal truths are completely accessible through rational or any other kind of investigation, they still do not discard the idea. In making a claim that we can discover some kind of objective reality (minimally objective or partially objective), they seem to contradict themselves. In this tendency they resemble Plato as he also seems to say that true ideas exist even if we cannot access them. Like Plato, these philosophers also insist that the philosophical enquiry into the nature of truth should not be discarded.

Some of the modern philosophers that critique Rorty's position are Simon Blackburn, Michael Lynch, and Bernard Williams.

Blackburn makes a harsh criticism of what he calls the radical relativism of the Sophists (Protagoras) and modern pragmatic philosophers. He thinks that the Protagorean "Man the Measure" argument or Rorty's notion of the "contingency of truth" would lead to nihilism and complete relativism in the absence of any objective criteria. This is how he begins his book, *Truth: A Guide*: "There are real standards. We must fight soggy nihilism, skepticism and cynicism. We must not believe that anything goes. We must not believe that all opinion is ideology, that reason is only power, that there is no truth to prevail. Without defenses against postmodern irony and cynicism, multiculturalism and relativism, we will all go to hell in a hand basket" (xiii).

Blackburn's idea is that we should not discard the idea of representation or correspondence between things and language, and that we have been able to present truth or at least to get closer to a truthful account of reality. Even if we may not be able to achieve absolute truth, it should not mean that we should discard the project of trying to discover it. He believes that there are true representations and false representations, right things and the wrong things. The notion of truth or falsity, that of right or wrong, can be determined by whether any representation reflects the reality/facts accurately. For instance, if we have a map and we can reach wherever we want to with its help, then the map correctly represents the reality:

Does a landscape tell us how it is to be mapped? In one sense, clearly not.  
. . . In another sense, however, the landscape indeed dictates something. It

dictates how it is to be mapped, given a set of conventions determining the meanings of the signs and shapes on the map, and the meanings of their presence or absence. Therefore, once a set of conventions has been put in place, a map can be correct or incorrect. In other words, it can represent the landscape as it is, or represent the landscape as it is not. (Blackburn 157)

On the one hand, Blackburn says that the “landscape dictates something”; on the other hand, he says that such dictations are based on conventions. Now the question is whether the landscape dictates or the conventions do? And these conventions are the established rules of a language game. Here, the standards to judge the truth value of statements (map) are conventions. And these conventions are developed by humans; they do not represent the landscape as it is. Therefore, any claim about maps (or any propositions) is true or false not in terms of whether it represents the landscape; rather it is determined by whether it hangs together with the established conventions.

Blackburn himself offers how Rorty would respond to this idea: “And all we have pointed out, he may say, is the success of the map, its utility to the churchgoer or the walker. Similarly, the one undeniable measure of science’s authority is the fact that its productions work” (158). The idea is that the maps work not because they accurately copy the landscape but because they help us cope with the problem, to find a particular place. Blackburn rejects Rorty’s position thus: “At this point the unconverted ought to complain—loudly, very loudly—that the opposition between coping and copying totters and falls. The map enables us to cope, indeed, but we also know why. It enables us to



cope precisely because it represents the landscape correctly; it enables us to anticipate what we shall find” (158).

Now Blackburn sounds logical and Rorty seems untenable. However, the opposite happens; Blackburn contradicts himself, and he does not seem to have understood Rorty’s point well or does not wish to admit that he does. Rorty’s point is that the map is our invention; it’s not the language that the landscape speaks in. So, we cannot “discover” that this map captures the “essence” of the landscape it represents. Here, what Nietzsche says about representation is very pertinent. While discussing his notion that what we believe to be true representations are nothing but mere metaphoric representations, description of reality in terms of human language, Nietzsche states:

When someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such seeking and finding. Yet this is how matters stand regarding seeking and finding "truth" within the realm of reason. If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare "look, a mammal" I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value. That is to say, it is a thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be "true in itself" or really and universally valid apart from man. At bottom, what the investigator of such truths is seeking is only the metamorphosis of the world into man. He strives to understand the world as something analogous to man, and at best he achieves by his struggles the feeling of assimilation. . . . His method is

to treat man as the measure of all things, but in doing so he again proceeds from the error of believing that he has these things [which he intends to measure] immediately before him as mere objects. He forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves. (118)

Similar to finding something one has kept behind a bush himself/herself, if one knows the geography, having an accurate map is not a surprising thing, either for him/her as the maker of the map or for someone who uses it. The idea is that language (map) is not the unproblematic medium of representation. It is rather, in the Rortian scheme of ideas, a tool for us to cope with the problems we face. Any attempt to prove the truthfulness or accuracy of the map will not be successful. It is working because we are following certain conventions that at a particular time and history are working. If the map represents the landscape, everyone, from anywhere in the world, should be able to understand it. But this does not happen. Blackburn himself does not see that possibility: “Certainly no map gives us the whole truth, entire, complete, and final. There are new things to map, as new interests grip us. But many maps give us some truths, and some more than others” (159).

One obvious question is “If map does not represent whole truth, entire, complete, and final,” how can we say that it is objective? How can we say that it “copies” or “represents” the landscape accurately? If we cannot prove that a map accurately represents or does not, what is the benefit of arguing for or against it? The impossibility of verifying the accuracy of representation is the reason why Rorty says we need to “set

aside” such truth seeking tendencies instead of arguing vehemently against them. The argument to prove the truthfulness of something will be inconclusive.

Similarly, Rorty would also say that we should try to see truth not from within the vocabulary, but from the perspective of another vocabulary. When we do so, we can see how what we think of as an accurate representation of reality may be completely inappropriate to represent what it tries to. We may need a completely different map (or something else). And here whatever kind of map works is not what takes us closer to the accurate representation of landscape. It is rather a more useful map. In this context, a reference from Ben F. Barton and Marthalee S. Barton’s discussion of the London Underground Diagram (LUD) will be relevant to illustrate the point about the usefulness of map. The LUD replaced the earlier map which, while trying to “faithfully present[ed] geographic relations among the many stations,” was very complex and congested. So, LUD, “in contrast, . . . , based on a design by engineering draftsman Beck, is ostensibly a highly schematized representation of the system that sacrifices geographic accuracy in the interests of both readability and consonance with experience” (65). The LUD helps us get from station to station and so to our destination, but no one would say that it is “accurate” as regards the distance between the stations. As Barton and Barton say, this map was highly useful and was appreciated by many people for its clarity and intelligibility despite the fact that its “clarity is deceptive; it is attained . . . at the cost of considerable distortion” (65).

The problem with “discovering” or “finding” the true nature of anything, the world or the landscape, is that that anything, including the world itself, does not speak its

own language that we can understand and express without any mediation of human language. That is why the whole history of philosophy has but vainly tried to discover the nature of truth about “nature” or “human nature.”

Another statement that shows self-contradiction in Blackburn makes it clear why Platonism is worth discarding:

We should remember, as well, that Socrates is not a cardboard cut-out absolutist. He does not roar and bawl the absolute across the hall; famously, he questions and questions but never dictates. He is not a dogmatist. This shows what we have already come across, that you can admit the authority of truth without immediately supposing that you possess it. The admission might precede a dark night of skepticism, whereby although truth, real truth, should be the target of our inquiries, we fear that we shall never achieve it. (29)

Blackburn sounds very Platonic when he says that we should continue trying to discover truth even if we won't find it. However, Plato at least believes, even if his practice deceives him, that rational investigation can acquaint us with the true. But Blackburn does not believe so, yet insists that we should not discard the search. Blackburn's position is untenable even as he claims that Rorty's position is so. Rorty says that since truth is the property of “sentences” and “sentences” are human creations, we cannot have an access to nonhuman reality or truth. This leads to his position that its futile to try to discover what we cannot. But Blackburn's position is untenable because he says that we cannot know the “Truth” in its entirety, yet we should not discard our search for it. Since we

have no criteria beyond human vocabularies, how can we claim that our representations have “this much of truth” or “that much”?

Blackburn also ridicules Rorty’s notion of consensual or justified belief in place of the Platonic notion of “universal truth.” Blackburn says:

The problem is that it seems integral to the self-conception of mapmakers and timetable producers, as well as scientists, historians and perhaps even literary critics, that there is a kind of success that goes beyond common agreement. We do not make a map by sitting and talking it through until we are all agreed, but by measuring and checking. There is such a thing as getting it right, and agreement with others is a very imperfect signal of having got things right, being neither necessary nor sufficient. (159)

This is a very traditional defense of the positivist position, that scientific truths are objective, measurable, and verifiable. Blackburn’s point is that when we have to determine whether something is true or not, we do not validate it by “gaining the assent of our peers” (160). For instance, when we need to determine “whether Cambridge is north of London,” we do not do so by asking our peers. Rather, we can use a compass to see whether the statement is true or not. But the point to remember is that the way we know the direction by using a compass is a useful way; it does not mean that the direction in the compass represents the relationship (direction) between Cambridge and London as it is. The other thing is that we need to be able to distinguish between what Rorty or Nietzsche say about “truth” and “reality,” the description about the world and the world itself. And what Blackburn seems to be talking about is “Reality,” the world outside.

Rorty never claims that reality does not exist. As we have discussed earlier, his claim is that we cannot know the reality as such. But his critics like Blackburn fail to make this distinction. George Bragues also makes a similar criticism of Rorty: “Beyond a few reflective moments, not even the most enthusiastic anti-objectivists can stop believing that there is in fact a world independent of our minds and language and that it is pretty much the same structure as we sense and describe it. Nor can they really doubt that, say, fire causes heat or that unprotected sex with an AIDS-infected individual will cause the transmission of the virus, while sustaining the opinion that such relationships are only narratives we happen to find appealing” (163). Rorty does not deny that “fire causes heat”; his point is that we cannot accurately “represent” what fire as such is because “fire” does not speak its own language and even if it does, we do not have an access to it. So, what these critics are doing is confusing “reality” with “truth.”

When we talk about truth, Rorty believes that we need to consider how every idea of truth is based on certain vocabularies. So, when we find an individual sentence to be very true, we need to see that in the broader context of vocabularies, sentences depend for meaning on the vocabulary they belong to. And when we move from one vocabulary to the other, we know how the sentence that seems absolutely true may be absolutely false in another vocabulary. For instance, the idea that “the sun revolves around the earth” was as absolutely true for the people before Galileo as it is absolutely false today. Let me cite a long passage from Rorty to make the point:

In such cases, it is easy to run together the fact that the world contains the causes of our being justified in holding a belief with the claim that some

nonlinguistic state of the world is itself an example of truth, or that some such state ‘makes a belief true’ by ‘corresponding’ to it. But it is not so easy when we consider examples of alternative language games—the vocabulary of ancient Athenian politics versus Jefferson’s, the moral vocabulary of Saint Paul versus Freud’s, the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle, the idiom of Blake versus that of Dryden—it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these better than another, of the world as deciding between them. When the notion of “description of the world” is moved from the level of criterion-governed sentences within language games to language games as wholes, games which we do not choose between by reference to criteria, the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense. It becomes hard to think that vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it. Attention . . . to the vocabularies in which sentences are formulated, rather than to individual sentences, makes us realize, for example, that the fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian” (*CIS* 6).

So, what is true or not is determined by the conventions established in vocabularies (Rorty, *PM* 321). And these vocabularies, as Rorty says, do not represent the language of the world. Therefore, pragmatists “reject the notion that we can match bits of our languages to bits of the non-linguistic world so that we can be sure that just those bits of

language . . . accurately represent or mirror the world” (Kumar 51). Such view assumes that we can transcend history and language. As has already been discussed, Rorty rejects this position. He would say that even what we call scientific and objective truths are consensual, that the community of scientists determines whether something is true or not. In normal conditions, whatever new “truth” is “found,” it has to conform to the existing theories and practices to receive the status of being “true.” Dorothy Winsor makes a similar claim about scientific knowledge/truth:

Moreover, the textual construction of knowledge is social in nature because each document must convince other people of its validity in order to be accepted as knowledge. Only documents that do convince others are used. Documents that, for any reason, cease to be convincing cease being treated as containing knowledge. Thus, for instance, twentieth-century scientists do not treat the contents of astrology texts as knowledge, although fourteenth-century scientists did. In effect, knowledge may be defined as that which most people in a discourse community are convinced of, and what a discourse community is convinced of is indicated by the texts it has accepted. (60)

Even scientists themselves admit that anything they “discover” is most likely to be superseded by a scientist yet to come.

Another critique of Rortian pragmatism or Protagorean relativism regards their claim about the contingency of truth and the multiplicity of interpretations. While discussing Protagoras’ dictum that man is the measure of all things, Blackburn says:



To return to our theme, the passage presents the classic ‘recoil’ argument, a judo-flip designed to discomfort the relativist Protagoras. The idea is that the relativist position, supposed here to be exemplified by the doctrine that man is the measure of all things, recoils upon itself. It is advanced as something to be accepted, as something true. But that is somehow inconsistent with the doctrine’s own import, its own denial that truth has the meaning that common sense (‘think thousands’) gives to it. In a nutshell, if the Measure Doctrine is true, then it is refuted by its own truth. And this means it cannot be true. (27)

Rorty would have an easy answer to this argument: he drops the idea of “truth.” He does not know whether what he says is true or not. This is why Protagoras also prefers to use “justified” beliefs as Wayne Booth uses warranted beliefs. What Rorty says here is that the tendency to talk about truth has not been beneficial, so it may be more useful to discard any discussion of truth. Rorty does not claim that everything is contingent except what he says. He rather believes in the contingency of everything. However, this should not be taken to mean that he believes in radical subjectivism. Rather, his scheme is pragmatic, that of utility rather than that of subjectivity or objectivity of truth. Stanley Fish has an answer to the kind of question raised by Blackburn. In the passage below, Fish responds to Hadley Arkes’s similar question about antifoundationalism:

Despite Arkes’s smugness, however, it is a point easily gotten around. First of all, it mistakes the nature of the anti-foundationalist claim, which is not that there are no foundations, but that whatever foundations there

are . . . have been established by persuasion, that is, in the course of argument and counter argument on the basis of examples and evidence that are themselves cultural and contextual. Anti-foundationalism, then is a thesis about how foundations emerge in contradiction to the assumptions that foundations do not emerge but simply *are*, anchoring the universe and thought from a point above history and culture, it says that foundations are local and temporal phenomena, and are always vulnerable to challenges from other localities and other times. This vulnerability also extends, of course, to the anti-foundationalist thesis itself, and that is why its assertion does not involve a contradiction, as it would if what was being asserted was the impossibility of foundational assertion, but since what is being asserted is that assertions—about foundations or anything else—have to make their way against objections and counter-examples, anti-foundationalism can without contradiction include itself under its own scope and await the objections one might make to it; and so long as those objections are successfully met and turned back by those who preach anti-foundationalism . . . , anti-foundationalism can be asserted as absolutely true since . . . there is no argument that holds the field against it. (30)

So, foundational claims are contingent, including the claim that “foundations are contingent.”

One more question that the absolutists like Blackburn have is similar to what Socrates asks about Protagoras in *Theaetetus*: Is there any difference between a tadpole

and a wise Sophist? Blackburn says: “This is fairly astonishing: how can Rorty deny and debunk truth, but keep notions such as ‘better informed’ or ‘more enlightened’ which are obviously inextricably entangled with it?” (161). In other words, “Why cannot we say that what a doctor says about medication is closer to truth than what a layman says about it?” This again takes us to what Protagoras says about being better and being truer, being more useful and being closer to truth. What Rorty would say is that a doctor or a wise sophist definitely knows better than the layman in her field of expertise. He would also say that doctors would be better able to cure patients than a layman. He means that those who are wise can offer us better solutions to problems we are facing because they are aware of more warrants. But this does not guarantee that what they know is true or closer to being true. This is because what is “truth” is what we do not know. It is like asking a question like “Does the sun always rise from the east?” And Blackburn would say that “the sun rises from the east” is true because we have seen it for centuries. Rorty would say that to claim that it does not rise from the east would be foolish because what we have seen does not support that position. However, we also cannot say that the sun may not rise from some other direction someday. So, the idea is to avoid saying that something is true or not and to start thinking about what is justified or not.

Michael Lynch also responds to Rorty’s call for stopping philosophizing or the philosopher’s search for truth. Lynch contends that even if we may not discover absolute truth, “we should [not] stop asking them [questions about one’s life like ‘How should I live?’ or ‘What matters to me?’]. I have argued in this book that pursuing the truth still matters even when it is difficult to achieve, and even when the truth achieved is partly

subjective and contextual” (180). He further says, “We are historical creatures; we are products of a culture, and our conclusions, after all, are only our conclusions. We are apt to be fools, to get things wrong even by our own lights. The key is to appreciate this fact—which I have argued is part and parcel with appreciating the possibility of objective truth—without slipping into cynicism. If we are bound to be fools, let us be fools with hope” (181). The first problem in Lynch’s statement is how something can be partly subjective and contextual. This means that the same thing is subjective and objective, contextual and acontextual. This is what he himself calls foolish, but I don’t understand what hope there is to discover objective truth when he himself admits that “we are historical creatures; we are products of a culture, and our conclusions, after all, are only our conclusions.” It is difficult to understand why he insists that we should try to discover “objective truth” when we know that we can never discover it. It is difficult to understand why he thinks that we still need to maintain the distinction between justified belief and true belief when he himself accepts that “our conclusions are only our conclusions,” which I understand to mean that they are subjective, true to me but not necessarily true to others or true ahistorically. As Rorty says, the problem is that we cannot know we have the truth even if we were to find it, since we are bound by our nature as historical beings.

