

## HOW TO TAKE RORTY'S TALK

Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things.

Richard Rorty,  
Contingency, Irony and Solidarity

What mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization, at least (so far) in all but a few recognizable and specific instances, should be described not as the *transposition* of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated. I have represented this too one-sidedly as being due to a lack of critical intensity and have not referred often enough to the importance, noted elsewhere, of 'residual needs.'

Hans Blumenberg,  
The Legitimacy of the Modern Age

One of the most potent but disconcerting facets of Rorty's philosophical position is his eagerness to reexamine and repudiate received models and assumptions about how we argue. Argumentation, the act of supporting a claim by offering persuasive reasons and rebuttals to criticisms, has been an inescapable, but often unexamined, method in philosophical thinking. Rorty's questioning of why we consider a compelling argument "compelling" requires that we rethink our normal habits of reading when interpreting

Rorty. Rorty suggests a meta-level shift in how we conceive of persuasion. This means that if we go into our reading of Rorty assuming these typical paradigms of argumentation, we will misinterpret important aspects of his stance.

Here's one story about argumentation, which we might call the *rationalist story*. When we argue, we are advocating and defending claims about the world, either concerning what the world is like (empirical), or how the world should be (normative). *Empirical arguments* are evaluated on the basis of whether their supporters can prove their case according to universal standards of evidence and logic (i.e., using observations about the world and the ability to make proper inferences and deductions from those observations). These arguments appeal to some version of *representationalism*, the view that we have knowledge when our beliefs about the world accurately picture the world as it really is. Theoretically, any individual anywhere at anytime should be able to hear these arguments and come to know the truth, unless that individual is perverted by prejudice or irrationality. So, according to this account of persuasion, when people argue over whether global warming is really occurring, they are trying to marshal the greatest body of information and draw the right logical conclusions from that evidence in order to establish their case.

Likewise, *normative arguments* try to establish the one right way the world *should* be, or the one right way we *should* act in the world, by appealing to universal moral and rational sensibilities that we supposedly all possess. Advocates of this account

accept some version of *moral universalism*: the view that everyone possesses the same universal moral/rational faculty. By appealing to these common ethical sensibilities, we can decide what we (and every other rational being) should do in the world, what type of world we want to produce. Simultaneously, we can decide what actions are reproachable, what world should not be allowed to come into being. People who do not come to the proper judgments are necessarily inattentive, irrational (whether because of the passions or mental insanity) or morally bankrupt. In this story, when determining whether murder is immoral, we are appealing to our moral and rational faculties in order to tell us if this action is an acceptable one, for anyone at any time.

Stephen Toulmin, an intellectual historian/philosopher, claims that this sort of attraction to the concept of rationality has an extended philosophical history. The traditional philosophical hope was to achieve "both an impartial forum or court of reasons, in which all men would have the same intellectual standing, and also impartial methods and procedures, whose even-handedness they could all alike acknowledge" (Toulmin, 1972: 43). This court of reasons was necessary in order to avoid the sort of relativist dilemma where each participant could potentially cite different and incompatible methods and procedures. Following the paradigm of mathematics, the hope was to develop an authoritative, historically invariant system of methods with which to settle controversies over beliefs (Toulmin, 1972: 44-5). Classically, it has been held that

this system must necessarily be based on *a priori*<sup>1</sup> knowledge, which is why Kant insisted that "the principles of human understanding could not just be empirical generalizations about the actual thinking habits of all human beings, past and present." An effective system of reason and judgment must be able to "impose itself on all rational thinkers, independently of their cultural and historical differences" (Toulmin, 1972: 45).

*Rorty flatly rejects this rationalist story.* He suggests that by striving to globally apply this ideal, rationalists have hypostatized and reified the characteristics of a specific sort of persuasion that merely occurs in some local, specific circumstances. Rorty thinks that only within certain social domains - domains in which the guidelines of argument evaluation are generally already agreed upon - can we appropriately apply this sort of model. For Rorty, there is no access to the true nature of the world or the shared essential moral self. Without this access, there is no way to explain why varying social groups would have a common, impartial framework with which to resolve disputes. Since in most philosophically and culturally interesting cases there is no way to use accepted understandings of the world or morality to adjudicate an argument, Rorty dismisses the general applicability of this rationalist paradigm. The upshot of this is that our understandings about which arguments are rationally persuasive are, in Rorty's view, manufactured understandings that diverge across communities, languages and vocabularies.

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<sup>1</sup> *A priori* arguments work from necessary givens to rational conclusions, rather than deductions or inferences from empirical observations.

This rejection of typical conceptions of argumentation introduces obstacles for Rorty though. How can he criticize this framework (and other typical positions of the modern vocabulary) without immersing himself in this paradigm? How are we supposed to read his criticisms if not along the lines of impartial true claims about the world? These difficulties have plagued past critics of enlightenment rationalism.<sup>2</sup> Such critics seem to contradict themselves when performing their critiques; they say things like "there is no truth that is rationally approachable" - thus seeming to paradoxically appeal to the rational superiority (and representational accuracy) of their criticisms. The problem is that these critics have failed to plant their assertions in a competing model of argumentation.

Conscious of these vicious circularities, or what Habermas calls "performative contradictions," that have hounded philosophical critiques of the Enlightenment, Rorty has labored to develop a philosophical position which permits him to uncompromisingly voice his criticisms of the received modern vocabulary.

### **"Normal Arguments" *versus* "Revolutionary Recontextualizations"**

Inspired by Thomas Kuhn,<sup>3</sup> Rorty renounces rationalist presumptions about

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche is often criticized for this. Additionally, Habermas contends that philosophers who draw on Nietzsche, like Foucault and Derrida, commit similar fallacies. See DSP page 16 as well as Habermas' Philosophical Discourses on Modernity.

<sup>3</sup> Kuhn's work has had a great influence on Rorty's project in general, but his influence in regards to Rorty's analysis of persuasion is almost transparent. Rorty's innovation on Kuhn's work is to extend the distinction between normal and revolutionary modes to all forms of persuasion in general rather than just scientific cases. See Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.

arguments (based on representationalist and moral universalist theories) in favor of conceptualizing persuasion in terms of a dichotomy between two different modes of persuasion: "normal arguments" and "revolutionary recontextualizations."

*Normal arguments* are the class of persuasive acts that occur when most of the participants in the controversy already share a larger vocabulary or language game which structures how they think about the world and how they think about arguments. Within the context of a greater body of shared methods for justifying beliefs and shared beliefs about the world, controversies are generally resolvable. *Only* with key presuppositions agreed upon can conversational participants apply common criteria to a controversial claim and come to a more-or-less unanimous conclusion. For Rorty, this sort of persuasion takes place only within the boundaries of historically contingent communities that participate in a common tradition or vocabulary.

This site-specific model, Rorty contends, is the sort of model that rationalists attempted to apply comprehensively. According to Rorty, to extend this localized paradigm of persuasion across distinct sorts of intellectual communities is both pointless and ineffectual. Rorty thinks we should acknowledge the historical and cultural boundaries that frustrate the general extension of this model, which is why he recommends that we delimit the use of the distinction between rational<sup>4</sup> and irrational forms of persuasion "to the interior of a language game, rather than [trying] to apply it to

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<sup>4</sup> Rorty suggests, however, that "rational" can be the name of a liberal moral virtue. This virtue has something to do with tolerance, openness to discussion and responsiveness to criticism. See DSP page 85.

interesting and important shifts in linguistic behavior" (CIS, 1991: 47).

In situations where the rules of argumentation are *themselves* controversial, there is little prospect for such straightforward resolution of disputes. These are situations that call for "revolutionary recontextualizations" - they turn on differences between vocabularies, between languages. In these situations, the use of the rational/irrational distinction is unhelpful. "Those who speak the old language and have no wish to change, those who regard it as a hallmark of rationality or morality to speak just that language, will regard as altogether irrational the appeal of the new metaphors,"<sup>5</sup> while "conversely, from the point of view of those who are trying to use the new language, to literalize the new metaphors, those who cling to the old language will be viewed as irrational" (CIS, 1991: 48). Such situations resemble what Kuhn called "extraordinary science." They are competitions between different paradigms or, as Rorty puts it, vocabularies.

Rorty's concept of *vocabulary* here is akin to Analytic philosophy's concept of "conceptual scheme," and the later Wittgenstein's concept of "language-game" as well as Kuhn's concept of "paradigm." Rorty's use of 'vocabulary' is metaphorical. He is not simply thinking of the literal sense of vocabulary, the body of words one employs to communicate with. Rather the term has been adapted to illustrate something grander - the set of communally shared habits, speech, beliefs and expectations that define how participants in a community see the world, what they anticipate from the world and how they live in the world. A vocabulary is the set of words and ideas that give life, one's

relation to the world, and the world itself sense; a vocabulary is a "way of describing, evaluating, judging, and even acting" (Bernstein, 1992: 262). Vocabularies are like language-games, as Wittgenstein used the term, in that they are connected to forms of life.

