

## THE SUBJECT AND CONSENSUS

THE SUBJECT AND CONSENSUS:  
A CRITIQUE OF RICHARD RORTY'S PRAGMATIC DEFENSE  
OF LIBERALISM

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## **Abstract**

Richard Rorty's pragmatic defense of liberalism rests on the claim that liberals should be loyal to the liberal consensus because they can only work by the values and beliefs they have been acculturated in. I argue that if liberals work by their own lights, then it does not follow that they should be loyal to liberalism. Instead, liberals should be loyal only to their complete stock of beliefs and values, as this, rather than the liberal consensus, fully represents the beliefs and values the liberal has been acculturated in. Two false premises lead to Rorty's erroneous conclusion. The first is that liberals are monocultural, meaning they are acculturated only in one community – the liberal community. The second is that liberals are unreflective followers of the liberal consensus. Against the first claim, I show that liberals typically belong to a variety of communities and this allows the liberal to rationally reject liberal beliefs and values and even liberalism outright. Against the second claim, I show that liberals have a more subject-centered rationality than Rorty accounts for in his description of reason. This subject-centered reason allows liberals to take a critically reflective attitude towards the liberal consensus. Without the assumptions I criticize, Rorty's pragmatic defense of liberalism falters and fails.

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## List of Abbreviations

Barry Allen:

- F&MPP* “Foucault and Modern Political Philosophy”, in Moss, *The Later Foucault: Politics and Philosophy*.
- KHP* “What Knowledge, What Hope, What New Pragmatism”, in Eggington and Sandbooth, *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy*.
- RAT* “Is it Pragmatism?: Rorty and The American Tradition”, in Pettegrew, *A Pragmatist’s Progress: Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*.
- WWE* “What Was Epistemology?”, in Brandom, *Rorty and his Critics*.

Jürgen Habermas:

- CES* *Communication and the Evolution of Society*.
- PT* “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn” in Brandom, *Rorty and his Critics*.

William James:

- PRA* *Pragmatism*.

Kai Nielsen:

- ADT* *After the Demise of the Tradition: Rorty, Critical Theory, and the Fate of Philosophy*.

John Rawls:

- PL* *Political Liberalism*.

<i>TJ</i>	<i>A Theory of Justice.</i>
Richard Rorty:	
<i>CD</i>	“Reply to Simon Thompson”, in Festenstein and Thompson, <i>Critical Dialogues</i> .
<i>COP</i>	<i>Consequences of Pragmatism.</i>
<i>ORT</i>	<i>Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1.</i>
<i>PMN</i>	<i>Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.</i>
<i>PSH</i>	<i>Philosophy and Social Hope.</i>
<i>RD</i>	“Reply to Dennett”, in Brandom, <i>Rorty and his Critics</i> .
<i>T&amp;P</i>	<i>Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3.</i>
<i>TLT</i>	<i>The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays on Philosophical Method.</i>
<i>U&amp;T</i>	“Universality and Truth”, in Brandom, <i>Rorty and his Critics</i> .



## *Introduction*

Richard Rorty attempts a pragmatic defense of liberalism through what I term the ‘social foundation thesis’. This thesis equates a descriptive fact with a prescriptive claim. He believes that if we cannot appeal to any ahistorical truths, the only basis for justification of a prescriptive claim is social facts. For Rorty, we can only justify any claim by appealing to the consensus of our community. This, however, does not imply relativism. He grants a special privilege to the Western liberal democratic community – this privilege is what he refers to as ‘liberal ethnocentrism’. If liberals acknowledge that they can only work by their own lights, Rorty believes that it follows that they should recognize that liberal democracy is the best possible form of government. The social fact of the liberal’s acculturation into the liberal community, combined with the liberal’s ethnocentric impulse to view his standards as the best, leads Rorty to claim that the liberal should be loyal to the liberal community. The method used to make this claim involves equating prescriptive claims about how liberal pragmatists should justify their beliefs with descriptive facts on how liberal pragmatists actually do justify their beliefs.

My thesis will be mainly an internal criticism of Rorty, focusing on the above claims. My strategy involves taking much of what he says as given, so that I may come to a full understanding of his position before I attack it. My criticisms will look mainly

at his equation of descriptive facts with prescriptive claims. I shall accept this equation as unproblematic until the last chapter, when I take up its criticism.

The first chapter is an exposition of selected themes in Rorty's work. In this chapter, I come to terms with some points that are often vague and I draw connections that he does not make explicit. I redescribe his work in a more systematic fashion than the literary, breezy style in which he usually presents it, so that the reader will be able to see more clearly the reasoning behind many of Rorty's most controversial and interesting claims.

In the first chapter, I discuss Rorty's work against the 'Philosophical' tradition (i.e. the idea that philosophy should be a pursuit of ahistorical truths), showing how he borrows and differs from others who have also reacted against this tradition, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and the American philosophers of the pragmatic tradition. I show how Rorty's rejection of Philosophical ideas such as the notion of ahistorical truth leads to his epistemological behaviorism – his theory concerning truth and justification. I then delve into Rorty's political philosophy, outlining his defense of liberalism and tying it in with his epistemological behaviorism and liberal ethnocentrism. I term this connection between his pragmatism and liberalism 'the social foundation thesis', as it attempts to justify liberalism on the basis of certain social facts about the liberal community. It uses descriptive facts to justify a normative or prescriptive claim.

The rest of my thesis is devoted to a criticism of Rorty's defense of liberalism. Revealing two false premises in Rorty's descriptive account, I show that the prescriptive claims that supposedly fall out of these erroneous social facts are invalid.

First, Rorty argues that the liberal pragmatist cannot rationally have anti-liberal beliefs, nor can she rationally choose to reject liberalism outright. This claim is only reasonable if it rests on the false presupposition that liberal pragmatists are mono-cultural, i.e. they are acculturated only within the liberal community. By recognizing that liberal pragmatists typically belong to a number of communities, we can see they can rationally reject liberalism outright. This will be the focus of the second chapter.

In the third chapter, I look at a second false premise. Rorty's claim that liberal pragmatists must appeal to the liberal consensus when justifying beliefs condemns them to being what sociologist Harold Garfinkel calls 'judgmental dopes'. An accurate socio-historical account of the way liberal pragmatists justify beliefs shows a more critically reflective attitude which disappears from Rorty's account. A liberal pragmatist comes to hold a belief as true not by appealing to the liberal consensus, but by appealing to his subjective stock of beliefs. I show that my more subjective socio-historical account of how liberal pragmatists justify their beliefs is compatible with accepting that humans are social animals.

The fourth chapter is devoted to some lingering questions left from my criticism of Rorty. I examine the consequences of my alternative subjectivist account for political philosophy. Arguing that such a subjective socio-historical account fails to tell us anything politically, I show that allegiance to pragmatism does not imply allegiance to a particular polity. It certainly does not tell the liberal pragmatist to be loyal to liberalism. At most, it can tell liberal pragmatists that they should appeal to their subjective stock of beliefs when critically evaluating or justifying political claims. No

one, however, needs a political theory to tell a liberal pragmatist to appeal to his own beliefs (what else should we appeal to?).

In the fourth chapter, I also argue that liberal pragmatists can maintain the goal of consensus building while rejecting Rorty's claim that the liberal pragmatist must conform to the liberal consensus. Liberal theorist John Rawls offers an idea of how we may view the achievement of consensus as more than a mere effect of common acculturation. I also question Rorty's emphasis on the importance of consensus in political philosophy. The norm of dissensus is a central part of the ethos of liberal democracy, and should be seen as a sign of a healthy, free, and open society. Rorty's insistence on solidarity and the achievement of consensus seems to undermine the importance of dissent to liberal democracy.

I also raise questions concerning what I believe is one of the most controversial parts of Rorty's account, namely his equation of descriptive facts with normative claims. I examine the work of philosophers, including Kai Nielsen, Hilary Putnam and Jürgen Habermas, who reject the claim that such an equation is forced upon us merely by the dismissal of ahistorical truths and believe that we can find ideals in social practices through developing what I term 'idealist' theories of justification.

I must make a few comments regarding my approach to Rorty's work and working within the confines of one tradition of political philosophy in general. Even though my thesis deals with political philosophy, very little space is devoted to political problems. This is unusual because examinations of political problems tend to occupy much space in the writings of political philosophers. When we engage in this discipline

we do so for reasons such as to find out ‘what is a just economic distribution?’, or ‘what are the appropriate levels of power that the state can have over the individual ?’.

Political philosophers discuss and debate theory that should help them in practice to solve problems such as these. This is political philosophy at the practical level. My thesis differs from this prevalent approach by looking at things on a much more theoretical level. In particular, I look at the way people justify beliefs. Much of Rorty’s political work can be seen as based on the foundation of how people justify knowledge and truth claims. I argue that he uses his epistemological behaviorism theory of justification (what I call the social fact thesis) as a foundation in much the same way as earlier philosophers might have grounded political philosophy on a theory of human nature. Rorty does, however, differ from these earlier philosophers, as his criteria of justification have a more self-consciously contingent socio-historical basis, whereas earlier philosophers aimed for objective, ahistorical grounding.

My criticism of Rorty is based on attacking his theoretical foundation for the liberalism he champions. This task does not revolve around looking at possible shortcomings of liberalism in practice or how it may fail to provide a desirable polity. These questions must be asked, but along with these questions we must also examine those theories such as Rorty’s that seek to provide foundations for liberalism. His most interesting claims about political philosophy are made at the theoretical level. At the practical level, he is not proposing new solutions to political problems. He is not introducing interesting new policy. His political work at the practical level amounts to him saying that we should work within the confines of liberal democracy to find the

solutions to our political problems. This may not seem like an exciting claim. But what makes it an exciting claim are the arguments that Rorty makes at the theoretical level concerning why we should work within the parameters of liberal democracy. His notions such as epistemological behaviorism and ethnocentrism – notions concerning how we do and should justify beliefs – are Rorty's most interesting claims. It is here that he is challenging the way we look at political philosophy, and this is where I focus my criticism.

Rorty is a prolific writer and has written a number of books, most of which are collections of essays. I have concentrated mostly on the work in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, *Heidegger and Others*, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, and *Truth and Progress*, as well as the numerous books on Rorty, which often include both essays on his work and his response to their criticisms. *Consequences of Pragmatism* and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* play less of a role in my argument due to their lack of focus on political philosophy. Nevertheless, these two sources are indispensable for getting a full understanding of Rorty's philosophical position. When I began my thesis, I assumed *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* would play a larger role in my understanding of Rorty's political position seeing as it is often cited as Rorty's main work on political thought. However, as I began reading more of it, I noticed that it differed significantly from the rest of his work. Many of the main ideas developed there are not touched upon in his later work or hinted at in his earlier work. Most notable among these is his definition of a liberal as someone "who believes cruelty is the worst thing we do" (CIS, 74). As a result of the differences between *Contingency* and the

other books, I have chosen to largely ignore the former. My discussion and criticism of the above definition of liberalism in the first chapter of my thesis is my attempt to address some of issues raised in *Contingency* and at the same time to present Rorty's political thought as a coherent, unified position.

## Chapter 1

### Rorty's Pragmatic Defense of Liberalism

In this chapter, I show the connection Richard Rorty draws between his pragmatism and his defense of liberalism. Rorty's defense of liberalism is an exercise in the possibilities of political philosophy once we take into account his dismissal of traditional philosophy. It is therefore necessary to look at his pragmatism first, and then show how he constructs a defense of liberalism based on it. The centerpiece of this defense is based on what I refer to as the social foundation thesis. The social foundation thesis includes important Rortian notions such as epistemological behaviorism and ethnocentrism and includes using descriptive claims as the foundation for prescriptive ones. In this chapter, I provide an interpretive exposition of Rorty's pragmatic defense of liberalism and make explicit some vague ideas and contradictions in his work.

### Richard Rorty and his Pragmatic Anti-Representationalism

I must first discuss Rorty's critique of upper case 'P' Philosophy (as distinguished from lower case 'p' philosophy). According to Rorty, Philosophy is the discipline that claims to have privileged access to a special kind of knowledge, namely knowledge of a language-neutral representation of the world. In this sense, Philosophy attempts to provide us with knowledge of the way the world actually is – apart from the way



humans interpret this reality. Knowledge comes in the form of representations of non-linguistic items – it is “accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible only through a general theory of representation” (PMN, 6).

According to representationalism, truth lies in correspondence to these non-linguistic items, in correspondence to reality. Representationalists claim that these “non-linguistic items ‘render statements’ determinably true or false ... for representationalists ‘making true’ and ‘representing’ are reciprocal relations: the non-linguistic item that makes S true is the one represented by S” (ORT, 4). So, to a representationalist, a true statement is one that accurately describes a non-linguistic item. There is a reality that transcends beliefs and which can measure the truth of these beliefs.

Representationalism is derived from two main ideas defining the course of Philosophy. Bjorn Ramberg summarizes these ideas as:

the Kantian idea that knowledge, or thinking generally, must be understood in terms of some relation between what the world offers up to the thinker, on one side and on the other side the active subjective capacities by which the thinker structures for cognitive use what the world thus provides. The second is the Platonic conviction that there must be some particular forms of descriptions of things, which, by virtue of its ability to accurately map, reflect, or otherwise latch on to just those kinds of things through which the world presents itself to would be knowers, is the form in which any literally true – or cognitively significant or ontologically ingenious – statement must be couched. (Ramberg, 351)

These two ideas – that of knowledge understood in terms of the subject-object dichotomy, and the idea that knowledge consists of accurate descriptions of the way the world presents itself – constitute what Rorty terms representationalism.

Rorty claims we should give up Philosophy not on the grounds of some metaphysical or epistemological claim that there is no such thing as truth-makers or language-neutral descriptions. Rather, we should give up this antiquated pursuit on the grounds the traditional metaphysical and epistemological search for language-neutral representations “simply isn’t working anymore ... it isn’t doing its job” (ORT, 33). It is not so much that we can say for sure that these Philosophical pursuits are not working. It is more that Rorty is “unclear of what it would mean” (COP, 27) to be able to say one of these theories is doing its job. There is no Archimedean point from which we can develop neutral criteria to judge whether any of these ideas are working. As a result, Rorty claims that we should stop asking Philosophical questions since, after all, we would not know what an answer to such questions would look like. We should not be “asking those questions anymore ... they have outlived [their] usefulness” (COP, 27). We should abandon the view that “knowledge [is] a matter of getting reality right”, and instead view knowledge as a “matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality” (ORT, 1). Rorty terms the philosophical movement that focuses on acquiring these ‘habits of action’ pragmatism and the rejection of ‘getting reality right’ anti-representationalism.

Rorty’s pragmatic anti-representationalism reduces traditional Philosophical problems, such as that of skepticism,<sup>1</sup> to pseudo-problems, as these problems are based on distinctions employed by Philosophers in their pursuit of getting reality right.

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty gives a good discussion of what exactly he is referring to when he talks about Philosophical problems or pseudo-problems in ‘Philosophy in America Today’, p. 215.

According to Rorty, some of the central Philosophical distinctions are those between the ahistorical and the historical, “the absolute and the relative, the found and the made, object and subject, nature and convention, reality and appearance” (PSH, xix). These distinctions are derived from the more general distinction between things “which [are] what [they are] apart from [their] relations to other things” and things “whose nature depends on those [very] relations” (PSH, xvii). Philosophy searches for these “absolutes beyond the reach of relationality” (PSH, xvii); it searches for an objective, ahistorical truth that attempts to get reality right. Once we abandon these Philosophical pursuits and, in turn, the distinctions which legitimize them, we can abandon the Philosophical problems that arise from the supposition that knowledge requires an effort to accurately represent reality.

Here Rorty’s work shows the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Rorty reads him “as a therapeutic philosopher, whose importance lies in helping us escape from ways of using words that generate pseudo-problems” (COP, 32). Rorty believes that what gives “Wittgenstein’s work its power is the vision of a point where we can cease doing philosophy when we want to” (COP, 36). He adds that Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is the “first great work of polemic against the Cartesian tradition which does not take the form of saying ‘philosophers from Descartes onwards have thought that the relation between man and the world is so-and-so, but I now show you that it is such-and-such’” (COP, 34). Wittgenstein did not attack the Philosophical tradition only to offer further theories on the nature of ‘how things are’ in an objective and ahistorical

manner. Since these Philosophical problems turn out to be mere pseudo-problems, further theories on the nature of 'how things are' are not required to solve them.

Rorty also borrows from Wittgenstein the idea that philosophers can lay no claim to possessing a distinct skill or unique expertise that enables them to deal with the problems of men in a way that another discipline cannot. Even some philosophers who dismiss the task of trying to 'get reality right' maintain that the philosopher has some special skill or expertise. Philosophers have long taken pride in the idea that they could approach the problems of men in a more rigorous manner than professionals from other disciplines. These philosophers believe a philosopher should be able to spot "flaws in any arguments he hears ... and be able to construct as good an argument as can be constructed for any view" (COP, 219). Rorty notes that both he and Wittgenstein attack the "notion of philosophy as a distinct *Fach*" (COP, 22), i.e. an area or subject, where philosophers have a special skill that enables them to attack the profound questions of existence.