Let us see how Lynch critiques Rorty’s idea that it is better to get rid of the distinction between justified belief and true belief. He maintains that we should keep the distinction between these two things: “In other words, lesson number one about justification is that not every justified belief will be true and not every true belief is

justified . . . . We value justified beliefs partly *because* justified beliefs tend to be true”

(73). He further says:

Truth, I’ve claimed, is minimally objective. Insofar as Rorty wishes to deny this, I reject it. Nonetheless, I certainly don’t deny that Rorty is right that context does affect the path of inquiry. I agree with Rorty that inquiry “has many different goals . . . getting what we want, the improvement of man’s estate, convincing as many audience as possible, solving as many problems as possible.” Quite so. As I argued above, when asking questions, when engaging in inquiry, we are guided by many values. But it is a serious mistake to think that on this basis, we should no longer say that one of the goals of inquiry is also having true beliefs. (74)

As I have already said, this position is self-contradictory. On the one hand he concedes that “context does affect the path of inquiry,” yet on the other hand, he claims that “truth . . . is minimally objective.” By saying that truth is not “completely” objective, he is himself admitting that it is subjective. Rorty’s or Protagoras’s use of the term “justified belief” is a way to avoid a perennial problem about proving something true beyond language and our perception. If we are bound by context and language, what we acquire through our inquiry is always going to be affected by these factors. So, what we may call to be true because we have certain evidences or warrants may turn out to be false tomorrow when we find some other evidences. And there is no end to this process. So, what we believe to be true is only a “justified belief,” justified to a particular community or a group of audience. As what we call truth is a property of language, any attempt to

discover “Truth” lying out there will be futile. How would Blackburn or Lynch verify that what they present as a truth is in fact true? We ought to pursue truth, they say, yet if they can put forward no truth that is unimpeachable, then why should we continue this pursuit?

Bernard Williams also follows a line similar to Blackburn and Lynch. Like Lynch, he does not completely reject Rorty’s claim that “‘it is impossible to step outside our skins—the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute.’ . . . . The least contentious is that we cannot think about the world without describing it in some way: the world cannot present itself uncategorized” (Williams 27). Rorty’s claim that “there is no way in which the world simply describes itself” is “not too upsetting” (Williams 27). One of the ideas of Rorty that Williams finds problematic is Rorty’s notion that “all we can do is compare one description with another. He denies that ‘deep down beneath all the texts, there is something which is not just one more text but that to which various texts are trying to be ‘adequate’” (Williams 27). I don’t think Rorty denies that there is “something” beneath or beyond the texts, since that would make him foundationalist, saying that we know absolutely that there is no objective reality. What he would say is that we cannot know that “something” or “objective reality” as we are bound by language and history. The main problem for Williams is to apply Rorty’s notion about objective reality to scientific discourse. Rorty believes that scientific progress is not merely a replacement of the old description by the new and more appealing one. It has to be taken rather as a progress towards “finding out what the world is really like” (Williams 29). As Williams says,

“Advances in scientific theory quite often, in fact, involve explaining why some predictions of previous theories were true, while other failed. Not all scientific advance does that—no recipe fits all scientific advance—but it is one important phenomenon that gives substance to the idea of objective scientific advance” (30). Williams believes scientific development is offering us a truer and truer explanation of the “world as it is” and human beings as they really are. Science is making an important contribution to mankind by discovering the ways the world and human form works. It is a contribution “to a conception of the world as it is, independently of our enquiries” (31). Williams further says, “An account of the relation of science to culture should still start, it seems to me, from that impression which so powerfully affects its practitioners, and which is so dismissively treated by Rorty: that science offers one of the most effective ways in which we can be led out of the web of texts, that archive of discourses in which Rorty finds himself imprisoned along with the ‘bookish intellectuals of recent times’” (36). But he immediately also says that “that conception may be an illusion” (31). And Williams is concerned that it is hard to give up the notion that science is getting us closer to truth about this world “even if it is an illusion. It will be hard to give up for those working in science” (31). Williams further says:

There is an important contrast here, which Rorty seems not to see, between scientific enquiry on the one hand and Rorty’s interesting ideas about the future of philosophy. In a revealing passage he says that ‘pragmatism denies the possibility of getting beyond the ... notion of ‘seeing how things hang together’—which, for the bookish intellectual of

recent times, means seeing how all the various vocabularies of all the various epochs and cultures hang together.’ That may be the program for the successor of philosophy, or for the literary studies from which he does not want that successor to be distinct, but it is certainly no program for science. The sense that one is not locked in a world of books, that one is confronting ‘the world’, that the work is made hard or easy by what is actually there—these are part of the driving force, the essential consciousness of science; and even if Rorty’s descriptions of what science really is are true, they are not going to be accepted into that consciousness without altering it in important ways—almost certainly for the worse, so far as the progress of science is concerned. (31)

This concern is legitimate and valid: the driving force for the scientists has been the conviction that their mission is to understand how the world really works. It is to understand the world through some objective criteria and rational methods. So, Williams’ concern is that Rorty’s notion about science as a genre similar to literature destroys the whole foundation upon which science is built. And when this foundation is demolished, how can science work? But Rorty is not saying that science has done nothing more than offer arbitrary theories about the world. He believes that science and technology has relieved mankind of several problems in the world and needs to thrive. As Williams himself cites Rorty, “its discoveries form the basis of modern scientific civilization. We can hardly be too grateful for them” (32). Williams’ concern that destroying the positivist notion of science will create a complete void is not certain. As Rorty says, “similar worry



was there about the loss of religious beliefs in eighteenth century and nineteenth century, but proved false” (*CIS* 85). And his idea that science does not discover the essential nature of truth or objective reality does not create the kind of problem Williams is afraid of. What Rorty is saying is that we should take science as finding better and better solutions to the problems human kind is facing rather than taking us closer to Truth. And science is mostly working to find solutions to problems rather than to understand the underlying nature of truth.

The idea that new theories confirm whether old ones were true or not is problematic as we do not have a metalanguage or metatheory to determine the truth value of any proposition or language games. So, Rorty is saying simply that we should avoid seeking something that we cannot have an access to or we have not been able to have an access to.

Then, Williams has a concern about the truthfulness of Rorty’s pragmatism, specifically,

whether his ideas can be, in their own terms, ‘true’ at all. For the pragmatist to say that his formulations are true presumably means simply that they work out: and what reasons have we to think that the pragmatists’ sentences about science will work out better in the practice of scientists than scientists’ sentences do? The point here is not that scientists have self-revealing knowledge of what they are up to, but merely that the scientists’ sentences help to keep them going—and that, for the pragmatist, is all that can matter. (31)

First, a pragmatist like Rorty would not claim that his sentences work better for the scientists than those of the scientists. Privileging his own sentences would not be pragmatic or antifoundationalist. Similarly, Rorty is not claiming that his theory is truer or better (in terms of being more capable of exposing the nature of the world) than that of the positivists. Second, Williams is making a water-tight division between the scientists and pragmatists. Pragmatism is not merely a philosophy whose insights cannot be adopted by any other people from disciplines other than philosophy. Even scientists can be pragmatists or can look at their work from a pragmatic point of view. It is also possible that scientists may find this pragmatic notion liberating rather than constricting; they now do not need to worry about Truth, but can continue in their mission to formulate or invent theories or things that work or improve human condition.

### **Leftist Critiques of Rorty**

In their criticism of Rorty, many of the radical Leftists<sup>12</sup> argue in a way that resembles modern foundationalists (Rightists). Despite their appreciation of Rorty's historicism, they fall back on a certain form of foundationalism by advocating the need to expose the underlying "structures of oppression." In general, Leftists have an ambivalent attitude towards Rorty's pragmatism. On the one hand they appreciate Rorty for breaking away from traditional philosophy or foundationalism. On the other hand, the radical Left characterizes Rorty, as William Weaver shows in his discussion of the radical Left, "as a 'complacent pragmatist,' a person who, having worked to turn our attention away from

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<sup>12</sup> For Rorty, the radical Leftists are those who believe that the task of the Leftists is to expose the underlying realities about oppressions and injustices. What these Leftists do is replace old vocabularies of the society with their own foundational vocabulary that, in their view, can expose the true nature of "oppression" and "injustices." See Chapter III of Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* (73-110) and Rorty's article "The Professor and the Prophet."

traditional philosophical problems, simply fails to do anything with his insights. This failure is seen as a complacency brought about by his social context: that of a white, male, privileged academic” (Weaver 743). So, from the perspective of the radical Leftist, Rorty is a conformist as he only destroys traditional foundations, but fails to offer any model to change the status quo. Rorty, in this view, fails to speak the language of the oppressed and detect the structures that create and perpetuate injustices and domination. He does not offer, in Fish’s terms, a “theory hope” or a solid frame of reference to speak about the injustices perpetrated towards the oppressed people. Many Leftists like Cornel West, Martha Minow, and Elizabeth Spelman disapprove Rorty’s theory for the lack of such frame of reference.

About the Leftist criticism of pragmatism, Rorty says: “In recent years, the post-Marxist ‘postmodernist’ Left has renewed the charge that pragmatism is ‘objectively’ conservative, that it cannot provide the sort of ‘radical critique’ which Marxism once offered us—the sort of icy-cold, ‘scientific,’ un-romantic, analysis that, so the postmodernist story goes, is required to cut through ‘ideological distortions’ and lay bare the underlying realities” (Rorty, “Professor” 73). So, their main charge is that Rorty fails to expose the underlying realities of oppression. And this is exactly what Rorty is trying to avoid: he believes that it is not beneficial to try to explore and expose the “underlying realities” or “Truth” about anything, whether it is oppression or any other phenomenon:

These radical critics are quite right in suspecting that pragmatists are no good at laying bare underlying realities. This is because pragmatists do not believe there are such things. We pragmatists think that the reality-

appearance distinction is an awkward and misleading tool of analysis, one that needs to be replaced with a distinction between the oppressors' descriptions of what is going on and the oppressed's descriptions, unsupplemented by the claim that the oppressed are on the side of the really real" (Rorty, "Professor" 73).

Here, neither the oppressor nor the oppressed have any access to the "really real." Such an attempt to pin down the underlying reality or to claim that the oppressed's stories reveal the authentic reality is essentialist. This tendency is similar to Platonism or vulgar Marxism. Rorty, as we have already discussed, intends to set aside such tendencies and underlines the need to offer an alternative redescription of reality from the perspective of the oppressed instead of trying to prove it to be true or authentic: "The oppressed have different purposes and wants from their oppressors, but they do not have deeper insight into reality. They just want to relieve suffering, to change things for the better" (Rorty, "Professor" 73). In order to fulfill the purpose of eliminating pain and changing the world for better, we do not need to understand what "the things really are." For Rorty, the problem with the oppressor is that they cause pain and suffering to the oppressed; it is not that what they think to be "real" is false:

The trouble with the oppressor is that they are causing unnecessary pain, not that they have gotten things wrong. So, all that intellectuals can do for the oppressed is help them formulate their purposes and their wants in a way which cuts loose from earlier language, language that the oppressors designed to serve their purposes and fulfill their wants. But the good new

language will be neither more rigorous nor less “ideological” nor less “superstructural”—closer to what is really down there at the base—than the bad old one. It will just be a more useful tool for changing things so as to decrease pain. (Rorty, “Professor” 73)

So, the problem with the radical Left is that even if they try to utilize Rorty’s pragmatism, in their attempt to fight the oppression of the poor and the marginalized, they uphold what they seek to destroy. Their criticism of Rorty for his failure to adopt the politics of the oppressed goes against the basic commitment of pragmatism to antirepresentationalism and contingency of every belief and world view.

Cornel West is a radical Leftist with an ambivalent attitude towards Rorty’s pragmatism. He shares with Rorty a pragmatic philosophical orientation. He, like Rorty, rejects all totalizing tendencies; he also is optimistic about the future. His focus on romantic vision and the need to fight for the elimination of suffering of mankind gets him closer to Rorty’s pragmatic vision and keeps him away from the pessimism of Foucault. However, some other hard core Leftists take him, as they do Rorty, as intellectually immature:

Finally, romantic hope is, for most American Leftists, a sign of intellectual immaturity. For such hope is incompatible with the ice-cold, man-from-Mars style of thinking and writing exemplified by Foucault, and with the scorn for the social hopes of the Enlightenment which we postmoderns are supposed to have learned from Nietzsche and Heidegger. From the point

of view of most of the American Left, West's tone is all wrong. So much the worse, in my view, for that Left. (Rorty, "Professor" 70)

Cornel West also shares with other Leftists like Foucault an interest in the analysis of society in terms of power relations. William Weaver sums up West's similarity with Foucauldians:

"Prophetic Pragmatism," Cornel West's theory, "shares with Foucault a preoccupation with the operation of powers." For West, as for Minow and Spelman, the languages of objectivity, convergence, and privileged discourse have all worked to channel power to certain groups within society. These languages are reflective of and help reinforce existing power structures. West's pragmatism "shuns any linguistic, dialogical, communicative, or conversational models and replaces them with a focus on the multileveled operations of power." (748)

West associates his pragmatism with oppositional discourses that raise the issues of race, class, and gender. For him, pragmatism becomes weak if it fails to commit itself to the politics of the oppressed. West opines: "neopragmatism learns from, builds upon, and goes beyond its own tradition from Emerson to Rorty—still concerned with human powers, provocation, and personality, it is now inextricably linked to oppositional analyses of class, race, and gender and oppositional movements for creative democracy and social freedom" (210). West thinks Rorty only reveals the problems of foundationalist language games but fails to relate these languages to the politics of power.

So, for Cornel West, Rorty's project is incomplete due to his failure to link traditional languages to the politics of power:

Neopragmatism only kicks the philosophic props from under liberal bourgeois capitalist societies; it requires no change in our cultural and political practices. What then are the ethical and political consequences of his neopragmatism? .... To undermine the privileged philosophic notions of necessity, universality, rationality, objectivity, and transcendentalism without acknowledging and accenting the oppressive deeds done under the ideological aegis of these notions is to write an intellectual and homogeneous history, a history which fervently attacks epistemological privilege but remains relatively silent about forms of political, economic, racial, and sexual privilege. (West 206-208)

West disagrees with Rorty because Rorty does not account for the role played by discursive power. Rorty, West believes, does not offer an alternative political vision even if he destroys the traditional ones. His historicizing, for West, is very immaterial; even if he claims that truth or reality is contextual, his account of context is very "thin." As West says, Rorty's historicizing "remains too broad, too thin, devoid of the realities of power" (749).

But Rorty cannot agree with West in terms of his idea of replacing representationalism with the notion of discourse. The model of discourse or the frame of reference of "discursive theory" brings West, despite his attempt to evade foundationalism, closer to foundationalism. As Weaver says, "To do away with

representationalism only to replace it with "discourse" is to fall victim to the same urges plaguing traditional philosophers. To the extent West insists that pragmatism give birth to a new political theory, and to the extent he attempts to use pragmatism to buttress his own prophecy, he is still playing the representationalist game" (751). What Rorty dislikes is to develop "a 'unified theory of oppression'—to find a philosophical way of integrating 'issues of race, class, and gender' " (Rorty "Professor" 77). So, Rorty finds West to be torn between an attempt to build such a theory and suspecting that anything important may come out of such a theory. In other words, West falls into the trap of representationalism that he tries to repudiate. As Rorty says, West "suffers from the same professional deformation which afflicted Marx. He is still enamored with the idea that his own academic discipline—philosophy—is somehow more closely linked to prophetic vision than are, say, anthropology, literary criticism, economics, or art history" ("Professor" 77). Rorty wants West and other Leftists to cast aside the residues of Marxist thought and any notion of a general theory of oppression. Rorty succinctly sums up what he likes and dislikes about Cornel West thus: "I agree with West that what the American Left most needs is prophecy—some sense of a utopian American future. But I think our Left could also use a lot less political correctness, and a lot less of what Stanley Fish has called, acutely, 'anti-foundationalist theory hope'" ("Professor" 78).