In cases that call for revolutionary recontextualizations, there is no sufficiently common overlap between vocabularies to generate agreement, or full persuasion. In such situations, there is no way to "appeal to neutral premises, nor widely shared beliefs" (ITGE, 1995: 300). Adherents of different vocabularies possess contrary understandings of what is the case and what would be sufficient to substantiate a certain belief as warranted. They hold fundamentally opposed ways of describing, evaluating, judging and even acting, and thus they are incapable of rationally persuading each other of the superiority of their own specific ways of describing, evaluating, judging and acting. There is no way to plead for a new vocabulary "on the basis of antecedent criteria common to the old and the new language games. For just insofar as the new language really is new, there will be no such criteria" (CIS, 1991: 9). In other words, Rorty believes in the possibility of *argumentative incommensurability*<sup>6</sup> between advocates of different vocabularies, the possibility that there are no trans-cultural, trans-vocabulary

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<sup>5</sup> Rorty's odd use of 'metaphor' here is explained later on in this chapter, see pages 22-3.

<sup>6</sup> This *argumentative incommensurability* is not to be confused with *linguistic incommensurability*. Following the work of Davidson, Rorty rejects the idea that different conceptual schemes could be so radically different that individuals within one scheme could not communicate to individuals in another scheme. There is always the possibility that members of one vocabulary can learn another vocabulary, or have another vocabulary translated into their terms. Understanding this other vocabulary, however, would

criteria for resolving disputes between vocabularies.

The only form persuasion can take in such revolutionary conditions is the mode of recontextualization. *Recontextualization* is the technique of telling stories about the world and a rival vocabulary so that, in contrast to the new vocabulary, the rival vocabulary appears both redundant and disadvantageous. Recontextualization does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, rather it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like 'try thinking of it this way' - or more specifically 'try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions' (CIS, 1991: 9).

Rather than trying to debate issues point by point, argument against argument, recontextualizations try to describe a new vocabulary, as a new way of seeing the world and acting in the world. They try to compare this vocabulary against the rival vocabulary in reference to pragmatic issues. They suggest new ways of thinking about old problems.

Since there are no trans-vocabulary algorithms with which to discriminate between vocabularies, one tries to contextualize a rival vocabulary, to compare as wholes the rival entrenched vocabulary against the new vocabulary.

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not decide disputes between vocabularies, because you can understand a vocabulary without thinking the vocabulary's methods of justifying arguments compelling.

## **Rorty's Revolution**

Rorty is excited by the sort of persuasion exemplified by the "revolutionary model." He sees his philosophical work as an attempt to articulate an alternative vocabulary to the classical modern vocabulary. It is an effort to redefine ourselves and suggest a new way of looking at the world. Specifically, he wants to describe an intellectual horizon where the preoccupations with metaphysics, rationalism, representationalism and moral universalism are no longer attractive.

So, as with revolutionary cases in general, Rorty's position cannot rely on a model of neutral, unbiased, normal argumentation. To assert his criticisms of classical modernism on the basis of modern assumptions would be self-defeating, paradoxical and incoherent. Rorty does not submit "arguments against," for example, "the 'correspondence theory of truth' or the idea of the 'intrinsic nature of reality,'" because "the trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary" (CIS, 1991: 8).

Likewise, Rorty recognizes that he can not make compelling appeals for his position on the grounds of common sense or intuition, because both common sense and intuition will be informed by the received vocabulary. Common sense and popular intuition are biased against a new vocabulary, because they've been manufactured by the dominant vocabulary. He notes, for instance, that "if contemporary intuitions are to decide the matter, 'realism' and Representationalism will always win, and the pragmatist's

quietism will seem intellectually irresponsible" (ITGE, 1995: 299).

Finally, Rorty doesn't want to deconstruct (as Derrida sometimes claims to do) or prove the unintelligibility (as the later Wittgenstein sometimes claimed to do) of the received vocabulary. Rorty admits<sup>7</sup> that he sometimes sounded, for example in PMN, as if he thought the traditional problems of modern philosophy "confused" or "unintelligible." He is now careful merely to claim that they haven't been *productive*. Rorty admits that he "should not speak, as [he] sometimes [has], of 'pseudo-problems,' but rather of problematics and vocabularies that might have proven to be of value, but in fact did not." He wants to make the charge of "relative inutility, rather than 'meaninglessness' or 'illusion' or 'incoherence'" (PRM, 1993: 445). One cannot demonstrate to adherents of the received vocabulary that their vocabulary is incoherent, because to do this would require one to prove that "central elements in that vocabulary are 'inconsistent in their own terms' or that they 'deconstruct themselves.'" This will be "inconclusive and question begging," because these terms are the "paradigm of coherent, meaningful, literal, speech" (CIS, 1991: 8-9).

In contrast to these sorts of arguments, Rorty embraces the technique of recontextualization. Rather than making "normal" arguments, Rorty wants to author a vocabulary that legitimizes itself by favorably describing its relation to the rival modern

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<sup>7</sup> Rorty has recently remarked, in a response to Susan Haack, that "I have sometimes used Wittgensteinian pejoratives like 'nonsense,' and 'meaningless,' etc., but I regret having done so. I think Wittgenstein was wiser when he said that you can give anything sense if you want to. Epistemologists have given various questions sense in the same way as astrologers and theologians gave their questions sense: by embedding

vocabulary. Rorty hopes to make the vocabulary he favors "look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics" (CIS, 1991: 9). His "method is to describe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it" (CIS, 1991: 9). Rorty wants to illustrate what it would be like to adopt a new set of behaviors - linguistic and non-linguistic - which would delimit a new way of seeing ourselves and our world. This outfit of behaviors would reflect a vocabulary in which the metaphysical concern<sup>8</sup> with Truth (in both representationalist and moral universalist respects) would no longer be interesting and would no longer be influential on our behavior.

This competing vocabulary is recommended to a particular audience, the western-liberal-secular-bourgeois audience, an audience which still largely maintains the modern vocabulary. In some ways, Rorty believes that this audience is uniquely situated to hear his message. Due to high levels of economic security and the abundance of leisure that characterizes this bourgeois audience, it is more able, in Rorty's estimation, to dispense with hard philosophical distinctions between truth and appearance (DSP, 1996: 113). And due to its secularism, it is more likely to want to get rid of these metaphysical distinctions. Other sorts of audiences may not and probably should not be interested in his neo-pragmatist vocabulary. Rather than striving to universally demonstrate the

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them in a coherent language-game. But questions about the utility of all three language-games persist" (RP, 1995: 223). I assume here he is referring to PMN.

superiority of his vocabulary, Rorty wants to offer a proposal to this particular "we"<sup>9</sup> at this particular historical juncture. He wants to say to us<sup>10</sup> that we should drop the modern vocabulary, or reform it, in favor of his neo-pragmatist vocabulary. He is trying to explain to us, by describing a new way of seeing the world, how the things that give our lives shape can be reinterpreted along the lines of his neo-pragmatist vocabulary. If we accomplish this, we will become a new "we," we will have a new identity, a post-metaphysical identity.

Rorty's writings employ a number of rhetorical tactics in accomplishing this recontextualization. One of the more common tactics Rorty utilizes is the *genealogy*.<sup>11</sup> Along with Nietzsche, Foucault and Heidegger<sup>12</sup> (among others), Rorty thinks that developing a genealogy of an intellectual tradition, a detailing of the particular historical events that shape an intellectual tradition, is a good way of undermining the naturalness

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<sup>8</sup> "Metaphysics" here is a Rorty's rough shorthand for the desire to connect to something other than ourselves, something like the real true world or the real true self. More on what "metaphysics" means for Rorty in chapters two and three.

<sup>9</sup> Chantal Mouffe has criticized this in Deconstruction and Pragmatism. She feels that this sort of approach suggests that liberal democratic politics involves a consensus where greater and greater groups come to value certain liberal democratic virtues. This characterization of liberal democratic politics is problematic, for Mouffe, because it fails to acknowledge the conflicting approaches that are only resolved in democratic politics by a provisional decision which marginalizes some of these groups. These democratic decisions to choose the policy that betters the most is appropriate, but we must always recognize, and remind ourselves of, the groups not bettered by the choice. See DP, pages 5-13.

<sup>10</sup> I am assuming here that my audience is also this Rortyan "we," though it is definitely possible that others could be interested in Rorty's work.

<sup>11</sup> In chapter three, I will gloss over Rorty's genealogy briefly. Lacking the space or time to examine historical claims about the tradition of philosophy, I content myself with an examination of Rorty's arguments about the utility of the modern tradition. Accepting that Rorty is in the right ball park when he claims that modern philosophy has been unsuccessful, I look at how Rorty argues against the modern vocabulary itself.