### **Rorty's Social Turn**

Once we dismiss Philosophy, a question arises: What role is there left for philosophy? Rorty claims the role philosophy can fulfill is "simply what [Wilfrid] Sellars calls an attempt to see how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term" (COP, 28). Rorty claims that if we define philosophy in this manner, then novelists, literary theorists, sociologists,

and so on, all fall under the category of ‘philosopher’. The philosopher is not one who is searching for a truth that is out of the reach of other intellectuals. Rather, Rorty describes the philosopher as the bookish intellectual who, in the Sellarasian manner of seeing things in the broadest possible sense, “can see how all the various vocabularies of all the various epochs and cultures hang together” (COP, 55). The philosopher tries to see how things hang together by using common sense supplemented with history, sociology, literature, biology and the like.<sup>2</sup> Much of Rorty’s own work in seeing how things hang together centers around his notion of epistemological behaviorism.

If the dismissed epistemological concerns found knowledge in accurate descriptions of the world, our pragmatic concern to acquire habits of action (pragmatic knowledge) locates knowledge in the intersubjective, contingent community. In this post-epistemological method of conducting philosophy, ideas of knowledge and truth are reduced to solidarity. Rorty says we should view truth as simply a matter of what is good for *us* to believe. Knowledge should be based on its usefulness to us in whatever pursuits we deem valuable, the *us* and *we* in question being the community of the inquirer. According to Rorty, knowledge is attained when one gets as much intersubjective agreement as possible. He calls this theory of justification based on agreement within a community ‘epistemological behaviorism’. He claims that when we offer justification, we say something that is intended to be convincing to our peers. So if I say ‘there is a snowstorm in Toronto’ to a fellow Hamiltonian, I will cite other propositions that support this claim. I could say that a radio or television weather report

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this point see *PMN*, pg. 176.

mentioned there was a snowstorm. Or I could say I heard the news from a friend. In other words, I would cite reasons that I feel would indicate a reliable source of such information to the Hamiltonian I am trying to convince. Rorty claims this is the everyday manner in which we try to convince others and ourselves of the truth of a claim. This commonsense model is based on justifying a claim by citing propositions deemed acceptable sources of information by myself and my peers. The most I can do to convince others of the truth of my beliefs is to cite more and more such propositions. Rorty claims that we need nothing else beyond the epistemological behaviorist model of justification. For Rorty, justification is a matter of conversation with one's peers and a belief is 'justified' only if it is deemed so by the consensus of one's community (which is comprised of one's peers).

With the idea of intersubjective agreement (solidarity) as knowledge, we can distinguish knowledge and opinion simply by the degree of intersubjective agreement a given belief achieves. Knowledge is found in topics where agreement is "relatively easy to get", and opinion is found in topics "where agreement is relatively hard to get" (ORT, 5). According to Rorty, the statement 'the earth revolves around the sun' would count as knowledge in Western society, as all or almost all Westerners would agree that this statement is true. A statement such as 'fetuses have a right to life' would count as opinion in Western society since Westerners are divided on the issue.

Rorty's epistemological behaviorism is influenced by Wittgenstein, as both philosophers hold that "understanding knowledge becomes a matter of understanding the social processes in which we justify belief" (McCarthy, 359). Both Wittgenstein

and Rorty are part of the ‘social turn’ in philosophy (as opposed to the linguistic turn).<sup>3</sup> Philosophers who are part of the social turn concentrate mainly on social phenomena to explain ‘how things are’ – how things hang together in a coherent manner. I agree with philosopher Thomas McCarthy when he says the social turn marks a “major turning point” in the focus of philosophy, “one marked by a shift in the level of analysis from language to social practice” (McCarthy, 367). Rorty describes this emphasis on the social as being “thoroughly Wittgensteinian in [its] approach to language” (CIS, 21). He explains that to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian is to accept that “since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existences upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths” (CIS, 21). Since knowledge is based on the intersubjective agreement of community members, truth becomes just a product – an invention – of humans. Rorty analyzes truth and other common philosophical concepts in socio-historical terms. Understanding concepts like truth, knowledge or justice becomes a matter of understanding the social and historical phenomenon behind our use of these words. Rorty’s ambition is to “help it come to pass that where epistemology and metaphysics were, sociology and history shall be” (RD, 103).

The achievement of solidarity within a community does not spell the end of the pursuit of knowledge. Since the pursuit of knowledge is not seen in terms of mirroring nature, one cannot justify the halt of inquiry. If our statements could mirror nature, we

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<sup>3</sup> Rorty discusses the ‘linguistic turn’ that attempted to turn “philosophy into a ‘strict science’” (TLT, 33) in his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays on Philosophical Method*.

could say a statement like ‘the sun is the center of the solar system’ is an exact representation and nothing should ever convince us otherwise. According to Rorty, a community cannot reach a point where they say ‘we know a statement is true and our knowledge of the truth of this statement will never waver’. A belief that we hold today may be discredited in the future. In the same way as Western society was sure that the earth was the center of the universe previous to Nicholas Copernicus’s discreditation of this idea, so Western society may someday discredit some (or possibly all) of its current stock of knowledge. For example, the contemporary scientific community informs us that oil and natural gas are fossil fuels. This belief is useful, as it has allowed us to make reasonably accurate predictions of where and how deep to drill for oil. Since oil is seen as ancient organic matter once at the earth’s surface, oil prospectors avoid drilling deep into the earth’s core, where there is little chance of finding the trace of such material. Nevertheless, there is now a theory catching the attention of the scientific community that a compound produced by dying stars has a complex organic structure resembling coal. These stars “belch out huge quantities [of this compound] into interstellar space” (Gold, 7). It is possible that when “the earth was being formed, some of this substance would have survived the trip here to become embedded in the guts of the planet” (Gold, 7). One way to test this hypothesis is to dig 6800 meters into the earth, where it is believed that no organically produced fossil fuel could have formed. Proponents of this new theory say that at this depth we will find vast quantities of oil. If we are able to find reserves of oil 6800 meters deep, we will obviously have to begin to question our conventional knowledge of oil being the byproduct of organic



decomposition. Our conventional knowledge of fossil fuels will no longer be good for us to believe. Since Rorty believes knowledge is a matter of coping with reality, he claims we must recognize our fallibility in the sense that someone may always come up with a better habit of action to deal with the task. As another notable pragmatist, Hilary Putnam, says: pragmatism is committed to fallibilism “as there are no metaphysical guarantees to be had that even our most firmly held beliefs will never need revision” (Putnam, 21).

### *The Tradition of Pragmatism*

In order to fully understand Rorty’s pragmatism, it is important to have a general idea of the history of pragmatism. Pragmatism began with the writings of Charles S. Pierce at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was brought to a wider audience shortly thereafter by William James and John Dewey. An intellectual movement that has been largely dominated by American thinkers, pragmatism is often identified as *the* American philosophy. It is said that it is a philosophy that could have only come about in America, where there is an “endless frontier for creative action” (RAT, 139) far away from the absolutism of Europe. This romanticization of America is prevalent in the works of many pragmatists, who thought America was a bastion from the “decadent scholasticism” that plagued the manner in which philosophy was carried out in Europe and caused the Europeans to lose sight of the “real, practical issue[s] at stake” (RAT, 139).

A notable difference between Rorty's pragmatism and the work of some of his pragmatic predecessors is his rejection of the scientistic attitude championed by John Dewey. Generally, Rorty is very favorable to Dewey's pragmatism, yet this is one point on which he and Dewey differ sharply. Dewey held the "experimental scientist up as the model to the rest of culture" (ORT, 64). He wanted to put politics on an epistemological par with science by debating and examining social policy with the same rigor and experimental attitude that the scientist brought to his work.

Rorty argues that pragmatism should not have a scientific method – nor should it rely on any one method for all purposes. Scientistic pragmatists like Dewey and Sydney Hook thought there "was one reliable method of reaching the truth about the nature of things" (ORT, 65), namely the scientific method employed by the experimental scientist. Rorty disagrees, saying that if we take the core of pragmatism to be rejecting "the notion of true beliefs as representations of 'the nature of things' and instead to think of them as successful rules of action" (ORT, 65), then we cannot speak intelligibly of having a method that allows us to reach the truth about the nature of things. We can only rely on experience to determine which method works better. And, Rorty adds, experience "does not show us" (ORT, 68) that science is the sole reliable method for determining what counts as a pragmatically true belief. Rorty claims that the results of our experience may on occasion lead us to re-evaluate the method that we use to find beliefs that allow us to cope successfully with the world. If we take seriously Dewey's claim that the scientific method always enables us to cope best with the world, we will be unable to alternate our methods to deal with various practical situations.

Rorty concludes that since no method can allow us to reach the truth about the nature of things, and since experience fails to provide evidence that the scientific method is the most reliable method to fix belief, there is no compelling reason for the pragmatist to be scientistic. The pragmatist has “no special duty” (ORT, 68) to hold science as the model of rationality to the rest of culture.

Compared with the work of other pragmatist philosophers, Rorty’s pragmatism follows “a minimalist, deflationary line, debunking traditional preoccupations of philosophy, while avoiding substantial philosophical commitments of his own” (RAT, 140). As mentioned earlier, his work differs from the work of many pragmatists because he believes philosophers have no special kind of knowledge or ability that gives them a privileged perspective on issues. His minimalism takes its cue from Wittgenstein more than from the earlier pragmatists. Rorty’s reductive pragmatism “works hard to make pragmatism say as little as possible” (KHP, 9).

### *Rorty’s Ethnocentrism*

Rorty’s pragmatism is related to liberalism through his notion of ethnocentrism. I shall explain the ideas behind ethnocentrism since an understanding of my project requires an understanding of this concept. First, I give an overview of this connection to familiarize the reader with it, before discussing the specific points that I find contentious.

Since knowledge is justified by the standards of the community, Rorty holds that there is no transcultural or natural sort of rationality from the point of view of which we can criticize the knowledge and practices of another culture. Nevertheless, Rorty is quick to point out that just because there is no transcultural criterion, this does not imply relativism – it does not mean that we are incapable of critiquing others. Rorty associates two views with relativism. The first is the idea that “every belief is as good as any other” (ORT, 23). The second is that “true is an equivocal term, having as many meanings as there are procedures of justification” (ORT, 23).

Rorty recommends that rather than being relativists we should hold the ethnocentric view that nothing can be said about truth and rationality “apart from the familiar procedures of justification within [our] society” (ORT, 6). We attach a “special privilege” (ORT, 12) to these familiar procedures of justification. If we are ethnocentric, we hold that knowledge “is [only] what we agree is justified by our standards, our methods, concepts, evidence and styles of reasoning” (WWE, 223). According to Rorty, the standards in question are those of the western liberal democratic communities of the North Atlantic bourgeois democracies.

One of the reasons Rorty is anxious to distinguish his position on truth and knowledge from relativism is that relativism is a “positive epistemological thesis about the nature of cognitive authority” (Forster, 63). In other words, the two main types of relativism – either the position that all beliefs are equally good, or the position that truth is merely another name for what any procedure of justification validates – are theories that attempt to talk about the nature of truth in all possible communities, under all

possible circumstances. Since relativism is a general theory, Rorty dismisses it as a “perverse form of attempted detachment” (ORT, 30), and is quick to remind us that he is not offering a positive epistemological theory. Rather, Rorty’s ethnocentrism is the “purely negative point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs” (ORT, 24). There is no overarching theory sought, a relativist theory least of all. The idea of having a purely negative point to make about truth harkens back to what I said earlier about the anti-representationalist position of dropping philosophical distinctions. We no longer have to view knowledge in terms of the objective-relative dichotomy if we cease our representationalist pursuits. Rorty believes relativists are still operating within this dichotomy and in this sense are talking about the ‘nature of truth’ – they are offering a positive epistemological theory. Once we stop engaging in these pursuits, we no longer have to advance the theory that truth is relative to communities, individuals, or anything else. Instead, we can just talk about truth as a concept that we use within the Western liberal community. We can claim there is nothing more to be said about truth apart from it being a compliment we pay to beliefs that are well justified according to the standards of the liberal community. This socio-historical account of truth is all we need to offer.

Not only does Rorty criticize relativism for being a general theory of truth, he claims pragmatism is incompatible with the relativist position in another interesting way. Since pragmatists clearly have a criterion for what counts as truth – utility as

judged by the consensus of the Western liberal community – they hold that, contra relativism, some beliefs are better than others. Rorty sums up his pragmatic ethnocentrism by saying, “if other guys have different beliefs from ours, and if we are trying to accomplish the same goals, then one of us just *has* to be inferior to the other. Pragmatists like me think that beliefs are habits of action. So insofar as projects are identical and habits of action differ, somebody is doing something wrong” (CD, 54).

Of course, Rorty believes the pragmatist has no non-circular justification for the pragmatic utility of his beliefs. Any justification can only appeal to other beliefs already held by the pragmatist. If someone asks a question such as ‘what is so special about liberalism?’, the liberal can only reply ‘do you know of anything non-liberal that serves my liberal purposes better’.<sup>4</sup> So when quizzed about holding certain beliefs, we can only either assume our beliefs are better or give circular responses. According to Rorty, the pragmatist cannot tell the difference between “‘justification for us’ and ... ‘justification period’” (RC, 13). The pragmatic anti-representationalist believes justification according to his standards is justification enough. Even though any explanation of this type of justification is circular, we cannot expect to have non-circular justification based on a metaphysical or epistemological foundation. The pursuit of non-circular justification is a comfort we have to give up in a post-Philosophical philosophy. Perhaps our discomfort with such circular justifications is a

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Rorty’s ethnocentric circular justifications of liberal culture see *COP*, p. 173 and *ORT*, p. 29.

byproduct of our Philosophical past. It is a discomfort instilled in us by what was seen as a *necessary* search for metaphysical and epistemological foundations.

As mentioned earlier, Rorty holds that the Western liberal democratic community acts ethnocentrically by granting special privilege to its own values and by counting as knowledge only that which is justified by Western liberal democratic standards. An example of ethnocentric justification would be the following: the Western liberal democratic community believes that in order for a government to be deemed legitimate, it must be freely elected by the people. Liberal democrats justify the people's consent as a criterion of legitimacy on the basis of other liberal democratic values. One of these beliefs is that individuals are autonomous and therefore should be put in charge of their own interests. Such interests include being governed by a government to which they consent. So, according to Rorty's ethnocentrism, the liberal democratic justification for what counts as political legitimacy is determined by other liberal democratic values; values that constitute our fundamental assumptions about politics and are supported by the consensus of the liberal community.

When liberals offer justification for their actions, beliefs and choices, they are using a vocabulary that is derived from the beliefs and values inherent in the consensus of the liberal community.<sup>5</sup> Rorty defines a vocabulary as

a set of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our

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<sup>5</sup> In Wittgensteinian tradition, Rorty sometimes refers to vocabularies as language games such as in CIS pg.5.

friends and contempt for our enemies, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. These are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. (CIS, 73)

When the members of the liberal community discusses political matters, they use terms that define the way liberals look at the political – terms such as civil liberties, inalienable rights, public and private sphere, and intellectual freedom. These terms are part of the liberal vocabulary and are either justified by fundamental assumptions within the liberal vocabulary or are fundamental assumptions themselves. Rorty's adoption of Wittgenstein's concept of language game is the most Wittgensteinian element in Rorty's work. As mentioned earlier, both Wittgenstein and Rorty argue that the truth, falsity, and the meaning of sentences and words are determined within the language-games or vocabulary to which the sentences and words belong.

### **Rorty's Liberalism**

#### *The Liberal Community*

We should now look at the question of who exactly 'we' are. What is this community that counts Rorty (and me) as members and who share a core set of values rich enough to constitute a vocabulary? As mentioned earlier, Rorty claims the political community of which we find ourselves members is the North Atlantic Bourgeois Liberals. This community is comprised of the citizens of the "rich North Atlantic democracies" (ORT, 198), nation-states such as the United States, Canada, and Great



Britain. Within these liberal democracies people hold a variety of differing political values. Most are either conservatives or social democrats, or occupy some place between these two poles. All these citizens share a set of values that are embodied both implicitly and explicitly in their personal beliefs and in their public institutions and practices.

Since Rorty is ethnocentric about the liberal democratic political community, it will be helpful to look at a few of the key philosophers whose ideas have helped develop its liberal values. It is a good idea to begin with John Locke, as he is often seen as the father of liberalism. The central idea behind Locke's liberalism is the claim that a government's sole legitimate purpose is to protect the 'natural' rights of its citizens. These rights are "summed up a century later in the American Declaration of Independence: the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Dewey, 7). Derived from Locke's notion of individual 'natural' rights is the idea that no one can be "subjected to the political power of another without his own consent" (Locke, 164). In other words, the government can govern only by the consent of its citizens.