Like Cornel West, some other radical Leftists like Martha Minow and Elizabeth Spelman make a similar critique of Rorty. These critics appreciate Rorty for destroying traditional discourses about objectivity, justice, and truth. They also adopt Rorty's idea that truth is situated or contextual and any attempt to discover a universal "Truth" is



bound to fail. However, they find a weakness in Rorty's project as it fails to locate the idea of context to specific phenomena like class, race, and gender. Their point is that Rorty fails to blend his philosophy with an alternative vision of politics. As Weaver writes:

Martha Minow and Elizabeth Spelman agree that Rorty's pragmatism is an exceptional rhetorical tool for taking on and overturning unwanted traditions. But according to them, the main problem with Rorty's pragmatism is Rorty. They contend that having cleared away the past, Rorty should have seen a path leading straight from pragmatism to a politics of the oppressed. Adopting elements of Cornel West's critique, Minow and Spelman suggest pragmatists fail 'to understand and appreciate the contexts of oppressed groups,' and that Rorty is 'insufficiently attuned to context.' These 'instrumental failures of Rorty's work' leave the door open for a sort of liberal complacency. Thus, his radical Left critics hold that Rorty's failure to understand his own position within class and society, and how that position inhibits him from being sufficiently attuned to the oppressed, creates a discontinuity between his pragmatism and his political perspective. (743)

The problem with these radical Leftists is that they seem to assume that the understanding of context gives us an access to objective ground for understanding the truth about injustices. If we understand the discourses of race, class, and gender, they believe, we can detect the cause of problems in our society. So, their tendency mimics representationalist

pursuit in trying to pin down the causes of things instead of focusing on solving the problems. As Weaver says, “Like other critics from the radical Left, Minow and Spelman seek a totalizing account of how injustice is distributed throughout the human community; how every form of injustice is traceable back to some causal source. They replace Marxist materialism with the oppressive nature of our discursive practices” (744-745). Their idea seems to be similar to what Bizzell says:

Now new critical theory has emerged as paradigmatic, in place of those that have been displaced by such critique, but there is a tendency for the method of analysis itself to fill the authoritative role previously occupied by a foundationalist theory. Anti-foundationalist analysis of social context itself is presumed to liberate us from that context. Stanley Fish has argued that when this happens, anti-foundationalism slides back into foundationalism. The tendency, in other words, is to hope that by becoming aware of personal, social, and historical circumstances that constitute our beliefs, we can achieve a critical distance on them and change our belief if we choose. In encouraging this hope, anti-foundationalism is setting up its method in place of the absolute standards of judgment it debunks. (40)

These radical Leftists slide back to foundationalism by suggesting that an attention to context offers us an understanding of the structures of domination. They like that Rorty’s pragmatism argues against any representationalism, since the ones in power are not conducive to their ends. But they want to replace those old ones with a new

representationalism, which, from the perspective of Rorty's theory which they have used to dismantle the traditional positions, they simply cannot. What Rorty would say in this regard is exactly the same as he says about Cornel West, "the oppressed have different purposes and wants from their oppressors, but they do not have deeper insight into reality" ("Professor" 73).

### **Rorty's Antifoundationalism, the Foundationalist Right, and the Foundationalist**

#### **Left: A Conclusion**

The discussion of Rorty's position in this chapter demonstrates how his pragmatism is an extension of the Sophistic antifoundationalism and a distinct break from essentialist metaphysics of Platonic tradition and epistemological certainty of the Locke-Descartes-Kant tradition. Rorty seeks to destroy the foundations of traditional philosophy; however, he does not offer any alternative foundation. He rather asks us to discard or "set aside" the philosophizing tendency and focus on alleviating pain and suffering of human beings. This is possible, according to Rorty, by shifting our attention from representationalist tendency to seek knowledge of the Truth to pragmatic focus on solutions to the problems mankind is facing. In doing so, he tells us to avoid any foundation, whether that of the Rightists like Blackburn or the Leftists like West. Rorty's suggestion leads to a question: "How do we operate in the world devoid of any foundations?" I will take up this question in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ACTING IN AN ANTIFOUNDATIONALIST WORLD:

#### THE RORTIAN ALTERNATIVE TO FOUNDATIONALIST POSITIONS

“Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.”

— Wallace Stevens (“A High-Toned Old Christian Woman”)

This chapter deals with Richard Rorty’s way of acting in an antifoundational world where we do not have any fixed method(s) to acquire the knowledge of what is essentially right or wrong, true or false, just or unjust. As we discussed in the previous chapter, Rorty discards the tendency of invoking a foundation to verify what is true. The question that I address here is, “How can one act in an ethical and responsible manner when there are no foundations to dictate what is good/bad?” In other words, the problem that all foundationalist critics have with Rorty’s antifoundationalism is that Rorty does not have any ground from which to act. They contend that Rorty’s position leads to a situation where anything goes. The foundational critics believe that in the absence of a certain framework, antifoundationalism is ineffectual. So, for the foundational critics, Rorty’s position leads to radical relativism and the impossibility of any social action, or at least the impossibility of social action grounded in a position for which the actor could offer good reasons for acceptance. In his *Modern Dogma*, Booth uses the term “motivist” for those who act when they have been able to claim no “good reasons” for acting. So, Rorty could act, these critics would allow; he just would have no particular reasons for acting in any particular way, for any particular cause (24). In this context, I will focus on

how Rorty offers us some ways to avoid such radical relativism. We will see how Rorty offers a way to operate in the world despite the lack of any stable or secure foundations.

The other people that find Rorty's antifoundationalism problematic are the Leftists<sup>13</sup>, both the radical and the spectatorial. They characterize Rorty's pragmatism as theoretically immature and politically conformist. They find Rorty ineffectual regarding changing the social structure and alleviating injustices in society, so they see him as more centrist than leftist. Rorty's ineffective position, for the foundational Leftists, makes him centrist because his focus on piecemeal approach for social change promotes compromise with the Rightists and fails to bring about a complete overhaul of the social system. So, all foundationalists have certain problems with Rorty, and—ironically—Leftists who agree with Rorty about the problems of humiliation, cruelty, and immiseration, also have problems with him. For all the foundationalists, Rorty's antifoundationalism is ineffective and lacks a basis for meaningful action.

### **Conversation Instead of a Frame of Reference: A Basis for Action**

Foundationalists believe that if we want to promote social practices that bring about positive social changes, we need a frame of reference to help us determine what is good and what is bad. These frames of reference can be anything from liberalism (based on enlightenment rationality) to doctrines of Christianity. When we have such references,

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<sup>13</sup>In this chapter, I will discuss three kinds of Leftists: Pragmatic Left, Spectatorial Left, and Radical Left. The Pragmatic Leftists are those who emphasize incremental reform. They focus more on practice than on theory. The Spectatorial Left, also called cultural/academic Left, replaces "real" politics with cultural politics and engages in the act of abstract theorization. The Cultural Leftists ignore "real" or practical problems that many of the poor or the marginalized people have to overcome. These are the categories Rorty identifies in his different writings including *Achieving Our Country*. The Radical Leftists are absolutists or foundationalists, insofar as they believe that Marxism or some other "ism" can answer all questions. Their focus is on "movement politics" (*Achieving Our Country* 111)

we can determine what kind of practices are good. For instance, Jeffersonian Democrats would say that dictatorship is bad because it violates what they see as the “universal principles” of human rationality and individual freedom, the belief that humans can make right decisions for themselves because they are rational creatures. They would contend that the principle of rationality binds all the people together and a system based on rational principles always leads a society towards a better civilization. For them, what reason says is universal. This is a very strong foundational position. But Rorty argues that even such supposedly universal principles are social and contextual. For instance, he rejects the notion that reason is the master of all things: “. . . all reasons are reasons for particular people, restrained (as people always are) by spatial, temporal, and social conditions. To think otherwise is to presuppose the existence of a natural order of reasons to which our arguments will, with luck, better and better approximate” (“Response to Habermas” 60). The difference between the particular reasons and “Reason” as a unifying perspective is that the former refers to the reasons we offer to justify something or some act and these reasons are not implicit in our mind free from social and cultural make-up of our being whereas the latter is a priori, by which we mean that it is a pre-existing faculty or capacity in all human beings. It is universal by virtue of being common to all humans despite differences in all contextual factors that surround them. On the other hand, those for whom reasons are particular situate reasons in particular historical and social practices. For instance, to believe in God was completely rational at certain times, but it may be completely irrational to many people in the present. As stated earlier, Rorty believes in reasons as social, rejecting notion of universal reason.

But foundationalists hold that when we lack such a foundation, the whole social system collapses, with a resultant radical relativism. Rorty is aware of such charges:

Anyone who says, as I did in Chapter I, that truth is not “out there” will be suspected of relativism and irrationalism. Anyone who casts doubt on the distinction between morality and prudence, as I did in Chapter 2, will be suspected of immorality. To fend off such suspicions, I need to argue that the distinctions between absolutism and relativism, between rationality and irrationality, and between morality and expediency are obsolete and clumsy tools – remnants of a vocabulary we should try to replace. But argument is not the right word. (*CIS* 44)

The charges of relativism are similar to Plato’s charge against Protagoras. But Rorty says that his position does not lead to a form of radical relativism. He contends that the notions of relativism or irrationalism do not work when “the notions of criteria and choice . . . are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another’ for the simple reason that such criteria and choices may only be formulated in the terms of a specific language games” (Nystrom and Puckett X). For Rorty, when everything is historically conditioned, we need to give up the distinction between rational and irrational, moral and immoral. There is no benefit in even using the term “relativism” when there is no standard to value how what is relative. Since statements are either valid or not within vocabularies, the idea of relative validity between discourses disappears. There are no neutral points of view and no standards to determine which is truer or more

moral. We cannot judge the values of one culture based on other cultures. So, Rorty suggests that we discard the term relativism.

Even when we discard the notion of relativism, the problem, for some foundationalists, still remains. As I stated earlier, they ask what the basis for any action might be when Rorty believes that we should discard any frame of reference. Beth J Singer states:

In general, I accept Rorty's diagnosis of most modern and contemporary philosophy. I also accept his call for philosophy that is not epistemology-centered, that stands outside the mind-body problematic, and that comes to terms with the inevitable historicity and cultural conditioning of knowledge without succumbing to skepticism. But the model he proposes—philosophy that is “edifying” rather than constructive, eschewing all metaphysics and refraining from commitment to any position or conceptual frame—sacrifices too much and is not the only way to escape the pitfalls of foundationalism. (190)

Even if Singer agrees with Rorty on many grounds, she thinks that we should not dismiss totally some conceptual frame or theoretical position. But for Rorty we cannot have any such fixed frame. Having a fixed frame is to privilege certain forms of reality over others. For instance, when one has a Marxist frame, he/she privileges class over all other factors of a social reality, and he/she privileges it in a particular way, different, for instance, from an Aristocratic frame or a sub-continent frame concerned with castes. When someone has a subject-centered reason as a foundation, he/she dismisses the results of human



imagination. Further, and regardless of the framework, many people are likely to forget that all such frameworks, including your own, are contingent and contextual. However, this rejection of stable frameworks does not mean that Rorty leaves us as isolated creatures doing everything on our own without caring about what is good for the society. Instead, Rorty strongly believes that we should rather focus on conversation. The belief that consensus building is the right approach is, what Burke calls “the Jamesian ‘will to believe’” (Permanence and Change 236).<sup>14</sup> Janet Horne sums up Rorty’s idea regarding relativism and the importance of conversation:

For Rorty, the “real” issue regarding relativism “is not between people who think one view is as good as another and people who do not. It is between those who think our culture, or purpose, or institutions cannot be supported except conversationally, and people who still hope for other sorts of support” . . . Rorty argues that conversation offers criteria for distinguishing “right” standards from “wrong” ones without appeal to external factors. . . . Rorty cites his reliance upon Charles Sanders Peirce in this vein, since “we can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false.” The result of conversation is solidarity, rather than objectivity. (251)

Rorty believes that we can avoid relativism by means of conversation or dialogic reason or what Habermas calls “communicative rationality.” But we need to see what Habermas

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<sup>14</sup> For Burke, “the Jamesian will to believe” is not the belief in the certainty of something. Here, we believe in something, as Burke does in “cooperation,” because we do not see any other better alternative. So, it is different from foundational believing where one sticks to a certain thing as certain, as Plato does with the immutable “ideas” or “forms.”

says about reason and how Rorty's and Habermas' positions differ. We need to examine how Rorty maintains an antifoundationalist outlook without completely discarding the importance of rational investigation.

Habermas makes a distinction between "reason as a purported relation of connaturality between subject and object and reason as a set of social practices" (Rorty "Universalist Grandeur" 130). Habermas calls these two kinds of reason subject-centered reason and communicative rationality respectively: "Subject-centered reason finds its criteria in standards of truth and success that govern the relationships of knowing and purposively acting subjects to the world of possible objects or states of affairs. By contrast, as soon as we conceive of knowledge as communicatively mediated, rationality is assessed in terms of the capacity of responsible participants in interaction to orient themselves in relation to validity claims geared to intersubjective recognition" (Habermas, "Alternative Way" 585). Habermas rejects subject-centered reason, "a truth-tracking ability of the sort Plato and Descartes believed to be built into the human mind," and seeks to promote communicative reason, which "is simply what exists when there is willingness to hear the other side, to talk things over, to argue until areas of agreement are found, and to abide by the resulting agreements" (Rorty, "Universalist Grandeur" 129-130). However, Habermas still wants to stick to a Platonic residue, to the notion of universal validity:

The transcendent moment of *universal* validity bursts every provinciality asunder; the obligatory moment of accepted validity claims renders them carriers of a *context-bound* everyday practice. Inasmuch as communicative

agents reciprocally raise validity claims with their speech acts, they are relying on the potential of assailable grounds. Hence, a moment of *unconditionality* is built into *factual* processes of mutual understanding—the validity laid claim to is distinguished from the social currency of a de facto established practice and yet serves it as the foundation of an existing consensus. The validity claims for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, “*blots out*” *space and time*; but the claim is always raised here and now, in specific contexts, and is either accepted or rejected with factual consequences for action. (Habermas, “Alternative Way” 585)

So, Habermas stills wants to establish context-independent validity for social action. He thinks that even if such validity emerges from local contexts, through consensus or intersubjective agreement, it rises to a transcendent level going beyond spatio-temporal restrictions. This tendency of seeking universal validity brings him closer to Plato when he says that dialectical conversation leads us to a recognition of immutable “ideas” or “forms.” So, for Habermas, the basis for action becomes some kind of universal agreement. That is why Rorty says that Habermas “fails to take the last crucial step” even if he rejected subject-centered reason (“Universalist Grandeur” 130). Rorty shows his difference from Habermas thus: “Habermas has sometimes suggested that I stray too far in the direction of relativism when I deny that universal validity is a goal of inquiry. He thinks of my rejection of the notion of universal validity as an unfortunate concession to romanticism, and as putting me in bad company. I, on the other hand, think of his

retention of the notion of universal validity as an unfortunate concession to Platonist universalism” (“Universalist Grandeur” 130).

Habermas does not discard the notion of truth whereas Rorty does and says that we can depend on utility or usefulness rather than truthfulness. Rorty’s focus is to avoid the idea of truth (as context independent) and to look for whether what we call truth is useful or not, “There is nothing to be understood about the concept of X except the various uses of the term ‘X’. This goes for the concept of truth as well” (Rorty, “Response to Habermas” 57). Rorty’s pragmatic focus makes it easier to act even when we do not have a foundation to determine what is true. Here, we go for what is useful and what can be justified through inter-subjective agreement or consensus. And this justification is through argumentation or “communicative rationality.” So, Rorty does not discard reason or argumentation but rather claims that “the conversation of humankind would go its unpredictable way for as long as our species lasts—solving particular problems as they happen to arise, and, by working through the consequences of those solutions, generating new problems” (“Universalist Grandeur” 131). Rorty thinks of solidarity instead of objectivity when we have to find a ground for action. This solidarity can be the result of conversation within a vocabulary or the result of imaginative identification in case of different vocabularies. In the latter case, Rorty believes that poetic appeal is more powerful than logical appeal, but he does not exclude one from the other.

## **Poetic Redescription: Speaking across Vocabularies**

We have seen Rorty's claims that we should depend on the result of conversation or argumentation for choosing the right way for acting or operating in the world. But a question arises, "How can you argue with people who have different vocabularies?" Or in another sense, "How can you replace an old vocabulary when you find that the new one is more useful and better than the old one?" Or, to put a point on the issue, "How can we justify that liberal politics/culture is better than Nazi dictatorship?" Now, it's difficult to argue across vocabularies at least in the way Habermas thinks it possible to establish universal validity since the ways of looking at reality differ in different vocabularies. The differences in our orientations also create differences in the assumptions about what constitutes reality. That is why Habermas's communicative rationality is not sufficient. We need what Rorty calls poetic redescription. Rorty's idea of the utility of strong poetry has some similarities with Burke's notion of poetic action. So, a discussion of Burke's focus on poetic/literary value will make it easier for us to understand Rorty's notion of poetic redescription.

