

## WHY RORTY?

A highly respected member of the philosophical establishment well into the 1970's, he has since turned revolutionary critic. After having taught for years at Princeton, one of the citadels of analytic philosophy, and after having edited an extraordinarily influential volume documenting "the linguistic turn" in analytic philosophy, he has managed to become its most effective native critic. At the same time, he has absorbed into his critique the main lines of Continental thought from Hegel to Heidegger to Habermas. Rorty is without equal in his mastery of the two philosophical cultures; he stands almost alone in having written penetrating essays on many of the major problems and figures of both. What is more, he has deployed this vast competence in a sustained effort to forge a new pragmatism that aims to be as broadly relevant as the original. Armed with a readable style and a witty irreverence, he promotes this cause not only in scholarly journals but, like James and Dewey before him, in mass periodicals as well.

Thomas McCarthy, "Private Irony & Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism"

Richard Rorty has carved out a unique and engaging position for himself in the contemporary philosophical world. Although his position has intrigued both Analytic and Continental philosophers,<sup>1</sup> generally Rorty has not been fully embraced by either tradition. From the analytic perspective, Rorty appears fuzzy-minded and irresponsible. For them, Rorty's talk of ending philosophy and moving beyond typical modern ways of thinking, especially in light of his renunciation of the Analytic tradition,<sup>2</sup> seems

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<sup>1</sup> Analytic philosophy is roughly the sort of philosophy that goes on in England and America, while continental philosophy is the sort of philosophy that goes on in Europe. The traditions, since the turn of the century, have been relatively isolated from each other. Whereas analytic philosophy has focused on the analysis of logic and language, continental philosophy has concerned itself broadly issues of culture, subjectivity, and rationality.

<sup>2</sup> At one time, Rorty was a central participant in the analytic tradition. With the publication of PMN, Rorty began an unexpected (though, at least in retrospect, foreseeable) attack on philosophy, including

threatening. From the continental perspective, Rorty appears dangerously American. For these thinkers, uncritically endorsing Enlightenment notions of liberty and democracy seems precariously close to endorsing the American military, McDonald's and Disneyland. They feel that Rorty hasn't fully come to terms with the failures of the Enlightenment, failures which suggest that modern culture, including the American flavor, is, at the bottom of it all, oppressive and wrongheaded. Although there are many important philosophers who escape this crude characterization, the above does get at the subtext that underlies Analytic and Continental reactions to Rorty. All-in-all, Rorty is important to both traditions, but an outsider to both.

Rorty is a thinker who has situated himself in the heart of important contemporary intellectual debates, while at the same time defying easy pigeonholing and, simultaneously, annoying the usual participants in those debates. Reworking the pragmatic tradition of philosophy, originally initiated by Peirce, James and Dewey, by adding insights from Analytic as well as Continental philosophy, Rorty has appropriated pragmatism as an alternative to traditional types of metaphysical philosophy. Rorty's alternative philosophical program relies on a canon that spans James and Wittgenstein as well as Nietzsche. This rethinking of philosophy has, in Rorty's estimation, general academic and cultural consequences. In accessible essays targeted at the general academy and lay public, Rorty has written about the role of the academic, the role of government as well as on issues concerning philosophy itself. Under the banner of his neo-pragmatism, he has attempted to redefine how we generally see ourselves and our

world.

Despite this *eclecticism* (the more hostile say *confusion*), Rorty has consistently elaborated a comprehensive, innovative, provocative - and, importantly, coherent - philosophical and cultural alternative, or, so I shall maintain. This work examines Rorty's philosophical and cultural position with an eye to explaining its nature as an alternative uniquely located in a rhetorical context structured by the historical legacy of what - for lack of a better description - I will call the "modern vocabulary." I suggest, to be more precise, that Rorty's work is most *usefully* seen as an emerging alternative *vocabulary* - a web of beliefs which structure how we see the world, what we expect from the world and the ways we act in the world<sup>3</sup> - which is competing against other alternative vocabularies, most notably those articulated by Derrida, and Foucault. These alternatives are competing within a philosophical and cultural terrain shaped by the failures and successes of the modern vocabulary which taught us to think of ourselves as rational individuals purposefully using knowledge (as opposed to mere opinion) to control the world.

What we are talking about here is a choice regarding how we should think of the world and our actions in it. Today there is a wide reaching dialogue concerning radical (in the sense of "root") choices regarding what sort of vocabulary we should use to describe ourselves and the world; what lens we should view our world through. Settling on one of these choices may have a general - if gradual - impact on our culture, insofar as

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the reception of his criticisms.