John Stuart Mill is another liberal notable mainly for his work on the limits of state coercion. Since Mill regards "abstract rights as a thing [not] independent of utility" (Mill, 10), he justifies liberal political rights and institutions on the basis of utility rather than by appeal to Lockean natural rights. Mill holds that it is in both the individual's and society's best interest to guarantee individual liberty through freedom of speech, conscience, intellect, and so on, as these liberties nurture a diversity of lifestyles, interests, and opinions. This diversity, in turn, leads to moral and intellectual

progress (utility) because it causes individuals to question their opinions and those of their neighbours, thereby forcing them to vigorously examine their ideas rather than dogmatically accepting them. It also leaves opportunity for the possible introduction of better ideas to replace those to which we are accustomed.

John Dewey is another important liberal thinker. Dewey dismissed the Lockean idea that “individuality and freedom [are] ... absolute and eternal truths; good for all times and places” (Dewey, 290). Instead, he examined liberalism through the “perception of historical relativity” (Dewey, 290). Dewey’s method of historical relativity has two essential steps. First, we must study existing social conditions and how they may “restrict, distort, and prevent the development of individuality” (Dewey, 291). Second, we must develop experimental methods in the form of policies which must be enacted “to deal with conditions in the name of increased individuality and liberty” (Dewey, 292). Dewey urged the government to undertake a proactive role by using progressive social policies to promote individuality, rather than maintaining its limited, laissez-faire role of protecting individual rights. In particular, Dewey had in mind such social policies as increased government intervention in the economy, more welfare programs, and increased rights for workers. Dewey believed these gains will, in turn, increase the “effective liberty of the masses in industry and cultural goods” (Dewey, 292), allowing the individual more resources for the project of realizing his individuality. In more basic terms, Dewey’s proposals aimed to provide people with more money and economic freedom to pursue their personal conception of the good life.

Traditional liberal values comprise the liberal community's shared set of values, albeit without the traditional philosophical justifications for these values. The traditional approach to political philosophy sought to justify political ideologies by a theory of human nature that claimed to represent the 'truth'. Rorty calls liberals who try to justify liberalism in this manner 'Kantians'. Kantians "think that there are such things as intrinsic human dignity, intrinsic human rights, and an ahistorical distinction between the demands of morality and those of prudence" (ORT, 197). Since the pragmatic anti-representationalist has given up on the Philosophical idea of some moral notion being intrinsic to humans, Rorty does not count these things that have been used in an attempt to provide ahistorical Philosophical justification among core liberal values.

To my knowledge, Rorty has not identified a set of core liberal values or compiled a comprehensive list of liberal values. Nevertheless, it is useful to take a look at a general outline of liberal values. Jeremy Waldron claims that liberal values are centered around "constitutional democracy, the rule of law, political and intellectual freedom, toleration in religion, morals and lifestyle, opposition to racial and sexual discrimination, and respect for the rights of the individual" (Waldron, 603). These are the values I am referring to when I speak of 'traditional' liberal values. They are the values most often associated with liberalism and embodied in the practices and institutions of nation-states that we term 'liberal'. Liberal institutions and practices are those things that put liberal values into everyday life, such as constitutions and laws where liberal values are explicitly expressed and enforced. They are also products of

these constitutions and laws, such as government policy, the free press, democratic elections and academic freedom in the universities. These traditional liberal values are values that people most often associate with liberalism. They are the definitive liberal values in the sense that if someone holds these values, they are said to be a liberal. Since liberalism does not name a natural kind, I think it is sufficient to identify those values most commonly found in the practices and institutions of liberal nation-states as the core liberal values.

Some of the key values that Rorty tends to focus on in his discussions of liberalism include the priority of the right over the good, state neutrality on conceptions of the good life, and the division of political life into private and public sectors. The priority of the right over the good means that as individuals in a liberal state each of us has certain rights and freedoms (freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and so on) that cannot be violated, even if violating these rights would lead to something good or commonly desirable. State neutrality on conceptions of the good life means that the state is prohibited from promoting or enforcing particular views about how a person should live his life. The division of political life into private and public spheres means that the state is prohibited from interfering in the private affairs of the individual (i.e. those activities of the individual that do not interfere with the rights and freedoms of others).

It should be pointed out that Rorty does not always define liberalism in terms of traditional liberal values. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, he defines a liberal as someone who believes that “cruelty is the worst thing [one can] do” (CIS, 74). This

idea is taken from Judith Shklar, who says “it seems to me that liberal and humane people, of whom there are many among us, would, if they were asked to rank the vices, put cruelty first. Intuitively they would choose cruelty as the worst thing we do” (Shklar, 44). Shklar connects this belief to liberalism by arguing that cruelty is “often utterly intolerable to liberals because fear destroys freedom” (Shklar, 2). Since liberals believe individuals should be granted basic freedoms to live their lives the way they choose, liberals need to be intolerant of those cruel acts that deny people freedom. Rorty claims that what makes a person a liberal is the belief that those cruel physical acts that create fear and destroy freedom rank first as the worst thing we do. Not only does he claim this is a liberal value, he claims it is *the* definitive liberal value.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine exactly why Rorty makes the intolerance of cruelty the definitive liberal value. He fails to offer any substantive argument on behalf of this unorthodox definition. Shklar, whom Rorty borrows this “definition of liberal” (CIS, xv) from, does not define someone as a liberal simply because he believes cruelty is the most intolerable of acts. She merely says that it *seems* to her that liberals would rank cruelty as the worst of the vices if asked. Furthermore, Shklar claims that Montaigne “put cruelty at the very head of the vices [but] was no liberal” (Shklar, 23). As a result, it is difficult to see Rorty’s motivation in offering this particular definition of liberalism.

Another problem with this unorthodox definition of liberalism is that Rorty fails to provide a clear account of what he means by cruelty. John Kekes expresses this point

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<sup>6</sup> Rorty claims that that the intolerance of cruelty should be “the definition of liberal” (CIS, xv).

when he says “Rorty uses ‘cruelty’ extensively in two sensitive essays of literary criticism [chapters in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*] in which he discusses Nabokov’s and Orwell’s attitudes towards cruelty, but nowhere explains what he understands cruelty to be” (Kekes, 836). Since Rorty has not provided a clear definition of cruelty, I shall offer a definition that would allow Rorty to reasonably claim that the intolerance of cruelty is the definitive liberal value.

I can accept Rorty’s claim that the intolerance of cruelty is the definitive liberal value on the condition that he means cruel acts are specifically those acts that take away the freedoms that are guaranteed in a liberal state. So an example of cruelty would be something like the persecution of different religions that would occur if there were no freedom of religion, or the oppression of various ethnic groups if people were not treated equally before the law. I can accept the intolerance of cruelty as the definitive liberal value if it meets the above requirements because being intolerant of cruelty would just be the same as being intolerant of all those things that liberals are not supposed to tolerate. In other words, believing cruelty is ‘the worst thing we do’ is just the same as despising all those freedom-denying offences that liberalism protects us from.

If Rorty is making what I term ‘the acceptable claim’ that cruel acts are just those that liberal society protects us from, then I can see how the intolerance of cruelty can be the definitive liberal value. However, if he is strictly adopting Shklar’s definition of cruelty – that all acts involving “the willful infliction of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear”(Shklar, 8) are cruel – then I have doubts about

the intolerance of cruelty being the definitive liberal value. We should be reluctant to term such a value 'the definitive liberal value' because we do not tend to define a liberal on the basis of whether he believes cruelty (according to Shklar's definition) is the worst thing one can do. We call a liberal a 'liberal' on the basis of that person possessing values such as intellectual freedom and freedom of association. If they did not hold these values, we would be reluctant to call this person a liberal. However, what if a person were to say 'I believe we have to be cruel sometimes. Sometimes as a nation it is necessary to be threatening and inspire fear to keep rogue nations in check, sometimes as parents we have to inspire fear in our children if they are to obey us, sometimes I like watching contact sports where players are physically cruel to other players as part of the game'. I doubt we would be reluctant to call this person a liberal. So long as he held other beliefs that we typically associated with liberalism, we would still term him a liberal. Since some liberals might hold views like the one above, it seems implausible to claim the intolerance of cruelty is liberalism's definitive value. On the other hand, what if a person said 'I don't like individual rights and people should not be treated equally before the law'? If a person made such a comment, we would have little reason to call this person a liberal. After all, he does not hold values that we tend to associate with liberalism. Since we do not usually define a liberal on the basis of whether he believes all willfully inflicted physical acts of pain that cause fear and anguish are intolerable, and Rorty offers no substantive argument as to why we should adopt this definition, I am reluctant to consider cruelty (under this definition) the definitive liberal value.

As a result of these problems with the intolerance of cruelty as the defining feature of what it is to be a liberal, we can dismiss this as the definition of liberalism. For the purposes of this thesis, whenever I refer to liberalism I shall be referring to traditional liberal values. These are the values that center around constitutional democracy, the rule of law, political and intellectual freedom, toleration in religion, morals and lifestyle, opposition to racial and sexual discrimination, and respect for the rights of the individual. In dismissing Rorty's definition of liberalism as the intolerance of cruelty, I shall be able to discuss liberalism without getting the reader muddled in confusion about whether the definition of liberalism that I am employing is Rorty's unorthodox one or one more in line with the traditional understanding of liberalism.

### ***The Connection between Pragmatism and Liberalism***

The connection Rorty draws between liberalism and his pragmatism centers around his claim that liberal pragmatists should be loyal to the liberal community. Rorty claims that the way liberal pragmatists should critically evaluate the political is based on what I term his 'social foundation thesis', which he believes leads to liberal pragmatists being loyal (i.e. ethnocentric) towards the liberal community. It is this putative connection between liberalism and pragmatism that is the focus of my criticism.

Rorty's claim that liberal pragmatists should be loyal to the liberal community constitutes a method of justification. A method of justification is necessary for us to



critically evaluate the political; it is necessary for us to have any ideas about politics at all. The everyday affairs of political life are filled with choosing between competing arguments, values, practices, and so on. A method of justification uses a standard that enables us to critically evaluate these options. Even though we may not need transcendental justifications anymore and we may be better off without them, we cannot conduct politics without some standard of justification, as we do not just make random guesses as to what is the best political action. Rather, we critically evaluate possible political arguments, values, and so on, basing our decisions on certain criteria. Therefore, critical evaluation based on criteria of justification is something that *any* politically concerned citizen engages in when looking at the political. Rorty offers his own method of justification that outlines how the *Rortian pragmatist* should critically evaluate the political.

Richard Bernstein claims that Rorty does not “seek to evaluate political practices critically ... he employs no standards or criteria to judge what counts as a ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ [political] experiment” (Bernstein, 549). I disagree with this claim. Rorty does in fact have a standard of justification that he claims liberal pragmatists should follow when critically evaluating the political, and it is based on social foundations. More specifically, it is based on the consensus of the liberal community. I shall show how Rorty’s account of communal justification based on his epistemological behaviorism leads to his claims about loyalty and ethnocentrism with respect to the liberal community.

As we have seen, Rorty believes a liberal pragmatist who is a full-fledged member of the liberal community will produce justification for her beliefs “which meets the demands of the community” (PSH, 37). Justification becomes a matter of social facts. There is a social foundation (the values of the community that we are habituated in) that justifies our loyalty to that community. This is what I term the ‘social foundation thesis’. The liberal pragmatist’s standard for justification is based on the values derived from the consensus of the liberal community.

According to Rorty's method of justification, a liberal pragmatist should decide between competing political arguments by appealing to his liberal values. Let’s look at a very simple case, where a liberal pragmatist is deciding whether a state should discriminate against some of its citizens for being members of an unpopular religion. The liberal pragmatist will agree that the state should not discriminate because he appeals to shared liberal values that claim we should grant freedom of religion. There is a consensus in favor of religious toleration in liberal societies, and, according to Rorty’s method, the liberal would have to look no further to critically evaluate this argument.

For Rorty, no further questioning or justification of liberal values is required. He claims that liberals’ convictions and loyalties to these values are legitimated by a consensus in the liberal community. This liberal consensus is sufficient for justification and “nothing else has any moral force” (ORT, 200), as “loyalty to [the community] is morality enough” (ORT, 199). This type of loyalty liberals possess towards their liberal values is what Rorty refers to as ethnocentrism. As mentioned earlier, to be

ethnocentric towards a community is to claim that justification is determined by the consensus of that community, and no other form of justification is required.

For Rorty, “ethnocentrism means loyalty” (ORT, 15), as it constitutes an attitude towards something that we hold with conviction in the sense that we will not abandon it; we are devoted and faithful to it. The idea that liberals are loyal to liberalism comports well with Rorty’s idea that political justification only requires a social foundation. If political justification requires no more than the liberal consensus, then liberals cannot help but be loyal to the liberal consensus. They could never rationally justify their leaving or revolting against the liberal community. For Rorty, liberals cannot rationally or morally question their loyalty to the liberal consensus, as they would have no justifying reason to do so. There is no “supercultural observation platform” (ORT, 213) beyond communal justification for liberals to use to criticize their loyalty to liberalism. Liberals would need anti-liberal beliefs – beliefs that give reasons not to be liberal – in order to make a rational ‘break’ from the liberal community. However, if Rorty is telling us that justification is ultimately sought in liberal values, then it would not be possible for the liberal to consistently have anti-liberal beliefs. The liberal community would never approve of them and, therefore, the liberal would not approve of them as good political alternatives. This is how the social foundation thesis leads the liberal pragmatist to be loyal to liberalism. The liberal pragmatist’s acculturation in liberal culture leads him to this loyalty. Rorty is content to treat those people who hold strong anti-liberal values and whose views make them unfit “for citizenship in a constitutional democracy ... as crazy” (ORT, 190).

In the previous section, I said that Rorty claims that to be ethnocentric towards something is to grant it a special privilege, which he now defines as loyalty. It should be pointed out that Rorty defines ‘ethnocentrism’ in these two different ways. I wish to criticize ‘ethnocentrism as loyalty to liberalism’ and not ‘ethnocentrism as granting a special privilege to our beliefs’. I have no objection to Rorty’s claim that we grant a special privilege to our beliefs in the sense that we think these beliefs are ‘better’ because they are justified in relation to our standards (or complete web of beliefs). My criticism concerns Rorty’s claim that liberals should be loyal to liberalism, and therefore I am criticizing Rorty when he uses ‘ethnocentrism’ in this respect.

Since the liberal community does not approve of anti-liberal beliefs, Rorty seems to be suggesting that liberal pragmatists should not criticize the liberal vocabulary unless the aim is to change the consensus. Liberal pragmatists should work within the parameters of the policies and practices deemed ‘acceptable’ or ‘rational’ by the liberal community. In practical terms, liberals must work within the confines of constitutional democracy. However, if a particular policy that an individual liberal is trying to promote fails to achieve the desired consensus, he should reject that policy for the sake of solidarity within the community. If the policy or opinion one aims to promote divides rather than alters the liberal consensus, this policy or opinion is “pointless” (ORT, 201). According to Rorty, sacrifice of personal political preferences for the sake of solidarity is part of what it is to be a pragmatist. He believes “the pragmatist [adheres to the rule] that when the individual finds in her conscience beliefs that are relevant to public policy but incapable of defense on the basis of beliefs common to her fellow

citizens, she must sacrifice her conscience on the altar of public expediency” (ORT, 175). For Rorty, solidarity with the liberal community is a goal that is not to be sacrificed.

From the outline of Rorty's method of justification we can derive a number of points concerning justification that I shall focus on in my criticism.

- 1) There is a social foundation, the liberal community, that liberals are habituated to, which supplies justification for a liberal pragmatist's political beliefs. The consensus of this community constitutes the ultimate political justification. The claim that liberal pragmatists should appeal to the consensus of the liberal community because they are members of it is the 'social foundation thesis'.
- 2) The social foundation thesis leads to liberals being loyal or ethnocentric towards the liberal community. This loyalty entails that liberals can only question or criticize the liberal consensus insofar as the aim is to change the opinion of the consensus. And these questions or criticisms must be within the confines of the vocabulary of the liberal consensus.
- 3) Solidarity with the liberal community should not be sacrificed for the sake of following individual conscience.

Rorty is advising the liberal to appeal to the liberal consensus for justification of his beliefs. Liberals should not break with this consensus even if it violates their individual beliefs. This is how Rorty's defense of liberalism rests on the social foundation thesis.

One aspect of Rorty's social foundation thesis may remain somewhat unclear. Rorty does not explain whether epistemological behaviorism and the social foundation thesis that follows from it are descriptive or prescriptive theories. Is Rorty *describing* the way we justify our beliefs or is he showing how we *ought* to justify our beliefs?