<sup>12</sup> This genealogical strategy has been a staple of post-Nietzschean continental philosophy. For some insights into how genealogies work see C.G. Prado Starting With Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy.

of certain philosophical and cultural intuitions. He holds that “narratives of the history of philosophy are among the most powerful tools of persuasion” anti-metaphysicians have at their disposal (DSP, 1996: 25). By exposing this history, Rorty hopes his readers will recognize that the modern vocabulary is both *historically contingent* (the outcome of social circumstances) and *historically unproductive* (it has failed to fulfill its promise).

Genealogical tactics are especially useful when trying to combat metaphysical vocabularies, because they illustrate the mutability, contingency and temporalness of metaphysical commitments. Demonstrating to the metaphysician that her philosophical interests and assumptions are historically malleable casts doubt on those assumptions and interests, because it suggests they are the products of mere chance, merely social inventions. If the metaphysician accepts the historical narrative, she will have to reconcile these contingent events with her ahistorical, metaphysical assumptions. Since the modern vocabulary is generally metaphysically oriented, Rorty finds genealogical tactics very fruitful.

Rorty's genealogical tactic is a component of a larger therapeutic strategy. This strategy is central to his recontextualization. Among other things, Rorty sees himself as carrying on a tradition of *therapeutic philosophy*, developed by people like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. This aspect of Rorty's philosophy does not try to erect philosophical systems, discover philosophical foundations or provide philosophical groundings, but rather attempts to get us to stop asking the sorts of philosophical questions that have

motivated the creation of past philosophical systems. Rorty wants to show us why the questions housed in the modern vocabulary aren't worth the attention we pay them. This sort of philosophy is meant to prompt the philosopher to "question his own motives for philosophizing"(PMN, 6), at least philosophizing in these modern ways.

Although Rorty once claimed to be *exclusively* doing this sort of therapeutic philosophy, more recently he has acknowledged a constructive side to his work. Rorty originally thought the way to fashion our new intellectual horizon was to merely scrape away the philosophical pretensions that had infected our vocabulary, which is why he saw himself as "ending philosophy." The idea was that once philosophers stopped leading us astray, we'd be doing just fine. Recognizing that purely negative philosophy only goes so far, Rorty began, with CIS, to construct a more substantial neo-pragmatist vocabulary as an alternative to the traditional vocabulary. This sort of constructiveness doesn't have anything to do with unearthing foundations or grounding cultural commitments, but with developing a new vocabulary, with disclosing a new world, with showing us how to see the world in a different way. So, we could say that Rorty's therapy, as the central strategy of his recontextualization, opens up the *conceptual space* for him to propose an alternative vocabulary, a radically new system of questions. His conceptual therapy denaturalizes the legitimacy of modern questions, which allows Rorty to say: let's look at my neo-pragmatist vocabulary, it can do all the work we need done without getting bogged down in those nasty metaphysical fiascoes.

Rorty can't *prove* to us, however, that his neo-pragmatist vocabulary is *better* than the older vocabulary. All he can do is recommend that we try out this new horizon - an orientation that ignores questions about metaphysical issues - and see if we like it better. All he can do is try to describe to us the advantages of adopting this new vocabulary and ask us to give it a try. So, when it comes to the issue of metaphysical truth:

to say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or 'true' as a term which repays 'analysis.' 'The nature of truth' is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect 'the nature of man' and 'the nature of God,' and different from 'the nature of the positron,' and 'the nature of Oedipal fixation.' But this claim about relative profitability, in turn, is just the recommendation that we in fact *say* little about these topics, and see how we get on (CIS, 1991: 8).

Rorty is suggesting that we experiment with a new post-metaphysical way of seeing ourselves and our world. He can only describe the advantages of this proposal; he cannot force us - through argumentative rigor or other means - into this experiment.

This is characteristic of recontextualizations: they cannot demand acceptance, cannot run their opponents up against argumentative walls, cannot be conclusive.

Recontextualizations always work from within a perspective, a new vocabulary, and the stories told as part of a recontextualization are only as good as they are attractive to possible converts. Rorty compares his position with that of atheists in a society and a time where most people were not atheists:

Such people can only hope to trace the outlines of what Shelley calls 'the gigantic shadow which futurity casts upon the present'. They foresee a time when the notions of Divine Will and of Cognitive Command have, for similar reasons, been replaced by that

of A Free Consensus of Enquirers [sic]. But, in the meantime, the pragmatist who urges our culture to abandon metaphysical activism cannot argue that such activism is inconsistent with a mass of our other beliefs, any more than ancient Greek atheists could say that sacrificing to the Olympians was inconsistent with a mass of other Greek beliefs. All the pragmatist can do is the sort of thing they did: point to the seeming futility of metaphysical activity, as they pointed to the seeming futility of religious activity.

In the end, we pragmatists have no real arguments against the intuitions to which books like Wright's *Truth and Objectivity* appeal. All we have are rhetorical questions like: Are all those epicycles really worth the trouble? What good do the intuitions you painstakingly salvage do us? What practical difference do they make? But such rhetorical questions have been the instruments of socio-cultural change in the past, and may be again (ITGE, 1995: 300).

There are no compelling, impartial means available for the neo-pragmatist to persuade others of the superiority of her vocabulary. Traditional modernists can always say that with a little more time and a little more effort something fruitful will come out of representationalism, moral universalism and rationalism.

Ultimately, Rorty thinks, all the neo-pragmatist can do is go about describing her vision, comparing it to the vision of the received tradition, and asking rhetorical questions about the utility of the traditionalist's vocabulary. There is no way to conclusively prove modernist questions unanswerable, because there is no way to prove that we've tried all the possible answers. Rorty contents himself with suggesting that neo-pragmatists "should see themselves as involved in a long-term attempt to change the rhetoric, the common sense, and the self-image of their community" (ITGE, 1995: 300). This project can ultimately - but won't necessarily - be successful.

## **Intellectual History as Revolutionary**

So far, we've begun to develop a sense of how recontextualization works, paying special attention to Rorty's own recontextualist project. We've seen that *the aim of Rorty's recontextualization is to compare, as wholes in regards to pragmatic considerations, his neo-pragmatist, post-metaphysical vocabulary to a traditional, metaphysical, modern vocabulary.* A place where we can find out more about how recontextualizations work from the *reception end* is Rorty's story about how intellectual history works. This section explores Rorty's story about the rise and fall of past vocabularies, with the intent of getting clearer on the reasons why new vocabularies become *popular*, so that we can have an idea of what sorts of decision processes are going on when adherents of an old vocabulary choose a new one.

Echoing Kuhn's story about science, Rorty views *revolutionary recontextualizations* as responsible for the paradigm shifts in particular disciplines and culture-at-large, and normal argumentation as responsible for the stable stretches in particular disciplines and the broader culture. In cases of normal argumentation, the set of beliefs may be altered, but the algorithms for concluding what should be believed remain roughly identical. Acting as radical disruptions to these relatively continuous courses, cases of successful revolutionary recontextualizations produce dramatic replacements of vocabularies, dramatic shifts in the rules of justifying beliefs. It is only in instances of vocabulary shifts that deep innovations are introduced into our cultural belief-system.

To draw from the Continental discussion of the “world-disclosing” aspect of language, recontextualizations disclose new worlds that can profoundly redirect intellectual activity. While normal sorts of inquiry are done within a commonly shared world, recontextualizations can introduce alternative worlds to work in. This can be a very helpful move, if the assumptions a community holds appear to be arresting progress. As James Bohman writes, “disclosure has to do with the role of rhetoric in communication for changing rigid interpretations, for cases of blocked learning and problem-solving, for making interpretation processes fluid when they have come to a standstill, whether by power, or ideology” (Bohman, 1997: 208). Recontextualizations provide us with the turns in the history of thinking, by changing how we see our world.

Rorty characterizes the unfolding of western thought as defined by an evolutionary rise and fall of these various vocabularies. *Pace* standard teleological accounts of history, the sort that suggest that history is progressing to some final ideal, Rorty's account describes the origination of these budding vocabularies as generally undirected and contingent. There is no inevitable and/or progressive reason why Einsteinian physics replaced Newtonian. These novel vocabularies are selected by communities depending upon the degree to which their utility - for a particular community at a particular time - makes them popular. If these vocabularies become popular, they become entrenched, commonplace, and natural and thereby come to be the common sense of society, the framework for normal arguments.

Employing a Davidsonian<sup>13</sup> linguistic analogy to illustrate what he's talking about, Rorty recommends we think of the relation between nascent vocabularies and older vocabularies as like the relation between metaphorical and literal speech. Metaphors, because they are not yet embedded within a language game nor have a habitual use, do not have a meanings *per se*, though they can *cause* us to perceive or think differently. In time, however, such metaphoric sounds may find a place in a language game and simultaneously a meaning. If a metaphor "is savored rather than spat out, the sentence may be repeated, caught up, bandied about. Then it will gradually acquire a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game" (CIS, 1991: 18). The metaphor dies; it becomes "one more, literally true or literally false, sentence of the language" (CIS, 1991: 18).