<sup>3</sup> This odd Rortyan use of 'vocabulary' is explained in chapter one.

these choices of vocabulary mold popular discourses, assumptions about the world, and actions performed in the world. (It could be argued that such a thing happened in the movement from Christian ways of thinking about the world to modern ways of thinking about the world.)

My hunch is that Rorty's neo-pragmatist vocabulary is the most viable option currently being considered - but that is the motivation for this project, *not* a conviction I will *defend* within the context of this project.<sup>4</sup> This project *will* help make this vocabulary more appealing by exploring what it is and suggesting improvements. Specifically, this project will attempt to: (1) outline and comment on the most important aspects of Rorty's philosophical and cultural vocabulary, (2) evaluate how successful Rorty's vocabulary is in the context of a rhetorical situation informed by the dissolution of modern problematics, and (3) recommend ways in which that vocabulary might be strengthened by responding to the needs that motivate the metaphysical tone of the modern vocabulary.

### **Situating Rorty's Thought: The Modern/Postmodern Debate**

'Postmodernism,' in philosophy circles as well as elsewhere in academia, is the sort of term that can be used as an intellectual "fighting word." Tossing it out there can induce intellectual hysteria; initiating a bitter debate between people who see themselves

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<sup>4</sup> Defending such a conviction would be a comparative task, demanding a close examination of all of the significant participants in the debate over the future of post-modernity. My work can be seen as laying the groundwork for such a move in that my work enables a better understanding of Rorty's relation to modernity through an understanding of the sufficiency of Rorty's vocabulary in light of the rhetorical pressures exerted by the modern legacy.

as defending the Truth against the barbarian hordes of literary critics and people who see themselves as exposing the oppressiveness of modernity. Indicative of the explosiveness of this debate is the Sokal Affair. In 1996, Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, wrote a parody of "postmodernist" studies of the natural sciences (specifically physics). The study was accepted and published by *Social Text* (Spring/summer 1996) as a serious undertaking on issues concerning reason, objectivity, realism and perspectivism. Sokal then "exposed" this parody in *Lingua Franca* (may/June 1996) igniting a violent debate between postmodern leftists and old "still-believe-in-the-Truth" leftists.

The debate revolved around the central question of whether truth - knowing things like they really are (as opposed to how we think they really are) - is a socially useful concept. Sokal thinks that truth is something we can get at and that getting at it aids us in enacting social and political reforms. By scientifically proving that blacks and whites have the same mental capacity, for instance, Sokal thinks that certain social prejudices that may inform public policy can scientifically be called into question (with the aid of - as Sokal puts it - some elementary ethics). Sokal argued, through his parody and later on in less ironic speech acts, that the left needs to "combat a currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social constructionist discourse . . . which is . . . inimical to the values and future of the left" (Sokal, 1996: 94). These discourses are so dangerous, thinks Sokal, because they deflate the claims of Truth offered by methods of inquiry like science by suggesting that truth claims are merely generally accepted social

conventions. Sokal's attack set off a brush fire of disputes and squabbles about what "postmodernism" entails, and how postmodern understandings of Truth relate to social activism.

The point of remarking on this controversy is not to engage in the discussion but to illustrate a larger trend. The Sokal affair isn't an isolated eddy in a relatively harmonious intellectual current. Rather, throughout culture, and intellectual culture in particular, these sorts of conflicts have been intensifying. As Richard Bernstein, a noted commentator on our current intellectual scene remarks, "during the past decade - in virtually every area of cultural life - there has been an explosion of discourses about 'modernity' and 'postmodernity'" (Bernstein, 1991: 199). These discourses themselves are indicative of "a prevailing sense that something is happening that radically calls into question entrenched ways of thinking, acting and feeling" (Bernstein, 1991: 199). There is a growing sense that traditional assumptions about philosophy, science and academic inquiry in general are fundamentally misconceived. The result is a dialogue (not always a virtuous one) between a growing academic avant-garde and a more conservative center. (In some cases, such as in certain literary criticism departments, the avant-garde has become the center.) Hence we have, for a while now, been in the midst of what is popularly called the modern/postmodern debate.

Unfortunately, this debate has at times been marked by a tendency towards aggressiveness, defensiveness, and confusion as the Sokal affair illustrates. The volatility of this debate has often made it hard to figure out what is going on. Because each side is so aware of "the enemy," there has been a propensity to overlook proposals

and arguments that are more centrist. High tempers tend to give the impression that everyone floating the postmodern banner or the modern banner agrees on important philosophical issues (if not every issue). This is far from the case. As Bernstein goes on to note “it is becoming increasingly evident that the terms ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ are not only vague, ambiguous and slippery, they have been used in conflicting and even contradictory ways” (Bernstein, 1991: 200). The philosophical platforms indicated by the word “postmodern” vary widely depending on who is using the term. Many thinkers, in practice, avoid the word “postmodern” (including the big shots like Derrida, Foucault and Rorty), partly because they feel the term obscures more than it illuminates.