I think Rorty believes epistemological behaviorism is both a descriptive theory and a prescriptive one. When he says liberal pragmatists justify their beliefs on the basis of the consensus of the liberal community, he offers a theory to explain the way people (in this case, liberals) usually justify their beliefs. He offers "a common sense model of justification" (Gutting, 15). A common sense model of justification attempts to represent or describe the way people usually justify their beliefs. This is in opposition to attempts that try to construct an ideal method of justifying beliefs by searching for objective criteria by which to evaluate beliefs. Rorty's social foundation thesis is, in part, one of his attempts, through socio-historical analysis, to describe how things hang together (in this case, concerning how humans come to justify beliefs) in the broadest possible sense.

Along with being a descriptive theory about how we justify beliefs, the social foundation thesis is also a prescriptive theory about how we *should* justify beliefs. Since there is no ahistorical criterion by which to evaluate beliefs, Rorty is making the claim that we both *can* only and *should* only judge our beliefs against the consensus of the community to which we are habituated. And given Rorty's ethnocentrism, he is not talking about any community, but, specifically, the liberal community. He says that without an ahistorical standpoint from which to judge competing beliefs and values,

liberal pragmatists are left in a dilemma, and “must in practice, privilege our own group; ... [The choice is either] ethnocentrism on the one hand or relativism on the other ... We Western Liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are” (ORT, 29). We have to work by our own lights –by reference to the beliefs and values that we have been acculturated in. Rorty believes that “there is nothing more to be said about truth save that each of us will commend as true those beliefs that he or she finds good to believe” (ORT, 24). He adds that without ahistorical criteria from which to evaluate beliefs, we should rely on “common sense (supplemented by biology, history, etc.)” (PMN, 176).

The strength of Rorty’s prescriptive statement that liberal pragmatists ought to appeal to the liberal consensus rests on the supposed descriptive fact that this is the way liberal pragmatists justify their beliefs anyway and there are no other criteria which they can rationally appeal to. Liberal pragmatists must start from where they are. According to Rorty, it is a social fact that the liberal pragmatist’s values are derived from the consensus of the liberal community, so what the liberal pragmatist ‘ought to do’ has to be based on that consensus. Thus, the prescriptive part of epistemological behaviorism is based on the descriptive part of the theory. I shall term theories that equate descriptive facts with prescriptive ones ‘equating theories’.

The idea of equating descriptive and prescriptive theories is not original to Rorty’s pragmatism. William James’ method of justification is also based on the idea of how people adopt beliefs in their everyday lives.

Messrs. Dewey, Schiller, and their allies, in reaching this general conception of (instrumental) truth, have followed the example of geologists, biologists, and philologists. In the establishment of these other sciences the simple stroke has always been to take some simple process actually observable in operation ... and then to generalize it. (PRA, 50)

Like Rorty, James does not distinguish clearly in this case between how people do acquire new beliefs and how people ought to acquire new beliefs. Also like Rorty, he treats the fact that his method of justification mirrors the way people actually count beliefs as true as a strength of this conception of truth.

Since Rorty offers the ethnocentric explanation mentioned above for the equating of descriptive facts with prescriptive claims, he does not commit the naturalistic fallacy. The naturalistic fallacy occurs when one attempts to deduce a prescriptive proposition about how humans 'ought' to behave from a descriptive proposition that describes certain imputed facts about human nature or the state of human affairs. David Hume rightly states that an 'ought' statement does not logically follow from an 'is' statement without explanation. It is an illegitimate deduction.<sup>7</sup>

Rorty avoids committing the naturalistic fallacy as he makes no deduction when equating a descriptive fact with a prescriptive claim. Hume claims that we cannot simply make the deduction from a descriptive claim to a prescriptive one; we must offer some explanation for this logical jump. Rorty provides such an explanation. He never says that the conclusion that 'liberal pragmatists ought to be loyal to the liberal consensus' follows necessarily from the descriptive claim that 'liberal pragmatists are loyal to the liberal consensus'. Rather, he offers an explanation based on ethnocentrism



for why he equates descriptive with prescriptive claims – we must use equating theories because we can only work by our own lights.

Since Rorty champions an equating theory, he is saying that pragmatists should adopt the method of justification commonly used by most other people. For Rorty, there is no special procedure a pragmatist must follow when justifying beliefs. There is nothing about his method of justification that sets the pragmatist apart from the herd. The only people who Rorty might say follow a different method of justification are the Philosophically inclined who justify beliefs against criterion that they believe represents an Archimedean standpoint.

The equating theory in the common sense model of justification plays an important role in my criticism of Rorty's defense of liberalism. I aim to show that the descriptive part of the social foundation thesis – that liberal pragmatists can only appeal to the consensus of the liberal community – is false, thus challenging the prescriptive claim that rests on it. So my thesis focuses largely on developing an accurate description of how a liberal pragmatist justifies his beliefs, with an emphasis on what criteria the liberal pragmatist uses to count a belief as justified. I shall show how an accurate description of this process challenges Rorty's prescriptive claim that a liberal pragmatist should be loyal to liberalism.

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<sup>7</sup> Hume discusses the naturalistic fallacy in *Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 469.

## Chapter 2

### *The Rational Rejection of Liberalism*

In this chapter, I argue against Rorty's claim that pragmatism demands that the liberal pragmatist be loyal to liberalism on the grounds that his pragmatism fails to support this conclusion. He makes the connection between liberalism and pragmatism by way of the social foundation thesis, that is, the idea that liberals should appeal to the liberal consensus when justifying a belief because they can only work by the values and beliefs they have been acculturated in. According to Rorty, if liberals work by their own lights, they must be loyal to the liberal community as they cannot rationally reject liberal beliefs and values or liberalism outright. By showing that a liberal pragmatist can rationally reject liberalism, I argue, contra the social foundation thesis, that there is no necessary reason for a liberal working rationally by his own lights to be loyal to the liberal community. Rorty gets his social facts wrong in the social foundation thesis. His argument only works if he makes the false claim that liberals are only members of the liberal community, belonging to no other community. I show that liberals typically belong to various communities and are usually acculturated in both liberal and non-liberal beliefs. Taking this social fact into account, liberals working by their own lights can rationally reject liberal beliefs and values and liberalism. Rorty's equating theory gets the descriptive social facts wrong; therefore, the prescriptive claim that follows from these

erroneous claims – that liberals should be loyal to the liberal consensus – is invalid. After proving this, I discuss a method of justification within Rortian pragmatism that coheres with the correct descriptive facts, although Rorty ignores this method in his social foundation thesis.

### **The Mono-Cultural Liberal**

Rorty can only deny that the liberal pragmatist is capable of rationally rejecting liberal beliefs and values if he claims that the liberal is mono-cultural, meaning she belongs to only one community. Then he can say that the liberal only has liberal beliefs in her stock of beliefs, and therefore must be loyal to liberalism. The liberal pragmatist needs to critically evaluate by reference to the beliefs she has been acculturated in. If the liberal pragmatist is only a member of the liberal community, his stock of beliefs is filled only with liberal ones. If this is the case, then liberals can never rationally reject liberal beliefs and values; they would have no justifying reason to do so. Liberals need anti-liberal beliefs – beliefs that give reasons not to be liberal – in order to make a rational break from the liberal community. If, however, one's stock of beliefs is filled with liberal beliefs, then it would not be possible for one to consistently hold anti-liberal views. The liberal would consider anti-liberal beliefs to be bad political alternatives if she judged them against her exclusively liberal stock of beliefs. As a result, she could never be anything but loyal to liberalism.

Nevertheless, the claim that the typical liberal is mono-cultural is obviously wrong. The liberal culture is a pluralist culture. People can be in the same liberal community and be members of different religious communities, ethnic or cultural communities, artistic communities, and so on. Rorty, therefore, should not deny that liberals are members of other communities besides the liberal community.

Nevertheless, given his past comments about this issue, Rorty would likely deny that the values from these other communities make a practical difference to the way a liberal pragmatist examines the political as a liberal pragmatist's complete stock of political beliefs and values is exhausted by liberal convictions. He could contend that all the liberal pragmatist's beliefs that have any influence on his political decisions are those that constitute the liberal vocabulary. After all, this is what Rorty seems to be suggesting when he states "the terms of praise that will be used to describe liberal societies will be drawn from the vocabulary of the liberal societies themselves" (ORT, 29). Whether intentionally or not, he fails to acknowledge that other values from our web of beliefs are used to praise (or criticize) liberal societies.

### ***The Consequences of Non-Liberal Beliefs***

In this section, I show the consequences of taking into account the fact that liberals typically belong to many communities with many sets of values. By proving that the typical liberal pragmatist belongs to multiple communities, I show that a central claim of the social foundation thesis, that the liberal pragmatist can never rationally

reject liberal beliefs and values, is false. Rorty can demand that the liberal pragmatist must be loyal to the liberal community only if he accepts the false premise that the liberal pragmatist is mono-cultural. Rorty's defense of liberalism rests on equating descriptive facts with prescriptive ones. Since he gets the descriptive fact that liberal pragmatists are not mono-communal wrong, the prescriptive claim that rests on it – that liberal pragmatists should be loyal to the liberal consensus (i.e. they should never reject liberalism) – is invalid.

### *Non- Liberal Political Values*

I mentioned earlier that Rorty's argument that pragmatists must be loyal to liberalism works if and only if pragmatists fail to hold politically relevant non-liberal beliefs and values. It, however, seems to be obviously false that the only values and beliefs relevant to political decisions are liberal ones. Liberals have values and beliefs derived both from other vocabularies and from pragmatic needs. These non-liberal values and beliefs do not meet the rather strict guidelines that Rorty sets for a value or belief to belong to the liberal vocabulary. Rorty says that in order for a value or belief to be a part of the liberal vocabulary, to count as moral justification for the liberal, it must be both shared by all members of the liberal community and be distinctive of the community.

We should look closer at the definition of what it is to be a liberal value or belief – that these convictions must be distinctive of the liberal community and shared by all

its members. It is easy to see why the liberal vocabulary would have to contain those shared values and beliefs of the liberal community. It is more difficult to see why Rorty insists that the values and beliefs of the liberal community be distinct from those of other communities. Rorty says the liberal vocabulary should be comprised of distinct convictions so the liberal community can use them to “construct its self-image through contrast with other groups” (ORT, 200). These contrasting features provide the members with a dignity through comparisons with “other, worse communities” (ORT, 200). Beliefs that all or most people of the world share, “such as elementary mathematical platitudes and the like [are] the sort of beliefs that no one wants to argue about because they are neither controversial nor central to anyone’s sense of who she is or what she lives for” (CIS, 47). I am assuming that other non-controversial beliefs, like the concern for personal basic needs, are included in these beliefs, since most people are concerned for their own welfare. Rorty adds that “beliefs which are central to a person’s self-image are so because their presence or absence serves as a criterion for dividing good people from bad people. A [moral] conviction that can be justified to anyone is of little interest” (CIS, 47).

Given Rorty’s rather narrow definition of ‘liberal vocabulary’, the typical liberal holds politically relevant values and beliefs which are considered non-liberal. It is easy to imagine a liberal pragmatist holding the beliefs and values that I shall discuss, as they are just parts of the common liberal pragmatist’s stock of beliefs.

The first type I shall refer to as pragmatic beliefs. These are based on things that most or all people, liberal pragmatist or otherwise, need in their day to day lives to

simply live or live a reasonably decent life. Beliefs based on the individual's need for food would qualify. People have a need for food. As a result, beliefs based on this need fail to be part of the liberal vocabulary as they are not distinctive of liberal society. Nevertheless, they are politically relevant because most people expect that their government should guarantee enough prosperity and stability so that people are able to work for at least a minimal amount of food. It is, therefore, likely that liberal pragmatists believe political institutions and practices should fulfill these expectations. Although they are not part of the liberal vocabulary, beliefs based on the need for food would likely be a part of a liberal pragmatist's stock of beliefs, and thus be used to critically evaluate the political.

There are other pragmatic needs that could count as politically relevant parts of the liberal pragmatist's stock of beliefs but fail to be part of the liberal vocabulary. These include the need for a certain level of security from threats and violence, shelter, companionship, financial security, and so on. It is easy to see how these needs could be politically relevant features of a liberal pragmatist's stock of beliefs. Also, it is obvious these beliefs are not distinctive of the liberal community. These pragmatic needs may not be shared by all people, at all times, but the need for them is not something only liberals share. Along with not being distinctive of the liberal community, we should also question whether there is a liberal consensus on these pragmatic beliefs – whether liberals share the same opinions about these issues. For example, most liberal pragmatists want security from violence. Nevertheless, the level of security that liberals want and the things that they are willing to sacrifice (such as individual rights) to

achieve security differ from individual to individual. So liberals may agree generally about wanting security from violence, but disagree about the degree of security. Such is the case in Canada over the anti-terrorism bill C-36. There is much debate over whether this bill “undermines the very rights on which our society is based” (Borovoy, A17). Since no liberal consensus exists on the particulars of these beliefs and values – in this case, the balance between civil liberties and security from terrorism – it could be said that they not only fail to be distinctively liberal, but also that all liberals do not share them.

The second type of politically relevant convictions that can be a part of a liberal pragmatist’s stock of beliefs, but not part of the liberal vocabulary, are beliefs and values from other vocabularies of communities that a liberal pragmatist is a member of. Each community has its own vocabulary, its own set of values, beliefs and desires, which give sense to its members’ choices. A liberal pragmatist can be a member of multiple communities. Perhaps he may belong to a religious community, an aesthetic movement, or an ethnic community. These communities and their convictions may be a central part of that person’s way of life, central to his stock of beliefs and values. And they may also affect that person’s political decisions. A Catholic’s values may influence his political decisions on issues such as abortion, promotion of religious values, and secularization. These beliefs and values are not part of the liberal vocabulary because they are not distinctively liberal. A Catholic does not need to be a member of the liberal community, nor does a member of a particular ethnic or cultural



group need to be a member of the liberal community. Nor are these beliefs and values shared: liberals need not share the same religious, cultural, or ethnic affiliation.

A liberal pragmatist may also hold some values that are overtly political and belong to the vocabulary of another political community. For example, a liberal pragmatist may find certain parts of Marxism convincing. He may find the Marxist analysis of alienation convincing in that he thinks wage-labor tends to be mindless and devoid of any intrinsic satisfaction. Even though this belief may contradict some of the values of the liberal community, a liberal can still find Marx's analysis of alienation convincing and be a member of the liberal community, on the condition that this belief does not cause him to reject liberalism outright.

We have seen that liberal pragmatists hold non-liberal values and beliefs. Nevertheless, given his position on the process of how we undergo changes in beliefs, Rorty would likely claim that the liberal cannot rationally reject liberalism outright. He claims that people are conservative when adopting new beliefs; they do not make revolutionary changes in their beliefs. As a result, a liberal cannot rationally reject liberalism because it would be a revolutionary change – it would force the liberal to reject too many of his old beliefs. He states that:

people can only rationally change most of their beliefs by holding most of those beliefs constant. 'Rationally' here means that one can give a retrospective account why one has changed – how one invoked old beliefs or desires in justification of the new ones – rather than having to say, helplessly, 'it just happened; somehow I got converted'. (ORT, 212)

Rorty claims that since we act conservatively when adopting new beliefs, any proposed changes to the liberal community will only be adopted “if we manage to fit them in with our [liberal] aspirations” (ORT, 212), as these aspirations purportedly represent the bulk of our old stock of beliefs. Since we can only justify new beliefs by reference to old beliefs, he denies that liberals can rationally undergo a radical change in beliefs like the rejection of liberalism, as it would involve rejecting too many of one’s old beliefs.

Rorty is wrong, however, to deny that liberal pragmatists can rationally reject liberalism outright. If we accept that liberal pragmatists typically belong to other communities, we can see that they can both take a conservative approach in their beliefs and adopt substantive or even revolutionary changes such as rejecting liberalism. In other words, a liberal pragmatist can reject liberalism while remaining rational in the sense of being able to justify this change by reference to his stock of old beliefs. I shall show how a substantive or revolutionary change in beliefs is possible by a plausible example of how a liberal pragmatist could reject his liberalism while leaving most of his old beliefs, values, and desires intact.

It is quite a significant matter for a person to completely reject a whole set of beliefs, especially when those beliefs in question are political ones. It is not often that people reject a political community or ideology and align themselves with another one. Nevertheless, these changes occur, as I shall argue, when there is enough tension between the belief systems of communities in which a person considers himself a member. Sociologist Sebastian de Grazia says that in “restful epochs beliefs systems

behave like the blood's circulation – they run quiet and deep” (De Grazia, xi). We do not always notice or pay much attention to our complete systems of belief because there is no pressing reason to be concerned with how these beliefs coherently fit together. There is no tension between beliefs or circumstances that arise that will require people to call these beliefs into question. At these moments, one's deeply held beliefs and convictions are compatible with living the good life.

De Grazia describes the process of undergoing substantial or revolutionary change in beliefs by saying that when a threat “disrupts an ideological system (if a wound, for that matter, breaks the skin) the vital psychological function of beliefs stands out in vividness. Out of disturbances in belief systems, anomie arises, a mental tension which in its moderate type reveals an intermittent apprehension in the adult of a danger before which he is helpless, and which in its severe type mounts to an anxiety fraught with terrifying images of a menacing world” (De Grazia, xi). So not only may threats or tensions cause us to call into question beliefs we normally take for granted, it seems reasonable to say that a great deal of anxiety and fear results. These tensions and the resulting anxiety and fear can lead to substantial changes in one's view of the world.

