

WHAT TO DO WHEN THEY CALL YOU A "RELATIVIST"

Recently, when I have sympathetically criticized Rorty in public discussions, I have discovered an enormous amount of hostility towards his work. He is frequently condemned for what some take to be the ultimate philosophical sin: failing to be "serious." Although, I have been sharply critical of some of Rorty's claims, I think it is unfortunate that many philosophers are all too eager to dismiss him as an "irresponsible" relativist and fail to do justice to his eminently serious practical-moral vision.

Richard Bernstein,
Beyond Objectivity and Relativism

The fact that any philosophical system is bound in advance to be a dialectical game, a Philosophie des Als Ob, means that systems abound, unbelievable systems, beatifically constructed or else sensational in effect. The metaphysicians of Tlon are not looking for truth, nor even for an approximation of it, they are after a kind of amazement. They consider metaphysics a branch of fantastic literature.

Jorge Luis Borges,
Ficciones

As I have noted, Rorty rejects the representationalist and moral universalist questions. He wants us to excise from ourselves the metaphysical desire to find the true nature of the world and the true nature of ourselves. Attempting to reoccupy the non-metaphysical function-positions these questions occupied, Rorty's neo-pragmatist vocabulary contains post-metaphysical substitute questions. These questions, in line with their non-metaphysical tone, embrace the contingency of both our ethical and epistemic communities. In Rorty's vocabulary, metaphysics is replaced by solidarity as the quality

of relation which makes our ethical intuitions meaningful and correspondence knowledge is replaced by coping as the goal which gives sense to our intellectual endeavors.

In regard to ethics and politics, Rorty wants to adopt a vocabulary that dispenses with the universalist question and explains why we act in particular moral patterns in terms of socialization. We act morally, and we hold certain actions to be moral, because we've been taught to see human conduct through a particular culturally manufactured lens. Different cultures see things through different lens, and there's no way of pointing to some deeper, essential, universal sense of morality to weed out authentic moral lenses from inauthentic. Rorty recommends that we ethnocentrically justify our set of moral habits, ideals and institutions, a set that is unique in its devotion to a tolerant attitude toward others. Being a liberal, for Rorty, means being someone whose culture encourages tolerance of different perspectives and life orientations and avoids cruelty towards others. Being ethnocentrically proud of this liberal culture is all we need in order to have an effective sense of our liberal culture's legitimacy, all we need to know how to expand our moral community and all we need in order to criticize and reform that culture.

In regard to inquiry, the search for knowledge, Rorty suggests that we rid ourselves of representationalist assumptions. Instead of trying to discover the true contours of the world, we should think of our academic practices in terms of an interaction between our habits of justification and the domain of causal forces of the world. We should orient ourselves, not by trying to unearth the truth, but by trying to cope with our world, trying to achieve our ends. Since there is no longer any

metaphysical truth we're supposed to be finding, all the different areas of academia (and other contexts for inquiry) are roughly in tune with the world. They offer different vocabularies for different ends. In the same way that Rorty emphasizes the sociological aspect of our ethical norms, he emphasizes the sociological aspect of inquiry. In both cases, he renounces the traditional search for a metaphysical foundation, an archimedean point as anchor for these activities.

In broad strokes, the above outlines Rorty's neo-pragmatist vocabulary. What this chapter will discuss is the anti-relativist response that this vocabulary has encountered. From the standpoint of tradition, abandoning the search for metaphysical foundations, foundations that would constrain the acceptable ethical communities and the acceptable forms of inquiry, opens the floodgates to relativism. Accepting relativism, for these modernists, is tantamount to accepting a cultural situation where we can expect communities to have radically different viewpoints on topics like morality and knowledge that may not be persuasive or even understandable to another community. Accepting relativism is to abandon the attempt to resolve ethical and epistemic differences. Metaphysicians view metaphysics as the intellectual means of quarantining the relativist virus.