In a similar way, vocabularies (which are often distinguished by clusters of metaphors) come to have a meaning and a force as they become more and more popular. In so far as these new vocabularies are useful (for a particular community or culture at large), they become the landscapes for normal arguments. This "catching on" may initially be restricted to a subgroup of the population (philosophers, scientists, poets, sports-fans, movie-buffs, etc.), but if the vocabulary is useful for other groups, it will become widely entrenched. The vocabulary that Kuhn developed around the metaphor of a "paradigm," because it was useful to a certain population, became entrenched and a

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<sup>13</sup> This is a standard sort of Davidsonian position. Davidson claims, in contrast to other writers on metaphor like Max Black, that metaphors, insofar as they are still live metaphors, do not have any meanings. The argument is that metaphors do not exist within a language game, and thus cannot have meanings. See Davidson's "What Metaphors Mean" in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation.

framework for the descriptions of certain episodes in scientific history - the framework for normal arguments. Reflexively, "metaphors which do not catch on with other people" are "ways of speaking or acting which the rest of us cannot find a use for" (CIS, 1991: 37). This is the test that separates geniuses from eccentrics. When some individual "produces a metaphor which we *can* find a use for, we speak of genius rather than of eccentricity or perversity" (CIS, 1991: 37). If Kuhn's use of "paradigm" had not seemed helpful, the expression would have faded away as an odd expression of an idiosyncratic person - i.e., nobody would have bothered to read his books.

These vocabularies, the private inventions of idiosyncratic individuals, like metaphors provide us with fresh ways of thinking about the world and/or ourselves. When these ways of thinking fulfill a public demand, they become popular and commonly used. Vocabularies and metaphors become popular "because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time" (CIS, 1991: 37). Vocabularies, then, originate from multiple locations in culture and, if they are attractive, begin to circulate in culture. In this respect "poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need" (CIS, 1991: 37). It is only when these vocabularies satisfy a need in culture that they take root.

This is *not* to suggest that the popularity Rorty speaks of stems from individuals making choices according to well-defined criteria. Rorty claims that the notions of

criteria and choice are out of place in the discussion. He writes that "Europe did not decide to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others" (CIS, 1991: 6). Adopting a new vocabulary is not a case of weighing different options and then choosing, based upon an existing criteria, the best option. Any sort of criteria for deciding arguments will be biased against a rejection of the dominant vocabulary. In light of this, adopting a new vocabulary is more like non-consciously picking up a new metaphor or a new fashion style. Adopting a new vocabulary is an impressionistic, messy process.

We can't even assume that the inventors of these vocabularies necessarily see their use. On the design level, the inventor "is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is that he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it" (CIS, 1991: 13). In fact, a new vocabulary often "makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose" (CIS, 1991: 13). New sorts of vocabularies, new metaphors or paradigms, could come from any origin, as long as they come to fill a niche. So, "for all we know, or should care, Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, [or] Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agape*. . . were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains" or "more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy" (CIS, 1991: 17). Rorty isn't trying to play

psychoanalyst here, he isn't trying to pin point where these ideas come from, but merely suggesting that it doesn't matter where they come from - what matters is whether they are useful and whether they catch on.

The analogy to *evolution* here runs deep. Rorty suggests we think of this causal story of vocabulary adoption as analogous to evolutionary adaptation. He wants to "see language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms - not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly" (CIS, 1991: 19). Believing that "cultural change of this magnitude does not result from applying criteria (or from 'arbitrary decision')" (CIS, 1991: 6), Rorty suggests that this sort of cultural change results from communities picking up useful linguistic habits. Species don't mutate based on criteria; they just mutate. However, which mutations are adopted is not an arbitrary selection; useful beliefs, like useful mutations, are selected. In this sort of view, words and vocabularies are like tools. Vocabularies, like tools, "beliefs and specialized bodily organs, can become obsolete, and eventually vanish - but they have survival value in their niche at their time" (RP, 1995: 230). Through this process, useful vocabularies, which may originate blindly, become popular and entrenched.

So, from Rorty's perspective, intellectual history is a cataloging of these useful vocabularies and the work they permitted to be done. When we look back at vocabularies like Newton's, Einstein's, the Romantic's and Christianity's we see a series of vocabularies that were useful at certain times for certain purposes. These vocabularies

permitted coordinated intellectual activities and a commonly appreciated sense of progress (or lack of progress). This history has no natural teleology in it. Like evolution, the vocabularies we possess today are the product of sheer contingencies, in respect to their invention, their adoption and the problems they deal with.

### **Rorty's Dilemma: Persuasion Without Trans-vocabulary Criteria**

So, what have we learned from the previous sections? From the first two sections, we learned that Rorty is trying to recontextualize rather than argue. His recontextualization attempts to compare, as wholes in regards to pragmatic considerations, Rorty's proposed neo-pragmatist vocabulary against the dominant modern vocabulary. He suggests that his neo-pragmatist vocabulary is more useful than the classical modern vocabulary. Like recontextualizations in general, the story that Rorty tells is not the sort of story that can be compellingly proven, either by observation or logical argument. From the last section, we get an idea of how recontextualizations, including Rorty's own, work from the *reception end*. We've learned that adherents of the dominant vocabulary, without making a choice according to criteria or whimsy, gradually pick up the habit of using a new vocabulary over the received vocabulary. Like evolution, vocabularies either fill pragmatic niches or they do not. If they do, they become popular; if they don't, they're ignored. Vocabularies that are popular become, in turn, the dominant vocabulary – the vocabulary which normal arguments assume.

This suggests an apparent contradiction between Rorty's characterization of how

recontextualizations operate as a persuasive technique *and* how recontextualizations are received by their audiences. On one hand, Rorty suggests, as the first two sections outlined, that recontextualizations appeal to pragmatic advantages as a way of luring converts to adopt a new vocabulary; on the other hand, Rorty suggests, in his story about how intellectual history works, that individuals who convert to a new vocabulary do not have any criteria for making that choice – they just come to make it or they don't. While Rorty plays up the fact that new vocabularies are pragmatically useful, and the fact that people discuss the advantages of various vocabularies, he is very careful to never claim that converts can apply criteria in making their choice.

The contradiction seems to be that *without criteria the notions of "advantages" and "disadvantages" seem vacuous*. How can vocabularies be perceived as advantageous (or disadvantageous) without relying on some criteria for evaluating a vocabulary? You may think that a vocabulary is useful, but you only think so if you have a sense of what counts as "useful" – a sense provided by criteria. Copernicus' vocabulary, for example, seemed better than Ptolomey's because of certain criteria; it was better able to explain the phenomena, it was simpler, it was more empirically adequate, etc. Further, if we begin from a received vocabulary, it seems that that vocabulary will contain a set of criteria, which, in most cases at least, will make a rival vocabulary look unattractive. How can recontextualizations, then, make persuasive claims for adherents of the dominant vocabulary that the new vocabulary is advantageous? Why did

Copernicus win out over Ptolomey?

I say “apparent contradiction” above, because I think that Rorty, at least implicitly, understands this problem and has a route out of it. This route, however, seems to be inadequate, only pointing to deeper difficulties in Rorty’s position. To begin to understand this route, let’s reexamine Rorty’s account of how people adopt a new vocabulary.

How do participants in an old vocabulary choose to convert to a new vocabulary?

In Rorty’s explanation he asserts that their choice is neither based on the application of a criterion or made arbitrarily. What do “criteria” and “arbitrary” mean here? Rorty suggests that these decisions “are often made not by reference to any criterion but *impressionistically* - like decisions about which book to read, which church to worship in, which romantic advance to reject, or which wallpaper to select” (italics added, DSP, 1996: 60). The choice to adopt a new vocabulary cannot be according to a previously established criterion because such a criterion, as a reflection of the vocabulary which houses it, will naturally reinforce one’s conviction to the dominant vocabulary. Rorty is careful to argue, however, that neither are these choices “arbitrary.” Rorty goes on to say, “decisions can only be called arbitrary if they fly in the face of recognized, previously formulated criteria” (DSP, 1996: 60). What Rorty means by “fly in the face of” seems to be to make decisions irrationally, for example by luck, or because of madness or incompetence. Choosing a vocabulary is not like flipping a coin or making

an ignorant mistake.