So, what really is going on? Ultimately, I think, we’re too close to what’s going on to write histories yet (though that won’t prevent people, I’m sure), and any drawing of epochal thresholds will remain speculative (though perhaps, ironically, self creating). Despite this confusion, something definitely is happening. The discussion of postmodernism “expresses a consciousness of fundamental changes in culture and society that are no less real for all their obscurity and ambivalence” (Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, 1987: 67) as Frederick Jameson also once remarked. It’s not merely a case of some intellectual fad claiming to solve our academic dilemmas. From these postmodern discourses has emerged a sense that we’ve been asking the wrong questions, orienting our intellectual activities to the wrong horizon.

The modernity/postmodernity debate has been occasioned by a growing sense of *crisis*. Increasingly, modern assumptions about subjectivity, rationality, knowledge and ethics have been called into doubt by both experience and argument. Modernists

typically thought of subjects as autonomous, standards of rationality as trans-cultural, knowledge as a question of discovering the real contours of the world and ethics as dictated by an inherent human moral nature. People have begun to buy into arguments which suggest that subjects are culturally and historically determined, standards of rationality are culturally divergent, there is no way to know the “true” nature of the world, and morality, like rationality, is a social creation not a universal law.

Philosophers, natural scientists and social scientists have pushed the critical awareness of modernity’s assumptions to the point where those customary assumptions often seem unwarranted, vague and inconsistent. Attention has turned away from trying to prove these assumptions to deciding what to do if they are gotten rid of.

Although we have grown more suspicious towards them, these assumptions remain constraining. In spite of the apparent need for alternatives, it’s hard for us to think out of the box these assumptions define. More conservative thinkers remain attached to these assumptions as indicators of the right direction to pursue. These thinkers, the “pro-modern” side of the modern/postmodern debate, want to *reform* the modern vocabulary rather than reject it. The confusion of the modern/postmodern debate flows naturally from the differences in reaction to this crisis.

One way of usefully characterizing this modernity/postmodernity debate is, I think, to describe it as the erosion of legitimacy for central questions in the modern vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> This *could be* an indicator of the - *possible* - closing of the modern epoch.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This sort of way of looking at intellectual events, and specifically what is meant by “questions,” will be explained in chapter one.

<sup>6</sup> This sort of way of looking at postmodernity, and specifically what is meant by “function-positions” and “questions” will be explained in chapter one. The places where I reference Blumenberg’s work in this

Even if this dissolution does not indicate the death of the modern epoch, it does indicate a significant philosophical and cultural *turn* - not merely some bright sexy answers to some old questions, but a fundamental redirection of intellectual interest. In this regard, “postmodernism” would refer, in part, to the widespread tendency to criticize central questions commonly asked in modern philosophy (and at times to pose substitute questions). These “bad” questions include: “How can we know the one true timeless nature of reality?”, “What separates rhetoric from truth?”, “What sorts of timeless and universal principles justify our ethical and political values?”, “Why are our eurocentric values better than primitive values?”, and “How can we technologically remake the world into a more human-friendly place?” The list goes on.

From this perspective, the modernity/postmodernity debate should not be thought of as one prefabricated set of cultural assumptions dramatically replacing another set, but as a growing critical discussion of central modern questions. These modern questions assume the objects of their interest, thereby constraining how we think about the world. The importance of the debate is that it indicates a fundamental rethinking of our intellectual direction, which, whether it culminates in reform or the end of an epoch, will significantly reorient our intellectual pursuits. This debate won’t be settled conclusively and won’t be resolved immediately. Rather, it will be an ongoing process that will defy historical beginning points and historical end-points.

While postmodernists don’t usually have problems with each and every question

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introduction to my thesis will be explained and expounded upon in the first chapter - and further illustrated in subsequent chapters.

in the modern vocabulary, they do have a general sense that we need a new intellectual vocabulary with which to orient our culture. While the critical thrust of postmodern analyses is generally shared, the particular upshots of those critical attacks often vary between philosophers. The light that enters unified through the prism diverges when it exits. The views of Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault<sup>7</sup> mark diverging reactions to an commonly experienced dissolution of trust in the Enlightenment project, including the scientific, moral and political facets of that project. Postmodernists overall, then, cannot be neatly defined by their adherence to a certain constructive platform. Rather, what unifies them is a common critical direction. They may dispute which questions are out-of-date, they may be unhappy with these questions for different reasons, and they may disagree about what other sorts of questions are interesting ones, but they do roughly agree that a mass of these modern questions has lost its allure. So, characteristic of our current position is a conflict between intellectuals who think these sorts of questions obsolete and those who still think them relevant and exciting.