Popularly, this relativist threat, though conceptually similar in both areas, assumes different associations according to the area of culture in which it's perceived.¹

Universalist critics of Rorty's vocabulary have the biggest problem with the *ethical*

¹ The distinction between *ethical relativism* and *cognitive relativism* used in this chapter has been commonplace in recent discussions of relativism. It reflects a general distinction, prevalent in our culture, between ethical or political issues and epistemic or scientific issues.

relativism of Rorty's position. Their intuitive response to Rorty's proposal is to say it is a bad proposal, because it doesn't give us a way of establishing the universal superiority of our morality, which is necessary in order to understand why we are better than people like Hitler and how we can prove to people like Hitler that they are wrong, bad, and immoral. Representationalists, on the other hand, worry that Rorty's vocabulary leads to *cognitive relativism*. They worry that Rorty's view of inquiry leads us to think that any group of justification habits is as good as any other, and therefore that there is no real notion of progress in inquiry – we're just shifting around from one set of beliefs to another.

Peculiar fears which animate Rorty's critics emerge in this discussion of relativism. This chapter gives us a sense of the deep rooted metaphysical considerations that influence the universalist and representationalist questions. The underlying metaphysical drives that shaped the formation of both the universalist and representationalist questions are informed by a fear of the relativist menace. While the last chapter focused on how Rorty responds to the functional considerations that have motivated the maintenance of the universal and representationalist questions, this chapter focuses on the larger background of metaphysics that has motivated both of these questions. The dipolar debate between metaphysicians and relativists has motivated much of western philosophy (and culture). This chapter looks at how Rorty tries to move us beyond this impasse.²

² Richard Bernstein, in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, has written an insightful examination of this debate.

Rorty rejects the metaphysical beliefs that motivated and shaped the modern vocabulary. He believes that the usefulness of the term “relativism” goes when metaphysics goes. In order to move beyond the charge of relativism though, he must *convince traditionalists* that they shouldn’t want to be metaphysicians anymore, and thus that they shouldn’t find the term “relativist” useful anymore. This chapter looks at what Rorty does when people call him a relativist. It looks at how Rorty tries to deflate the import of the charge of “relativism.” In regard to the last chapter, then, this chapter further extends our understanding of the Blumenbergian therapy that Rorty hopes to accomplish. It expands our understanding of how Rorty hopes to convince the metaphysician to stop being a metaphysician.

What Does “Relativism” Really Mean?

The charge of relativism is a powerful but ambiguous one. It has a lot rolled into it; the task of this section will be to isolate the different things going on when critics claim Rorty is a relativist. Here’s one possible meaning of saying someone is a relativist. If she is a relativist, you might think, then she has no way of legitimizing her commitments (ethical or epistemic) to herself. She has no reason for acting one way versus acting another, because all cultural values and norms of inquiry are on the same philosophical ground - only through arbitrary choices could she assume one set of commitments over another. Relativism, in this sense, “is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other” (CP, 1982: 166).

What is meant by relativism here is more like ‘nihilism’ - the belief that all commitments are equally good, and there is no principled reason to choose one set of commitments over another.

This sort of relativism-as-nihilism is relatively easy to refute, because it is paradoxical. If Rorty claims that all claims are as good as any other claims, then there is no reason to assume that that claim itself is any better than the claim that certain claims are objectively better than others. So, “if there were any relativists, they would, of course, be easy to refute. One would merely use some variant of the self-referential arguments Socrates used against Protagoras” (CP, 1982: 167). These arguments all say that this sort of relativism is inconsistent, that it cancels itself out in a self-referential paradox. Statements like “all truth is a matter of interpretation” seem to be inherently inconsistent, because if the argument is true, it calls its own conclusion into doubt. Is the claim “all truth is a matter of interpretation” merely an interpretation? If it is only an interpretation, why is it a better interpretation than the claim that “all truth is a matter of correspondence between beliefs and reality?” As we touched upon in the first chapter, this line of reasoning has widely been perceived, by the tradition, as a dead end.