So, we know how these choices *aren't* made, but that still leaves us with the question of how they *are* made. Clearly, choosing a new vocabulary cannot be the result of a previously formulated criteria, and yet, Rorty suggests the choice cannot fly in the face of previously existing criteria either. What does it mean to choose a vocabulary “impressionistically?” Well, it seems what Rorty has in mind is the sort of choice that is deliberative but not according to knockdown reasons. The reasons a new vocabulary is attractive are subtle and often debatable. To choose a new vocabulary is to decide to reorient oneself, to adopt a new criteria to direct one's life. It's like the decision to choose one lover over another. While the choice to convert to a new vocabulary seems to run counter to existing criteria, Rorty's point seems to be that these choices aren't arbitrary, because they are not *merely* cases of not acting according to criteria - they are also choices governed by *new* criteria. The point is that the decision makers are still making “rational judgements, and in doing so they are transforming their country and thereby themselves” (DSP, 1996: 60). It's not like the choice to adopt a new vocabulary is some failure to adequately act on existing criteria, its not like the choice is made by a mad person or incompetent person, rather, the choice is a reasoned choice to adopt a new vocabulary.

This suggests, however, that adopting a new vocabulary is to adopt, simultaneously, the criteria which make that vocabulary look attractive. The

contradiction I mentioned earlier, then, falls by the way side when we realize that the advantages claimed by a recontextualization *only appear to be “advantages” from within the vocabulary*. This makes sense in the context of Rorty’s claim that he is not suggesting that these decisions are made according to utilitarian criteria, that people choose a new vocabulary based on what pragmatic benefits they think they can get out of it. “Pragmatists do not think there are such things as ‘utilitarian criteria’” anymore than they think there are such things as foundationalist criteria (DSP, 1996: 61). It’s not like advantages, as pragmatic benefits, are outside the scope of a vocabulary. It also makes sense in the context of Rorty’s claim that recontextualizations will always beg the question, will never be able to prove their case. Recontextualizations are dependent on the audience making the first move to accept them. Their advantages will only seem like advantages to the converted.

While we do, when adopting a new vocabulary, make reasoned choices - deliberative, purposeful choices – those choices are not based on trans-vocabulary criteria. They are not made according to reasons that are compelling for adherents of the dominant as well as the rival vocabulary. We *are* forced, as Rorty obliquely puts it, into “the practice of muddling through towards happiness as best we can” (DSP, 1996: 61). While we still “deliberate about various advantages and disadvantages” (DSP, 1996: 61), there is no common cause between the old vocabulary and the new about what are advantages and disadvantages. Advantages and disadvantages don’t float free of

vocabularies; they are, in contrast, embedded within vocabularies and criteria.

Rorty suggests there are no real “criteria for answering” the question “which language game [should we] be playing” (DSP, 1996: 64). This is because in these revolutionary settings “the choice of means and the choice of ends (the choice of which language game to play and the choice of which life to lead) are hard to disentangle from one another” (DSP, 1996: 64). Just like when choosing a lover, when we choose a vocabulary, we are at the same time deciding who we want to be. We are choosing a vocabulary and a criteria for evaluating vocabularies at the same time. All-in-all, we evaluate new vocabularies:

in the same way as Europe evaluated the dispute between Aristotle and Galileo and that between the Church and Voltaire - in sloppy, messy ways to which questions about infinite regresses and circular arguments are irrelevant. These are the same sloppy, messy ways in which we make all the important decisions of our lives, either as communities or as individuals (DSP, 1996: 65).

It’s hard to argue about which life we should lead, about what is a “good life.” People who disagree on questions like these are unable to prove their case. All they can do is ask the other to make a leap of faith,<sup>14</sup> to try it their way.

So, recontextualizations talk about advantages that only seem like advantages from the other side of the looking glass. This resolves the apparent contradiction between Rorty’s characterization of the technique of recontextualization and his description about how we adopt a new vocabulary, but it introduces, I think, a much

deeper dilemma for Rorty's position. The dilemma is that *without a way for a new vocabulary to appeal to an already compelling criteria for its attractiveness, it becomes unclear why recontextualizations would ever be successful*. Why do leaps of faith happen? If all previously formulated criteria are inherently conservative, why would we come to adopt a new vocabulary? Why would we come to adopt new criteria? While it doesn't seem too far out to claim that these decisions *proceed* reasonably, deliberately, purposefully, it's hard to understand how this reasoning could *lead* to anything but a conservative conclusion, a conclusion against making a leap of faith. It's unclear why we would, all of a sudden, choose a new life.

Here, it seems that Rorty retreats into the rhetoric of evolution, thereby obscuring this dilemma but not resolving it. Rorty wants to recharacterize intellectual history in evolutionary terms as a causal selection process where vocabularies are selected, because they are pragmatically beneficial. Rorty thinks we should conceive of:

'our language' - that is, of the science and culture of twentieth-century Europe - as something that took shape as a result of a great number of sheer contingencies. Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of mutations finding niches (and millions of other finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids (CIS, 1991: 16).

In this sense, our culture is the product of many different vocabularies finding niches, finding places where they can help us deal with our world. By stressing the evolutionary aspect of his account, Rorty seems to bypass this issue of how people choose a new

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<sup>14</sup> I borrow this Keirkagaardian phrase consciously. A leap of faith is, in this sense, beyond the abilities

vocabulary. Vocabularies, like species, find niches and survive or they don't find niches and they perish. If we think of vocabularies as species, we don't have to worry about this issue of choice.

The problem is that this sort of evolutionary story supplies us with an account of how new vocabularies come to be adopted only by obscuring the conscious, deliberative selection processes that go on in choosing a new vocabulary. The reason the analogy between biological evolution and cultural evolution is misleading is because biological species *don't* have any *choice* over whether they survive or not – if they meet the requirements of a niche, they survive – whereas a vocabulary only survives if *we choose* to keep it alive – if a vocabulary is chosen, it becomes popular and dominant. This disanalogy suggests that Rorty's appeal to evolution, though seductive, doesn't get him out of the bind of explaining how adherents of a dominant vocabulary can choose to adopt a new vocabulary without any trans-vocabulary criteria that would dictate doing so. We're still left wondering how we come to choose a new life.

So, pulling together the strands of my argument from the previous sections, Rorty's characterization of intellectual history, specifically his characterization of how new vocabularies are chosen, seems to call into question the possibility of success for recontextualizations - including his own. In the next section, I suggest an alternative account of how intellectual history works. This account provides us with an explanation

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of a rational mind to choose.

of how recontextualizations can be successful, while also providing us with a deeper understanding of what recontextualizations must do in order to be persuasive.

### **Blumenberg: Function-positions, Reoccupations and Therapeutic Philosophy**

Inspired by Hans Blumenberg,<sup>15</sup> a philosopher/intellectual historian most noted for his analysis of the transition from Christianity to Modernity,<sup>16</sup> this section provides us with an alternative understanding of how new vocabularies are adopted. It should be mentioned at the outset that this account of intellectual history is meant to reconstruct Rorty's position, not replace it or prove reason to reject it. My suggestion is that this Blumenbergian account, specifically his account of how a new vocabulary is adopted, provides us with a better way of thinking of Rorty's notion of recontextualization.

Blumenberg's work provides some helpful notions in-between "choices governed by criteria" and "arbitrary choice" that we can use to analyze vocabulary-shifts (including Rorty's own proposed shift). As an overview, Blumenberg's central suggestion is that vocabularies respond to and shape the needs of individuals in a society. These needs, or

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<sup>15</sup> In the rest of this section, I explicate a Blumenbergian account of how vocabulary shifts occur. My Blumenbergian account should be acknowledged as my own. Blumenberg is a tricky philosopher to interpret. I would advise anyone interested in these topics to check out his books, especially The Legitimacy of the Modern Age.

<sup>16</sup> Blumenberg wanted to explain why the modern age seemed Christian in many respects. In response to this question, he developed an elaborate theory about what goes on in epochal thresholds, periods in history when fundamental vocabularies are replaced by other vocabularies. Though this analysis had its origin in

“function-positions,” vary across different epochs and different vocabularies but they exert rhetorical and persuasive constraints on new vocabularies that try to replace entrenched vocabularies – they operate as the criteria that govern ideas about which arguments are compelling within an epoch. However, function-positions themselves, in certain circumstances, can become the topics of evaluation that affords the conceptual room for new vocabularies to be introduced. In the same way that the people can be socialized into thinking that certain needs are natural, they can be taught that these needs are unnatural. My suggestion is that this notion of “function-positions” helps us to understand what sorts of issues recontextualizations have to deal with.

To begin to develop this Blumenbergian account, let’s rethink the notion of a vocabulary. Rorty suggests that a vocabulary is a particular view on the world that shapes our expectations and actions in the world. A Blumenbergian account agrees with this characterization, but deepens this understanding by adding the notions of “function-positions,” “questions,” and “answers.” Vocabularies, according to this account, are systems of questions that are designed to respond to certain functional considerations, or “function-positions.” During an epoch, a period of historical time when one vocabulary is dominant, a variety of answers are given in response to a relatively constant system of questions. Each question in this system of questions is answered by particular theoretical candidates. For example, one of the questions in the modern vocabulary, the

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Blumenberg's examination of the relation between the Christian and modern epochs, he suggests that this account is applicable to epochal transitions in general (Blumenberg, 1976: 69).

moral universalist question - “how is morality based on a common, universal human nature?” – was answered by suggestions like Kant’s that we each have an immanent rational nature which grounds our moral actions. While different answers may be given to the question, the question itself offers the common reference point to evaluate candidates.