Burke, like Rorty, rejects the correspondence theory of language and believes in the contingency of language and reality. Like the Sophists, he believes that every understanding or perception is bound to be governed by the orientation of an individual. This leads to the state of the existence of diverse interpretations in a society:

The possible "chaos" which Richard foresees seems to be something like an aggravation of the process which we described in our section on "Perspective by Incongruity" . . . . For with a pronounced heterogeneity of

action-patterns . . . , we seem to have the perfect setting for a culture of gargoyles, grotesques, and caricatures unless some distinct master-purpose can both guide and restrict the speculative output. In other words, *freedom* must be defined by *purpose*. Otherwise we are simply “free” to continue flying apart from one another in the direction of mental “chaos.” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 253)

This quote demonstrates a few things. First, Burke was worried about the disintegration of western culture due to varying interests of people. And he tries to offer a solution to overcome that chaos. He focuses on “action” and “purpose.” It is here that Burke sees the importance of a poetic solution, “a new fixed way of reading signs” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 167). In his shift from a scientific use of language to a poetic/dramatistic use of language, he moves language’s purpose from defining what something “is” to determining what action we need to take to promote cooperation among human beings. Here, he seems to be closer to what Mathew Arnold says about the role of poetry: “It is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 252). Burke believes that poetry has the potential to transform our attitude and overcome chaos, although he does *not* contend that poetry shows us, in Arnold’s terms, “high truths.”

Burke calls the poetic interpretation of reality pseudo-statements, which become statement after they face objective recalcitrance and become “socialized” or “revised”: “a statement is an attitude rephrased in accordance with the strategy of revision made necessary by the recalcitrance of the materials employed for embodying this attitude”

(Burke, *Permanence and Change* 255). Unlike Arnold, he does not assume that poetic pseudo-statements are neutral or what he calls non-ethical. These statements are ethical and governed by certain interests. However, “such a position does not involve us in subjectivism, or solipsism” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 256). Burke further says: “It does not imply that the universe is merely the product of our interpretations. For interpretations themselves must be altered as the universe displays various orders of recalcitrance to them. We are emphasizing the fact that the ethical bent from which one approaches the universe is itself a part of the universe, and a very important part. Our calling has its roots in the biological, and our biological demands are clearly implicit in the universal texture” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 256). In other words he means that a prejudice or a point of view is not solipsistic, because it is in part grounded in our biological commonality. And subjectivism is checked by recalcitrance, by which Burke means the limitations imposed on us by the conventions of the world we live in. For instance, I may say that “I can safely jump from this high place and fly.” But we have seen and known that when someone jumps from a window or an airplane, he/she falls down. The above pseudo-statement becomes statement after it is changed to make it conform with the historical contingencies. The transformed statement can be something like “I can safely jump from this high place with the aid of a parachute” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 255-56).

He calls poetic descriptions “discoveries,” but these discoveries are the ones “flow[ing] from the point of view, which, however, are revisions made necessary by the nature of the world itself. They thus have an objective validity” (Burke, *Permanence and*

*Change* 257). There is a dynamic play between the subjective nature of poetic “discoveries” and the recalcitrance the world presents to the individual point of view. And the individual points of view (poetic inventions) are altered “to shape them in conformity with the use and wont of his group” and this is how they are transformed “from the private architecture of a poem into the public architecture of a social order” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 258). This is how, in Burke’s scheme of ideas, the world operates. In short, “the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man’s relations to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 264). In his discussion of the use of poetic metaphor, he emphasizes the aspects of cooperation: “Since social life, like art, is a *problem of appeal*, the poetic metaphor would give us invaluable hints for describing modes of practical action which are too often measured by simple tests of utility and too seldom with reference to the communicative, sympathetic, *propitiatory*, factors that are clearly present in procedures of formal art and must be as truly present in those informal arts of living we do not happen to call arts” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 264)).

So, Burke’s notion of poetry is very broad; it is a way of using language in which action is the primary focus and the purpose is to induce people to cooperate for meaningful communication. And it can combat the competitive nature of modern materialistic civilization. In emphasizing the competitive nature of life, we are inclined to claim “superiority rather than of affirming solidarity” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 268). He believes that the cooperative aspect of communication has been reduced to its minimum by this competitive emphasis, and he claims that the poetic metaphor “has the



advantage of emphasizing the participant aspect of action rather than its competitive aspect . . . . And in a world which has lost its faith in transcendental revelation, the poetic metaphor enables us to start from a point of reference wherein the ‘the revelation’ is of a secular nature . . .” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 266). And besides the cooperative aspect of poetic metaphor, Burke also highlights its utility, not in a materialistic but in a broader humane sense. This utility of the poetic action is not to find something beneficial for individual happiness or material prosperity, and this utility is not to be understood in a combative sense. Rather, as Burke says, “it is in the truest sense active, but its acts move toward the participant, rather than the militant, end of the combat-action-cooperation spectrum” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 269). If we cannot understand the nature of the world, then poetry can help us. As Burke says, “beyond these tiny concentration points of rhetoric and traffic, there lies the eternally unsolvable Enigma” and in such situation “there is no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 272).

To recapitulate, Burke places a heavy role on poetry. We have to understand it in the context of modern society, when traditional institutions were collapsing and materialistic culture was taking hold of almost every aspect of life with a resultant lack of cooperation among human beings. Burke tells us to discard the scientific use of language, where the focus is on defining what is true despite the fact that what we all call a neutral definition is always mediated by our interests, and to adopt poetic metaphor where the emphasis is on “rediscovery” and human action. And the purpose of human

action is cooperation and the establishment of “solidarity,” of a more humane world. However, Burke is aware that a poetic description of the world is not unethical, or neutral. It is instead always from a certain point of view. Still, it is not what we normally call subjective or solipsistic as it is revised to face the recalcitrance that the world presents before our poetic description. What Burke means is that our new vocabularies have to get socialized to be accepted, and thus become “objective” or real. Here, his sense of the word “objective” is not what scientists mean by it. It rather means that such points of view are not merely relativistic or subjective; they are based on what Rorty would call “historical facts.”<sup>15</sup> So, poetic metaphor helps us, in Burke’s system, to overcome the problem of “mere relativism.”

Like Burke, Rorty also highlights the role of poetry. For Rorty too, poetry has a broader meaning, mostly referring to great ideas or innovative ways of describing the common reality of our life. Here, great poets include philosophers like Nietzsche and Hegel, poets like W.B. Yeats and William Blake, scientists like Galileo and Einstein, religious founders like Christ and Buddha. What these poets do is to offer new alternative redescriptions. When the old vocabularies do not work or become less useful, we need such poets to offer alternative vocabularies which can be more beneficial to human community. And this notion that the alternative vocabularies will be beneficial should be

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<sup>15</sup> For Rorty, any claim we make about the appropriateness of any solution we offer has to be, at least partly, based on what we have seen or experienced in the world. For instance, Rorty claims that there is no other better alternative than liberal democracy, and his claim is neither subjective nor universal. This is because his claim is based on what we have seen in the world, that no other political system has ever offered more freedom and happiness to people than liberal democracy. As Rorty says: “It would be a conviction based on nothing more profound than the historical facts which suggest that without the protection of something like the institutions of bourgeois liberal society, people will be less able to work out their private salvations, create their private self-images, reweave their webs of belief and desire in the light of whatever new people and books they happen to encounter” (*CIS* 84-85).

understood as non-foundational yet grounded in historical reasons or facts. In changing from one vocabulary to another, arguments are of little use, and the distinction between the rational and irrational becomes useless:

To accept the claim that there is no standpoint outside the particular historically conditioned and temporary vocabulary we are presently using from which to judge this vocabulary is to give up on the idea that there can be reasons for using language as well as reasons within languages for believing statements. This amounts to giving up the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of “rational” which is neutral between vocabularies. But because it seems pointless to say that all the great moral and intellectual advances of European history—Christianity, Galilean science, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and so on—were fortunate falls into temporary irrationality, the moral to be drawn is that the rational-irrational distinction is less useful than it once appeared. (*CIS* 48)

Rorty draws the idea of “strong poets” from Harold Bloom. The strong poets are ones who are able to challenge their “father poets” and reinterpret (Bloom calls it misinterpret) their acts in a way that looks completely new. Bloom distinguishes such poets from “weak poets” who merely follow great poets of the past. The strong poets come up with “redescriptions of familiar phenomena” (*CIS* 54). That is why Rorty associates his pragmatism with Romanticism as the Romanticists offer imaginative redescriptions of reality. However, he does not completely agree with the Romanticists. So, to clarify

Rorty's notion of poetry or poetic appeal, we need to distinguish it from a similar notion of the Romanticists.

Rorty cites Isaiah Berlin to clarify his notion of romanticism: "Berlin revivifies the notion of romanticism by opposing it not to classicism but to universalism. He thereby transforms it into one term of a philosophical, rather than a literary, contrast. He calls universalism the 'backbone of the main western tradition' and says that it was that backbone that romanticism 'cracked'" (Rorty, "Universalist Grandeur" 132). Here, Romanticism rejects Platonic universalism. It undermines the rationalist basis of Platonism and Plato's attempt to bring rational certainty and the "poetically sublime together." In other words, romanticism attempts "to undermine an assumption common to Plato, Kant, and Habermas: that there is such a thing as 'the better argument'—better not by reference to its ability to convince some particular audience, but because it better tracks universal validity" (Rorty, "Universalist Grandeur" 134). So, romanticism, by denouncing rational approaches to reality, believes in the imaginative potential of the "poet, or, more generally, the imaginative genius, who will be our redeemer, rather than the sort of thinker whose aim is argumentative invulnerability" ("Universalist Grandeur" 135). As Rorty believes, the romanticists also often contend that " 'ideals are not to be discovered at all, but to be invented; not to be found but to be generated, generated as art is generated'" ("Universalist Grandeur" 135-36). The poets' role is not to imitate reality or other poets (correspondence theory); rather, it is to create something of one's own. That is why the romanticists emphasize self-creation, as does Nietzsche. Romanticists have a desire to break the crust of conventions and to build their own system: "Whereas the

universalist is instinctively a reformer, someone who wants to improve things by fitting more pieces of the puzzle together, the romantic is instinctively a revolutionary, someone who wants to sweep the puzzle off the table” (Rorty, “Universalist Grandeur” 136).

Therefore, the romanticists do not go for agreement. To opt for an agreement or consensus is to become a conformist and to be happy with the present state of affairs. It is to agree to “eternalize custom and tradition” of the past instead of undermining the past and focusing on creating the future of mankind (Rorty, “Universalist Grandeur” 136). In short, romanticists reject the universalist gesture of the rationalists and highlight the importance of imagination and vision to acquaint us with the inner reality, which is absolute and divine. Their focus is thus on invention rather than on discovery or mimesis. Their way of acting is governed by an individualistic quest for freedom and self-creation. Rorty adopts their notion of invention, however, without agreeing with them in terms of their focus on “inner depth” and their rejection of intersubjective agreement.

The problem with Romanticism is that it shares with Platonism its belief in the infinite and its undermining of the finite. As Rorty says, “Berlin recognized that the Platonic attempt to fuse grandeur and invulnerability had survived within the bosom of romanticism. For one idea that linked the romanticists with the onto-theological tradition was that of ‘the infinite’, an ambiguous term that the universalists and romantics use in different ways” (“Universalist Grandeur” 134). Romantic absolutism lies in the belief that romanticists are capable of creating a fusion between the individual “I” and the universal “I” or the cosmic soul. This belief that the imagination can provide an access to the absolute and the eternal is what makes them similar to the Platonists despite the fact that

they don't agree with Platonic idea of rational certainty and universality. William Blake's famous poem reveals this tendency well:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour. ("Auguries of Innocence" 11)

So, romanticists, despite their focus on humanism, attempt to go beyond the human to something eternal and divine. And it is this tendency that Rorty wants to get rid of. Romantic versions of the infinite come from their focus on " 'depth' and 'profundity'" where "our self-knowledge is a knowledge of God" ("Universalist Grandeur" 135). In essence, the idea of depth or profundity is similar to the Platonic version of "grandeur." Despite the fact that the romanticists discard the notion of "discovery" and replace it with "invention," they still attempted to go beyond "three dots at the end," that their discomfort with the "three dots" leads them to find their redeemer in "the poet, or, more generally, the imaginative genius" (135).<sup>16</sup> So, they failed to believe that what the poets offer is also contingent.

Rorty very beautifully presents his position regarding romanticism and universalism thus:

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<sup>16</sup> What Rorty refers to by "three dots" here is that the romanticists were not inclined to say that their inventions cannot capture the "infinite." They did not want to take their inventions as incomplete, ever changing, or contingent. They were uneasy with the potential incompleteness of their endeavor. They wanted a kind of a "redemption." In other words, they would not be happy without finding all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

Formulating the opposition in these terms brings me to my central thesis: that pragmatism should be viewed, not as a version of romanticism, but as an alternative to both universalism and romanticism. The pragmatist response to the dialectic Habermas summarizes in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is to say that talk of universal validity is simply a way of dramatizing the need for intersubjective agreement, while romantic ardor and romantic depth are simply ways of dramatizing the need for novelty, the need to be imaginative. But neither need be elevated over the other, nor should either be allowed to exclude the other. Instead of asking epistemological questions about sources of knowledge, or metaphysical questions about what there is to be known, philosophers should make it their business to do what Dewey did: helping their fellow-citizens balance the need for consensus and the need for novelty. (“Universalist Grandeur” 136)

There are many implications. The Romantic idea of innovation is not sufficient in itself; nor is it merely a personal goal alone, as it is for Nietzsche. This romantic redescription also requires Habermasian conversation to “make startling new ideas widely accepted” (“Universalist Grandeur” 136). Here, Rorty’s notion of new vocabularies which “seemed absurd to one generation” becoming “the common sense of the next generation” is similar to Burke’s notion that the poetic pseudo-statements become statements after they are revised and socialized due to the recalcitrance the world presents before them. The difference between the two is that Burke does not see the importance of Habermasian

reason that much as he emphasizes the dynamic play of the new ideas and the recalcitrance.

Rorty believes that we can turn the seemingly absurd or irrational to rational or meaningful “not by brainwashing but by explaining how the new ideas might, if tried out, solve, or dissolve, problems generated by the old ones.” He further says, “Neither the notion of universal validity nor that of a privileged access to truth are necessary to accomplish this latter purpose. *We can work toward inter-subjective agreement without being lured by the promise of universal validity, and we can introduce new and startling ideas without attributing them to a privileged source*” (“Universalist Grandeur” 136-137). So, a pragmatist believes that demonstrating how new ideas work to resolve problems that old ones were unable to handle is sufficient. Rorty says that “we do not need words like ‘intrinsic’ or ‘legitimate’ or ‘unconditional’ to supplement such banal expressions of praise or blame as ‘sounds plausible,’ ‘would do more harm than good’ . . .” (“Universalist Grandeur” 138). So, Rorty contends that we neither need universalist grandeur nor do we need romantic depth, but we need both imaginative invention and rational argumentation.

Therefore, Rorty blends his notion of poetry (romantic innovation) with pragmatic utility. Rorty himself calls pragmatists romantic utilitarians, as the main purpose of the romanticists is to show that the new vocabularies are good/right only if they have the utility to make human life happier and happier. And vocabularies that can make human life happy can be diverse. So, Rorty thinks that we need to expand the focus on romanticism to “romantic polytheism.” Here, we should keep options open and try to see



as many alternatives as possible so that we are aware which one is better than the others available. Here polytheism means the idea that we should not try to find any grand theory (god) with which to hang everything together. We should not be uncomfortable with a variety of perspectives. We should rather appreciate the value of each of them. Rorty thinks that to be polytheist we need to stop thinking that what Christianity says is the only good thing and what other religions (or any vocabulary) say are bad. Regarding polytheism, he tries to clarify his idea by comparing Nietzsche with Dewey:

Nietzsche thought democracy was “Christianity for the people”—Christianity deprived of the nobility of spirit of which Christ himself, and perhaps a few of the more strenuous saints, had been capable. Dewey thought of democracy as Christianity cleansed of the hieratic, exclusionist elements. Nietzsche thought those who believed in a traditional monotheistic God were foolish weaklings. Dewey thought of them as so spellbound by the work of one poet as to be unable to appreciate the work of other poets. Dewey thought that the sort of “aggressive atheism” on which Nietzsche prided himself is unnecessarily intolerant. It has, he said, something in common with traditional supernaturalism. (“Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism 31)

A pragmatic focus on utility makes romantic polytheism possible because the focus is not on a single truth but on utility. Further, different people may find different vocabularies useful. The best thing for a pragmatist/romantic polytheist is to tolerate and appreciate differences. Rorty’s idea of polytheism is compatible with and also supportive of truly

democratic politics even if it does not privilege democracy over any other forms in terms of its connection to truth or true nature of human beings. Rorty says: “Your devotion to democracy is unlikely to be wholehearted if you believe, as monotheists typically do, that we can have knowledge of an ‘objective’ ranking of human needs that can overrule the result of democratic consensus. But if your devotion is wholehearted, then you will welcome the utilitarian and pragmatist claim that we have no will to truth distinct from the will to happiness” (“Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” 34).