I now present an example that shows how a liberal pragmatist critically evaluating the political according to his stock of beliefs can reject liberalism, and do so by leaving most of his old stock of beliefs intact. This will show that a liberal pragmatist need not always be loyal to liberalism just because he has been acculturated and habituated within the liberal community. Belonging to a plurality of communities and having other pragmatic beliefs that may not comport well with liberalism can lead the liberal

pragmatist to reject liberalism. For example, a liberal pragmatist who is a Quebecois may initially be in favor liberal rights and values. He may be a full-fledged member of the liberal community. Nevertheless, over time he may see liberal rights and values as ignoring his needs in terms of preserving a strong Quebecois culture. He may come to desire a polity that allows for communal rights over the individual. He may see the preservation of a strong Quebecois culture as a necessity for his conception of the good life inherent in his stock of beliefs and values. Out of the tensions that result between the Quebecois's commitment to liberal values and his realization that these liberal values may be eroding his culture, the Quebecois and like-minded members of his community may adopt a more communitarian vocabulary – a vocabulary that may give a greater priority to the importance of culture and the common good.

Of course, if the Quebecois was a liberal in the first place it would likely be the case that his liberalism and commitment to culture at one time did not conflict. When his culture was less threatened, the Quebecois may have believed liberalism and the preservation of culture were compatible values. He may have thought that liberalism fulfilled his conception of the good life. However, due to an ever-increasing American and English-Canadian influence on Quebecois culture through television and other media and the economic pressures on young Quebecois to be educated in English, Quebecois culture has become threatened. Due to these threats, he realizes that liberalism and the preservation of culture are not as compatible as he once thought. The Quebecois then has to decide whether liberalism or his culture is more important to his conception of the good life. And he may reasonably choose to preserve his culture.

The reason the formerly liberal Quebecois rejects liberalism is because it fails to deliver what he thinks is the good life for him. It is more pragmatic for him to adopt the communitarian vocabulary. Even though he was a liberal, the Quebecois holds other values that are not liberal, such as the preservation of his culture. So contingent factors have led to tension between two formerly compatible sets of values. For the sake of maintaining his conception of the good life, he abandons one of those sets.

The above example describes plausibly how a liberal can come to reject liberalism while leaving most of his former beliefs intact. William James describes the conservative process by which we change our beliefs as meeting new experiences that put a strain on our old beliefs. We try to incorporate these new beliefs into our web of beliefs, always keeping in mind that we wish to make as minimal a disturbance as possible to the web. James claims that when it comes to belief, “we are all extreme conservatives” (PRA, 50). We aim to have the new belief incorporated into our web of beliefs in a manner that is “felicitous and expedient” (PRA, 50).

Although the Quebecois has significantly changed his beliefs, he has done so in accordance with the conservative model. The ‘new experience’ that he has encountered is the threat to his culture from the larger English-Canadian and American cultures. He then realizes that the preservation of Quebecois culture and liberalism are incompatible and looks towards a communitarian alternative. Although he dismisses liberalism, he does so rationally by keeping much of his old stock of beliefs, including those that center around the preservation of Quebecois culture. Although there is more than a ‘minimal disturbance’ to his stock of beliefs, it is perhaps the most minimal possible if

he is to give priority to the preservation of Quebecois culture in his conception of the good life. James acknowledges that we can make revolutionary changes to our stock of beliefs. Nevertheless, the “most violent revolutions in an individual’s beliefs leave most of his old order standing” (PRA, 50).

### *Marginalizing Values*

Against my claim that liberals can rationally reject liberalism, Rorty might reply that although liberal pragmatists are acculturated in a variety of different communities, they should not take the values of other communities seriously. He might say that liberal pragmatists should only take the values of the liberal community as authoritative in matters of justification, as this is what it means to be ethnocentric about liberalism. Nevertheless, if Rorty were to contend that the beliefs of other communities are irrelevant to how we critically evaluate the political, he has not given a reason for this claim. He would need to explain why the liberal pragmatist should be ethnocentric toward one part of his beliefs (his liberal beliefs) and not ethnocentric toward his non-liberal beliefs.

This would be a difficult explanation for Rorty to provide. He always offers ethnocentric ‘justifications’ such as ‘that is the way we liberals do things around here’ when showing why liberal pragmatists should be ethnocentric towards liberalism. Nevertheless, this is just an informal way of repeating one of the central claims of the social foundation thesis – that liberal pragmatists should work by their own lights, by

the beliefs, values, and desires that they have been acculturated within. This is the idea present in Rorty's equating theory. The social foundation thesis can only make the moral claim that liberal pragmatists should only count the liberal community as authoritative in matters of justification if it rests on a false descriptive premise that liberal pragmatists are mono-communal. But as we have seen, liberal pragmatists are typically acculturated in a variety of communities. The social foundation thesis fails to provide a reason why the liberal pragmatist should be ethnocentric about liberalism but not other belief-systems he is acculturated in. It fails to provide the defense of liberalism that Rorty intended. If we are to follow Rorty and use an equating theory, then the social fact that liberal pragmatists are acculturated in a number of communities will lead to the claim that a liberal pragmatist should appeal to all of the beliefs he is acculturated in when justifying political claims.

Perhaps Rorty recognizes that people appeal to their complete stock of beliefs during critical evaluation, and that is why he claims that liberal pragmatists are "reluctant to marginalize" (ORT, 201) any of their convictions. Unfortunately, he fails to draw the conclusion implicit in this claim, since his liberal ethnocentrism causes liberals to marginalize their non-liberal beliefs. When he claims that liberal pragmatists should appeal solely to the liberal community for purposes of justification, he forces liberal pragmatists to marginalize beliefs that fail to match with the consensus of that community. According to Rorty, if the liberal pragmatist disagrees with the liberal consensus regarding the best public policy to adopt in a given situation, he must abandon his own convictions for the sake of solidarity. Liberal ethnocentrism wrongly

claims that pragmatists “must sacrifice [their] conscience on the altar of public expediency” (ORT, 175). But this supposed ‘duty’ of the pragmatist to sacrifice his own convictions for the sake of solidarity forces the liberal pragmatist into the very position Rorty wants to avoid. It forces the liberal pragmatist to marginalize his values and beliefs because they conflict with the liberal consensus.

If we are to take seriously the claim that the liberal pragmatist can only work by his own lights, then he must judge his beliefs by reference to his stock of beliefs. This is how the liberal pragmatist judges beliefs, and if we are to equate prescriptive claims with descriptive ones, then this is the method of justification that the liberal pragmatist should use. The idea that the liberal pragmatist should justify beliefs and values by reference to his stock of beliefs is not unfamiliar to pragmatism. I shall show that this method runs throughout the work of other pragmatist philosophers including Rorty, although he ignores this method in his social foundation thesis. I shall elaborate on the details of this method using the work of William James to further explain what it means to claim the pragmatist should critically evaluate by reference to his stock of beliefs.

### **The Pragmatic Criterion**

The source that is behind, not only Rorty’s, but all variations of pragmatism, is that “questions of ultimate justification are left to the future, to the substance of things hoped for” (PSH, 27). This is a variation on William James’ definition of truth as that



which “is good for us to believe” (ORT, 22). If something advances our goals, leads to richer and better human activity, it counts as justified. I shall term the notion that truth is what advances our conception of richer and better human activity the ‘pragmatic criterion’.

For a liberal pragmatist, to judge a belief against his notion of richer and better human activity is to judge a belief against the values and beliefs that s/he already holds. It is to judge an opinion against one’s personal stock of beliefs. I shall call this method of judging beliefs and values by reference to one’s personal stock of beliefs ‘the pragmatic method of justification’. Pragmatist philosopher William James describes this process:

The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to strain. Somebody contradicts them, or in a reflective moment he realizes that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much as he can, for in the matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into another most felicitously and expediently. (PRA, 50)

Since according to the pragmatic method of justification, the worth of all values is contingent on the individual’s stock of beliefs, any value is only justified by the pragmatic criterion conditionally, and decisions about competing political arguments are, therefore, relative to person, time, and place. The pragmatist cannot make any ‘philosophical’ comments on the values themselves. He cannot say something like ‘a

pragmatist must always choose value  $a$  over value  $b'$ . While pragmatists cannot say anything about a necessary connection between pragmatism and particular values, pragmatism does demand a specific method for choosing political values. Even though this method is empty – it has no necessary content except the pragmatic criterion, it is the method a Rortian pragmatist is committed to.

The idea that pragmatism is only a method is not unfamiliar to pragmatism.<sup>1</sup>

Pragmatist philosopher William James claims that

pragmatism stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. As the young Italian pragmatist Papini has well said, it lies in the midst of our own theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next some one on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body's properties.... But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms. (PRA, 47)

James is saying that each activity going on in the respective rooms can be pragmatic activity so long as it follows the pragmatic method ('uses the same corridor'). The respective theories, in order to prove they are pragmatic, must show that their distinctions make a difference to practice. The theories must yield practical results by allowing us to cope with the world. Of course, the criteria by which pragmatists determine what beliefs and theories 'make a difference to practice' and 'allow them to

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<sup>1</sup> In 'Pragmatism Without Method' (ORT, 67-83), Rorty is arguing against Dewey's claim that the scientific method is the best method to always fix belief, and therefore should be the method used by pragmatists at all times. Although Rorty's essay is titled 'Pragmatism Without Method' it is hard to believe that he would object to the minimalist method described here. The only components to this method are that a theory must make a difference to practice, that it must lead to the achievement of one's goals. If pragmatism did not support this method, it is hard to say what meaning 'pragmatism' would have at all. Therefore, Rorty is being rash in the titling of his essay, because according to both his work and the work of all who fall under the pragmatist rubric, pragmatism at the very least has the criterion that a belief is to be judged by its utility and pragmatists must methodically adhere to this criterion.

cope' is their stock of beliefs. Pragmatists evaluate a belief by the way it allows them to accomplish something that they find useful to the lives they wish to live.

We have seen that if the liberal pragmatist is to critically evaluate by reference to the beliefs she has been acculturated in, then she should adopt the pragmatic method of justification. Liberal pragmatists should not justify beliefs and values by appealing to the liberal consensus. Rorty's claim that we should be loyal to the liberal consensus rests on the false presupposition that liberal pragmatists are typically mono-cultural. Liberals are loyal to our stock of beliefs, not the liberal consensus. Once we take the pluralism of the liberal pragmatist into account, we see that we can reject the claims of the social foundation thesis. We can dismiss Rorty's claims that the liberal cannot rationally reject liberalism, that she should be loyal to the liberal consensus, and that working by her own lights means appealing to the liberal consensus. There is another interesting reason why we should reject the social foundation thesis. We should reject it because it rests on another misconception of the way the liberal pragmatist justifies his beliefs, namely, it fails to consider the self-reflexive individual in its explanation of justification. I explore this issue in the next chapter.

### Chapter 3

#### The Judgmental Dope

In the first half of this chapter, I shall examine a second presupposition of Rorty's social foundation thesis. Rorty's claim that liberal pragmatists simply appeal to the liberal consensus when justifying beliefs implies that liberal pragmatists are, to borrow a term from sociologist Harold Garfinkel, 'judgmental dopes'. Once we develop a more accurate socio-historical description of the way liberals validate beliefs, we see that liberal pragmatists are self-reflexive individuals with critically reflective attitudes. As self-reflexive individuals, they critically evaluate beliefs not by appeal to the liberal consensus, but by appeal to their subjective stock of beliefs. In recognizing the liberal pragmatist's self-reflexiveness, we develop a more subject-centered conception of reason. The second half of the chapter is devoted to two issues. First, I argue that this more subjective socio-historical description is compatible with accepting that humans are social animals. Second, I discuss what this socio-historical description means to a political philosophy where we equate descriptive theories with prescriptive ones. I conclude that such an individualized socio-historical account fails to tell us anything politically. It certainly does not tell the liberal pragmatist to be loyal to liberalism. At most, it tells liberal pragmatists that they should appeal to their subjective stock of

beliefs when critically evaluating or justifying political claims. However, no one needs a political theory to tell him to appeal to his own beliefs in critical evaluation.

### **Monological vs. Dialogical**

There are interesting parallels between the way Rorty justifies liberalism by his social foundation thesis and the way Kantians (in the sense defined in chapter 1) justify liberalism. As mentioned earlier, Kantians justify liberalism by appealing to a theory of human nature that claims individuals have intrinsic human dignity and intrinsic human rights. Likewise, Rorty tries to justify liberalism by invoking, not a theory of human nature, but a socio-historical account of humans in his social foundation thesis. The claim that liberal pragmatists must be loyal to liberalism is based on a socio-historical account of how humans come to acquire values and beliefs. According to Rorty, people are social beings, fully habituated within society. They determine the truth of a belief by referring to the consensus of the community they are habituated in.

I think the problem with Rorty's socio-historical account of justification is that it goes too far in relying on the community in his explanation of how humans come to hold their beliefs and values. Rorty creates a false dichotomy between social reason and subject-centered reason as conceived by classical epistemology. The idea behind the social foundation thesis is that, for the liberal pragmatist, justification by the liberal consensus is justification enough. To appreciate the reasons why a liberal holds a belief we only have to look at the consensus of the liberal community. But this describes the

typical liberal as a judgmental dope. In this section, I consider why Rorty has chosen to ignore the individual in his epistemological behaviorism.

The social foundation thesis is a reaction against the variety of subject-centered reason that dominated classical epistemology. According to Jürgen Habermas, in classical epistemology the epistemic authority of the subject was sustained by three assumptions.

1. that we know our own mental states better than anyone else;
2. that knowing takes place in the mode of representing objects; and
3. that the truth of judgements rests on evidence that vouches for certainty. (PT, 35)

As a result of the epistemic authority of the subject, reason was seen as monological, meaning it was a process that the subject could carry out in isolation. Verification of the truth of judgements is something that can be left to the individual, as one does not need a community to verify whether a belief represents the nature of things. Since classical epistemologists held that one could know his or her own mental states and representations better than anyone else, reasoning about these claims was seen as primarily a subject-centered affair – it was something that an individual could accomplish independently of others.

In a reaction against subject-centered reasoning, Rorty's explanation of the way we come to believe something is true entirely removes the notion of subject-centered reason. He believes that the determination of truth and knowledge is a completely social phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Although I agree with Rorty to an extent on this point, I believe he is far too rash in disposing the notion of the subject when describing how we come to

hold beliefs and values. I shall show that it seems more reasonable to view people not as a slave to consensus, but rather as individuals who reflect on the social practices that are set before them. So we need to take a step back from relying completely on social phenomena, and, to an extent, put the notion of the critical, reflective individual back into our descriptive account of how liberals justify beliefs and values. Of course, I am not suggesting a return to classical epistemology and the epistemic authority of the isolated, monological subject. Rather, I am urging Rorty (and other philosophers caught up in the social turn) to take a more nuanced view of the relation between the individual and society than the account provided in the social foundation thesis. Rejecting the classical epistemologist's view of reason does not imply that the notion of the critically reflective subject has to be removed from our conception of reason.

Taking into account a more nuanced view of the relation between individual and society is not something new to philosophers of the social turn. Charles Taylor, along with Rorty, reacts against the monological reasoning that has dominated classical epistemology. Nevertheless, he does so in a more careful manner with respect to the role of the individual. According to Taylor, human life has a fundamentally dialogical rather than monological character. Like Rorty, Taylor claims the beliefs we hold are primarily the result of conversation with our peers, or to use Taylor's somewhat more exclusive phrase, "significant others" (Taylor, 33). Despite the fact Taylor would disagree with my argument for a more subject-centered reason, I use his work to show that we can reject the subject-centered reason of classical epistemology, yet still hold

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<sup>1</sup> See Rorty, U&T, p. 2 and n. 5.

that people are critically reflective individuals. Taylor says that the dialogical character of our life:

is not just a fact about genesis that can be ignored later on. It is not just that we learn the languages in dialogue and then go on to use them for our own purposes on our own. This describes the situation to some extent in our culture. We are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, and stances to things, to a considerable degree through solitary reflection. But this is not how things work with important issues, such as the definition of our identity. We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. (Taylor, 33)

Taylor claims we engage in conversation with our peers not merely to follow the consensus our conversation produces, but rather to trade ideas with one another and to seek peer approval and respect. The difference between Rorty and Taylor is that Taylor believes that we work out some beliefs in isolation, and that even though most of our important beliefs are worked out in conversation, our beliefs are not just formed by whatever consensus is produced by the conversation, but often by reactions and struggles against the results of those conversations. This idea comports better with the notion of humans as reflective individuals who do not just accept the consensus as matter of fact, but at times challenge, question and react against the consensus. I shall call this tendency that people can have of questioning and challenging and evaluating beliefs and values a ‘critically reflective attitude’ and those who possess this attitude I shall refer to as ‘self-reflexive individuals’.