A vocabulary, as a system of questions, is motivated by an underlying system of function-positions which defines and molds the questions. These function-positions, the particular psychological needs that make a question an important question to ask, serve as the functional criteria for evaluating an answer. So, in the case of the universalist question, that question is an important question, because we want, among other things, a universal sense of legitimacy for our moral system. Theoretical systems which don’t meet these functional criteria aren’t adequate and, as this inadequacy becomes apparent, will be rejected. Vocabularies, then, must do the sort of work defined by their associated function-positions.

Perhaps we should think of a “job search” as an analogy that might help bring these abstractions down to an accessible level. Like the job titles used in a job search, a question in a vocabulary sets up the requirements for particular candidates. A job title, like a question, sums up all the functional duties a candidate is supposed to be able to fulfill. These functional duties, deemed to be important by the employers, or in the case of vocabularies the adherents of a vocabulary, motivate and shape the job description.

Reciprocally, these functional duties become the criteria that allow us to decide whether a candidate is satisfactory. Candidates who don't seem to compellingly fulfill the job description end up getting fired, in the same way that theoretical systems which don't do the work that is expected of them end up being ignored.

A question makes certain intellectual assumptions seem natural. While these assumptions don't completely determine the acceptable intellectual direction, they do delimit its scope. The system of questions delimits the possible orientations adherents can take by delimiting a set of possible answers. So, the representationalist question in the modern vocabulary constrains our behavior by focusing us on representational issues, but allows for a certain freedom by its openness to different understandings of how representationalism works.

In a vocabulary, these questions are held together in a certain cultural logic. The system of questions in a vocabulary has a coherent logic to it that relates each question to the other questions in a mutually reinforcing system, so that asking one particular sort of question is related to asking another sort of question. A vocabulary is holistically oriented so that the questions assume each other. Despite the internal logic of the system, the questions are not entailed by each other, they are not redundant. Rather, they represent different components of a general intellectual orientation. They define the points where adherents of the vocabulary deem intellectual work to be important. They define the central jobs adherents of a vocabulary expect a vocabulary to perform.

From Blumenberg's perspective, the shift in vocabularies that we've been examining is a shift in the system of questions we use to orient our intellectual activity. Blumenberg claims that while the typical course of an epoch is characterized by an alternation of answers given to constant questions, in the way that Christians proposed different doctrines of salvation, at certain times the vocabulary of an epoch is rapidly replaced by another vocabulary and an epoch closes as a new epoch begins. These epochal thresholds are "the phases of more or less rapid change in the basic rules for the procurement of very general explanations" (Blumenberg, 1976: 66). A historical curiosity, an epochal transition is the time when rather gradual intellectual development is interrupted by a period of rapid change; a period that moves "in a single, unambiguous direction" (Blumenberg, 1976: 468). A new vocabulary is born at the expense of an older vocabulary.

Blumenberg suggests that in these epochal transitions there is a reworking of the system of questions and the system of function-positions. The system of function-positions changes as a period no longer needs or wants to perform certain tasks. Though the change in functional needs may involve only a subset of the system of function-positions, the recasting of the system of questions must be holistic, because those questions are consistent with each other. This explains why Modernity looked so different from Christianity. Even though modern individuals were still interested in traditional Christian needs, like the need to have a natural telos in history, they fulfilled

this need with a new sort of question, a question which assumed that we, as assertive individuals, could achieve our own telos. The questions weave a net that orients human action and belief. Since they all work together, when you make local alterations in the system of questions, you have to rethink the whole system, the whole vocabulary. A vocabulary must be rewoven into a coherent<sup>17</sup> whole.

Epochal shifts mark contractions and expansions in the fundamental system of function-positions that define what we expect out of our vocabularies. In each epoch, new function-positions are introduced and these new function-positions entrench themselves into our psychological needs. Blumenberg claims that in the case of the Hellenistic/Christian transition, for instance, the Christian theology created "new 'positions' in the framework of statements about the world and man that are possible and expected" (Blumenberg, 1976: 64). We are *socialized* into desiring our vocabulary to do certain things. These function-positions become internalized and "felt" in the sense that they come to seem natural, important, and indispensable to the society.

One of Blumenberg's central insights is that during these vocabulary shifts the function-positions that first motivated the question still propel adherents of the old vocabulary to want a new vocabulary to do the same sorts of work. These function-positions, socially and psychologically instilled into adherents of the dominant vocabulary, are not easy to escape. They "cannot simply be 'set aside' again or left

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<sup>17</sup> This need for coherence might be overstated. If we start thinking of beliefs in terms of their effects on behavior, then it seems that an incoherent set of beliefs may still allow us to act in an attractive way. For

unoccupied in the interest of theoretical economy" (Blumenberg, 1976: 64). These rhetorical constraints explain what Blumenberg calls his *reoccupation thesis* - the idea that new vocabularies are rhetorically forced to respond to the function-positions that may have been introduced in past epochs by formally dominant vocabularies. According to this thesis:

The historical process stabilizes the system of questions<sup>18</sup> once raised and thus exercises a pressure toward answers, which imposes the 'settling' and reoccupation of systematic positions that have become vacant (Blumenberg, 1976: 300).

This reoccupation causes the new vocabulary to look similar to the old vocabulary, e.g., the way the modern vocabulary seemed similar to the Christian vocabulary in its interest in a notion of progress culminating in a heaven like telos.

But, before we get ahead of ourselves, the question remains – what motivates the renunciation of one vocabulary for another, and the corresponding shift in the system of function-positions? Why would a new vocabulary be able to break free at all from the functional expectations of adherents of dominant vocabularies? In this Blumenbergian account, a new vocabulary replacing a dominant vocabulary depends on a *crisis*<sup>19</sup> in the old vocabulary *and* the success of *therapeutic philosophizing*.

First, let's look at the perception of a crisis which predates a vocabulary shift.

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the time being, however, let's assume that coherency is a good.

<sup>18</sup> Though Blumenberg uses "system of questions" here, I think he should have said "system of function-positions." What exercises the pressure to reoccupation is not the questions themselves, but the functions those questions are meant to allow us to fulfill.

<sup>19</sup> "Crisis" is here used in a sense associated with its Greek root verb "krinein," which means "to separate, to divide, to choose, to judge" (Blumenberg, 1976; 11).

This sense of crisis may be an outcome of the protracted unproductiveness of a vocabulary or it might arise suddenly from a direct confrontation between the expectations of adherents of a vocabulary, as structured by the vocabulary, and the world.<sup>20</sup> In the first case, if enough answers (read: specific belief-systems) are rejected because of their inadequacy, the question itself comes to seem doubtful. Adherents of the vocabulary come to wonder if the assumptions contained in the question are good assumptions to make. In the second case, the assumptions in the question are disappointed by encounters with the world. This is the sort of thing that happened in the case of Galileo. Blumenberg claims that "Galileo's use of the telescope marks a historical moment whose unsuspected result, the discovery of unseen realities in the universe, was to have radical consequence for the understanding of man's position in and toward nature" because a "wealth of significance of what had hitherto been withheld from man is confirmed, and thus the morality of self-restriction is disabused and put in the wrong and its abandonment is a logical consequence" (Blumenberg, 1976: 369). Galileo saw things that weren't supposed to be there, which made the Christian vocabulary suspect. Either through a slow disappointment or a shocking one, a dominant vocabulary is made suspect as a sense of crisis overwhelms adherent's enthusiasm for the vocabulary.

A sense of crisis regarding the satisfactoriness of a vocabulary originates for the adherents of that vocabulary. Importantly, this sense of crisis is recognized *from within*

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<sup>20</sup> This Blumenbergian account does not contradict, as it might seem, Rorty's anti-representationalism. All we're talking about here is the disappointment of expectations. Expectations are disappointed in a

the vocabulary, though initially it may be restricted to a subpopulation of adherents of the vocabulary. This crisis situation opens up the possibility for rival vocabularies to challenge the accepted vocabulary. Once the old vocabulary has been compromised, adherents of the old vocabulary may come to notice new alternative vocabularies (though these rival vocabularies may have existed prior to the crisis and been ignored). Perhaps the daring or the imaginative decide they want to champion these new vocabularies. These rival vocabularies compete with the dominant vocabulary in competition defined by its rhetorical nature (Blumenberg, 1979: 451). Advocates for the new vocabularies and the old each try to tell each other compelling stories about why their vocabulary is better than all the rest.