In fact, this line of thought has been so widely perceived as inadequate, it has rarely been actively advocated. Rather, this sort of relativism has typically been used by modern philosophy professors as a “straw man.” They trot out this scarecrow to demonstrate to first year students the importance of clear headed thought and the function of philosophy. As Rorty suggests, “no one holds this view” (CP, 1982: 166). Largely this sort of view has been discussed merely as a way of positively reinforcing

metaphysical desires, just like stories of boogie men serve to keep children asleep in their beds.

All Rorty has to show in order to refute this sort of criticism is that we still have ways of evaluating ethical and epistemological claims even if we give up on ethical universalism and representationalism. All he has to do is explain why anti-universalists and anti-representationalists won't become nihilists. Rorty does this by focusing on sociological explanations. Ethnocentrism, our culture's natural social inertia, provides the explanation for why we remain in our moral community, while the success of our communities standards of justifying beliefs explains why we stay in our intellectual community. These living practices are enough to make the real world decisions we routinely make about which beliefs should be believed. Rorty, then, in both cases of cognitive and ethical relativism, establishes that we have reasons, even from within his post-metaphysical perspective, to think that certain beliefs are better than others, and thus we will not become nihilists even if we are post-metaphysical.

Rorty claims, however, that this understanding of relativism-as-nihilism doesn't get at the heart of the issue. The real force to the relativist charge, he claims, stems from the contrast between "relatively valid" and "universally valid." Critics charge Rorty with relativism, because he gives up the attempt to find universal, ahistorical truth, either of the ethical or epistemic sort - he stops trying to discover metaphysical foundations. The practical force of the relativism charge, then, only makes sense to someone who can make sense of the contrast between "relative validity" and "universal validity," a distinction that only makes sense to someone who thinks there can be something more

than community indexed values and practices of justifying beliefs. The charge of relativism only makes sense to someone who thinks that we can be more than ethnocentric in our norms of inquiry and ethics.

Rorty suggests that the force of the relativist knee-jerk criticisms comes from the intuition that the sort of ethnocentrism he suggests is insufficient to support ethical, political, and epistemological commitments. Rorty argues that this intuition is a product of our assumptions about the possibility of neutrally and ahistorically justifying these commitments. According to Rorty:

To say that convictions are only 'relatively valid' might seem to mean that they can only be justified to people who hold certain other beliefs - not to anyone and everyone. But if this were what was meant, the term would have no contrastive force, for there would be no interesting statement which were absolutely valid. . . . so we must construe the term 'only relatively valid beliefs' as contrasting with statements capable of being justified to all those who are uncorrupted - that is, to all those in whom reason, viewed as a built-in truth-seeking faculty, or consciousness, viewed as a built-in righteousness detector, is powerful enough to overcome evil passions, vulgar superstitions, and base prejudices. The notion of 'absolute validity' does not make sense except on the assumption of a self which divides fairly neatly into the part it shares with the divine and the part it shared with animals (CIS, 1991: 47).

In other words, the charge of relativism only has force if it relies on the moral universalist and representationalist assumptions of the modern vocabulary, which means that the charge of relativism amounts to saying to the post-metaphysician: you have some counter-intuitive views.

Rorty claims that the charge of relativism loses its force if we question the distinction between universally valid and relatively valid - which is precisely what he does with his anti-metaphysics moves. Rorty's response to the relativism criticism, then, is not to deny that his views are relativistic, but to respond that from his vocabulary that

observation is a nonsequitar - either it is a trivial observation or a senseless one - because from within his vocabulary there is no term to contrast “relativist” with. Rorty sidesteps the issue, then, by claiming that from his perspective the charge of relativism is either boring or unintelligible.