*A New Socio- Historical Account of Justification*



Thomas McCarthy has pointed out that Rorty's socio-historical account of justification rests "on conformity and consensus models that dominated sociological action theory following World War II" (McCarthy, 368). According to sociologist John Heritage, these models were in a large part influenced by Wittgenstein's "rule following model of human action" (Heritage, 105). In these models, social actors (individuals within society) were depicted as committed "in consequence of socialization, to prescribed courses of action while social action was conceptualized as normatively regulated behavior such that deviation from established patterns would regularly enough, be sanctioned" (McCarthy, 368). This sociological interpretation of Wittgenstein has "been rendered implausible beyond repair" (McCarthy, 368) because it describes "the members of a society to be judgmental dopes" (Garfinkel, 68). Sociologist Harold Garfinkel coined the phrase 'judgmental dope' to describe the member of a society who unreflectively follows sets of rules in pre-defined situations. This is exactly what Rorty is claiming liberals do when they appeal to the consensus of the community to find out what the 'right' action is. He is describing liberal pragmatists as judgmental dopes – unreflective followers of consensus. The social foundation thesis seems to imply some sort of determinism where the choices of the individual are not made by reflective reasoning, but are pre-defined by the values of the liberal consensus. Rorty's description and others like it "systematically ignore the [individual's] own understanding of social structure and his or her reflexive use of it" (Garfinkel, 68). Since he uses an equating theory, we can conclude that he is basically saying that

liberal pragmatists *should* be judgmental dopes by simply following the liberal consensus.

Against the notion of people as judgmental dopes, Garfinkel develops his own socio-historical model of rule following, and thus a model of how the individual interacts with society. Heritage says Garfinkel has rightly shown us that common norms and values, “rather than regulating conduct in predefined scenes of action, are instead reflexively constitutive of the activities and unfolding circumstances to which they are applied” (Heritage, 109). The individual’s actions are guided but not determined by the values and norms he is acculturated within. His actions are a constitutive part of the social norms that guide him. After all, what constitutes social norms if not the actions and choices of the individual social actors that make up the community? McCarthy nicely sums up Garfinkel’s work:

the accent certainly falls differently in models of social practice without a subject where the determining factors [of behavior] are language, traditions, society, ... and the like. Garfinkel’s thicker description of making sense of everyday settings with its emphasis on the agent’s own practical reasoning, brings the subject back into the social practice. (McCarthy, 369)

Unlike Rorty’s social foundation thesis, Garfinkel provides a socio-historical account of how the individual interacts with social values and norms that recognizes the role of the self-reflexive subject. His critique points out the inaccurate socio-historical account of how people justify their beliefs that underlies the social foundation thesis.

Based on Garfinkel’s model of rule following and social practice, along with what I have said earlier about the pluralistic liberal justifying beliefs by reference to his

subjective stock of beliefs, we have the makings of a new socio-historical model of how liberals interact with the rules and norms of society. The most obvious difference between this model and Rorty's model is the greater role afforded to the individual. On my account, the individual liberal pragmatist does not only appeal to the liberal community when seeking justification for his or her political claims. If we can identify any set of values that the individual liberal pragmatist appeals to for justification of political values, it is simply his or her complete stock of beliefs. In other words, the liberal pragmatist follows the pragmatic method of justification that I discussed in chapter two. If we are to equate the descriptive fact that this is how liberal pragmatists justify their political beliefs with the moral claim that this is how liberal pragmatists *should* justify their political beliefs, then the liberal pragmatist is acting in accordance with Rortian pragmatism when he justifies his beliefs by appealing to his stock of beliefs. This is how a pragmatist should act when justifying his beliefs; he should follow the pragmatic method of justification.

### **Subjectivism and Social Animals**

In this section, I shall defend the role of subjectivism in the pragmatic method of justification in a number of ways. First, I show that certain areas of Rorty's pragmatism that I do not wish to reject support subjectivism. This includes arguing that it is consistent to view liberals both as social animals and as having a subjective method of

justification. Upon establishing the connection between Rortian pragmatism and subjectivism, I examine the role of this subjectivist Rortian pragmatism in politics.

First, I want to clearly define the meaning of subjectivism as it is applied to the pragmatic method of justification. Subjectivism entails that the liberal pragmatist's subjective stock of beliefs is the criterion by which he counts something as justified. His stock of beliefs is authoritative in matters of justification. So if a liberal pragmatist states that 'capital punishment is wrong', he finds the statement convincing because it coheres with his subjective stock of beliefs. He does not find a communal standard authoritative in such matters. Simply doing this would render him a judgmental dope. Even if the liberal pragmatist did justify this belief by appealing to the liberal consensus, it is only because the value of appealing to the liberal consensus for purposes of justification is already judged as a good idea by the liberal pragmatist, and is part of his stock of beliefs.

I shall now look at criticisms that Rorty might make in response to the claim that liberal pragmatists use a subjective standard for justification. These criticisms revolve around the claim that humans are social animals and, therefore, are acculturated to appeal to communal standards of justification as opposed to subjective standards. I accept that we are social animals, so in each criticism I must show that it is consistent to view people as social animals in the specific ways to be outlined and at the same time maintain subjectivism with regard to justification.

### *Humans as Social Animals*

A question arises concerning the consistency of subscribing to both subjectivism and the view that we are social animals. Can we count a liberal's subjective stock of beliefs as authoritative in matters of justification and at the same time maintain that we are social animals? I do accept that we are social animals. We are products of our acculturation and derive our values and beliefs from the communities we belong to (in combination with our interactions with the physical environment). Furthermore, we debate, refine, and reject our values based on our conversations with fellow community members. Our interactions and co-operations with these people shape the type of individuals that we are.

I shall now respond to criticisms of subjectivism in light of the fact that humans are social animals.

1) *Subjectivism and the Atomistic Individual*. Does my subjectivism force me to deny that humans are social animals, and instead adopt the antiquated position that individuals are isolated egos? Some pragmatists think that accepting subjectivism necessarily involves accepting that humans are atomistic individuals.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is also Rorty's motivation in failing to fully acknowledge the role of the self-reflexive individual in describing justification. My talk of a critically reflective attitude may seem to be a return to classical epistemology. It may conjure up notions of a subject that is prior to our social self, a self that remains after we strip off all the layers of

habituation and acculturation, something left behind that cannot be explained in a socio-historical manner but requires a Philosophical explanation.

Nevertheless, it is wrong to assume subjectivism is necessarily based on a notion of humans as atomistic individuals or that holding this position forces me to deny that we are social animals. After all, I am not denying that social factors affect what the liberal pragmatist finds convincing or that the liberal pragmatist's beliefs are derived from the beliefs of various communities. Our self-reflexive individuality can be explained as the result of various social and biological factors, a product of circumstance rather than something a priori.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is the result of our Western culture, the result of Cartesian rationalism or the enlightenment. Michel Foucault has given us some insight into the historical development of the Western individual into a self-reflexive subject. Robert Strozier, writing on Foucault's work in this area, says that according to Foucault's historical account:

Modern philosophy initiates a historical discourse that represents humans as self-analyzing and self-knowing, and gives rise, on the more abstract level, to the 'invention of man' in the modern era ... It is precisely during this historical period that the self inquiry into who and what we are - what constitutes collective and individual self identity - has become the central issue. That is, as enlightenment subjects we are constituted as individuals positioned in a self-inquiring space that allows us to investigate exactly how we have been constituted as subjects of discourse. This understanding allows us perhaps to resist discourses that constitute us and to think differently. (Strozier, 145)

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see David Depew's Introduction to *Pragmatism: From Progressivism to Postmodernism*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> An example of a biological factor that could affect our self-reflexivity is our cognitive capability. If we did not have the cognitive capability of critically evaluating our beliefs then no social factor could ever make us self-reflexive.

According to Foucault, the enlightenment was largely responsible for our increased concern with the issue of 'who and what we are'. It attempted to define our ahistorical human nature. Although the enlightenment failed in this respect, it unintentionally made humans into more self-reflexive beings. Foucault says that perhaps the modern subjects' ability to resist and react against their acculturation is the result of the enlightenment's investigations into how individuals are constituted by social factors, or to use a more Foucauldian phrase 'how they have been constituted as subjects of discourse'. Through the enlightenment's focus on the constitution of our 'collective and individual identity', people came to understand their capacity for self-inquiry, self-analysis, and their ability to react against certain beliefs they are acculturated in. Even though enlightenment subjects exercise their self-reflexive capacities, we should not view this as a realization or fulfillment of human nature, but rather as a product of a particular historical period in conjunction with certain biological factors. The enlightenment's attempt to define ahistorical features of human nature failed even though it succeeded in influencing the behavior of certain people.

In another place and time, Rorty's judgmental dope description of justification might be more apt. Nevertheless, it is an inaccurate description of how liberals justify their beliefs. A description of the phenomenon of justification that takes individuals with a critically reflective attitude into account is more appropriate for liberal democrats in the Western world. And I do not see why the explanation of individuality as a social phenomenon that can be explained by socio-historical factors would not cohere with an account of humans as social animals.

To illustrate my point that our individuality and critically reflective attitude are no more than a product of social (and biological) factors, I shall discuss how we look at science as opposed to politics. Due to various social factors, it would probably be true that the average Western liberal democrat is somewhat of a judgmental dope when it comes to scientific knowledge. Not all Western liberal democrats are given the specialized education that would be required to understand complex scientific ideas such as quarks, nuclear fission and thermonuclear dynamics. The average person is willing to take the word of the scientific community on these matters without critically reflecting on the grounds of supposedly scientific knowledge. Whether it is due to lack of education, lack of resources or general lack of interest, the average Western liberal democrat's criterion for judging a scientific belief to be verified as knowledge is based simply on the conclusions of the consensus of the scientific community. Although the average liberal democrat is adopting this criterion because it is included in his subjective stock of beliefs, he is still somewhat a judgmental dope when it comes to scientific knowledge.

Even if there is some trace, however minimal, of the liberal democrat's critically reflective attitude in the area of scientific knowledge, the judgmental dope theory may be more accurate here than in the area of political knowledge, where there is frequent disagreement on matters of policy and political affiliation. Perhaps Western liberal democrats are not more like the Rortian judgmental dope when it comes to political matters because there is a general interest in politics (even despite a sometimes apathetic attitude) as these changes affect our everyday lives. On the other hand, the



average citizen is not so much affected in an immediate way by changes in scientific knowledge. Or it could be that political debates are more accessible than scientific debates. Whatever social factors may be involved, liberal democrats are not usually judgmental dopes on political matters even though they can be in other areas of knowledge. So our critically reflective attitude towards knowledge is the result of time and chance rather than some inherent quality. Social factors affect the level to which we employ our critically reflective attitude and can even affect the way it is used from one area of knowledge to another.

2) *Social Animals Having a Subjective Stock of Beliefs*. The question still must be raised concerning whether it is intelligible to describe the liberal pragmatist as having a subjective stock of beliefs even though all of her beliefs are derived from the various communities that she belongs to. Someone might claim that since all beliefs are communally derived, it is senseless to describe an individual's beliefs as subjective. He might say that there is nothing that can really be described as subjective about the liberal pragmatist's beliefs; that these beliefs are just the amalgamation of the various communal standards that the liberal pragmatist adheres to. This person might say that the liberal pragmatist ultimately finds convincing what these various communal standards determine as justified because his beliefs can be entirely reduced to various communal standards.

I disagree with the notion that an individual's stock of beliefs fails to be subjective in any sense because those beliefs are communally derived. These beliefs are subjective for a number of reasons. For example, a factor that influences a person's web

of beliefs and makes it subjective is the manner in which the person chooses to arrange all these values within his web of beliefs. This idea is similar to William James's claim that "individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction [with a theory, or a set of beliefs] differently" (PRA, 51). The way people choose to arrange their beliefs is left to individual discretion. Perhaps factors like past experiences might influence people to give priority to certain values over others. A witness or victim of racial discrimination may give priority to the value of racial equality over other liberal values. It may be the most important feature of liberalism to that person. Or if individuals belong to more than one community, they may choose to give priority to one community's values over the other. There are other ways besides giving priority to a value or a set of values that affect the way individuals arrange their values. As I have mentioned earlier, a person can pick and choose values from various communities without being a full-fledged member of that community. A person may find Marx's theory of worker alienation convincing without subscribing to many other Marxist beliefs. The arrangement of values, different life experiences, the picking and choosing of values from various communities are some of the many ways that an individual's stock of beliefs is unique to that individual and not simply reducible to the values of communities.

The liberal pragmatist's individual values may be *derived* from various communities. However, his stock of beliefs as a *whole* are not *reducible* to any communal standards. We can look at the individual beliefs of a liberal pragmatist and identify them with the various communities they are derived from. Nevertheless, if we look at the liberal pragmatist's stock of beliefs and all the subjective factors such as

arrangement, pluralism, and life experiences that affect it, we can see that these beliefs as a whole cannot be accounted for by any one community nor by the plurality of communities that the liberal pragmatist belongs to. In this sense, an individual's beliefs are subjective. Thus, the liberal pragmatist can be a social animal through and through yet still have a subjective stock of beliefs.

3) *Subjectivism and Conversation*. On the subjectivist view, we can still accept that coping with the world, achieving a better way of life, and adapting to the challenges the social and physical world presents us with is a matter of conversing with our fellow community members. We can still accept that we work out our problems through conversation with those who share enough of our beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. Rorty calls such conversation with fellow community members 'normal discourse'. Rorty says that in normal discourse

everybody agrees on how to evaluate everything everybody says. More generally, normal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a good question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. (PMN, 320)

Those engaging in normal discourse work within the values and standards of the given community and these values and standards determine what counts as justified within the community.

Even though liberal pragmatists engage in normal discourse, they do so under their own individual volitions. Remember, the conventions that structure what counts as justified are 'agreed-upon' conventions. The reason why the liberal pragmatist finds these conventions convincing and agrees with them is because they cohere with his

subjective stock of beliefs. Pragmatists do not have to “sacrifice their consciences on the altar of public expediency” (ORT, 175), as Rorty claims they do, and accept whatever is the outcome of normal discourse simply because they are social animals who cope with the world partly through conversation. Pragmatists do not have to conform to the consensus for the sake of solidarity simply because they are social animals. They are not judgmental dopes. Even though a liberal pragmatist may have entered into normal discourse where he initially agrees to a set of conventions that determines what counts as justified, he can reject the outcome of normal discourse if it forces him to reject too many beliefs. He can reject the agreed upon conventions if sacrificing his conscience is deemed by him too much of a price to pay for solidarity.

Of course, a liberal pragmatist could possibly choose public expediency over his ‘conscience’. But only because he already holds the belief that sacrificing some of his beliefs for the sake of public expediency was a good thing. Nevertheless, this is not a matter of rejecting one’s whole stock of beliefs – or one’s whole conscience. It is a matter of pairing off one part of your beliefs (a small set of moral beliefs that oppose the act) against another (a commitment to public expediency). At no time could you reject your conscience if that meant you had to reject your whole stock of beliefs. One could not rationalize rejecting their whole stock of beliefs at a given time. This would involve ‘stepping outside’ all of your beliefs which is incomprehensible.

4) *Habermas’s Criticism of Subject-Centered Reason.* We should now look at Jürgen Habermas’s criticism of the type of subject-centered reason that has dominated classical epistemology to make sure my own notion of subject-centered reason does not

succumb to the same criticisms. Habermas critiques the three central claims of this position that were mentioned earlier:

1. that we know our own mental states better than anyone else;
  2. that knowing takes place in the mode of representing objects; and
  3. that the truth of judgments rests on evidence that vouches for certainty.
- (PT, 35)

These three claims are all closely connected to one another and imply that, for the classical epistemologist, the individual can know the world objectively by having his mental states ‘represent’ objects in the world. Propositions based on these mental states constitute objective knowledge – they rest on evidence that vouch for certainty – because any individual observer could be dropped into the initial observer’s place, and have the same results. By the same results, classical epistemologists mean that each observer would produce the same appropriate, representational mental state by observing the same object in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Against the claims of classical epistemologists, Habermas argues that we cannot know our own mental states better than anyone else because understanding propositions is the product of reciprocal interaction among communicative participants. We understand knowledge claims not through ‘accurate representations’ of the world; rather, through being habituated in the values and beliefs of a community, and becoming participants in its continuing conversation. So I think Habermas believes we can dismiss the three claims of the classical epistemologist in the following way: mental states are no longer viewed as the focal point of knowledge since knowledge is the goal and product of conversation not the goal and product of accurate

representations of the world. So the three claims of the classical epistemologists that form the basis of subject-centered reason are all false due to their 'representational' presuppositions.

Habermas's criticism of subject-centered reason does not harm my position as my notion of subject-centered reason does not touch upon any of the three claims of the classical epistemologist. There is no return to 'representationalism' in my claim that liberal democrats are self-reflexive individuals.