Despite the crisis regarding the vocabulary, the specific set of function-positions to which the vocabulary was responding to and shaped by remains forceful. Adherents of the vocabulary realize that their expectations are not going to be met, but they still hold onto those expectations (though they may be more conscious of what those expectations are when they are disappointed). This is why conservatives have a natural advantage in this rhetorical contest. The disappointment in the questions, however, offers the necessary psychological *friction* to begin to evaluate the very function-positions that were motivating and shaping the question. It creates the right sort of situation for therapeutic philosophy. Therapeutic philosophy, if successful, can level and even reverse the natural advantages of the dominant vocabulary.

Therapeutic philosophy involves the intense criticizing of function-positions that motivated the maintenance of past vocabularies.<sup>21</sup> Advocates for a new vocabulary can point to the existing sense of crisis and suggest that perhaps we should choose to conceptually orient ourselves towards a new horizon. They can try to convince the audience to get rid of the expectations that constrain their choices. The sense of crisis injects the level of necessary self-doubt to get the imaginative, young or rebellious thinkers to give up on the accepted vocabulary and go out on a limb. These sorts of rhetorical acts are reminiscent of Wittgenstienian and Nietzschean therapeutic philosophy. They are attempts by "critical intensity" to destroy a function-position or set of function-positions in the older vocabulary thereby undertaking "amputations on the system of world explanations" (Blumenberg, 1976: 66). If advocates for the new vocabulary are successful, they will be able to therapeutically dissolve the questions and the function-positions those questions were occupying. The result is that in the new vocabulary "certain questions are no longer posed, and the answers that were once forceful for them have the appearance of pure dogma, of fanciful redundancy" (Blumenberg, 1976: 467).

It's important to note that Blumenberg's understanding of how to do therapeutic philosophy is different from Rorty's. Whereas Rorty sees therapeutic philosophy as endeavoring to debunk the naturalness of certain *questions* in order to permit us to get rid of

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<sup>21</sup> This can be a gradual process, demanding the work of generations of theorists. This explains why modernity has continued to look less and less Christian. Throughout the generations, theorists dissolve more and more of the function-positions that the Christian vocabulary introduced.

them, Blumenberg suggests that therapeutic philosophy has to be more than that. Therapeutic philosophy must analyze and dispense with the underlying *function-positions* that provoke us to ask those questions in the first place. It must show us why the functions those questions were supposed to perform are not interesting functions. Advocates for a new vocabulary, in Blumenberg's view, must either do this sort of therapy or reoccupy the function-positions with new questions - questions designed to let us perform the same sort of work adherents of the former vocabulary claimed that vocabulary could do (or would be able to do).

When thinking of Blumenberg's conception of therapeutic philosophy, remember that function-positions are themselves instilled within intellectual populations, they don't transcend the bodies that believe in them. Like other sorts of cultural beliefs, these functional needs are socially fluid; meaning they can, over extended periods of time, be reworked or rejected. Therapeutic philosophers attempt to utilize the sense of crisis as leverage for criticizing the very functional criteria that motivated the retention of a vocabulary. Therapeutic philosophy is an attempt, through long-term critical intensity, to question the naturalness of the functional considerations that motivated the maintenance of the dominant vocabulary (Blumenberg, 1976: 65). This questioning, through counter-socialization and rhetorical posturing, denaturalizes the legitimacy of these function-positions. What had been taught as necessary is caricatured as irrelevant.

This therapeutic philosophy, however, cannot delegitimize - immediately at least - all the function-positions ingrained by past vocabularies. Function-positions which are

not weak, which have not been called into question by the crisis, are difficult to remove. These function-positions, the residual needs which still seem compelling, constrain the variability in possible new vocabularies. Resocializing an intellectual population to no longer think certain tasks important is a multigenerational project. The function-positions which remain strong must be reoccupied by a rival vocabulary in order for that vocabulary to be persuasive. For instance, "in the world of Hellenism, Christianity found its function and the scope of the answers required of it prescribed to it as an empty frame to be filled. Its claim to be heard and to take part in the competition of doctrines promising salvation and explanation of the world could only be made good by the acceptance of this function" (Blumenberg, 1976: 68). This pressure to reoccupy explains the continuity between vocabularies.

While the reoccupation thesis does not foreclose the possibility of real vocabulary changes, it does foreclose the possibility of *completely* reorienting ourselves. In vocabulary shifts, new vocabularies are not motivated by all the function-positions that motivated past vocabularies, but they also reoccupy many important function-positions which had motivated past vocabularies. As Blumenberg observes about epochal shifts in general, "it is in fact possible for totally heterogeneous contents to take on identical functions in specific positions in the system of man's interpretation of the world and of himself" (Blumenberg, 1976: 64). The content is different, the vocabulary is different, because in regards to some important function-positions, the new vocabulary doesn't

perform the sorts of functions the old vocabulary did, but there is still a great deal of functional continuity.

So, let's step back a moment and see what this new understanding of vocabulary shifts provides us. As we discovered in the last section, Rorty's description of how individuals choose a rival vocabulary seems to be unable to explain how these leaps of faith are reasonably made. Rorty's account doesn't give us an adequate story about how adherents of a dominant vocabulary would come to choose a new vocabulary.

In contrast, Blumenberg's account provides us with a little more depth. During periods of crisis, function-positions become the common topics for rhetorical exchanges. During periods of crisis, there is enough psychological friction to begin to evaluate the very needs that make a vocabulary interesting. This sense of crisis creates enough intellectual space to allow for reasonable, deliberative and insightful discussion about what sorts of vocabularies should be interesting. For each function-position, advocates of a new vocabulary must either argue that their vocabulary reoccupies that function-position or they must convince adherents of the old vocabulary to give that function-position up. A discussion of this system of function-positions and a vocabulary's ability to fulfill these positions is the *only* way advocates for a new vocabulary *can* persuade adherents of the entrenched vocabulary to switch sides, because *a rhetorical strategy responsive to issues regarding these function-positions is the only sort of rhetoric that is persuasive across different vocabularies*. Since the audience has internalized these

function-positions, to persuade that audience you must respond to these function-positions - either by trying to resocialize the audience or by showing how the new vocabulary can perform those functions.

So, whereas Rorty's story skirts the issue of how a new vocabulary is able to replace a dominant one, Blumenberg's story lets us see that in many ways a new vocabulary ends up being continuous with its predecessor. In other important respects, however, the new vocabulary is able to launch a discussion about the function-positions that were motivating the vocabulary. This sort of therapeutic philosophy, while difficult, has the opportunity to change the very function-positions that shape a vocabulary. In this manner, the adoption of a new vocabulary can, at the same time, be an adoption of a new criteria for evaluating vocabularies. We have a new level of depth with which to understand vocabulary shifts.

However, is this new level of depth a good thing? One of the central strengths of Rorty's story is its attempt to salvage the intuition that we should not limit the radicalness of a new vocabulary. The adoption of a new vocabulary cannot come about because of any cross-vocabulary criteria, even utilitarian criteria, because those criteria would limit the variability of new vocabularies. Rorty wants to preserve the diversity of our cultural imagination by avoiding any appeals to strict notions of rationality, utility or divine right that might inhibit our appreciation of a new vocabulary. He grants that his account is relatively vacuous, but doesn't think we should try to be any more precise than this

(DSP, 1996: 61). If we try to be thicker, we will end up imposing restrictive and limiting criteria on these decisions. Progress often comes from unexpected directions and introduces ideas that, at one time, were unimaginable. Retaining the thinness of Rorty's description, then, is a way of not artificially closing off our options. Does Blumenberg's account run roughshod over this intuition, thereby constraining our imaginations?

I think not. This account does not provide argumentative criteria that we can apply to each and every vocabulary-shift. The notion of "function-positions" helps us to specify some of the topics of discussion that will emerge in a recontextualization, but it doesn't give us a sure-fire means of evaluating recontextualizations. It doesn't provide such criteria, because these function-positions have to be *addressed*, but they don't have to be *accepted*. Just as we've been socialized into thinking these needs important needs to fulfill, we can be resocialized into thinking these needs don't need to be fulfilled. Each epoch defining recontextualization includes the jettisoning of some needs. People simply learn not to be interested in certain issues. In other words, these function-positions are not universal, they are the fluid products of socialization and thus change over history. Since there is always the possibility of setting aside some function-positions, you can't use any specific set of function-positions as "neutral universal criteria" that apply to all vocabulary shifts. They are thicker guidelines than Rorty suggests, but they are still pretty thin - they merely help to set the agenda of what issues have to be addressed, and point to the techniques necessary for recontextualizations to be

persuasive.