So, Rorty doesn't want to answer this charge of relativism. He just wants to change the subject by remarking that talking about relativism in this sense begs the question. The real question is not whether Rorty is a relativist or not, it's whether we should give up the metaphysical aspirations we hold dear. Rorty thinks we should; traditionalists think we shouldn't – a subject we canvassed in chapters two and three. The charge of relativism is merely an obscuring way of saying that from the traditionalist's perspective it seems like we're dumping the proverbial baby with the bath water. When talking to a Rortyan style neo-pragmatist, then, using the term 'relativism' is like talking about Greek Gods to a Christian (DSP, 1996: 47). Rorty doesn't think of himself as a relativist, because of the associations the term has - associations which have historically made sense only within a metaphysical vocabulary. While he would prefer to call his view “post-metaphysical,” his critics call him a “relativist.” Rorty's point is not so much that these critics are wrong - he isn't a relativist - but that the neo-pragmatist position questions the very assumptions which would lead one to use that word (DSP, 1996: 47).

Rorty's implicit argument, then, is that we should talk about metaphysics not relativism. If Rorty's recontextualization is persuasive when it comes to giving up metaphysics, then the relativism issues falls by the wayside. Rather than discussing

relativism, we should discuss whether attempting to find a metaphysical reality is a good idea - whether we should search for this metaphysical reality in order to secure our ethics and inquiry against a changing and chaotic world.

Does Rorty himself, however, beg the question by redirecting the relativism debate back into the debate about metaphysics? Does the charge of relativism, even if only intelligible from a metaphysical standpoint, tell us anything new about the metaphysical worldview; anything that we haven't got at before? Following the Blumenbergian functionalist perspective set up in chapter one, does the metaphysician's concern with relativism reveal important functional considerations that motivate the metaphysical quest? Does the fear of relativism reveal functional considerations that deeply inform the universalist and representationalist questions? I believe it does. The question of relativism, in the context of the metaphysical drives that animate the modern vocabulary, reveals some important functional considerations that motivate the maintenance of the modern vocabulary. By examining the question of relativism we can get to a functional consideration that motivates the metaphysicist question. Rorty tends to, I think, brush over this function-position.

While Rorty gets at the connection between the pursuit of metaphysics and the desire for comfort, stability and security in a chaotic world, the charge of relativism, I think helps to illustrate another set of needs that motivate the metaphysical project. Often the charge of relativism, I suggest, is motivated by a fear of society splitting off into isolated factions who have no means of deciding disputes. Metaphysicians want a way of showing that certain beliefs and the communities that hold them are simply wrong,

simply not objective knowledge. To continue our outline presented in the second chapter, we might define this function-position as:

(2) The objectivist function: answering the metaphysics question will allow us to show how some perspectives are in error thereby allowing all of us to access a common objective viewpoint.

The idea is that discovering metaphysical truth will be a check against the differences between moral and epistemic communities. We can constrain the variability of subjective perspectives on the world by an account of objective knowledge. If we don't do this, metaphysicians believe our social interactions will be misguided and uncoordinated.

Rorty embraces divergence in community opinion. He encourages the proliferation of cultural voices, as evidenced in his endorsement to the world disclosing aspect of language. In order to address the functional considerations that motivate the retention of the modern vocabulary, then, it seems that Rorty ought to respond to this aspect of the relativist criticism. Because he needs to at least address this function-position in order to offer a persuasive position for modernists, Rorty's refusal to acknowledge the issue seems inadequate.³ Rorty does, however, provide us with the resources to make a response. While he does not employ these resources in his discussion of relativism, he does in other areas of his writings supply the resources for a defense against the fear that the proliferation of moral and epistemic communities may lead, at its logical extreme, to a situation where different communities have radically different understandings of morality and inquiry.

This response assumes that what the metaphysician really wants (or should really want) is a way to coordinate ethical and epistemic action. More fundamental than the desire for objectivism, for accurate unbiased knowledge, is the desire for a commonality between groups that permits us to pursue our ethical and epistemic endeavors. If you think of beliefs as habits of action, as Rorty does, then our commonsense intuition that when two people have different views on the same topic at least one of those views must be wrong can be substituted with the intuition that when two people have different views on the same topic they can't believe both views if those views suggest different patterns of action. The response I am going to outline reoccupies this deeper function of coordinating action. I suggest that Rorty's position provides us with intelligent mechanisms for coordinating ethical and epistemic activity thereby avoiding the danger of relativism.