The claims that I do make in support of subject-centered reason are as follows:

1. Liberal pragmatists have a critically reflective attitude towards the values and beliefs of the liberal community that they have been acculturated into. But this critically reflective attitude can be completely explained in a socio-historical manner, i.e. as a product of social and biological factors.
2. The liberal pragmatist evaluates beliefs and values by reference to his subjective stock of beliefs. This point has been shown to be a more accurate description of the way liberal pragmatists critically evaluate beliefs and values by sociologist Harold Garfinkel. What this implies is that the liberal pragmatist does not just simply appeal to the consensus of the liberal community in the manner Rorty describes.
3. The basis of the critically reflective attitude and self-reflexive actions of the liberal pragmatist is his subjective stock of beliefs and values. This stock of

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<sup>4</sup> See Howe, *On Habermas*, p. 3.

beliefs and values are subjective and cannot simply, as a whole, be reduced to the consensus of any one community.

Philosophers like Rorty and Habermas rightly point out that many of the processes of arriving at knowledge claims are the results of conversation with one's peers. They are also right in claiming that when we do engage in conversation the aim is to convince your fellow conversational participants. The idea that people aim for consensus in conversation weighs particularly heavy in Habermas' work as a great deal of his arguments take as their starting point the obvious claim that when we engage in conversation we have a desire to be understood. Habermas claims that if a person wants to be understood, she must be making universal validity claims – claims that aim to be validated as true both for the person making the claim and all those participating in the conversation. He analyzes these everyday speech acts as follows:

The speaker must choose a comprehensible expression so that the speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true proposition ... so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance, and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communication actions can continue undisturbed only as long as we suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified. (CES, 2)

Habermas claims that under ideal conditions of communication – conditions such as unforced agreement and allowing all those who wish to be participants to take part in

the conversation – we can achieve a rational consensus on knowledge claims. These claims that are validated as knowledge by a rational consensus will be universal in the sense that no rational person could deny them. He claims this is the way that we are able to determine what counts as knowledge in a post-Philosophical world without having to resort to what he considers the undesirable alternatives of ethnocentrism or relativism.

Habermas describes various social processes relating to how we go about justifying our beliefs. These processes are the ones mentioned above – aiming for consensus amongst peers, being habituated in the beliefs of the community, facing the same political and social problems, and so on. There is no doubt that these processes are social and are defining features of how we go about justifying beliefs. But even though many of the processes are social, what still stands at the end of justification for the liberal pragmatist – what still counts as ‘ultimate’ justification – is the liberal pragmatist’s subjective stock of beliefs. The liberal pragmatist still maintains his self-reflexive attitude towards the results of a consensus or any justification reached by a social process. The notion of a critically reflective attitude is necessary to accurately describe the process by which liberal pragmatists justify beliefs. Ignoring the critically reflective attitude is just bad sociology.

Habermas’s notion of constructing a critical theory based on the achievement of a universal rational consensus is not sociology; it is a philosophical project. It is not merely an exercise in describing the way liberal pragmatists do act. Although it is based on the way we do justify beliefs, it aims to *construct* ideals out of the way we engage in



discussion that will allow us to achieve a rational consensus. It is a constructive, philosophical project; it is not merely a descriptive, sociological project. In this sense, my position that we recognize the role of a critically reflective attitude in our descriptive accounts of the way liberal pragmatists justify their beliefs need not conflict with Habermas's project. In the next chapter, I shall show how constructive 'idealist' theories like Habermas's can be compatible with my description of the self-reflexive liberal pragmatist.

I should also point out that subject-centered reason is perhaps a misnomer for the description of the method of justification of the self-reflexive liberal pragmatist. The process that occurs when a liberal pragmatist critically evaluates a belief does not fit well under the dichotomies of subject-centered reason and community-centered reason, or monological centered reason and dialogical reason. It resists categorization into any one of these dichotomies because the method of justification is neither entirely community-based nor something entirely subjective. My description stops short of being dialogical because it brings back the notion of the self-reflexive individual. My description stops short of being monological because it maintains that a person's critically reflective attitude is influenced, in part, by one's acculturation, and many of the processes of critical evaluation are carried out through conversation with one's peers. So perhaps it is best not to look at my description of the self-reflexive liberal pragmatist in the terms that these dichotomies present us with.

### *Pragmatism and Politics*

Thus far I have shown that if we follow Rorty's pragmatism, we end up with the pragmatic method of justification that tells us that a liberal pragmatist should critically evaluate his beliefs against his subjective stock of beliefs. This method, however, does not offer any defense of liberalism – it claims that the only criterion a pragmatist can use to justify any political institution is that it helps him create the type of society that he wants to live in. Rorty's pragmatism cannot tell a liberal pragmatist what beliefs to have. It can only tell liberal pragmatists that they have to work by their own lights, by the values that they are acculturated within. Rorty's pragmatism, therefore, does not tell us anything interestingly political. No one needs a philosophical theory to tell them that they should choose the type of society that best suits their needs and interests – or, as I have put it earlier, fulfills their notion of richer and better human activity. It is just the way we think anyway.

Thus far, it may seem that I am championing the pragmatic method of justification. I shall now qualify this impression. I have been contrasting the pragmatic method with the social foundation thesis, which is the other method of justification in Rorty's pragmatism. I have been using the pragmatic method not so much to champion it as the method we *should* be using, as I have my doubts about equating theories (more on this next chapter). And, naturally, as a political philosopher, I am uncomfortable with the idea that philosophy should have as little to say about politics as the pragmatic method lets us say. I have been using this method more as the only method of

justification that makes sense within Rorty's pragmatism. As I said earlier, I have been aiming to provide an internal critique of his pragmatism, which means provisionally accepting many of its claims. The acceptance of the pragmatic method depends on whether it is correct to equate these claims or not. If we are Rortian pragmatists, and thus accept the equating of these claims, then we should use the pragmatic method. The pragmatic method certainly makes more sense than the other method offered by Rorty once we account for those errors he has made in his construal of certain descriptive facts. In other words, the pragmatic method corresponds with the descriptive facts of how liberal pragmatists actually justify their beliefs. It is the one that the Rortian pragmatist should choose, since the Rortian pragmatist equates descriptive facts with prescriptive ones. Even though I am reluctant to champion the pragmatic method, I shall argue later that even if it offers all that we can say about justification, this does not necessarily have to have negative political consequences. Pragmatism can still have a role, even if it is a minimal one, in the way we conduct politics, even if it cannot tell us anything substantive about politics.

If there is one thing that I champion, it is the notion of bringing the subject back into our description of how the liberal pragmatist justifies his beliefs. We should not construe the liberal pragmatist simply as a judgmental dope. Whether this subjectivism has any political consequences remains to be seen.

Even though Rorty's pragmatism fails to tell us much about politics, this does not imply that philosophy has nothing interesting or constructive to say about these matters. I shall explore in the next chapter some interesting and constructive possibilities left for

political philosophy. But first I shall discuss the type of methodology in political philosophy that Rorty is committed to, and what is wrong with it.

Rorty's social foundation thesis shares a common methodology with political philosophy in the Philosophical tradition. The former tries to set up a foundation to justify a political scheme using a socio-historical foundation (how we justify beliefs), whereas the latter tries to justify a political scheme using a metaphysical foundation (usually based on notions concerning god, reason or human nature). In both cases, they rest the justification for political institutions on a non-political foundation. It is important to ask whether political philosophers should be concerned with this specific task. I say both yes and no. Yes, the political philosopher should acknowledge the non-political, socio-historical facts of a community when arguing on behalf of a political scheme for that community. But no, the political philosopher should not try to use these socio-historical facts as foundational justification for that political scheme.

We should not approach the problems of political philosophy thinking that political values and institutions are in need of a foundation, whether the foundation is metaphysical or socio-historical. It does not seem to be a fruitful approach. The same non-political, socio-historical facts about a community can be interpreted in numerous ways to justify multiple and competing political regimes. A clever political theorist could take a non-political, socio-historical fact about the way a community justifies its beliefs and use it as justification for a variety of political regimes for that community. Arguments that look for non-political foundations for political schemes are typically "convincing only to those who already accept their conclusions" (F&MPP, 173). For

this reason, it seems more productive to focus on political conclusions rather than non-political foundations when debating the merits of a political regime.

Although we should avoid using a descriptive socio-historical fact as a foundation for a political claim, I believe that a political theorist still needs to take into account the socio-historical facts of a community when arguing on behalf of a political scheme. A political theorist who argues on behalf of adopting a political scheme for the Western liberal democratic community that is built around the notion (or contains the implicit notion) that Western liberals are a highly collectivist society is probably not worth taking seriously. That is not to say that we should shun a political theorist who says liberal society *should* become more collectivist. I am merely saying that a theory is doing something wrong if it *describes* Western liberal society as collectivist.

There is an important difference between a political theory that takes a socio-historical fact into account and one that uses it to justify a specific political regime. A political theory should contain an accurate understanding of a community's political and non-political, socio-historical experience and it should be an attempt to deal and cope with this reality, but it is not fruitful to try to justify this regime solely by reference to some non-political, socio-historical fact. Such facts may be relevant, though only partially, and cannot carry the entire burden of justifying a political regime.

## Chapter 4

### Pragmatic Political Philosophy

At the end of last chapter, I said all that remains of Rorty's pragmatism after we account for its false presuppositions is a philosophical position that fails to tell us a great deal politically. Acknowledging this, I shall discuss the limited role of pragmatic political philosophy in the first part of the chapter. This will include the examination of consensus as the goal of political philosophy, and a discussion on how one can pragmatically defend political institutions once we take into account my criticisms of Rorty's pragmatism. In the second part of the chapter, I examine some lingering questions concerning equating theories. Looking at alternatives to equating theories, I examine the possibilities of political philosophy conducted within the social turn.

### The Subjectivist View of Consensus and Community

What, if anything, can Rorty's pragmatism contribute to our understanding of politics, if we reject the claims of the social foundation thesis and adopt the pragmatic method of justification? Here I shall focus on what becomes of the ideas of agreement and consensus if Rorty's pragmatism cannot tell pragmatists to sacrifice their conscience for the sake of liberal solidarity. We obviously cannot throw out the ideas of

agreement and consensus in political theory. One could argue that in our post-Philosophical world, the political consensus serves as the sole legitimating feature of politics.<sup>1</sup> The state can no longer legitimate its existence on the basis of representing some moral-political truth, but can justify itself only by operating on principles and values that are accepted by the consensus of its citizens.

I think the concern (and burden) of creating and maintaining a consensus on political matters can be left to day-to-day politics. Rorty cannot provide a philosophical justification on the basis of pragmatism for saying a liberal pragmatist *must or should* conform to the liberal consensus. Nevertheless, we can provide pragmatic reasons within the realm of the political. There is a difference between the ideas of ‘philosophical justification on the basis of pragmatism’ and ‘pragmatic reasons in the realm of the political’. The former seeks to show that something about the philosophical doctrine of pragmatism enforces a duty on pragmatists to conform to the consensus. If we fail to conform, we fail to be pragmatists. The latter provides reasons to subscribe to the consensus by appealing to each individual’s stock of beliefs. It aims to show the everyday advantages of subscribing to the consensus. For example, if we want to build a consensus, we would convince liberal pragmatists of the practical advantages of working together in a strong unified political community over letting differences alienate liberals from their fellow community members. We would not simply do what Rorty tells us to do; that is, we would not insist that the liberal

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the idea of the necessity of consensus for political legitimacy see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 136-137.

pragmatist as a pragmatist should forget his personal beliefs and conform to the consensus.

Of course, the idea of finding pragmatic reasons in the realm of the political to convince people to seek solidarity is not unlike John Rawls's work on political stability, unity, and legitimacy. Rawls claims that the liberal political state must be endorsed by an overlapping consensus of its citizens. He does not say we should join the consensus because of some philosophical doctrine (such as pragmatism). Instead, recognizing that liberal democracies are pluralistic communities, he believes that principles of fairness should be adopted because they appeal to each citizen's conception of richer and better human activity (or to use a more Rawlsian phrase a 'comprehensive religious, philosophical or moral view'). Rawls claims the liberal state should not

assert or deny any particular comprehensive moral, philosophical, or religious view, or its associated theory of truth and the status of values. Since we assume each citizen to affirm some such view, we hope to make it possible for all to accept the political conception as true or reasonable from the standpoint of their own comprehensive view, whatever it may be. (PL, 150)

Since citizens should adhere to the liberal state from the standpoint of their own beliefs, consensus is achieved by appealing to each individual's sense of richer and better human activity – by showing the political advantages to each citizen in endorsing a liberal polity. Contra Rorty, it is not achieved by saying that pragmatists *must* aim for social solidarity. There is also no reason to think that pragmatists would have to abandon the notion of achieving a liberal consensus just because they have no philosophical duty to aim for social solidarity.



It is unusual that Rorty would not, as a pragmatist, try to offer more political reasons for why the liberal pragmatist should be loyal to liberalism. If, for a pragmatist, the value of a belief is measured by its practical consequences, Rorty should devote more time to defending liberalism by showing how it fulfills the beliefs and values of liberal pragmatists better than any other polity. Rorty sometimes defends liberalism and, more specifically, America in poetic terms that echo the tone of Walt Whitman and William James. In this sense, Rorty speaks of liberal America as a democratic, open vista and the land of limitless opportunity and new beginnings.<sup>2</sup> At other times, he claims liberalism offers some sort of vague hope to America that will enable the nation to transform itself into an egalitarian society.<sup>3</sup> And at other times, he speaks in very broad terms of liberalism as the best form of society thus far.<sup>4</sup> But Rorty fails to defend liberalism by talking about specifics. He needs to provide the liberal pragmatist with specific reasons why liberalism will achieve the type of society that will meet the needs and concerns that we face in the new century. For example, he could tell us why we should have good reason to expect a more egalitarian society from liberalism. Not only does he not provide reasons for this claim, but he believes “criterionless hope” (PSH, 120) is a virtue. Sometimes, despite his call for renewed hope, Rorty seems down right pessimistic about America ever becoming an egalitarian state.<sup>5</sup> Why should we rely on a faint, possibly even criterionless hope that an egalitarian version of liberal society may be achieved instead of looking for concrete alternatives? Perhaps Rorty’s optimism

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<sup>2</sup> See *PSH*, pg. 120.

<sup>3</sup> See *PSH*, pg. 243-251.

<sup>4</sup> See *ORT*, pg. 29.

is a much needed reaction against the “self indulgent, pathetic hopelessness” (PSH, 263) of what he calls the Foucauldian left. But optimism for liberalism needs to be coupled with substantive reasons why liberalism deserves this optimism.

Rorty should concentrate on defending liberalism in the more pragmatic manner of showing that it can achieve the desired type of society and solve the pressing problems faced by liberal pragmatists. An interesting project for him would be to convince disillusioned liberals that there are good reasons to be optimistic about liberalism. For example, it would be interesting for him to look at the Quebecois. As mentioned earlier, many Quebecois were formerly liberal but now feel liberalism fails to protect their culture. Although the majority of Quebecois are probably best described as liberal democrats, their support for the scaling back of key individual rights and freedoms is making their province resemble a communitarian polity. Many of these infringements are defended by the communitarian notion of the priority of the community over individual rights and freedoms. What would Rorty say to a group of liberals losing their faith with liberalism? How would he defend it and show how it can solve their problems or deserves their renewed commitment? This would provide a truly pragmatic defense of liberalism, as it would demonstrate liberalism’s ability to form the type of polity that satisfies the Quebecois’ beliefs and values. The Quebecois’ faith in liberalism cannot be restored by appeals to long-term hope or rhetoric such as ‘liberal democracy is the best polity thus far’. Such appeals are easier to accept where liberals are relatively satisfied with their polity, which may be the case in English

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<sup>5</sup> See *PSH*, pg. 234.

Canada or the United States. But where people are beginning to believe liberalism no longer solves their problems, as in Quebec, liberalism needs a defense couched in more practical terms.

### *Dissent*

We need to consider to what extent consensus is desirable in a liberal democratic society. Is it a desirable goal to achieve a consensus on all political matters in a community? Is dissent inherently admirable? One aspect of Rorty's work – and the work of much political philosophy in the social turn – is the emphasis on constructing a consensus within political communities. He thinks liberal democracies must desperately avoid the loss of solidarity. For Rorty, a healthy liberal political community requires much solidarity. Nevertheless, I think it is important to ask whether we are erecting a false idol in being so single minded about the value of consensus. While consensus does have its role in politics, it is important not to overemphasize it and to define the extent to which dissent may be desirable in a liberal democracy.