One thinker who still finds these modern questions alluring is Jurgen Habermas. While acknowledging the failures of the modern epoch's Enlightenment project, Habermas has consistently and at great length championed the Enlightenment project as viable and valuable. Habermas "thinks it essential to a democratic society that its self-image embody the universalism, and some form of the rationalism, of the Enlightenment. He thinks of his account of 'communicative reason' as a way of updating rationalism"

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<sup>7</sup> The following concentrates on the later postmodern philosophies of Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault. Under my definition of postmodernism, we could include Nietzsche, Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein, as well as less influential philosophers. I concentrate on these later postmodern thinkers, because the

(CIS, 1989: 67). Habermas still maintains the modern assumption “that the task of philosophy is to supply some social glue which will replace religious belief” and the modern belief that “Enlightenment talk of ‘universality’ and ‘rationality’” is “the best candidate for this glue” (CIS, 1989: 83).<sup>8</sup> Of course, the Enlightenment project has definitely been transformed under Habermas’ care. In Habermas’ version, there is a weakening of what Rorty would call the modern vocabularies’ emphasis on representationalism - the desire to answer the question: “how is knowledge a product of an accurate picturing of the world?” Like Kant, Habermas is more concerned with retaining a notion of universal ethics that will undergird the superiority of a liberal society, and also furnish a benchmark with which to criticize failures in the liberal, democratic ideal. Nevertheless, Habermas is a distinguished modern sort of philosopher.

While Habermas has significantly revised the modern enlightenment project, he continues the legacy of modern thinkers in that he has an urge for universal validity: an urge to answer the question: “why are democratic values and ideals timelessly and universally valid?” Habermas trusts that the political democratic, liberal vocabulary we western societies hold can be supported by an Enlightenment philosophical foundation which relies on an account of universal rationality. In democratic practices, institutions and ideals, Habermas locates the closest real-world approximation to what he believes are universally established ethical norms. If we agree that what unites an epoch is the agreement on fundamental questions, and not necessarily the answers to those questions,

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debate has tended to concentrated on these live participants, with discussions of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein as background.

<sup>8</sup> Habermas’ relation to Rorty is developed throughout this thesis, with specific emphasis placed on this issue in chapters two, five and six.

then Habermas is distinctively modern, in that he is answering distinctively modern questions.

As I've briefly remarked above, the Enlightenment project as a whole, including Habermas' revision of it, has come under increasing attack from some avenues of philosophical thought. These postmodern philosophies are roughly united in their suspicion of modern notions of rationality, accounts of individualist and autonomous subjects, ahistorical and universal accounts of morality, and correspondence accounts of knowledge (Bayes, Bohman and McCarthy, 1987: 68). These sorts of philosophies are typically negative forms of thinking. They are critical, focusing on unearthing the internal contradictions, shortsightedness or dangers of the Enlightenment project. Most postmodern philosophers, acutely sensitive to the problems, limitations and dangers of the Enlightenment project, have tended to concentrate on exposing these flaws rather than offering constructive alternatives. Attacking one by one the supporting pillars of modern philosophy, they have emphasized that which was excluded. In contrast to emphasizing the universal, they have emphasized difference; in contrast to reason, they have emphasized the subconscious and the insane; in contrast to rationality, they have stressed rhetoric, etc. (McCarthy, 1991: 3).<sup>9</sup> These philosophers don't want to provide a unified and totalizing philosophical vision or project, because they are suspicious of unity and totality. They think broad systematic philosophy naturally excludes marginalized groups.

The constructive aspects of these postmodern avenues of thought tend to be

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<sup>9</sup> McCarthy criticizes this trend in postmodern philosophy as a "negative metaphysics." He thinks this sort of philosophy trades the exaggerations, mistakes and shortsightedness of modernity for the exaggerations, mistakes and shortsightedness of postmodernity. In McCarthy's opinion, philosophy

parasitic on the larger Enlightenment project. Rather than trying to provide a new “metanarrative “ for an epoch post modernity, these thinkers have concentrated on supplements to the modern story. For the most part, they have attempted to develop particular “counter-projects” which – from the perspective of the margins – will expose the local, contingent and particular shortcomings of the Enlightenment. While they make general critical observations about the problems of the Enlightenment, their constructive goals are typically limited to exposing these problems in particular circumstances. Derrida’s deconstructionist projects, attempts to show how the logic of metaphysics is conceptually dependent on and supplemented by an excluded other, are advocated in the context of the continued existence of western metaphysics. They aren’t meant to “end” metaphysics but to supplement it. Likewise, Foucault’s genealogical projects, attempts to catalogue the systems of power and knowledge which create subjects and notions of rationality, and control the practices of those subjects, are meant to supplement the one-sided view of rationality and subjectivity characteristic of modernity. In his essay “What is Postmodernism?” Lyotard follows this trend<sup>10</sup> when he commands us all to “wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate differences and save the honor of the name” (Lyotard, 1984: 87). Lyotard’s marginal project is to frustrate, by disobeying them, the usual politics of language games, thereby making room for differences and alternative language games.