Rorty’s idea of tolerance and appreciation of different vocabularies resembles what Wayne C. Booth calls listening rhetoric. The basic question we have been considering is that of communication and the way of operating in the world when there are diverse world views or vocabularies. As Burke emphasized the participant nature of the communicants and as Rorty highlighted the importance of tolerance, Booth says that if we listen to the other side of the argument, we may not have complete agreement, but we can definitely improve communication and can at least hope for a more compassionate and humane world. Going beyond the customary definition of rhetoric as an art of persuasion, he proposes to use a different notion, that of listening-rhetoric:

I thus hope that it will be useful to introduce a third term, covering those rhetors and rhetoricians who see their center as not just how to persuade effectively but how to practice listening-rhetoric (LR) at the deepest possible level. When LR is pushed to its fullest possibilities, opponents in any controversy listen to each other not only to persuade better but also to find the common ground behind the conflict. They pursue the shared

assumptions (beliefs, faiths, warrants, commonplaces) that both sides depend on as they pursue their attacks and disagreements. So we need a new term, rhetorology, for this deepest practice of LR: not just distinguishing defensible and indefensible forms of rhetoric but attempting to lead both sides in any dispute to discover the ground they share—thus reducing pointless dispute. This point becomes the center of the final chapter. (Booth, *Rhetoric of Rhetoric* 10)

Here, Booth's focus, in Burkean terms, is more on cooperation than on competition, communication than on argumentation. In other words, Booth is more concerned about creating a harmony among different groups of people despite the fact that they have disagreements on various fronts. That is why he seems to be interested in redefining the role of rhetoric from persuasion to understanding and cooperation and why he further says: "What is inescapable is that underling all our differences about what makes good communication there is one deep standard: agreement that whatever the dispute, whatever the language standards, communication can be improved by *listening to the other side, and then listening even harder to one's own responses*" (Booth 21). Booth calls us to expand the audience "to include the whole world," by which he means to create solidarity among peoples of different cultures and places with different perspectives and world views. The idea of solidarity, though in a slightly different sense, is what Rorty finds very important to see across vocabularies.

## **Solidarity: A Shift from Logos to Pathos**

In this section I wish to discuss Rorty's answers to the questions: "How is human solidarity possible when there are no universal and essential aspects of human life?" "How can an ironist think of solidarity among humans?" "How to forge a common ground when we don't believe that there is any foundation that cuts across different vocabularies?" "How is it possible to show that what someone does is bad?" "What kind of ethics governs our acts?" "How can we act as responsible human beings?"

Despite the fact that Rorty is an ironist, he has an answer to these questions. Despite the fact that he does not agree with the Kantian notion of universal principles of ethics, he thinks that we can act ethically. To understand Rorty's notions of solidarity and ethics, we need to understand his idea of a pragmatist as a liberal ironist. By developing his notion of liberalism and ironism, he is capable of offering us his suggestions about how to act.

Rorty defines an ironist as:

Someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch

with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (*CIS* 73)

These ironists are always aware of the contingency of their positions. They believe that there is no way to formulate a set of criteria to choose between final vocabularies. Unlike Platonists and Kantians, an ironist is a historicist, one who believes that “nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence” (*CIS* 74). As we discussed in the beginning of this chapter, Rorty is contrasting his notion of ironism with Platonism, metaphysics, or essentialism. For these ironists, all philosophers or scientists redescribe reality the way a poet does it. None of these types of scholars have any privileged knowledge of the “really real.”

And liberals believe in human freedom and happiness. For them, “cruelty is the worst thing they do” (Rorty, *CIS* 74). But critics like Habermas think that ironism leads to “irresponsible subjectivism” (Rorty, *CIS* 83). Ironism and liberalism cannot go together because liberal politics requires some “consensus about what is universally human” (Rorty, *CIS* 84)—what leads us away from cruelty. But Rorty thinks that “such freedoms require no consensus on any topic more basic than their own desirability” (*CIS* 84). Rorty tries to demonstrate that liberalism and ironism can co-exist; the liberal outlook can work towards the elimination of cruelty and pain. Now the question is “How can the liberals reduce cruelty and suffering when they don't have any idea about what is

essentially cruel?” “How is human solidarity possible when there is doubt about every final vocabulary?” The foundationalists believe that ironism will “dissolve liberal societies” (Rorty, *CIS* 85). What keeps the social glue intact when the traditional beliefs in rational social institutions collapse?

For Rorty what keeps liberal societies intact is hope for a better future rather than any metaphysical notion about human nature or human society. This hope is not a hope for a better life after death, nor is it a hope for knowledge of “Truth.” It is a concrete hope for a happier and freer society in the future for ourselves and our future generations: “Modern, literate, secular societies depend on the existence of reasonably concrete, optimistic, and plausible *political* scenarios, as opposed to scenarios about redemption beyond the grave. To retain social hope, members of such a society need to be able to tell themselves a story about how things might get better, and to see no insuperable obstacles to this story’s coming true” (Rorty, *CIS* 86). Our hope will work to bind people together—“the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendents but for everybody’s descendents” (Rorty, *CIS* 86). We cannot be certain that there will be a better society, but we can tell stories about how such society would look and work towards that goal. And we hope that we will equally work for the better world for our grandchildren as we do for our better afterlife.

Rorty says that the prediction that the liberal societies will collapse may be correct (*CIS* 85). But he thinks that we have sufficient reasons to hope that such prediction will be false. He argues here through an analogy. He says that “lots of people

in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries predicted the opposite. They thought that hope of heaven was required to supply moral fiber and social glue—that there was little point, for example, in having an atheist swear to tell the truth in a court of law” but loss of religious faith did not bring about the collapse of the social system (Rorty, *CIS* 85).

Now let’s examine the question about cruelty and human solidarity. The foundationalists believe that solidarity is a dubious idea in antifoundationalist ironism: “Metaphysicians tell us that unless there is some sort of common ur-vocabulary, we have no ‘reason’ not to be cruel to those whose final vocabularies are very unlike ours. A universalist ethics seems incompatible with ironism, simply because it is hard to imagine stating such an ethic without some doctrine about the nature of man. Such an appeal to real essence is the antithesis of ironism” (Rorty, *CIS* 88). On the one hand we cannot define what is cruel, while on the other hand we cannot argue about something being bad or cruel as we have different sets of criteria. So, in such a situation, solidarity seems a remote thing to achieve.

Rorty thinks that it is not more difficult to achieve solidarity in the liberal ironists’ world than in that of the metaphysician’s. Here, the method is not logos but pathos as liberal ironists discard the notion of “our essential humanity” (*CIS* 189). So, a liberal ironist does not argue that a violation of “our essential humanity” is bad and our sense of morality should be based on such essential humanity. Instead, as Rorty says, the liberal ironist tries to use redescription to show “‘what humiliates?’ . . . . The liberal ironist just wants our *chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription. She thinks that the recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is

the only social bond that is needed” (CIS 91). What the liberal ironist needs is “as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies” (Rorty, CIS 92). So, the liberal ironist does not try to prove that humiliation is bad on some metaphysical grounds or some theoretical assumptions or human nature; rather, she wants us to see what we would feel when we are in the same situation as those who are suffering. That is why “for liberal ironist, skill at imaginative identification does the work which the liberal metaphysician would like to have done by a specifically moral motivation—rationality, or the love of God, or the love of truth” (Rorty, CIS 93). And when the liberal ironist *can* and *does* look at the situation from the perspective of the immiserated, we realize that it is a position that consensus beliefs hold to be unacceptable. That is, we experience it emotionally, but we can validate it ex post facto “logically,” with the logic producing consensus agreement.

Rorty also makes a distinction between the traditional notion of identification in terms of the notion of “humanity as such” and imaginative identification in which we don’t try to find some common element among all human beings. The only thing that matters is our doubt about our own sensitivity to pain. We need to put ourselves in place of the others. That is, we have a sense that if we can put someone in a position of understanding the conditions of the suffering, this person will understand and change: there is some “commonality” in the sense that “pain” is something that all human beings should be able to avoid. The imaginative identification rests on



the self-doubt which has gradually, over the last few centuries, been inculcated into inhabitants of the democratic states—doubt about their own sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives. The identification seems to me impossible—a philosopher’s invention, an awkward attempt to secularize the idea of becoming one with God. The self-doubt seems to me the characteristic mark of the first epoch in human history in which large numbers of people have become able to separate the question “Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?” from the question “Are you suffering?” In my jargon, this is the ability to distinguish the question of whether you and I share the same final vocabulary from the question whether you are in pain. (Rorty, *CIS* 198)

The “liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at” this imaginative identification that replaces rationality in terms of human solidarity (Rorty, *CIS* 94).

So, Rorty believes that narratives are more powerful than logic. These narratives include novels, ethnographies, and journalistic reports that offer vivid picture of suffering and humiliation. Lynn Baker sums up Rorty’s view about the role of narratives:

According to Rorty, the narrative can be authored by one of the oppressed or by someone else, and is an attempt to interpret the situation of the oppressed group to the rest of their society. Such narratives increase human solidarity by expanding the sympathies of persons who are not

members of the oppressed group so that they come to see the oppressed as an “us” rather than as a “them.” Increased human solidarity, however, does not constitute an “us” admitting a “them” to membership through an act of noblesse oblige. Rather, according to Rorty, the narrative process of interpretive description encompasses the non-oppressed as well as the oppressed; it “is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like *and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.* (700)

Narratives help us visualize and identify with the sufferings and pains of the people whom we think to be “others.” We become aware of the sufferings of other people and sufferings we might have caused. Therefore, narratives have power to arouse sympathies in us and expand our sense of “we” to include those whom we heretofore have regarded as “them.” So, through imaginative identification, we can establish solidarity.

Does this idea of imaginative identification contradict Rorty’s antifoundationalism? Is such identification ahistorical and acontextual? Wayne C. Booth falls back on foundationalism despite the fact that he shares a lot with Rorty in terms of creating solidarity by listening to as many other people as possible. As Booth says “I am strongly on the Platonic side: torturing a baby to death for the sheer pleasure of it is always wrong . . .” (Booth 13). Does Rorty fall into this trap? No. What Rorty would say regarding “torturing a baby” is that what Booth says is true in our current vocabulary and subsequently in our current beliefs. Instead of making a claim that it is always wrong to torture infants, Rorty would ask the question, “What would we feel if we are or our babies are tortured to death?” So, from a Rortian contingency principle, imaginative

identification cannot be universal. And his distinction between traditional notion of identification and his notion of self-doubt, as we discussed earlier, clarifies his position as being antifoundationalist.

In other words, he means that the identification he talks about is neither dictated by belief nor by rational moral principles, nor is it something essentially universal due to an imaginative transcendence of historicity. As he says: “But this solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of us” (*CIS* 192). This I would call a negative identification, an identification as a result not of similarity but of doubt about ourselves whether we are sensitive to the pains and humiliations of others.

Rorty’s notion of solidarity as achieved through our sensitivity to pain leads us to the question of ethics. What does it mean to act ethically in an antifoundational world? Can we still talk about morality “once we drop the notion of ‘moral principle’”? (Rorty, *CIS* 59). Rorty answers it positively, that it is still possible to talk of morality. Antifoundational philosophers do not think that morality is less important than what foundationalists think. Rorty says: “We can keep the notion of ‘morality’ just insofar as we can cease to think of morality as the voice of the divine part of ourselves and instead think of it as the voice of ourselves as members of a community, speakers of a common language” (*CIS* 59). So, acting ethically in an antifoundational world involves

“collaborating for purposes of mutual protection rather than as a band of fellow spirits united by a common goal” (*CIS* 59). Therefore, in the world of the liberal ironist, acting ethically involves respecting differences and providing space to other individuals that does not interfere with one’s own freedom and public life. And this applies to the situation when we have to deal with people with other vocabularies. As Rorty cites Wilfred Sellars, “morality is a matter of . . . ‘we-intensions,’ that the core meaning of ‘immoral action’ is ‘the sort of thing we don’t do’” (*CIS* 59). As Booth suggests, acting ethically means practicing listening-rhetoric. Dealing with other vocabularies still entails and even requires this sense of ethics, ethics as tolerance, because we do not possess any criteria that we can use for determining what is ethical in other vocabularies. The belief in the contingency of any ethical notion or principle requires us to appreciate what people in the other vocabularies do unless that endangers our own freedom and happiness. So, we do not treat others the way we would not like to be treated. But this also does not mean that we should treat others the way we like ourselves to be treated; we cannot be sure whether people in other vocabularies like our notions of ethics.

### **Answering Hitler**

To attempt further clarification of this discussion concerning ethics, I want to take up questions asked repeatedly of Rorty: “How can we say that Hitler was wrong?” “How can we say that Rorty’s poeticized culture can deal with the possibility of the rise of the dictators like Hitler or Mao?” When we have no shared beliefs or principles, what makes us determine that Fascism was bad? These questions put a point to the question of how we can make ethical evaluations when we have no foundation.

One major such question comes from Habermas. Habermas believes that the Rortian notion of poeticized or romanticized culture may give rise to people like Hitler who destroy established institutions. The lack of any universal standards and Rorty's preference for poetic redescription in place of argumentation, in Habermasian terms, may create a conducive atmosphere for dictators like Hitler because we cannot say that Hitler's practice was essentially wrong.

Rorty admits that we cannot stop Hitler. But he also says that antifoundationalism does not create a more conducive atmosphere than foundationalism. It was not Rorty or positions like those of Rorty's that actually *did* give rise to Hitler, so eschewing Rorty's position will not protect us from such an occurrence in the future, since it did not protect us from Hitler himself. What Rorty believes, and he knows that the only thing we can do is to believe, is that a pragmatist might be able to convert a Nazi. Let me quote what Rorty says in a response to Xavier McCarthy, who raised this seeming problem:

Like Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, McCarthy sees my refusal to take on the job of answering Hitler as a sign of irresponsible "decisionism" or "relativism." But I have always (well, not always, but for the last twenty years or so) been puzzled about what was supposed to count as a knockdown answer to Hitler. Would it answer him to tell him that there was a God in Heaven who was on our side? How do we reply to him when he asks for evidence for this claim? Would it answer him to say that his views are incompatible with the construction of a society in which communication is undistorted, and that his refusal of a voice to his

opponents contradicts the presupposition of his own communicative acts? What if Hitler rejoins that to interpret truth as a product of free and open encounters rather than as what emerges from the genius of a destined leader begs the question against him? (What if, in other words, he goes Heideggerian on us?) Richard Hare's view that there is no way to "refute" a sophisticated, consistent, passionate psychopath--for example, a Nazi who would favor his own elimination if he himself turned out to be Jewish--seems to me right, but to show more about the idea of "refutation" than about Nazism.

If I were assigned the task not of refuting or answering but of converting a Nazi (one a bit more sane and conversable than Hitler himself), I would have some idea of how to set to work. I could show him how nice things can be in free societies, how horrible things are in the Nazi camps, how his Fuhrer can plausibly be redescribed as an ignorant paranoid rather than as an inspired prophet, how the Treaty of Versailles can be redescribed as a reasonable compromise rather than as a vendetta, and so on. These tactics might or might not work, but at least they would not be an intellectual exercise in what Apel calls *Letztbegrundung*. They would be the sort of thing that sometimes actually changes people's minds. By contrast, attempts at showing the philosophically sophisticated Nazi that he is caught in a logical or pragmatic self-contradiction will simply impel him to construct invidious redescrptions of the presuppositions of

the charge of contradiction (the sort of redescrptions Heidegger put at the Nazis' disposal). ("Truth and Freedom" 636-637)

It becomes clear that pragmatists do not claim that there is no place for Hitler in their liberal ironist world. Rorty even says that arguing against the Nazi or trying to convince the Nazi through arguments that his beliefs are problematic or self-contradictory won't produce any good result as the clever Nazi can develop his own logic to counter such arguments. The assumptions of his arguments may not, or most probably do not, match with ours. So, it's futile to try to argue against him, which is why Rorty says that he would not try to "refute" the Nazi but rather, as he says, would use a poetic redescription to convert the Nazi instead of arguing. So, what a pragmatist does is to offer a more attractive redescription and to show how horrible things are in Nazi camps. Here, Rorty would offer a Jewish version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But again, there is still one question, "Does a Nazi have compassion to feel the pain of others?" This is a valid question because the ability to feel pain is not, in a pragmatist view, universal, existing in all human beings. So, the only thing we can do is to believe that such a pathetic appeal blended with his poetic appeal may work as it has in some cases. That it lacks universal success makes it no worse, of course, than any other attempt to make a Nazi change his attitude. That is, Rorty might not persuade *all* Nazis, but his lack of universal success is only a reason to throw out his suggestion if we have some other way by which we *can* achieve universal success. *So*, the only option here is a Jamesian "Will to Believe."