The task I've set out for myself in the next two sections, then, is to reconstruct Rorty's position in order to highlight the bounds on his endorsement of the proliferation of cultural voices. The next couple of sections will examine these sides of the "relativist scare." This response to the fear of relativism, a level deeper than Rorty's own, makes Rorty's vocabulary more attractive to metaphysicians, because it addresses more of their concerns. By showing how Rorty's vocabulary doesn't lead to a fragmentation of society, or at least endorses such fragmentation only insofar as is appropriate, this chapter helps to free our minds from the bonds of metaphysics.

³ Rorty does celebrate the variability of different vocabularies in relation to metaphysics, but he doesn't flesh this out adequately. See the section on metaphysics in the last chapter and CP pg. 166.

Ethical Relativism

For universalists, Rorty's explicit acknowledgement that the only privilege our moral community owns is that it is ours, makes him a relativist. It means that he gives up on the goal of grounding a universal Enlightenment moral community on a notion of a cross-cultural human nature. Moral universalists don't think that our Eurocentric liberal culture is merely something we've come up with; for them, it's something that fits with the essential nature of human beings. They worry that Rorty's position affords non-liberal moral communities the philosophical grounds for rejecting this ideal. For universalists, without the necessary constraint provided by a metaphysical foundation for the Enlightenment moral utopia, varied and irreconcilable moral communities will develop, including - potentially - moral communities which forsake Enlightenment values.

Their abhorrence of Rorty's position, and the pejorative label of relativism they attach to it, stems from their fear that Rorty has given up on trying to establish a universal moral culture. Moral universalists fear that Rorty has delimited the appropriateness of liberal views to merely our community. According to them, if you can't demonstrate an intrinsic universal moral nature, how are you going to refute the attitudes of people like the Nazis, racists, or sexists. The ability to universally, a priori, refute certain moral attitudes is so important, because it either gives you a means of convincing these people to adopt your position, or if they cannot be convinced, justifies your intolerance and belligerence towards them. Abstractly, moral universalists feel that Rorty's position

allows for the intense diversification of conceptions of the good life. If there's no way of showing that the Enlightenment moral vision, revolving around notions of liberty and democracy, is a priori better than other moral visions, universalists worry that a relativist predicament ensues. In this predicament, groups who hold different moral and ethical visions, including groups whose visions contradict the notions of liberty and democracy that inform the Enlightenment vision, will be equally respected. Democratic liberalism will lose its moral high-ground.

The moral universalist sought an answer to the universalist question as a way of preventing this centrifugal force. Understanding the common human nature that underlies all conceptions of morality was both meant to assure us that we were on the right track, and that we should be able, assuming we were dealing with rational human beings, to convince others to follow our lead. For universalists, due to their metaphysical orientation, the legitimacy of our own moral intuitions and the value others should recognize in those intuitions were the same thing. In this manner, furnishing a metaphysical foundation for the moral vision of the Enlightenment was necessary to abate a relativist predicament. Capping the centrifugal forces that might permit every moral vision to look as attractive as any other was a motivating force for the metaphysician.

Rorty denies that the Enlightenment, liberal, democratic vision of morality and politics should be grounded on a metaphysical foundation. For Rorty there is no way of *neutrally endorsing* one particular ethical, political stance over another. Rorty accepts the claim that "there is no standpoint outside a particular historically conditioned and

temporary vocabulary we are presently using from which to judge this vocabulary” which requires him to “give up on the idea that there can be reasons for using languages as well as reasons within languages for believing statements” (CIS, 1989: 48). From this post-metaphysical standpoint, Rorty suggests we would be better off trying to make clear exactly what the Enlightenment moral and political vision is and work to concretely realize that vision.