Dissent rightly plays a large role in most liberal democracies. Political theorist Gary Shiffman states that political debate in liberal democracies

almost always ends in disagreement, and this disagreement is almost always viewed as legitimate. We expect political parties to pursue competing agendas. We consider political and religious disagreement to be a sign of a free and open society. (Shiffman, 176)

I believe liberal democracy is best described as having a strong consensus on the procedures of democracy – things like the procedures of parliament, elections, and civil debate – and on general notions of rights that help define these democratic procedures – things like freedom of speech, toleration, assembly and religion. There is much dissent, however, on matters of policy and political affiliation. For example, the people of the United States are divided almost evenly amongst those who support the Republicans and Democrats and their respective policies, with the balance of power often shifting in favor of one or the other. Although there is a consensus on matters of democratic procedures and the related rights and freedoms, this consensus is only achieved when these procedures, rights and freedoms are broadly construed. When we get to the specifics on these issues, there seems to be a fair amount of disagreement. For example, there is a great deal of debate in Canada about the democratic process regarding the majority (or ‘first past the gate’) electoral system, as many Canadians wish to convert to a proportional system. There is also a considerable debate regarding rights, such as whether there should be limitations on free speech.

So does the dissensus which characterizes politics in a liberal democracy weaken liberal democratic nations? Is it a cause for concern? I say no. We only have to reiterate the arguments of John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* to see why dissensus is good for a liberal democracy. Mill argues that diversity of opinion benefits society as a whole. Dissensus does not lead to paralyzing disagreement but a renewed effort to convince those from the other camp to join our side. Even though I can only make this point in an

ethnocentric way, liberal democracies with their toleration of dissensus seem to fare much better than those societies who do not tolerate dissensus.

Liberal democratic politics seem to be at their healthiest when there is a certain amount of disagreement on social policy. When a political party puts forth its policies, it aims to achieve a consensus, but I think the party would be surprised if it ever attained this goal. If a political party won with let's say 80% of the popular vote or a budget was approved unanimously by the congress or parliament, then "once the astonishment wore off, wouldn't we object that somehow the process had gone wrong, become illegitimate" (Shiffman, 177). Liberal democrats have come to expect a lack of consensus and acknowledge that politics is often a messy, plodding process. Despite the occasional frustration that may result from a lack of solidarity, I think liberals appreciate and value the checks and balances that result from having a pervasive dissensus in politics.

It baffles me that Rorty works so hard on behalf of solidarity and consensus, when dissensus tends to be the norm on all but the most general matters in the liberal democracies he champions. If Rorty truly believes liberal democracy is the best form of government thus far, he should be more accepting of dissensus and less concerned with consensus. Rorty seems to be caught in a dilemma when he claims that liberal democrats should aim for consensus and solidarity: his position is either politically irrelevant or un-liberal democratic. If he is saying that we should aim for solidarity and consensus, he is betraying the ethos of liberal democracy. To be a liberal democrat is to both tolerate dissensus and view it as a mark of a healthy, free, and open society. It is

un-liberal to want to remove dissensus from society. On the other hand, if Rorty is saying that consensus is unnecessary on issues of policy or on the specifics of rights and procedures, but we should have consensus on a general understanding of these rights and procedures, then what he is saying is largely uninteresting and politically irrelevant. Liberal democrats already share a consensus on the general rights and procedures of liberal democracy. This consensus is, after all, what makes them all members of the same political community. To simply state that liberal democrats should have a consensus on these matters is irrelevant and uninteresting. It is preaching to the converted. It is asking liberal democrats to keep on holding values that they probably never questioned in the first place. So either formulation of Rorty's championing of consensus puts him in a predicament. If he is making the interesting claim that liberals should seek consensus where dissensus normally prevails, he is missing something central to the ethos of liberal democracy. If he is saying that liberal democrats should maintain the consensus they already share, his position is simply uninteresting and politically irrelevant.

### *Equating Theories and Their Alternatives*

Thus far I have shown that Rorty's attempt to draw a connection between liberalism and pragmatism by the social foundation thesis fails. Over the course of my argument against the social foundation thesis, I have remained within the parameters of Rorty's pragmatism, by constructing my arguments largely in Rorty's terms. This has

involved accepting the equation of descriptive with prescriptive theories, the pragmatic method of justification, the focus on socio-historical accounts of individuals and society, and Rorty's reductive pragmatism as unproblematic. I have remained within the confines of Rorty's pragmatism to give an internal criticism of his work – an attempt to fully appreciate his pragmatism before conducting a criticism of it. I shall now look at the most controversial part of this pragmatism, namely his equation of descriptive facts with prescriptive ones. I shall show why this is controversial, what the alternatives to this position are, and identify the interesting and challenging questions that it raises for those who work within the confines of the social turn in political philosophy.

Can we equate the way individuals justify their beliefs with how they should justify their beliefs? Some philosophers think the “inference from fact to value must be made – if one forsakes ... the abject relativism to which anti-foundationalism commits itself – simply because there is no other ground for value” (Dillon, 113). Nevertheless, other philosophers in the social turn believe philosophy is not limited to simply offering equating theories. They think it is a fruitful project to construct ideals out of social practices; to look for ideals of how a community *should* justify their beliefs that may differ from the way the community *does* actually justify their beliefs. These philosophers argue that just because the Philosophical tradition that championed ahistorical truth has been discredited, it does not follow that we can rely only on descriptive facts to make moral claims. They accuse Rorty and others like him of going

too far in their rejection of the Philosophical tradition.<sup>6</sup> These philosophers include Jürgen Habermas, whose work on discourse ethics – the effort to find universal claims to validity implicit in the way humans use language – has gained much currency in post-Philosophical political theory. I shall term attempts to find universal claims to validity the ‘ideal branch of post-Philosophy’ for their insistence that ideals of rationality and discourse exist and the project of philosophy is to find these ideals.<sup>7</sup>

The definition of the task of philosophy is at stake in the dilemma between the ideal branch of philosophy and the alternative that Rorty champions. If philosophy should not search for ideals and merely concentrate on constructing equating theories, then philosophy’s only task is to describe how things hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term, using socio-historical and scientific theories to develop these descriptive accounts. On the other hand, if philosophy should search for ideals, then it has a distinctly philosophical task – the task of constructing ideals out of discourse and its implicit rationality.

The project of deriving rational ideals from discourse is an interesting way to pursue philosophy in a post-Philosophical fashion. Nevertheless, it is far too early to

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<sup>6</sup> See James Ryerson, ‘The Quest for Uncertainty’, *Lingua Franca*. In this article, Ryerson interviews various prominent American philosophers about their opinion of Rorty’s work. The article is an informal and illuminating look at the American philosophical community’s view of Rorty’s work and his response to these views.

<sup>7</sup> In the last chapter, I said that we should be suspicious of political philosophers who seek to justify political schemes using non-political foundations. Habermas and others who seek to construct idealist theories are doing just this with reason and discourse being their non-political foundation. Although I believe that it may be a fruitful task to construct an idealist theory, it is still too early to conclusively make any statement whether it can be fruitful or not. I will elaborate on this point later in the chapter. Nevertheless, despite my reservations about such a project, it is still worthwhile to take a look at this very interesting debate that is taking place in post-Philosophical political philosophy between ‘equating’ and ‘idealist’ theories.



say whether this task can be a fruitful one. Critics of Habermas have pointed out that “much still needs to be done” (Rockmore, 60) in the area of discourse ethics. Even those who follow Habermas claim it is too early to determine if it is possible to develop such a position. Kai Nielsen proposes the use of critical theory based in part on Habermas’s work and Rawls’s idea of reflective equilibrium, but is unsure whether such a theory can work. Nielsen claims we must expect to wait “four to five decades” (ADT, 149) to see if critical theory amounts to anything notable or practical.

Although we cannot determine whether it is possible to derive ideals from social practices, the project certainly seems to be worth pursuing. Based on what I have shown in the previous chapters, any critical theory needs to recognize a renewed role for the subject in developing socio-historical accounts of how the individual interacts with society. Before critical theorists attempt to derive ideals from social practices, their descriptions of social practices must first be accurate. As we have seen, we need to avoid inaccurate theories based on describing humans as judgmental dopes.

Although I propose that liberal pragmatists should use the pragmatic method of justification, philosophy can still show pragmatists interesting and useful ways to critically examine their notions of richer and better human activity and to resolve conflict in debates. Kai Nielsen has written of how philosophers can develop a critical theory that would allow people to develop a critical stance on their beliefs and those beliefs prevalent in their society. Nielsen’s critical theory is compatible with the pragmatic method of justification so long as we reject his claim that critical theory

reflects a singular rationality. I shall argue that we should adopt Nielsen's conception not as a singular rationality but, rather, as one particularly good tool among others for helping us deal with what Dewey called 'the problems of men'.

Nielsen's critical theory is based on the idea of wide reflective equilibrium, which he takes over from liberal theorist John Rawls. Reflective equilibrium is a test for normative claims, which can be applied both to individuals to make sure their personal moral beliefs cohere with one another, and socially, where two or more people are trying to get their moral beliefs to cohere. There are two types of reflective equilibrium: narrow and wide. Narrow reflective equilibrium aims at achieving a coherence (or equilibrium) between people's general moral principles and their moral intuitions. In contrast, wide reflective equilibrium considers a greater amount of differing moral theories as well as theories on epistemology and human nature. Nielsen uses wide reflective equilibrium in his critical theory. Following Rawls, he believes that we should rely on wide reflective equilibrium to test our claims about the basis of political criticism because an effective "conception of justice, should [be] more likely than its rivals to transform our perspective of the social world" (TJ, 512). Narrow reflective equilibrium is too conservative in the sense that it can not lead us to change many of our initial beliefs, as it only considers those moral intuitions and principles that we already hold. On the other hand, wide reflective equilibrium may force us to radically change our views because it considers a wide range of theories and principles only some of which we already hold.

Wide reflective equilibrium consists in finding a balance between considered particular moral convictions and general moral principles that participants hold, and “a cluster of background theories including most certainly moral theories and social theories, among them social theories that are quite definitely empirical theories about our social world and how we function in it,” including “an empirically based broadly scientific account of human nature” (ADT, 200). Reflective equilibrium is achieved when there are no discrepancies or inconsistencies left between the best of these theories and people’s considered convictions. It tests people’s moral convictions and principles on the basis of how well they cohere with the mass of these convictions and principles. Under reflective equilibrium, we reject moral convictions and principles in two ways: 1) if the mass of one’s particular moral convictions do not match the more general moral principles, we toss the principles; and, 2) if a few particular moral convictions disagree with most of one’s moral convictions and general principles, then the few particular moral convictions are to be rejected.<sup>8</sup>

According to Nielsen, critical theory should be holistic – it would be a “theory that sees, displays, and explains how things hang together in a comprehensive way – which is in an integrative way a descriptive-explanatory theory, an interpretive theory, and a normative critique” (ADT, 132). Critical theory would employ what we know of the social sciences, describing the way that people are. But since it considers the moral values and theories of the participants in reflective equilibrium, plus background moral principles and theories, it should also provide a critical stance from which participants

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<sup>8</sup> Nielsen discusses how we reject convictions and principles in wide reflective equilibrium in

could either reaffirm or modify their stock of beliefs. Since wide reflective equilibrium provides a standpoint to critically reflect on our beliefs, Nielsen claims critical theory has an “emancipatory thrust” (ADT, 148).

Nielsen gives an example of this emancipatory thrust:

Suppose that one of the possibilities is to organize work so that we have small, worker-controlled and owned firms often competing with each other, and another is to have large state-owned and hierarchically controlled factories run by the state (i.e., by a bureaucracy of state managers) but where the wages are high, the workplace clean and safe, the hours reasonable, and workers have minimal responsibility but considerable security. Which, where these are the only feasible alternatives, is the more desirable future to try to make our own? In trying to reach a conclusion we would try to trace out the probable life consequences of the various choices. We would need to make specific moral judgements about various work situations and relate them to the more general values of our society, such as the comparative value we would attach in conditions of moderate scarcity to security, autonomy, happiness, creativity and the like. Taking all these and other elements together, we would try (if we use wide reflective equilibrium) to get the most coherent package of considered judgements and policy recommendations that we would on reflection be prepared to accept. (ADT, 223)

Nielsen believes that the result of such efforts is an informed and rational consensus, provided these results are the product of undistorted communication among those deliberating where the ideals of discursive fairness and argumentational fairness are respected.

Nielsen does not just view critical theory as a good tool for questioning our beliefs, and developing plausible solutions for our political problems. He attaches a considerable amount of philosophical significance to it. For Nielsen, critical theory is a

criticism of criticisms; it allows us to speak of “rationality in the singular” (ADT, 137).

Nielsen, echoing Jürgen Habermas, claims that there can be

no genuine solutions to the problems of men if we do not have universal rational standards of criticism and validation. If we can find nothing like an Archimedean point in virtue of which we can speak of sound or better arguments *sans phrase* as distinct from just having persuasive arguments that convince a given audience at a given time, then we can only have a very context-dependent social criticism that, if we reflect on the conditions of its warrant, can hardly count a genuine criticism and is not clearly distinct from ideology. (ADT, 135)

Nielsen claims that by starting with a consensus based upon values that all participants share, we can work outward towards more contested claims using reflective equilibrium to achieve an ever-widening consensus. The result will be a rational consensus all participants should adhere to as it has been achieved by rational deliberation based on a shared method (reflective equilibrium) and shared values.

I believe there are good reasons to be suspicious of declaring wide reflective equilibrium a singular rationality. Nielsen thinks there can be no ‘genuine’ solutions to the problems of men without universal, rational standards of criticism and validation. This criterion, however, that Nielsen says a ‘genuine solution’ must fulfill is significantly different from the criterion people normally expect a genuine solution to fulfill. I think the solutions that we want to our political problems are those that solve our problems in a manner that our political community has deemed appropriate. For the liberal community, determinations of genuine solutions would be made by the liberal consensus affirmed by liberals each from their own substantive moral standpoints. This is the liberal society’s understanding of ‘genuine solution’. Trying to say that a genuine

solution must be verified as universally rational seems to be a philosophical concern divorced from what a political community really expects from a solution – whether it solves the problem at hand in an appropriate way. Nielsen, who aims to connect critical theory with the pragmatic tradition, should as a pragmatist justify why a genuine solution must also aim for universal rationality apart from just solving a problem at hand.

I am not sure why Nielsen defines ‘genuine solution’ in this manner. If we take him seriously, then we are unable to claim there has been genuine solutions to our problems in the past, since we do not have universal rational standards to confirm them as such. Without universal rational standards, we cannot claim that the abolition of slavery was a good thing or that Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal was a genuine solution to the problems of the Great Depression. I think we can confirm that these have been genuine solutions to the problems of men, even if we can only do so in an ethnocentric way. If Nielsen’s project can be fulfilled, then having an Archimedean point by which to judge the validity of our beliefs is a good tool. Nevertheless, if the project fails to be viable, I believe we can still determine what a genuine solution is. Nielsen’s ‘genuine solution’ offers us philosophical comfort that my ethnocentric definition cannot, but I believe it is a philosophical comfort we can do without.

It is probably best to view critical theory as a good tool for dealing with the problems of men. If the project can be carried out, it will consider the best of our philosophical and scientific theories along with our predominant beliefs and provide a relatively neutral standpoint by which to critically evaluate moral and political

alternatives. Whether this allows us to achieve something that we can call a rational consensus based on universal rational standards remains to be seen. Nielsen defines a rational consensus based on universal rational standards as the result of rational deliberation based on a shared method (wide reflective equilibrium) and using shared values as a starting point. Given Nielsen's definition, it is not impossible for critical theory to achieve its goal. His universal rational standard is not in need of chimerical criteria such as a god's eye view or an ahistorical truth. Under his definition, a universal rational standard is an attainable goal as it is merely a matter of people reaching a consensus using a certain method from a shared starting point. Nevertheless, we should remain suspicious of Nielsen's idea that critical theory will establish 'rationality in the singular'. I am not sure what is meant by 'rationality in the singular', but if it means that wide reflective equilibrium is the one true method for coping with our beliefs, then we should be suspicious. Echoing Rorty's arguments against scientistic conceptions of rationality, we should be wary of those methods of rationality that claim they are, in every case, the best method to fix belief. Only experience can tell us if critical theory is the best method for all occasions, and since Nielsen's critical theory is still an unfinished project, we have as yet no experience in using his method to fix belief. We cannot pass judgement on whether critical theory is the best method for all occasions until we see more work on the project.

I have shown what I think is an interesting debate amongst political philosophers of the social turn. Rorty's equating of descriptive theories with prescriptive ones is a controversial position, and the debate amongst philosophers of the social turn seems to

center around questions arising from this claim. The results of the debate on whether we can derive ideals from our social practices will determine, I think, the role of political philosophy in the social turn. If we can find ideals in social practices, then I believe political philosophy may have a constructive role in shaping the way we look at politics. Political philosophers may be able to tell us how we should think about politics, what a good solution to a problem looks like, and where we should be heading politically. On the other hand, if the search for ideals in social practices proves to be unfruitful, then political philosophy will have to confine itself to a more limited role. As I have shown with my criticism of Rorty, pragmatism has little to say about politics if we equate descriptive theories with prescriptive ones.



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