Also, what the liberal ironists do is to try to make themselves aware about as many alternative vocabularies as possible so that they can compare their vocabulary with

that of the others. What this means is that even if Hitler may refuse to accept or even to see other vocabularies, people in a pragmatist world will not go by what anyone says if they find other vocabularies having a capacity to make their life better: happier and freer. Even if we may not be able to convert Hitler, we can convince the people in a liberal society to see the problems in Hitler's approach by offering vocabularies which paint better worlds than that of Hitler.

Another important thing is that in a liberal society where people believe that every redescription is contingent, such redescription must be explained well if it is to be institutionalized. People have to be convinced that what any poet presents (it could be Hitler) is beneficial and better than the existing vocabulary. Pragmatists believe that in a liberal society change occurs not "by brainwashing but by explaining how the new ideas might, if tried out, solve, or dissolve, problems generated by the old ones" (Rorty, "Universalist Grandeur" 136). And it is our belief that in a society where "the press, the judiciary, the elections, and the universities are free, social mobility is frequent and rapid, literacy is universal, higher education is common, and peace and wealth have made possible the leisure necessary to listen to lots of different people and think about what they say," the rise of someone like Hitler to power and a continued rule becomes very unthinkable (Rorty, *CIS* 84).

### **Spectatorial Left to Pragmatic Left: From Pessimistic Scrutiny to Utopian Vision**

As I have stated in the beginning of this chapter, Rorty identifies three kinds of Left: the Pragmatic/Reformist Left, the Radical Left, and the Spectatorial/Cultural Left. Rorty's pragmatic/Reformist way of acting is charged with being ineffective, groundless,



and theoretically naïve or simplistic by both the Radical and Spectatorial Left. Their charge is in a sense similar to the kind of charge foundationalists in general launch against the pragmatists, that pragmatism lacks a strong ground for any action. These Leftists call Rorty a conformist and a centrist whereas Rorty himself thinks that his pragmatism is legitimately Leftist despite the fact that he is a strong anti-communist. I'll here first discuss Rorty's relation with the Radical Left and move to his relation with the Cultural Left and show how Rorty's Pragmatic Left is not ineffectual or conformist.

The major issue the Radical Leftists raise is that of "progressive social change." And they believe that pragmatism lacks a ground to act for such a change. The Radical Leftists believe that for achieving a social change, we need to focus on movement politics whereas Rorty replaces movement with campaigns. The Radical Leftists' focus is on the complete overhaul of the system and the establishment of a society where "people" will be the masters. And, they believe, it can be achieved through movement politics, which is based on strong foundation that offers them a ground for action. Rorty distinguishes movements and campaigns thus:

By 'campaign,' I mean something finite, something that can be recognized to have succeeded or to have, so far, failed. Movements, by contrast, neither succeed nor fail. They are too big and too amorphous to do anything that simple. They share in what Kierkegaard called 'the passion of the infinite.' They are exemplified by Christianity and by Marxism, the sort of movements which enable novelists like Dostoevsky to do what Howe admiringly called 'feeling thought'. (*Achieving Our Country* 114)

Radical Left's movement politics "assumes that things will be changed utterly, that a terrible new beauty will be born" (*Achieving Our Country* 115), which will "require seeing everything as part of a pattern whose center is that single thing. Movement offers such a pattern, and thus offers such assurance of purity" (*Achieving Our Country* 117). And such a pattern is their analysis of power struggle in terms of class or race or similar other categories. The Radical Leftists hope for, even perhaps work for, some "terrible new beauty," although they sometimes are not clear about what it is and if they are clear they have no pragmatic, reasonable way of achieving it short of bringing down the status quo almost completely. And they are absolutists, foundationalists, insofar as they believe that some kind of theory, such as Marxism, can answer all questions.

They are also idealists. Among their ideals, one is the end of capitalism and the establishment of participatory democracy. However, they do not say how it works. They talk about big changes "rather than about specific practices and specific changes in those practices. They say that a market economy should end but do not offer a picture of how the economy will operate in the absence of this form of economy.

The benefit the Radical Left has is that strong poetry can make a "terrible new beauty" in fact beautiful to people, so that they could be induced—as they did with Mao, Lenin, Jesus, Mohammad and so forth—to "revolt" against the status quo. It can inspire people to a great extent as it tries to assure people of the certainty of establishing a world in accord with their vision. But their strong poetry runs up against historical facts or objective recalcitrance. They also often fail to offer the ways their world operates in concrete terms; even if they achieve success to change the system, it does not sustain.

Rorty, on the other hand, focuses on campaigns, which are finite and concrete. He believes “Campaigns [for particular] goals as the unionization of migrant farm workers, or the overthrow (by votes or by force) of a corrupt government, or socialized medicine, or legal recognition of gay marriage can be conducted without much attention to literature, art, philosophy, or history” (*Achieving Our Country* 114). Campaigns do not require “ideals.” The focus on concrete and finite changes can bring about gradual change in society. This is pragmatic or practical way of acting.

Could the Reformist left do as much as Radical Left could to inspire people? No. As Rorty says, the problem that the Reformist left has is that it is not “sexy” (although he doesn’t use that word): there is nothing very inspiring about an incremental approach. However, their use of poetic vision for social change can also inspire people in some way. People work towards that vision because the pragmatic leader paints a beautiful picture that they can aspire for. An example of this can be how Obama was able to inspire even though it was clear that he was not looking for radical change. That is, we can inspire with a vision of a better world, get people on board, even when the work that needs to be done is incremental.

In his criticism of Rorty’s anti-foundationalist notion of prophetic vision (poetic vision) and incremental approach, Lynn Baker<sup>17</sup> offers us an example of how Radical Leftists would understand the pragmatic vision, and Rorty’s response shows us how

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<sup>17</sup> The categorizations of the Leftists I have made are functional. We can find several differences among a single category. We also can see a lot of overlapping. I have brought the examples of Baker’s criticism of Rorty to show how a Radical Leftist would respond to the Pragmatic Left. I have categorized Baker as a Radical Leftist in the sense that she believes that social change is not possible when the prophet/poet does not have a strong theoretical ground or a fixed framework to anchor her vision. And that framework or ground is similar to what other Radical Leftists would say about Marxist notion of social change (through class struggle).

Pragmatist Leftism works. Baker contends that Rorty's utopia or prophetic<sup>18</sup> strand, the central element of his pragmatist hope, suffers as he does not offer any ground—like analysis of injustices in terms of class—for the materialization of such hope or vision. As Baker cites, Rorty's vision for social change is “that which moves a society closer to realizing his three interrelated aspirations: that suffering and cruelty will be diminished; that freedom will be maximized; and that ‘chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized’” (699). To work towards achieving that goal (though that won't be the final thing to be achieved), Rorty does not think there are any fixed methods “except courageous and imaginative experimentation” (qtd. in Baker 699). Rorty, “nonetheless, suggests two vehicles by which social progress has occurred in the past and might occur in the future: narratives and separatist groups” (Baker 699). Both the poets (narrators) and the leaders of the separatist groups have to offer attractive redescriptions to show how society can be better than the existing one. They can help reduce cruelty and social injustices. But these prophets (poets or leaders) would not use any essentialist notions of cruelty or injustice to make their argument sound attractive, as argumentation may not help when we are trying to change vocabularies. The best they can do is to make their vision as beautiful and concrete as possible and as much supported by the historical warrants as possible. They would not invoke any metaphysical doctrines to garner support from the people.

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<sup>18</sup> Here, “prophet” is used in a metaphoric sense. What Rorty or Baker calls a prophet is similar to Rorty's notion of a strong poet with a clear vision of the future. For Radical Left, such poets are their leaders like Marx or Mao who speak for a complete revolution. They believe that Marxist or proletariat version of truth is objective. For Rorty, his prophets are anti-foundationalist poets who offer alternative vocabularies by beautifully painting the picture of the world they want to establish. But they never claim that their world is “pure” and non-ideological.

Baker appreciates Rorty's focus on vision. But she thinks pragmatic irony will make it difficult for the prophets to convince the people about the usefulness of their redescriptions. Baker says that "an anti-foundationalist society may be less inclined to follow a prophet promising only a contingent vision of a better world than a metaphysical society will be to follow a prophet asserting that moral truth or God is on her side. The latter prophet, for example, may be relatively better at inspiring and motivating, at capturing the imagination of her society" (Baker 712). The foundationalist priest can inspire people better because she can refer back to the authority of "God" or "Truth" to validate her claim. The idea is that people follow something easily when they *believe* it to be true, but when they know that what they are told does not have any certainty in terms of truth value, they hesitate to follow that. Baker further says:

Indeed, an anti-foundationalist conception of social change as evolution may dilute both the prophet's belief in her own vision and her motivation to effect social change. It is one thing to believe, as a prophet by definition does, that the status quo is neither necessary nor the best possible state of affairs; but it is quite another to believe that the better world one envisions and would work towards achieving is also a contingency, a mere resting point in a larger evolution. (Baker 714)

But for Baker's idea to be true, it requires us to have a prophet like the Pied Piper, someone who can inspire people to follow him unquestioningly. We don't have the Pied Piper, any more than we have God to validate our claims. Regarding the anti-foundationalist prophet, the answer Rorty would give, as Baker herself cites, shows how

such a prophet does not need any authority: “a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstances” (Rorty, qtd. in. Baker 714). Furthermore, it was not the case that Harriet B. Stowe, for instance, said *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was True. She just wrote it. Some people might take it as true, of course, but that would be their lookout. Rorty’s point here is that contingent does not mean that it is completely baseless. The basis that makes people believe what the prophet offers or makes the prophet herself believe her vision is not a metaphysical foundation, but historical contingencies. This belief on historical contingencies means that the vision offered by the prophet looks plausible and promising based on what we have seen and experienced in this world. Instead of invoking any authority beyond humanity, which people have found it difficult to trust, it is better and perhaps more realistic to invoke things that are human or around us.

Rorty also directly responds to Baker’s critique of the seeming inconsistency in his pragmatism. In particular, he responds to Baker’s point that his evolutionary pragmatism robs confidence and motivation from the prophet about his own vision. And Rorty’s claim clarifies how a prophet cannot hold a belief and guarantee the certainty of her vision which is beyond her control:

The good kind of prophet thinks of herself as *just* someone who has a better idea, on an epistemological par with the people who claim to have a new gimmick for retreading tires, or programming computers, or redrawing the company's table of organization. Good prophets say that if

we all got together and did such and such, we would probably like the results. They paint pictures of what this brighter future would look like, and write scenarios about how it might be brought about. When they've finished doing that, they have nothing more to offer, except to say "Let's try it!" (a phrase I prefer to "Just do it!"). This kind of prophet does not think that her views have "legitimacy" or "authority." The other, worse, type of prophet thinks of herself as a messenger from somebody (God) or something (Truth, Reason, History, Human Nature, Science, Philosophy, the Spirit of the Laws, The Working Class, the Blood and Soil of Germany, The Consciousness of the Oppressed, Woman's Experience, Negritude, the Overman who is to come, the New Socialist Man who is to come) - somebody in whose name, or something in the name of which, they speak. Such prophets think of themselves as not just one more voice in the conversation, but as the representative of something that is somehow more than another such voice. (Rorty, "What Can You Expect" 719)

Rorty is replacing Baker's "just do it" with "let's try it!" It clearly demonstrates pragmatic awareness about the lack of complete certainty of the results of our actions. It also clarifies that we cannot say "just do it" because we do not have any authority to justify what we do to be true or certain. However, as Rorty says, we have hope and vision that inspires us to work towards turning it into reality and living up to it. And the pragmatic prophets also need to offer ways to achieve that better world. The point here is

that we cannot be certain about the “nature of cruelty” or the “nature of oppression,” and we cannot offer any uncontroversial definition of these and similar other terms; however, we can show the difference between the world in which we are living and the world we may achieve if we do certain things. Here, the inspiration and motivation are aroused not by any authority which people have started questioning, but by the beautiful world they can envision, the vision that is plausible and also supported in part by the “historical facts.”

Rorty offers some examples where the tendency of seeking legitimacy by invoking a non-human authority is declining:

Still, while waiting, I can recite the same optimistic “up from principles” story that Dewey recited. I can point to the steady decline in requests for legitimation and for citation of authority over the last few hundred years, the steady increase in willingness to experiment. I can give examples of how the citizens of the constitutional democracies have been getting less fanatical, more willing to listen to novel prophecies, more imaginative, since the churches were disestablished, the franchise opened up, a liberal education was made available to the masses, avant-garde art made a paying proposition, and so on. This is the only sort of case I can make to show that, in Baker’s words, “this recognition of contingency makes the prophet more effective.” (Rorty, “What Can You Expect” 722)



So, there is some evidence that we are moving towards a poeticized culture (not seeking authority). And Rorty also demonstrates that social change is possible even if we do not have any metaphysical foundation. But pragmatic prophets cannot make false promises.

Like the Radical Left, the Cultural Left also thinks that Rorty's pragmatism lacks radicalism. They think that the Pragmatic Left is complacent and thus promotes the status quo. And Rorty's pragmatism is, they contend, supportive of liberal democracy which, for them, maintains the structure of the oppression of the poor and the marginalized. The quotation below shows the nature of their criticism well:

Among members of what one might call the "academic Left," the principal political criticism of Rorty seems to be that his work is insufficiently radical. Richard Bernstein, for example, notes that "despite occasional protests to the contrary, it begins to look as if Rorty's defense of liberalism is little more than an *apologia* for the status quo—the very type of liberalism that Dewey judged to be 'irrelevant and doomed'." Thomas McCarthy puts the point very succinctly when he argues that one of Rorty's "rules for action" appears to be, "Don't engage in radical criticisms of our culture and society." Frank Lentricchia asserts that Rorty has simply sold out to the bourgeoisie. (Gander 5)

The main opposition to Rorty is that his pragmatism lacks the radicalism necessary for change, that Rorty ends up supporting the institutions that are perpetuating different forms of domination/oppressions. He is conservative (Singer 1825), and he is complacent and conformist (Hutchinson 565). They believe that he fails to see liberal democracy as a

new form of domination of the marginalized. Adorno and Horkheimer also believe that any defense of liberal democracy is one more excuse for maintaining the status quo (Rorty, *CIS* 57). Their point is that since the foundation of liberal democracy, the enlightenment notion of rationality has become corrupt, and there is no value to it because it is bereft of any philosophical foundation.

Baker's analysis of Rorty is useful here. Even if Baker found a lack of foundation in the pragmatic notions of prophetic vision to be problematic, she does not think that Rorty privileges liberal democracy over other systems, which would make him a foundationalist. Her analysis clarifies Rorty's position:

The preservation of existing American political institutions is not the focus of Rorty's utopian vision. Nor is his advocacy of their preservation evidence that Rorty has no utopian vision. Rather those institutions are yet another vehicle for the realization of Rorty's vision, which he has chosen largely by default . . . . Rorty repeatedly expresses a willingness to reexamine the value of those institutions in light of "practical proposals for the erection of alternative institutions." (707)

Rorty finds no other better alternative available than liberal democracy to fulfill his three hopes: that suffering and cruelty will be minimized, freedom will be maximized, and chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized. He never claims that liberal democracy is essentially superior to all other forms of governance. Rorty says that Whitman's and Dewey's

classless and casteless society . . . is neither more natural nor more rational than the cruel societies of feudal Europe or of eighteenth-century Virginia. All that can be said in its defense is that it would produce less unnecessary suffering than any other, and that it is the best means to a certain end: the creation of a greater diversity of individuals—larger, fuller, more imaginative and daring individuals. To those who want a demonstration that less suffering and greater diversity should be the overriding aims of political endeavor, Dewey and Whitman have nothing to say. They know of no more certain premises from which such a belief might be deduced.

*(Achieving Our Country 30)*

He thinks that “liberal culture needs an improved self-description rather than a set of foundations . . .” (*CIS 54*). For the creation of a better society, we need to be able to offer better alternative redescriptions of our culture. This is possible only when we have a vision and act it out for the betterment of the society. If the Cultural Left or the Radical Left comes up with a better alternative, a pragmatist would never stick to the existing one. But, as we discussed earlier, these Leftists do not often offer any alternative or even if they do, they do not explain how their alternative will run the society in the absence of the existing one.