Does this lead to the proliferation of moral visions that concerns the universalist? If Rorty were to answer this question, in his initial response, he would probably point out that in a certain sense a fear of relativism is antithetical to being a good liberal democrat. Rorty would argue that liberal democratic societies were founded on encouraging the diversification of moral visions. Liberal democracies, especially in the U.S., arose as a means of governing a society that was characterized by different understandings of the moral life. Democracy, the separation of church and state, the creation of inalienable civil rights, the freedom of the press; all tie into an acceptance and endorsement of a discussion of alternative models for the best way to live one’s life. Liberal democratic understandings of morality and politics are premised on the assumption that through these lively encounters we gain a refined sense of the options for modeling our life on. They also are premised on the idea that we should be allowed to *choose* from these alternative proposals. So, this version of the relativist fear, at its extreme, indicates a metaphysical worldview that is intensely undemocratic and illiberal. For Rorty, the metaphysical attempt to figure out, a priori and indisputably, the philosophically privileged view of the moral life is an attempt to end conversation. It is an attempt to artificially restrict the

differences and freedoms that characterize liberal democracies. This sort of relativist fear is more appropriate for a dictator than a liberal democrat.

Rorty recognizes, however, that liberal democracies don't tolerate everyone. More precisely, they don't tolerate the people who can't tolerate others, the people who burn down black churches, the anti-Semites, the gay bashers, etc. So, while a liberal democracy should tolerate most visions of the moral life, they cannot tolerate the realization of those visions that run counter to the notions of liberty and democracy. Rorty's way of handling individuals like the Nazis, those groups who have trouble tolerating others, is to try to reeducate them into our moral community. Besides coercively restraining them, in war or prison for example (both at times justified), Rorty's only option is to try to get them to recognize their common solidarity with the people they have trouble tolerating. This is the key distinction for liberals, between people who have different ideas of the good life but who are able to tolerate other views, and those who cannot. Towards the first we should embrace their relativism, towards the second we should try to reeducate them.

Rorty agrees with the metaphysician that these sorts of bigots should not be accepted, but he disagrees about the best way of containing them. Whereas the metaphysician thinks that we can look to philosophy to come up with clever arguments which can reform the enemies of liberalism, Rorty suggests the best way to contain this threat is educate our young not to be bigots. As our discussion in the third chapter covered, Rorty believes, for numerous reasons, that the attempt to contain this relativist threat is best done by the creation of a liberal democratic ethos. This ethos will be

created when we can get - through the manipulation of sentiment (through stories, through anthropological reports, through documentaries, etc.) - people like the Nazis to see others as worthy of the same moral consideration as they give other Nazis. This should not be construed as a facile distinction between how we handle other democratic societies and how we handle our own. In cases internal to liberal democracies (e.g., the KKK) as well as external to democracies (e.g., the Nazis), Rorty suggests we must work to realize the ideal of liberal societies. Just as we might try to reeducate a Stalinist we should try to reeducate the skinhead in the U.S.

In my hypothetical Rortyan response, then, Rorty would try to reoccupy this relativist function-position only to a limited degree. He would argue that the desire to force all moral differences to the outside, if we want to be good liberal democrats, is a bad idea. He would acknowledge, however, that we do have to contain this relativist threat somewhat; we do have to try to create a pervasive liberal mentality that prides itself on tolerance except for those who act intolerantly. And yet, he would proceed to point out that the best way to do this is not through metaphysics but through the social creation of liberal virtues. In this response, we should try to coordinate ethical activity by socializing individuals within a liberal democratic community. Within this community, however, ethical action should have no dictated coordination. A liberal democratic society provides the freedom for individuals to spontaneously choose different models of the good life. We should give up on Kantian moral philosophy and start to concentrate on manipulating sentiment through novels, speeches, anthropologist's reports, etc.