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should follow a Habermasian program as a path between these extremes. See Thomas McCarthy, Ideals and Illusions, especially the introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Lyotard is an exception to this trend in some ways, because he also focused on the need to construct “new ideals of justice and truth beyond the false ideals of emancipation and consensus” (Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, 1987: 71). Despite this, there are good reasons to think this trend dominant in postmodern philosophy.

These postmodern projects are all advocated in the larger context of a dominant modernity. Rather than seeking to progress to a vocabulary that escapes these problems, postmodern thinkers want to internally subvert modernity by activating and emphasizing its contradictions. They are suspicious of the notion of “revolution,” of our ability to romantically redirect our intellectual direction. In contrast to this Marxist-like revolutionary program, they are interested in subverting modernity from the inside. As Lyotard has eloquently articulated, the postmodern style of philosophizing does not construct a “metanarrative,” a larger historical story that justifies philosophical and cultural commitments. These sorts of “metanarratives,” appeals to the natural march of freedom, or scientific progress, or universal human rights, are modern devices which, according to postmodern writers, tend to exclude alternative stories. In contrast, postmodern projects are meant to expose the internal contradictions of modernity, and thereby introduce multiple voices of conscious into the limited discourse of modernity. While this will affect modernity, will provide a new shape to modern sensibilities, it will not *per se* “end” modernity.

Whereas modern philosophers typically claimed that they were radically departing from Christian philosophy, postmodern philosophers typically don’t want to claim a rupture between their positions and modern positions.<sup>11</sup> Postmodern philosophy, with its emphasis on blurring boundaries, typically doesn’t claim to offer a break with the past. The notion that we could, in one fell swoop, split ourselves off from our past and

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<sup>11</sup> This suspicion towards radical disjuncture is another reason why postmodern philosophers are reluctant to call themselves “postmodern.” The title “postmodern” seems to suggest such a radical caesura with modernity. This sort of conception is more appropriate to modernity’s self-conception.

autonomously construct a new progressive future are, in hindsight, distinctively modern notions. Part of the postmodern critique of modern philosophy is an attack on these notions of revolution, progress and autonomy. Postmodern philosophers, then, are in general more interested in offering local antidotes to global myths. They don't want to claim to be offering a new grand project, but to be offering projects for the margins.<sup>12</sup>

Under this characterization of postmodernity, Rorty fits uneasily. Rorty shares most of the negative lines of thought voiced in the postmodern tradition, but he departs from the postmodern party-line by emphasizing the project of developing a new comprehensive vocabulary to replace the classical modern vocabulary. He thinks of himself as offering a new grand narrative for contemporary culture, a new systematic vocabulary with which to describe our hopes and fears. While he acknowledges that this revision in self image will be gradual, piecemeal and long-term, he still emphasizes a revision of our consciousness, not a supplement to it. Although he shares the postmodern suspicion of abrupt radical disjunctures, he still emphasizes a general and total rethinking of our self-image. Continuous with a romantic tradition that unifies him more with Nietzsche and Heidegger than with Foucault and Derrida, Rorty thinks we can develop a new vocabulary for thinking about our lives and projects. But like other postmodernists, Rorty admits this vocabulary will be a gradual development.

This postmodern "metanarrative" is, however, a very different sort of story than the narrative provided by the Enlightenment thinkers. Whereas modernists typically

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<sup>12</sup> As "postmodernity" has been popularized, this has often been misunderstood. There is a tendency for these sorts of philosophy, as they become more mediated from their sources, to seem like they provide a radically new "geist" spirit. This "revolutionary" view of postmodernism is not a faithful view of the work of Lyotard, Derrida or Foucault.

thought of their story not as a “story” but as the “Truth,” Rorty is ostensibly providing a narrative, a “story,” for a post-metaphysical culture. Whereas the modern narrative was told in an ahistorical, universal voice, Rorty’s is told in a historical and local voice. His vocabulary gives us a historical sensibility that makes post-metaphysics<sup>13</sup> reasonable in the context of our current historical juncture. This narrative is “local” rather than “universal.” It is one option among many, but it defines an intellectual direction that has a general, unified and comprehensive orientation. Rorty wants his narrative to serve a binding role among a particular population, the western-secular-bourgeoisie. He wants it to unify this population in a common intellectual sensibility that, while permitting and encouraging differences in thinking, sets up commonly held assumptions that delimit those differences.