The change of a social system is not possible merely through the abstract theorization of the oppression and injustices as done by the Spectatorial Academic Left or Cultural Left. Even if the Cultural Left charges Rorty with being ineffective, Rorty demonstrates how

their preference for theory over politics or practice, analysis over action, makes themselves more ineffective than Rorty's pragmatists. Rorty claims:

Insofar as a Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left . . . . Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate. They are spending energy which should be directed at proposing new laws on discussing topics . . . . The academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms. (*Achieving Our Country* 14-15)

The focus of this Cultural/Academic Left has been in philosophizing or theorizing concrete events and politics. So, in their Leftist practice, theory has replaced practice and turned individuals into detached spectators. They are more interested in abstract theorizing than in the practical work of passing laws, working with the laboring class, and so forth. As "spectators," they *watch* what is going on from a distance, and they do not engage in the specific and mundane work of Reformist politics. They see the Reformist left as co-opted by their willingness to work with, even compromise with, the Establishment, including with their political opponents. They disapprove of the "bipartisan" tendencies of the Reformist Left.

They are so much engrossed with complex and abstract theorizing that they think, according to Rorty, that the more abstract theorization they make the more subversive of social institutions they become. Their analysis of society and social institutions turns

individuals into “subjects,” not agents for change. Rorty claims: “The contemporary academic Left seems to think that the higher your level of abstraction, the more subversive of the established order you can be. The more sweeping and novel your conceptual apparatus, the more radical your critique” (*Achieving Our Country* 93). Some of the people in the Cultural Left, like Foucault and Fredric Jameson, have become so obsessed with abstract theorizing that they don’t see any action for social change possible. They have been busy making a pessimistic analysis of the social system that does not leave any place for action. So, what we have today is “a spectatorial, disgusted, mocking Left rather than a Left which dreams of achieving our country” (*Achieving Our Country* 35). Rorty says that “paradoxically, the Leftists who are most concerned not to “totalize,” and who insist that everything be seen as the play of discursive differences rather than in the old metaphysics-of-presence way, are also the most eager to theorize, to become spectators rather than agents” (*Achieving Our Country* 36). This tendency towards complex theorization has brought a deep pessimism to the Left. They see nothing as possible; “hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left—principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness. The Whitmanesque hope which lifted the hearts of the American Left before the 1960s is now thought to have been a symptom of a naïve ‘humanism’” (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* 37). It now has started focusing on either a Lacanian notion of “inherently unsatisfiable desire” or the “undecidable nature of meaning” or the “impossibility of commensuration between oppressed and oppressor” (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* 37).

Even if Spectatorial/ Cultural Left is antifoundational in its rejection of the notion of “Truth” or “Objectivity,” it fails to avoid a trap to fall back on some other sort of foundationalism. Foucault is one of the most influential of these “cultural” Leftists. Like others of this type, he sees everything in terms of the “networks of power.” He tries to hang everything together with his notion of “ubiquitous” power (*Achieving Our Country* 94). This is a very fixed frame of reference for him and his followers. Rorty says: “In its Foucauldian usage, the term ‘power’ denotes an agency which has left an indelible stain on every word in our language and on every institution in our society. It is always already there, and cannot be spotted coming or going. One might spot a corporate bagman arriving at a congressman’s office, and perhaps block his entrance. But one cannot block off power in the Foucauldian sense” (*Achieving Our Country* 94). This Cultural Left’s “theory”—of power or ideology or the like—has taken them closer to the secular theology of Platonism: “I now wish to say that, in committing itself to what it calls ‘theory,’ this Left has gotten something which is entirely too much like religion. For the Cultural Left has come to believe that we must place our country within a theoretical frame of reference, situate it within a vast quasi-cosmological perspective” (95). Even if Foucault rejected the grand theory of Plato, he developed his own grand theory of power: “Grand theories—eschatologies like Hegel’s or Marx’s, inverted eschatologies like Heidegger’s, and rationalizations of hopelessness like Foucault’s and Lacan’s—satisfy the urge that theology used to satisfy. . . . [T]he ubiquity of Foucauldian power is reminiscent of the ubiquity of Satan, and thus of the ubiquity of original sin—that diabolical stain on every human soul” (*Achieving Our Country* 38, 95).

Even if the Cultural Left has been successful in changing the way we used to treat marginalized people, especially in the academy, it has done very little in changing real laws and bringing some observable transformations in society. About its positive aspects, Rorty says: “This Cultural Left has had extraordinary success. . . . they have decreased the amount of sadism in our society. Especially among college graduates, the causal infliction of humiliation is much less socially acceptable than it was during the first two-thirds of the century. The tone in which educated men talk about women, and educated whites about blacks, is very different from what it was before the Sixties” (*Achieving Our Country* 81). However, due to their focus on theorization and their negligence towards making practical reforms to reduce economic and social exploitation of the poor and the marginalized, they have accomplished very little after 1960s: “Except for a few Supreme Court decisions, there has been little change for the better in our country’s laws since the Sixties. But the change in the way we treat one another has been enormous. . . . [D]uring the same period in which socially accepted sadism has steadily diminished, economic inequality and economic insecurity have steadily increased. It is as if the American Left could not handle more than one initiative at a time—as if it either had to ignore stigma in order to concentrate on money, or vice versa” (*Achieving Our Country* 81, 83). The Cultural Left, being as ideologically pure as the Right, is unwilling, as is the Right, to engage in the sort of bipartisan compromise that can move society forward. Instead, while they do make gains in reducing humiliation, they have also produced a situation in which the two sides no longer talk to each other. To be sure, a good bit of the problems rests with the ideological Right, but the Radical Left has played its part.

Their abstract theorization and replacement of practical politics with cultural politics or the politics of difference or identity, as stated earlier, indirectly strengthens the status quo and the Rightist agendas. This Left's inability to intervene in social practices has led to the worsening of the situation. Instead of their fear of Rortian pragmatism leading to fascism, their own pessimism and passivity may pave a path for fascism: "Many writers on socioeconomic policy have warned that the old industrialized democracies are heading into a Weimar-like period, one in which populist movements are likely to overturn constitutional governments. Edward Luttwak, for example, has suggested that fascism may be the American future" (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* 89). People will think that system has cracked so that they will seek a strong man to vote for: "The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots" (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* 90). Rorty believes that when the Cultural Left in the United States fails to address the issues of the immiserated and the oppressed here at home and seems to care more about the oppressed internationally, the people in the country who are being ignored—by the Rich who care about themselves, and by the Left—will lose patience. When they see no care taken for their concerns, then they might look for a Strong Man like Hitler.

So, both the Spectatorial Left and the Radical Left find the Reformist Left to be inadequate for its willingness to do things incrementally, and its willingness to "get in



bed” with their political opponents. A half of a loaf is better than none, the Reformists might say, while the Spectators can’t be bothered to reach for the bread at all (although they are happy themselves to take the bread offered them by the Establishment in the form of nice tenure jobs at Duke or elsewhere) and the Radical Left would rather starve than deal with the “devils” who are their opponents.

So, Rorty suggests the Spectatorial Left renounce any urge to create grand theories and the Radical Left discard talking about movement. They should focus on hope over knowledge and piecemeal approach to a complete overhaul of system. They should focus on vision rather than on abstract analysis of the social situation. As Rorty says, “the Left should put a moratorium on theory” (*Achieving Our Country* 91). Rorty thinks that the Left also should discard a “detached spectator point of view” and adopt an “agent point of view” (27). And when the Left begins to focus on making “reforms,” envisioning a better world, and explaining how it will be achieved, there will be a solid ground for action.

### **Rorty and His Pragmatic Way of Acting: A Conclusion**

To sum up this chapter, Rorty’s appeal to set aside epistemology, as discussed in the previous chapter, does not create a vacuum. His focus on utility, as determined by conversation among the members of a vocabulary or a discourse community, offers us a ground for operation in an antifoundational world. In Rorty’s scheme, what keeps us working towards the betterment of society is not our knowledge of truth or certainty about the consequences of our possible actions, but a clear vision about a better future for ourselves and our future generation. And towards that purpose, strong poets can help us

invent stories and present them before us in an interesting way so that we work hard to achieve the world as envisioned by these strong poets or secular prophets. In such a poeticized culture, the issue of relativism becomes useless. And for Rorty, our goal of actions should be to expand our “we-intensions” and reduce pain and suffering by focusing on solidarity rather than on objectivity.

Rorty also refutes the charges from the both the Radical Left and the Cultural Left that his pragmatism is “ineffectual” and “complacent.” He clearly demonstrates that the ground for any action for social change is not provided by any theoretical framework; it is rather provided by a concrete vision for which the Cultural Left is incapable. So, for Rorty, instead of pragmatism being conformist and ineffectual, the Cultural Left itself promotes the status quo by being obsessed with “theorizing.” That’s why the focus of the Left should not be on a pessimistic analysis of “culture,” as Foucault offers; it should be on experimenting with tools that can potentially improve human condition by eliminating suffering and injustices.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS: PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATORS

#### AS NEGOTIATORS AND POETS

After discussing foundationalism and antifoundationalism and the issues of knowing and acting in the three previous chapters, I now want to offer a brief summary of the thesis and then offer some thoughts for a further project, on the implications for professional communication and communicators. First, I will summarize the debate between Plato and the Sophists in terms of foundationalism and antifoundationalism for situating Rorty and his pragmatism in the classical debate. Second, I will recapitulate Rorty's antifoundational way of knowing as comparable to the Sophistic rhetoric and Burke's theory of language and contrast Rorty's ideas with both modern foundationalists and antifoundationalists, including both the foundational and antifoundational Leftists. Third, I will summarize the discussion about the usefulness of Rorty's conversation, poetic redescription, and solidarity for operating in the world in reasonable manners. After summarizing the discussions from the previous chapters, I will offer some thoughts on the implications for professional communication theory and practice. I will point out how Rorty's conversation, poetic redescription, and solidarity, which help us in general navigate the postmodern world, help us as professional communication professionals. In this section, I will show how Rorty's pragmatic belief in utility and poetic redescription can help us rethink the discipline of professional communication and how his focus on

appeals of strong poetry can help professional communicators act in innovative ways to offer new vocabularies.

The debate between Plato and the Sophists concerns the nature of truth and the possibility of achieving that truth through certain methods. Plato believes in the existence of immutable truths and the possibility of acquiring them through rational investigation even though he focuses on dialectic and the constant questioning of our own beliefs. This strong belief that the universal truths exist makes him foundational. His foundationalism lies in his belief that something is *True* if it accurately “mirrors” or “represents” the fixed and universal ideas. On the other hand, the Sophists reject this notion of universal and immutable truths and advocate the contingency of truths. Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias believe that every interpretation is human interpretation and its truthfulness is contextually determined. In this view, the notion of truth becomes a justified belief, justified by what Burke calls objective recalcitrance and what Rorty calls historical facts. So, what is good should be determined not by whether something (any human representations or laws) corresponds to some universal principles or absolute truths; rather it should be determined by its usefulness to the human community. This rejection of fixed standards of judgment and their focus on the usefulness to human community bring them closer to Rorty’s antifoundationalist beliefs.

Following the Sophist-Burke tradition in which every understanding is human interpretation, Rorty rejects the correspondence theory of language, which means that our language is not the reflection of reality (things, the world); it is not the language that the world speaks in; it is rather our invention to “describe” the world before us. When we say

that the language we speak/write is the language we have invented, and when we say that the world itself as such does not have its own language or we do not have access to such non-human language (not invented by humans, or extrahuman), then what we call “Truth,” as fixed and immutable, becomes problematized. What we call “Truth,” in Rorty’s scheme, becomes the “property of sentences;” and these sentences depend on a certain vocabulary to achieve meaning. This gets close to what Burke says in “Terministic Screens” about the construction of truth.<sup>19</sup> And these vocabularies (like discourses or disciplines in Foucault), in Rortian terms, are tools to solve some problems, not to reflect reality objectively as thought by foundationalists like Blackburn and Lynch. So, Rorty undercuts the representationalism of these foundationalist philosophers where language can mirror reality objectively and accurately. Rorty also subverts foundationalist Leftist epistemology in which the true nature of reality can be understood if we unravel the underlying realities of oppression or structures of power. For Rorty, neither the vocabulary of the Marxists nor that of the rationalists, neither that of the psychologist nor that of the scientists, gets us closer to truth; even if it does, we do not know whether it does or does not or how close to or how far from truth it puts us.

The possibility of the existence of multiple vocabularies creates the problem Burke calls the “welter” of interpretations (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 167). The

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<sup>19</sup> Burke believes that our interpretation of reality depends on the kind of orientation we have. For instance, the way a psychologist interprets human relationship is different from the way a sociologist interprets it. Similarly, Darwin’s understanding of human history is different from the theological understanding of it. So, Burke’s idea that our understanding is filtered through certain terministic screens is similar to Rorty’s notion that the conventions of a vocabulary determine the meaning of the sentences produced within that vocabulary.

postmodernists like Jacques Derrida<sup>20</sup> think that complete indeterminacy is liberating because we are not bound by anyone or anything. But Rorty does not go to that extent, does not become a complete anarchist. What stops the complete indeterminacy due to the “welter” of interpretations is “conversation,” through which we come to an intersubjective agreement or consensus about our interpretation. And there is no benefit in perennially continuing the conversation, which we can if we like, when the majority of people believe that “this interpretation” is useful for the present situation. So, conversation, which leads to, validates, and reinforces consensus, can be a basis for operating in the world in the absence of any universal standards.

Sometimes, the interpretation thus established may become less useful due to different changes in circumstances or the introduction of a new linguistic tool. In that situation, we cannot argue for the new and convince the people based on the criteria of the first vocabulary, because the assumptions of the two interpretations, indeed their fundamental orientations, are too different. What we need here is poetic redescription, a brand new way of describing the reality. Here, the new vocabulary is like a new metaphor we use for describing the same thing. After we create new vocabulary and offer it in a beautiful way (as poets do) we will be able to attract the people towards it. Then we need to explain our vocabulary and convince people by showing them in a concrete way that your new tool/vocabulary will benefit them. So, first we need to show how the old (present) vocabulary has become less useful (analysis as done by the critical scholars); second, we need to present a new alternative which will reduce the problems and increase

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<sup>20</sup> See Derrida’s “Signature, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.”

the benefits. So, when conversation itself is not sufficient, poetic redescription can be a basis for our actions.

What kinds of benefits do poetic redescriptions create? The answer can be understood through Rorty's idea of solidarity. Rorty's poetic redescription encourages us to accept a new vocabulary, a new way of understanding the world, and with it to accept—or to reinforce our acceptance of—those ideas, beliefs, and values that create solidarity. That is, I would compare conversation and poetic redescription as ways of producing and reinforcing solidarity—the first doing so by means of logically good reasons (logical and reasonable because grounded in the assumptions of a shared vocabulary), and the second doing so by means of poetic appeals (which then, if the new description is to be maintained, must come to be accepted as reasonable). The benefits that poetic redescription or the new vocabulary offers are those that reduce pain and suffering and promote more and more happiness and freedom by breaking the artificial boundaries among people and expanding our “we-intensions.” So, our purpose is to make people's life easier and more comfortable. As we cannot say what is True, Rorty shifts his focus from what is “objective” or “True” to what promotes “solidarity.” Poetic redescription can be useful in changing the vocabularies or in speaking across vocabularies when the purpose is to offer an alternative that reduces pain and suffering. So, solidarity also forms a ground for acting in an antifoundational world.

These three grounds he offers for acting do not secure foundations, and they can be replaced by other grounds offered at different occasions for changes in situations. Instead, these grounds seem to be useful in the present situation in the United States. If

anyone shows the weaknesses of these three bases and offers a better option, pragmatists should welcome that option. Rorty's position is thus similar to that taken by Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias*, where Socrates says that what he believes is bound by "iron and adamant" but would be altered if someone offers what Socrates sees as superior in some way (Plato, *Gorgias* 147). Likewise, these three bases that Rorty offers are also contingent. And the only basis for offering these grounds for communication and operation in the world is, for Rorty, their "utility."

These ideas of conversation, poetic redescription, solidarity, and utility also serve as the bases for Rorty's relation to the Leftist theorists (of both the foundationalist and antifoundationalist varieties) in terms of acting. Leftists today within the bounds of the academy focus on "cultural politics," "identity," or the "politics of difference." In their complex and abstract analysis of the notions of identity, difference, or culture, they have become "spectatorial," renouncing activism and reformist zeal. This paralytic tendency indirectly promotes the status quo and weakens real motives for political change. That's why Rorty believes that to remain practicing Leftists, these Cultural or Academic Leftists have to discard a "spectatorial point of view" and adopt an "agent point of view" (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* 27). These Cultural Leftists, even if they have in some ways been able to avoid a representationalist doctrine, have failed to offer any alternative and a picture of the world their alternative may create. Thus, they lack a poetic redescription, necessary for instilling "hope" in people and motivating them towards actions for social change.



These Leftists, especially the radical ones, emphasize “movements” rather than “campaigns.” They want a complete overhaul of the system; however, they offer no idea for how the world will be run after they devastate the old system. So, the better option will be, in Rorty’s scheme, incremental reform or a piecemeal approach. By this, Rorty means that we need to focus on concrete programs and campaigns which are finite and achievable. And the methods for change are both imaginative redescription and rational persuasion. The purpose of these reforms is to reduce human suffering and increase human happiness and freedom. In other words, the main reason why we act is to promote solidarity and create a harmonious world governed by love and compassion.