So, the force of the charge of relativism seems to stem from the moral universalist's fear that giving up on the attempt to demonstrate an intrinsic, universal nature leads to a tower of Ba'bel situation where each moral community is on the same footing as any other - even the enemies of liberal democracies. While Rorty either misses this implication of the charge of relativism, feels it is adequately covered elsewhere, or just fails to grasp the nettle, this section has tried to show how Rorty's position supplies ample resources for responding to this relativist fear. As we can see, embracing alternative conceptions of the ethical life, so long as they remain within the bounds of a liberal democratic mentality, is a good thing. Those advocates of alternative conceptions that do not exhibit the virtues of liberal democrats should be reeducated. From this standpoint, we no longer need metaphysics as the blunt instrument to pound in and secure our ethical and political convictions.

Cognitive Relativism

Representationalists have an even greater fear that Rorty will not be able to fulfill the objectivity function. Whereas doctrines of ethical relativism have been common recently, doctrines of cognitive relativism have been less common. This asymmetry reflects a difference in the level of comfortableness, in liberal democratic societies, in the tolerance of divergence in ethical and scientific discourses: generally, liberal democrats are comfortable with the idea that different groups of people have different conceptions of the good life, but are uncomfortable with the idea that different epistemic communities could have radically different ideas about how the world is. Science is supposed to ultimately lead to consensus; liberal democratic politics is supposed to be a means of dealing with a lack of consensus. And thus, relativism may be appropriate in politics and ethics but not in objective inquiry.

For representationalists, it's very hard to imagine that there is no objective world that checks the various opinions we can have about the world. They think that real academic progress depends upon us having an account of objective knowledge. This account of objective knowledge is what separates us from the primitives, it is what undergirds our scientific progress and our technological progress. If we are sure that we are getting at objective knowledge, we can be sure that we will progress along a linear path in our understanding of the world. Developing an understanding of the metaphysical world, the real world, then, is critical to unifying academic inquiry in a progressive direction.

Their abhorrence of Rorty's position, their tendency to charge it with relativism, is an outgrowth of the fear that Rorty has given up the pursuit of an account of objective knowledge. The fear that Rorty's position suggests that there is no epistemic privilege to the sorts of knowledge Enlightenment cultures have produced, e.g., there's no way of saying that astrophysics is more objective than astrology. This suggests that our progress, including progress in scientific disciplines, has been illusory. A theory of representation is so important for the representationalists, because it supposedly will ground this account of objective knowledge. It will provide us with insights into how objective knowledge is possible.

Related to this relativist fear is another motivation for the metaphysician that we have yet to discuss, the desire to refute idealism. Representationalists also think that only an account of objective knowledge can account for the error in the view that the world is somehow a construction of our beliefs. They fear that without an objective account of knowledge, there is no reason to think that the world we experience is more than a mere construction of our beliefs. Rather than our beliefs, ideally at least, reflecting the world, the world reflects our beliefs. If the idealist predicament is true, then, we can believe anything we want and different individuals or groups may operate in different worlds.

Traditionally, representationalists looked to metaphysics as a way of ruling out social constructivist and idealist positions. If we could discover a real world, a world independent of our beliefs about it, we could demonstrate that idealism was fundamentally wrongheaded. Idealist doctrines could be debunked in the light of metaphysical truth. Representationalists looked to metaphysics as a way of establishing

that the world is independent of our beliefs about it, that the world has a causal power over us. Related, then, to the objectivist function-position is the realist function-position.

We can summarize this function-position as:

(3) The realist function: answering the metaphysicist question will allow us to rule out the possibility that, as human beings, we somehow create the external world.

So long as representationalists want to prove the existence of the *real* world, they will be interested in metaphysics.

Much of the additional horror at Rorty's position, then, has to do with this fear of idealism. Rorty's critics worry that his position leads us into this whimsical idealist world where different communities of inquirers can construct any world they want to. This deflates the possibility of inquiry being tied down to a common world, the possibility of us, as a community, coming to a better and better picture of the true nature of the world. If inquiry in some sense creates the world it studies, all sorts of pseudo academic pursuits, like astrology, or Biblical creation stories, or new age theories about aliens, are justified.