In contrast to the projects of Derrida and Foucault, this vocabulary is not parasitic, is not to be done at the margins. Like Enlightenment philosophers, Rorty provides a total, unified narrative. The “totality” and “unification” of this narrative might strike thinkers like Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault as dangerous qualities, but Rorty is also advocating a “thin” narrative. Unlike Modern metanarratives, Rorty’s is less substantial, less defining. It is “thin” in the sense that it is designed to accommodate differences in a way sympathetic to the hopes of Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault. The point is to offer a larger common framework that will support a celebration of local differences. Nevertheless, the narrative does have borders. It does define an outside in relation to an interior. Rorty’s vocabulary is hostile to Platonists, to reductionists, to dictators, to skin-

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<sup>13</sup> What a “metaphysician” and a “post-metaphysician” are will be cleared up in the second and third

heads, to the KKK. His embrace of difference is limited to those who can be incorporated within a post-metaphysical liberal and democratic society. Rorty's narrative defines the limits of different viewpoints, but keeps the interior of those limits open to difference. He is not quite the anarchist that Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida sometimes seem to be.

The second key difference between Rorty and other postmodernists is his attitude towards the political intuitions of modernity. While Rorty agrees with the critical analyses of the Enlightenment project, he does not, as other postmodern philosophers sometimes do, read those analyses as providing insights about politics. In contrast to other postmodern philosophers, Rorty is actively interested in salvaging the political and moral vision of the Enlightenment project. Whereas Foucault generally had a negative outlook on the political project of the Enlightenment, and Derrida has an ambivalent attitude,<sup>14</sup> Rorty is optimistic and positive. Emphasizing the value of the moral and political goals of the Enlightenment, Rorty is proud to be a liberal democrat. Exhibiting a characteristically American optimism towards these goals, shared by thinkers in the pragmatic tradition like James and Dewey, Rorty wants to find a new way of packaging these goals.<sup>15</sup>

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chapters.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida is ambivalent towards liberal democratic politics. While he has criticized simplistic notions of liberty, consensus politics and the common good, he has endorsed the overall political message of the Enlightenment. See The Other Heading for his views on European politics. Despite his claims that deconstruction has wide ranging political importance, many commentators have felt that Derrida's philosophy is practically irrelevant to politics. See McCarthy, Ideals and Illusions pg. 97-123 as well as Bernstein, The New Constellation.

<sup>15</sup> Though I will not cover this ground in this study, Rorty's endorsement of liberal democracies seems at times a bit naïve. I agree with his commitment to these values, but I tend to think he underemphasizes the difficulties, revealed by contemporary social theory and cultural studies, in practically realizing these

His vocabulary is an alternate way of thinking about the political and moral intuitions, an alternative which avoids a reliance on the metaphysical assumptions of the Enlightenment project. Rorty wants to push away the ladders of the modern philosophical vocabulary – foundationalism, representationalism, essentialism, and universalism - that characterized early modernism and supported the development of the culture and institutions we now enjoy while retaining the actual culture and institutions those ladders helped us get to. Whereas postmodern philosophers typically read the faults of Enlightenment assumptions about rationality, truth and ethics as spelling an end to an endorsement of the Enlightenment’s political and ethical ideals, Rorty argues that those ideals can be decoupled from these notions. His vocabulary is a systematic effort to show how we can do this.

Rorty, then, is provocatively in-between the modern/postmodern debate. While he shares the postmodern antagonism to most of the philosophical questions that defined the modern epoch, he wants to salvage the political and ethical intuitions of that epoch in a new systematic vocabulary. He continues the modern project, in his desire to systematically reform the modern vocabulary, but puts a postmodern twist on that project by jettisoning the philosophical foundations that were supposed to support that project. Predictably, Rorty’s stance upsets both sides of the debate. Modernists like Habermas see him as trying to get to the right place, but using the wrong tools. Moreover, these writers think that Rorty is danger in the same way that other postmodernists are dangerous; he undermines our notions of Truth and universal validity that are central to

the Enlightenment project. Postmodernists like Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida see him as exhibiting a failure of nerve, a failure to really challenge oppressive forms of government and culture, a failure to apply the lessons learned from the fiasco of Enlightenment philosophy to our political ideals and institutions.