If conversation, poetic redescription, and solidarity can help us in general navigate the postmodern world, then this triad should be able to help us as professional communication professionals. This implication of Rorty’s ideas for professional communication theory and practice will be an area for a future project, so I will only point to the direction this future research project will take. Two major areas to which Rorty’s ideas can contribute are pragmatic rethinking about professional communication theory and research and the use of strong poetic appeal of redescriptions to change vocabularies or to offer new perspective on an issue.

The discipline of technical writing or professional communication has been redefined since the late 1970s in different ways, and major influences on these redefinitions include Kuhn’s philosophy of science, Bruno Latour’s theory about the social construction of scientific facts, and different postmodern cultural and anthropological theories. Following these trends in different disciplines, Carolyn Miller’s

1979 article offers a redefinition of professional communication, which she calls in this article “technical writing.” She urges technical writing teachers and scholars to discard traditional definition of it as a skills or technique course<sup>21</sup> and to adopt a definition as a humanistic and rhetorical discipline. Her main theoretical basis is the historicist and the contextualist rejection of windowpane theory of language. Her approach is, as she herself calls it, a “communalist perspective,” in which “the teaching of technical or scientific writing becomes more than the inculcation of a set of skills; it becomes a kind of enculturation” (617), which can be seen as a variation on the use of conversation to achieve solidarity. For Miller, technical writing has to be humanistic and even if it has to be practical, it should not be limited to “getting things done” without considering the communal good (Moore 115). Writers such as Steve Katz<sup>22</sup> and Russell Rutter<sup>23</sup> have focused on issues of ethics, humanism<sup>24</sup>, and communal good. These writers also argue against an instrumental approach.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In a traditional sense, technical writing was taken as to transmit technical information as clearly as possible. So, the focus was on clarity, objectivity, and accuracy. See Miller’s article “Humanistic Rational for Technical Writing” and “What is Practical about Professional Communication?”

<sup>22</sup> See his article “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust.”

<sup>23</sup> See his article “History, Rhetoric, and Humanism: Toward a More Comprehensive Definition of Technical Communication.”

<sup>24</sup> Here, this humanism does not mean traditional liberal humanism in which an individual is thought to be a free agent with a rational capacity to build her/his own personality overcoming all the social or contextual factors. So, the humanism referred to here is anti-humanist humanism.

<sup>25</sup> This is a traditional approach in which the purpose of technical writing is to “get things done” (Moore 115). See Elizabeth Tebeaux’s “Let’s Not Ruin Technical Writing, Too: A Comment on the Essays of Carolyn Miller and Elizabeth Harris” and Patrick Moore’s “Instrumental Discourse Is as Humanistic as Rhetoric.” From Katz’s perspective, technical writing in this sense will be like Just’s memo. See Katz’s “Ethics of Expediency...” for more information.

Writers like Dale Sullivan and Bernadette Longo<sup>26</sup> vehemently criticize the notion of technical writing as instrumental discourse, which they believe produces literate “slaves” (Sullivan 216). But they also think that Miller’s approach is not sufficient. They focus on highlighting the importance of studying technical writing as a discourse that promotes and perpetuates dominant ideologies of a society or the corporate world. So, the task of professionals in technical communication is to unravel the workings of ideology or power in technical writing discourse. It’s not merely to understand the conventions of the genres often used or available for working in certain situations. Instead of merely teaching the students the culture of the institution (as Miller thinks), which again creates literate slaves because they will only know how to operate in the culture of the institution but will fail to be critical of the culture<sup>27</sup>, we need to teach how different social and cultural factors of a society affect how technical writing is produced and regulated. So, these writers/scholars have drawn ideas from what Rorty would call Cultural Left or what they themselves call a critical (cultural) perspective<sup>28</sup>, mostly from Foucault.

Both Miller and Longo are concerned that professional communication should not lead to the production of literate slaves. But despite the similarity, their positions are different. And the question now is, “Does a pragmatist support, advance, or replace Miller’s and Longo’s approaches?” First, Rorty provides good reasons in support of their concerns. He rejects the positivist notion of science, since science is not a discipline that

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<sup>26</sup> See Dale Sullivan’s “Political-Ethical Implications of Defining Technical Communication as a Practice” and Bernadette Longo’s *Spurious Coin*.

<sup>27</sup> These writers like Sullivan will say that even what we call communal good will be directed for the good of the dominant group.

<sup>28</sup> See Nancy Blyler’s “Taking a Political Turn: A Critical Perspective and Research in Technical Communication.”

deals with “pure facts” or objective truths. It is, like poetry, a way of describing the world and inventing vocabularies as tools to solve human problems. So, his theory can provide us a basis for rejecting the “mirror” metaphor for describing technical writing and scientific language in general. This is similar to Miller’s rejection of the “windowpane theory of language,” or Longo’s rejection of the neutrality of scientific discourse. As neither the “mind” nor the “language” are mirrors, in Rorty’s scheme, there is no point in characterizing technical writing/communication as objective and neutral representation of scientific or technical knowledge. When there is no language that scientific facts speak, and when conventions of a vocabulary determine what counts as true, the focus on clarity, objectivity, and neutrality to capture the reality as such becomes useless. So, Rorty provides good grounds for Miller’s and Longo’s positions that technical writing is not neutral.

Similarly, Rorty would agree with both Miller and Longo in historicizing language use. He would say that the kind of technical discourse that is practiced is determined by social and institutional contexts, which means that every technical discourse is a vocabulary situated in certain contexts. In other words, the use of technical writing discourse depends on its rhetorical situation. In terms of Miller’s approach, Rorty would advance her position about the communal good. He provides a useful way for determining what kind of technical vocabulary can be said to have communal good in the absence of any fixed definition of communal good. Here, Rorty’s notion of “truth” as a “justified belief” is important. Instead of taking technical writing as merely an act of persuasion, as Miller and many others after her have taken, we need to reconceptualize it

as an act of negotiation, negotiation among different groups, from engineers/scientists to the users, including the technical writer herself. This negotiation demands an involvement of all stakeholders in determining what is good. Here, technical professionals should practice rhetoric (in technical discourses) as negotiation (conversation) or what Booth calls Listening-Rhetoric. Rorty's position helps Miller counter the notion of technical communicator as a neutral transmitter.<sup>29</sup> In this context, technical writing does not pass through a conduit; rather, it emerges in the space of interaction or conversation.

Rorty would not agree with Longo or other critical theorists (Cultural Leftists) that technical writers or professionals should use language that denaturalizes the operations of power. In other words, Rorty would not agree with the Foucauldian critical thinkers that any attempt at denaturalizing language can help us see beyond discursive structures. For Rorty, breaking loose from one language game would not lead to a non-ideological state, as Longo would think. Longo's critical perspective, in her view, grants her a vantage point from which she can understand how all discourses work. So, she is free from all ideologies. The understanding of the contexts of a discourse helps us, according to her, uncover the process by which truth is constructed in a discourse. This is similar to what Stanley Fish calls theory hope<sup>30</sup>. However, for Rorty, if we find that one

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<sup>29</sup> The traditional model of communication is often referred to as the Shannon-Weaver Model, which takes communication as transmission of information from the sender through a certain channel to the sender. Here, communication is completely one way and the role of the technical communicator, if this model is followed, is to reduce as much of noise as possible in the act of transmission. This model of communication influenced technical communication for a long time. For more information on this model, see *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*.

<sup>30</sup> Fish talks about how anti-foundationalism turns foundational. As Bizzell says, "Anti-foundationalist analysis of social context itself is presumed to liberate us from that context. Stanley Fish has argued that

language game is repressive, what we can do is to discard it and adopt the other more useful one. Rorty would agree with Longo that it is necessary to show how a certain technical vocabulary leads to pain and suffering, however, without any claim about the underlying realities about pain and suffering. In place of over-theorizing the politics of the oppressed or the normalization of discursive power, Rorty would prefer offering new vocabularies and replacing the old one. This is what Rorty calls an “agent point of view” as opposed to Cultural Left’s “spectator point of view” (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* 27). Rorty does not believe that we can stand free from all ideologies or vocabularies, so he prefers the pragmatic approach to the Foucauldian critical approach. He discards theory hope.

As an illustration of Foucauldian Leftist perspective and the usefulness of Rorty’s pragmatism, let’s examine the issue of map making discussed by Barton and Barton.<sup>31</sup> Do the maps represent reality, as Blackburn contends, or do they invent truths? Barton and Barton and many others in visual communication believe that the “map is not the territory,” that maps or any other semiotic practice does not represent reality (Hayakawa, qtd. in Barton and Barton 52). The cultural critics (whom Rorty would call Cultural Leftists) go beyond that assertion and claim that maps are ideological as they are governed by the politics of exclusion. That is why Barton and Barton suggest map

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when this happens, anti-foundationalism slides back into foundationalism. The tendency, in other words, is to hope that by becoming aware of the personal, social, and historical circumstances that constitute our beliefs, we can achieve a critical distance on them and change our beliefs if we choose. In encouraging this hope, anti-foundationalism is setting up its method in place of the absolute standards of judgment it debunks. That is, it is promised that employment of the method will confer objective mental powers very similar to those that were supposed to be conferred by the absolute standards. This is what Fish calls the “theory hope” of anti-foundationalism” (40).

<sup>31</sup> See Barton and Barton’s “Ideology and the Map: Toward a Postmodern Visual Design Practice.” What do the visuals do?

makers or designers use the techniques of palimpsest and collage to denaturalize the operations of ideology or power politics. However, arguing that a map is useful when it comes in the form of collage or palimpsest assumes that we can break away from ideology and have an Olympian non-ideological perspective, something which Rorty claims is impossible. In effect, such a move becomes foundational even as it rejects traditional form of foundationalism, by manifesting a representationalist desire to reflect the world in itself in its pure form and shape.

Rortian critics agree with cultural critics like Barton and Barton that maps are not neutral and that they are ideological; they are engaged in the politics of exclusion. However, Rortian critics deny that there is any way to design non-ideological maps. Rortian antifoundationalism does not want to replace one form of foundationalism with another. The Rortians neither claim that the LUD (London Underground Design) is an accurate representation of the city, nor do they suggest that LUD should be discarded as it turns individuals into, in Barton and Barton's terms, consumers from users. A Rortian concern would be whether it is useful or not, whether its use makes it easier for users to find places. If anyone comes up with any other map which is more useful, then a pragmatist discards the old one and adopts the new. In the case of Barton and Barton's claim that maps are ideological in the sense that they repress certain forms of reality and highlight the others to fulfill the interests of the dominant groups, what a pragmatist would prefer is to offer or to encourage map makers to offer as many maps as possible so that they can choose the one that seems the best for the situation. However, even the best one is not non-ideological and neutral.

In addition, Rorty's notion of conversation or negotiation also helps in the practice of map making. In Rorty's scheme, an alternative to both the idea of accurate representation of reality and the techniques of collage and palimpsest would be to construct a map through negotiation with the users of the maps. The conversation can determine what is good for the community of the users. Robert Johnson's user-centered approach<sup>32</sup> in which the professional communicator negotiates the needs of the users with the knowledge of the experts will be more useful than that of the palimpsestic map that confuses rather than facilitates the users.

Rorty's notion of poetic redescription also offers a major contribution to persuasive professional communication practices when there is a need to invent new vocabularies. Assigning the role of a poet or a prophet to a professional communicator may sound very strange. Due to the dominance of the rational culture, the role of imaginative invention has been largely neglected in technical professions in the West. In the field of professional communication, such a notion is very alien also because technical communication programs and literature programs often have a tense relationship, and scholars in technical communication seem to think poetry to be antithetical to technical writing. The tension also derives from technical writing's association with science and technology, which is often opposed to genres like literature and poetry: one is thought to be completely objective and the other completely subjective. However, Rorty's notion of poetic appeal or redescription can be very important for

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<sup>32</sup> See Johnson's *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and Other Mundane Artifacts*.



professional communicator. The major focus of his notion is on inventiveness or imaginative redescription and its poetic appeal.

Strong poets offer a new way of looking at reality and explain how that benefits the community. I believe a successful professional communicator has to be able to blend reason with imagination, an ability to negotiate with an ability to innovate. Let me offer an examples of how Rortian poetic appeal can be useful in the workplace for professional communicators through a discussion of Stephen Denning's *Squirrel Inc.*, a book that talks about the role of narratives or stories to change ideas and persuade people. Denning's use of the story itself is an example of a strong poetry attempt: the author tries to get us to see how people need new vocabularies by giving us a narrative rather than a logical argument using the conventional vocabulary that has so far been unable to effect this desired change of perspective.

One among the various purposes of storytelling discussed in the book is bringing about change. As the writer says, when we have a brand new idea to bring about change in times of crisis (i.e, crisis in old vocabulary), we can tell a story "because a story can communicate a new idea quickly, easily, and naturally" (7). The writer uses squirrels as characters to tell a story about a company in a critical situation. Squirrel Inc. was a nut-burying company, helping the squirrels bury nuts in the fall for use in the winter. But this approach becomes problematic, because humans have started digging up their gardens and taking away the nuts. Now, the squirrels need to find some other way so that they won't suffer in the cold days of winter. The new executive of *Squirrel Inc*, Diana, has a new idea : she wants to replace nut burying with nut storing. However, "going from nut

burying to nut storing is a pretty big transition” (8). The problem is that squirrels have been “instinctively burying nuts,” and discarding it and adopting a new method is a difficult thing for them (8). Further, the management committee does not seem to be convinced that the new scheme will work. So, one of the characters in the story, the bartender, suggests to Diana that she tell a beautiful story with a very clear picture of “what change you’re trying to make” (9). In effect, he suggests that she create a new vocabulary through poetic redescription. Diana tells a story in which a squirrel named Timmy stored nuts in the hollow of a tree trunk and could use the stored nuts up to February; he was able to relax and enjoy his life with his family. She further says, “But just imagine if Timmy had been able to store more nuts with the proper technology: he would have had a supply of food for the whole winter. Imagine if all squirrels used modern storage techniques. What if Squirrel Inc. was helping millions of squirrels store their acorns and other nuts? Just think what a business that could be for Squirrel Inc” (21). She also highlights “what would have happened without the change idea.” As she says, “Just imagine how Timmy the squirrel would have spent his winter if he hadn’t had his store of nuts, scraping and grubbing around, getting frustrated most of the time. Nothing being where he’d left it” (15).

This story about organizational communication reveals a lot about the importance of having a poetic vision and presenting it in a concrete way. As Rorty says, when the old vocabulary becomes dysfunctional, a good poet comes up with a new vocabulary, which is a new tool to solve the problems that the old one fails to. Diana’s idea of “nut storing” was unthinkable to others in her company, and therefore, many of them disapproved of it

in the beginning. Think how difficult it had been for great poets like Galileo or Jesus to change vocabularies. So, what we need is to tell a beautiful story about what the world we envision through our new vocabulary looks like. This is what Diana does by creating a concrete story about how Timmy was able to relax and enjoy life when others were disappointed. Telling a story about change also requires us to paint a picture of the potential situation of the world if the vocabulary is not changed. This is what Diana does by telling what a frustrating situation Timmy would have had if he had not stored nuts. The squirrel story shows that, first, we need to have a clear vision; second, we need to paint the picture of the world that this vision can create; third, we need also to demonstrate what the future will look like if the same thing continues. The story embodies the role of imagination or invention that is very cleverly or reasonably executed. Here, as Rorty says in “Universal Grandeur, Romantic Depth, and Pragmatic Cunning,” imagination does not exclude reason; rather it utilizes it to get the best result possible. What would a Foucauldian executive do in such a situation? What would he/she think about the new vocabulary that Diana suggests? She might say that it is just a replacement of one form of repression with the other. So, such a Foucauldian would not offer any useful alternative, which ultimately makes her a mere spectator and makes Timmy a starving squirrel.

Even if it is a commonplace to say that poetry inspires, and that the inspired craftsmanship of professional communicators is persuasive, still the awareness of contingencies, of *dissoi logoi*, in which “truth is in the eye of the beholder,” provides a context for professional communicators that frees imaginations and makes a more

welcoming place for inspired work. It is also important that professional communicators keep in mind the importance of imagination and inspiration because it is better than living as literate slaves.

To sum up, Rorty's antifoundationalism does not lead to a radical relativism. There are sufficient grounds on which we can base our actions for improvement of our life and society. Rorty's pragmatism revives Sophistic rhetoric and shows how anti-representationalism, conversation, and a focus on the utility of strong poetry can be useful in promoting the ethics of tolerance and mutual happiness. The application of Rorty's theory of language to professional communication seems to offer us a useful model to handle many situations in professional communication practices. This is an area that requires further research, but it should prove to be fruitful for the future of professional communication.

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