It's important to keep in mind that these function-positions should not be construed narrowly. It's not like we're saying that whichever vocabulary appears to be the most useful, thinking of useful in terms of practical benefits, will be adopted. Function-positions could be any number of things. For example, when Cardinal Bellarmine argued against Galileo and the Copernican theory, he was appealing to functional considerations that now appear quaint. He was making sophisticated arguments that we should reject the Copernican theory, because it doesn't accord with the scriptural description of the heavens (Bernstein, 1987: 66-7). Underlying the dispute between Bellarmine and Galileo is a difference of function-positions. For Bellarmine, there is a need to have any scientific theory accord with Biblical truth. Galileo feels this need less. In order for one to win out over the other, at some level or another these two will begin to argue about the very functional considerations that motivate the other retain his position. Function-positions are simply criteria for evaluating vocabularies that have been socialized into intellectual populations. In this sense, function-positions can include upholding Biblical truth, pleasing the Greek gods, or securing ourselves against metaphysics. Function-positions are merely deep seated assumptions about what sort of intellectual work a vocabulary should perform.

While these functional criteria are the topics of rational (i.e., having to do with

reasons) debate, they do not decide these debates. Just as in Rorty's account, there is a fundamental element of rational undecidability in these exchanges. While there is rational, well thought out, insightful debate about vocabularies and the system of function-positions they relate to, choosing one vocabulary over another depends on how courageous, imaginative or rebellious one is. This is why the shift from one vocabulary to another is not instant. There is an extended period where a new vocabulary is getting enough critical mass to break into the mainstream.

While these Blumenbergian guidelines don't decide vocabulary shifts, they do offer a useful framework for thinking about them. They can be very helpful, on a case by case basis, in figuring out why a particular recontextualization was successful. Thinking in this framework will help us pick out the substantive issues that are involved in any given vocabulary shift. As Blumenberg demonstrated in his analysis of the shift from Christianity to Modernity, in particular cases these guidelines can provide us with a sufficiently thick description for understanding what's substantially going on. These guidelines don't artificially restrict the sorts of innovations that vocabulary revolutions can introduce, but they do give us a handle for understanding how these innovations are introduced.

### **Rethinking the Technique of Recontextualization**

From this Blumenbergian account we can draw a few observations that can help us reconceptualize how recontextualizations work. We said earlier that it's hard to see from Rorty's characterization of intellectual history how recontextualizations could ever be successful. Recontextualizations, as Rorty tells us, discuss various advantages and disadvantages of a vocabulary, but, as we figured out later, these advantages and disadvantages only make sense from the interior of the new vocabulary. It is hard to see, then, why adherents of the dominant vocabulary would buy into a recontextualization and find a new vocabulary attractive. Their criteria for making such choices would tend to make the new vocabulary look unappealing.

Following Blumenberg, however, we can get a sense how vocabulary shifts are possible. During periods of crisis, adherents of the dominant vocabulary, because of long term disappointments or sudden contradictions, begin to doubt their vocabulary. This sense of crisis does not lead, however, to an immediate rejection of the function-positions that motivate the retention of the received vocabulary. These function-positions remain a constraining force that makes other vocabularies look inadequate. This sense of crisis, however, affords the possibility for critically discussing these function-positions themselves. Through critical, therapeutic philosophy, imaginative theorists can begin to question the very function-positions that underlie a vocabulary. In this way, both the vocabulary and the criteria of argumentative resolution within that vocabulary become topics of debate.

This has direct bearing on how we think of recontextualizations. Following Blumenberg, we can see that one of the jobs a recontextualization must perform is to reexamine, under situations of crisis, the very function-positions that constrain the variability of new vocabularies. Doing this sort of therapy provides the intellectual space that permits a new vocabulary to seem attractive. This sort of therapy, however, can only be successful within a limited scope (though there's no way of knowing beforehand how limited this scope is). Beyond this scope, in regards to the function-positions which are not therapeutically dissolvable, the new vocabulary must claim to reoccupy the accepted function-positions. If this combination of therapy and reoccupation is successful, a new vocabulary comes to replace a dominant one.

The shift from one vocabulary to another is largely a persuasive act. In this respect, a particular historical audience must be persuaded that the new vocabulary is attractive. Blumenberg's analysis of function-positions, questions, and answers allows us to get a grasp on what this entails. This persuasion involves deliberation on the part of the audience. This deliberative decision making process does not *appeal* to the specific understandings shaped by a vocabulary, but *addresses* specific functions that the entrenched vocabulary was supposed to perform. In order to be persuasive, the advocates for the new vocabulary must compare the old vocabulary in reference to a debatable system of shared function-positions. The vocabulary must be responsive to the psychological needs of adherents of the old vocabulary, or it must be able to deflate those

needs.

So, what does this new perspective on recontextualizations suggest for Rorty's own recontextualization? In order to establish that his vocabulary is more appealing than the traditional modern vocabulary, Rorty must tell a story that illustrates *why* his neo-pragmatist vocabulary is more attractive than the classical modern vocabulary. This story will try to show why certain functional needs the modern vocabulary was supposed to perform are not interesting functions to perform and how his neo-pragmatist vocabulary fulfills the other, still interesting, functions the modern vocabulary purportedly performed. In order to be persuasive, Rorty must accomplish two primary tasks: he must (1) show us that his vocabulary can reoccupy most of the function-positions the traditional vocabulary fulfilled, and (2) therapeutically show us why certain function-positions should be discarded, why we should stop being interested in fulfilling certain function-positions. Rorty's vocabulary will have to *address* (but not necessarily *accept*) the function-positions adherents of the traditional modern vocabulary claimed that vocabulary could fulfill. In order to be persuasive, Rorty will have to address the socialized needs that have been ingrained in participants of the modern vocabulary.

While Rorty has failed to explicitly analyze vocabulary shifts through this framework, I hope to show that, according to this framework, Rorty does a good job of fulfilling these tasks in his recontextualization. This might seem odd to the reader. We've already claimed that Rorty fails to thematize the rhetorical constrains these

function-positions impose upon any recontextualization. And yet, here we are suggesting that Rorty does in fact abide by those constraints, by reoccupying certain function positions associated with the modern vocabulary. I am suggesting that despite Rorty's failure to acknowledge the functional continuity between vocabularies, he does perform the sort of philosophical moves that are expected from the perspective of a Blumenbergian framework. The reason Rorty performs these moves is not because he is thinking in terms of this framework, but because he is sympathetic to his critics. By engaging in dialogue with modernists, Rorty has gained a refined sense of the needs and interests that propel modernists to ask the sorts of questions they do, which allows him to (by and large) accomplish the tasks I outlined above.

Rorty does make some Blumenbergian therapeutic moves, which is why he has to provide an alternative vocabulary and not merely some new answers to old questions. Most importantly, Rorty is interested in massaging away the desire to see the world in metaphysical terms. He wants to cure us of the need for metaphysical comfort that has shaped and motivated the universalist and representationalist questions. Whereas the modern vocabulary taught us to want metaphysical assurances and permitted us think we could obtain those assurances, Rorty's neo-pragmatist recontextualization tries to teach us why we shouldn't want those metaphysical assurances and why we don't need mechanisms within our vocabulary to achieve those assurances. Rorty wants us to give up on certain function-positions, which amounts to seeing those desires as we know see

the Greek desire to appease the Gods - to see them as fanciful, quaint, silly.

Since Rorty does make these more substantial therapeutic moves, his vocabulary takes on a radically different systemic logic compared to the traditional modern vocabulary. Because vocabularies are systems of questions that have a certain systemic logic to them, Rorty's refusal to claim to satisfy certain traditional functions associated with the modern vocabulary necessitates that he propose an entirely different vocabulary. He can't merely scrape away philosophical pretensions, because those pretensions have infected our vocabulary systemically; they have been circulated through the vocabulary. He must, instead, propose a new vocabulary, a new set of questions, that will avoid claims to providing metaphysical comfort. If Rorty was fine with the complete set of those function-positions, he would not need to provide a new vocabulary at all - he could just make some isolated suggestions about how we could best obtain our needs, about how we could answer the modernists' questions. It is precisely because Rorty is not comfortable with some of the needs, that he wants to articulate a new vocabulary.

My contribution to this discussion then, is to reframe the debates between Rorty and his critics in terms of this Blumenbergian framework. Assuming the notions of vocabulary and recontextualization that Rorty has developed, I attempt to show how those notions interact with the function-positions of the modern vocabulary. This contribution fulfills a deficiency in Rorty's own account in that it provides us with a robust systematic handle for evaluating Rorty's work.

## **In Summary**

In conclusion, this chapter shows us that we have to think of Rorty's project as revolutionary philosophy (as the articulation of a vocabulary) rather than normal philosophy (arguing within the criteria of an antecedently accepted vocabulary). Rorty is in a rhetorical position - he is trying to recontextualize and narrativize our cultural and philosophical position in a way that tempts us to adopt his new vocabulary. The Blumenbergian framework we developed gives us a handle with which evaluate this rhetorical project and to suggest improvements. From this framework, we will look for Rorty's therapeutic attempts to dissolve certain function-positions and his attempts to reoccupy other function-positions. The following chapters utilize this framework to explicate and evaluate Rorty's philosophical project.