Rorty's midway position is reflected in his ambivalence to the "postmodern" label. While in an early essay<sup>16</sup> he self-consciously appropriated the term "postmodernism" from Lyotard, he has since rejected the term. There are many reasons why Rorty avoids this term, but one important one is that he still endorses the role of human self-assertion in human affairs. His tendency to maintain the "modern" label is, I think, an indication of his belief (shared with Blumenberg) that the core aspect of modernity is defined by the question: how can humans assert themselves (versus the Christian submission to God)? As long as Rorty is still talking about the ways in which humans can assert themselves, cope with their world, redefine themselves, I think he feels it appropriate to call himself a "modern." Moreover, Rorty even sees himself as the most *consistent* sort of modern, because he wants to get rid of all forms of metaphysics. He wants to give up any metaphysical comfort and rest our projects *shakily* in our human, contingent hands. He hopes that someday we will "no longer [be] able to see any use for the notion that finite, moral, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings" (CIS, 45). From this perspective, his project is another endeavor (in a

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discussions of these limitations of Rorty's thinking.

<sup>16</sup> See "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism" in ORT, pg. 197-202.

long series of endeavors) to strip the Christian residue from the modern core of self-assertion.

Despite the fact that he still calls himself a “modernist,” Rorty is typically viewed by more conservative elements of the philosophical establishment as a postmodernist. For modernists, Rorty appears more familiar than other postmodern philosophers, but is still caught up in challenging assumptions they hold dear. These sorts of critic see Rorty as an odd hybrid of postmodernism and liberalism. They worry that Rorty’s philosophical moves will plunge the Enlightenment project into the difficulties of relativism, social constructivism and irrationalism that other postmodern philosophies are often subject to. Despite the shared political and ethical vision, these modern philosophers still see Rorty’s position as fundamentally postmodernist and therefore unsatisfactory.

In spite of this confusion, for my purposes I will treat Rorty as a postmodernist. What I am interested in looking at in this study is how Rorty tries to persuade us to adopt his new vocabulary in light of the rhetorical position he finds himself in. Because he wants us to stop asking central philosophical questions that undergird the modern project, he must perform the same sorts of rhetorical tasks that other postmodernists have to perform. Whereas modernists are relatively content with the defining questions of the modern epoch, postmodernists are not – they are interested in getting us to move beyond those questions. In this respect, Rorty is a postmodernist. Whether he is reforming the modern vocabulary or initiating a new epoch, Rorty is still confronted by the rhetorical tasks that face postmodernists in general. In this respect, Rorty is still constrained by the

rhetorical issues (examined in chapter one) that shape an epochal transition. By wanting to reject fundamental questions that defined modernity, Rorty has to perform an epochal transition, a radical change in vocabulary. Providing an insightful analysis of what is going on in this radical shift is the nuclear interest in this study.

### **An Interpretative Overview and Some Signposts**

This work is concerned with how Rorty advocates his new vocabulary in the context of the modern/postmodern debate and the legacy of the modern vocabulary. This study is organized around two central topics. First, I want to explore how we should look at persuasion if we give up the standard assumptions about rationality that defined the modern vocabulary. Rorty gives up, in situation of disagreements between rival vocabularies, strong notions of rationality that could decide such disagreements. In this study, I look at how Rorty accounts for the possibility of cross-vocabulary persuasion, critique that account and then develop an alternative, but sympathetic, account. Second, once we've straightened out how to account for cross-vocabulary persuasion, I want to look at whether Rorty's vocabulary is persuasive from this standpoint. Since Rorty is trying to persuade individuals to cross over from the modern vocabulary to his neo-pragmatist vocabulary, we can examine Rorty's position as an attempt at cross-vocabulary persuasion. In broad terms, I want to look at whether Rorty's vocabulary, in terms of its major components, is compelling for modernists.

In order to evaluate these issues, I have focused on what I consider to be Rorty's mature philosophy at this point. Rorty's position has continually been evolving. His

intellectual journey from Analytic philosophy to cultural kibitzer suggests that there is no set of historically transcending philosophical beliefs that define his views. There are many “Rortys,” then, that one could interpret. Contributing to this proliferation of voices is the fact that Rorty’s work, besides CIS and PMN, has mostly been in the form of essays published at various points over the years. Part of my project here will be to gather these disparate essays together in order to broadly outline Rorty’s neo-pragmatist vocabulary. My interpretative emphasis is on the most recent works: CIS, EHO, ORT as well as the essays published since these works. CP is perhaps the beginning of what I consider the mature Rorty, but even in those essays, Rorty’s position is relatively immature and open to refutation. I look at PMN as background to these projects, but I think that Rorty has clearly updated, especially in regard to alternatives to metaphysics and representationalism,<sup>17</sup> his philosophical position since PMN. Rorty’s writings previous to PMN are ignored as largely irrelevant to my interests.

My interpretative tone is critical if sympathetic. I want to develop a framework with which to look at cases of cross-vocabulary persuasion and then I want to systematically evaluate Rorty’s work according to that framework. I will take Rorty’s vocabulary and put it into a certain context by explaining how it related to central questions of the modern vocabulary. My hope is that this contextualization will illustrate the viability of the neo-pragmatic turn and the desirability of that turn. In this move, I echo Rorty’s desire to recontextualize rather than argue<sup>18</sup> – I want to prove my point by

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<sup>17</sup> For example, in PMN there is an overt stress placed on “hermeneutics” which disappears in the later works. While there is a prevailing tone which overlaps all his works from PMN and on, there have been many alterations in the details and the sort of vocabulary Rorty is suggesting.

<sup>18</sup> This distinction between recontextualizing and arguing will be explained in chapter one.

comparing the neo-pragmatist vocabulary to the modern vocabulary rather than by trying to argue point-by-point that the neo-pragmatist vocabulary is superior. In this light, it should be kept in mind that a certain imagination and willingness to suspend one's disbelief is the most profitable way to read this project (as it is to read Rorty's own writing).

The analytic framework that informs this investigation is highly influenced by the work of Hans Blumenberg, a recent German philosopher most noted for his analysis of the transition from Christian philosophy to modern philosophy. Influenced by Blumenberg, I assert that Rorty's work can best be thought of as an attempt to get rid of certain questions that have animated modern philosophy – most importantly three types of questions: (1) questions regarding how we can connect to a metaphysical world; (2) questions regarding how we can discover knowledge, where knowledge is thought of in terms of accurate representation; and (3) questions regarding how morality and politics are connected to an intrinsic moral nature common to all human beings. It has typically been held that answering these questions is necessary in order to avoid skepticism, relativism, idealism, irrationalism as well as nihilism.

Using Blumenberg's analysis, I propose a calculus with which to examine Rorty's work as an attempt at cross-vocabulary persuasion. I claim that Rorty has to address the functional considerations that motivated modernists to ask these questions, if he is going to compellingly advocate his neo-pragmatist vocabulary. I then examine whether Rorty does address these issues, suggesting that for the most part he is successful at these tasks. In cases where I find Rorty wanting, I propose revisions on his vocabulary designed to

address these functional issues.

The **first chapter** sets up this Blumenbergian analytic framework. I look at Rorty's analysis of modern rationalist models of argumentation paying special attention to Rorty's concept of recontextualization. I then move on to Rorty's story about how recontextualizations work in the context of intellectual history. From this background, I propose a modification on Rorty's understanding of how recontextualization works along the lines of Blumenberg's analysis of epoch transitions. Through this discussion, I develop a critical framework with which to evaluate Rorty's neo-pragmatist vocabulary – a framework that informs the topics of subsequent chapters.

The **second chapter** examines Rorty's understanding of what the modern vocabulary entails. Following my Blumenbergian framework, I suggest that Rorty's presentation of the modern vocabulary illustrates that that vocabulary has been concerned with a metaphysical question – “how can we connect to a metaphysical world?” This larger metaphysical question has shaped the two primary questions of modern philosophy: the representationalist question – “how can we discover knowledge, where knowledge is thought of in terms of beliefs picturing reality?” and the moral universalist question: “how can we derive moral obligation from our own intrinsic ethical natures?” While exploring these defining questions, I try to outline the functional interests that motivate modernists to ask these questions in the first place. In addition, I examine the question of whether there are still contemporary tendencies to find these questions interesting.

The **third chapter** develops a view of Rorty's philosophical project. Relying on

the observations made in chapter two, I suggest that Rorty rejects the metaphysical question and, likewise, the metaphysical aspects of the representationalist and universalist questions. Relating Rorty's claims to the functional considerations that motivated the modernist questions, I look at why Rorty thinks these questions useless. I then consider why Rorty thinks the questions housed in his neo-pragmatist vocabulary are more useful.

The **fourth chapter** gets at underlying issues related to metaphysics. One of the central criticisms Rorty has endured, in regards to both his ethical and epistemological positions, is the charge of relativism. I look at how this charge relates to the fears that motivate the metaphysician. Examining these issues gives us a stronger sense of why the questions asked by modernists seem so attractive to them. Observing that Rorty fails to adequately address these fears, I construct a Rortyan response to these fears built from already existing elements of his vocabulary.

In the **epitext**, I sum up these observations about Rorty's vocabulary and put them in the context of a perspective on the history of modern philosophy. In the context of a general overview of Rorty's vocabulary, I focus on the role of persuasion in a post-metaphysical, some might say "postmodern," world. I comment on the importance the Blumenbergian account I developed in the first chapter possesses for this world. Further, I claim that Rorty should modify his own account of cross-vocabulary persuasion along the lines of this Blumenbergian account.