Rorty's position seems to suggest that there is no way of securing objective knowledge, that relativism and idealism are acceptable philosophical positions. Let's first look at how Rorty's position suggests cognitive relativism. Rorty denies that there is any objective world our knowledge is trying to picture accurately. According to Rorty, different academic groups are trying to obtain useful beliefs about the world, which suggests that any number of academic groups, so long as their inquiry is useful in some sense, can be justified. Potentially, then, multiple academic groups can be handling the

same topic from different perspectives. Rorty admits as much when he writes that we shouldn't see "Duns Scotus as more or less open to questions of justification than Darwin, even though his views about what beliefs were relevant to what other beliefs were quite different" (RP, 1995: 153). Doesn't this suggest the sort of relativism which will cripple academic pursuits? Doesn't this suggest the abandonment of any notion of academic progress? Second, Rorty's position seems to lead to idealism. If each academic community can have its own picture of the way the world works, doesn't it seem like the act of academic inquiry in some sense creates the object of study? If different academic communities are working in different worlds, so to speak, doesn't that seem to suggest that we can control the world through our beliefs? Don't we need a notion of a metaphysical world as a way of checking against this tendency to slip off into a world of fancy?

From the standpoint of metaphysics, the fear that Rorty is a relativist bleeds into the fear that he is an idealist. This issue of idealism is connected to the issue of relativism in that they both illustrate a fear that Rorty has given up a sense in which certain beliefs hook up to a reality. In the relativist predicament, the contours of the world no longer make a difference when evaluating different descriptive beliefs. In the idealist predicament, the contours of the world are manufactured by our beliefs about them, different communities live in different worlds that are the product of their own minds. In both cases, for the representationalist, the metaphysical real world, a real world that is independent of our beliefs and to which our beliefs must correspond, is a way of

checking a tendency towards arbitrariness and whimsical fancy which can potentially lead to disastrous consequences.

Does Rorty's position lead to cognitive relativism or idealism? I will first look at the charge of relativism and then move on to the charge of idealism. In regards to the charge of relativism, I think Rorty would say that as in the case of ethical relativism, a fear of cognitive relativism is also antithetical to being a good liberal democrat. Inquiry in open societies, from Rorty's perspective, is a matter of any different groups proposing different vocabularies, as different ways of seeing the world, and then letting others criticize and modify those vocabularies. Trying to rule out certain vocabularies as subjective, then, leads us to artificially restrict the ability to examine new ways of seeing the world. In this perspective, the pursuit of objective knowledge retards our academic process.

Only within a vocabulary, within a way of looking at the world, is it appropriate to limit the variability of hypotheses before the act of inquiry. Vocabularies are important, because they include assumptions about the way the world behaves which limit the variability of claims that can be made about the world. They also include rules for evaluating claims. These limitations serve to direct and channel academic inquiry in a constructive direction. They permit us to coordinate epistemic activity. Within a vocabulary, inquiry progresses more like Kuhn's description of normal science, inquiry progresses according to a commonly agreed framework. This framework provides the shared assumptions that make disagreements resolvable. Within a vocabulary there is no

possibility for relativism, because vocabularies set up the rules for adjudicating disputes.

It is only at the level of different vocabularies that cognitive relativism is appropriate.

Rorty would recognize, however, that there is some point to capping the variability in different vocabularies. If we have too many different sorts of intellectual communities, there will be no coordinated academic activity within culture at large. With too many vocabularies for inquiry, there will be no force for any one vocabulary against another. Rorty's notion of coping, however, helps to set bounds on the variety of vocabularies. Every vocabulary is *not* as good as every other vocabulary, because certain vocabularies are more useful, they let us cope with the world in interesting ways. While Rorty allows for differences between epistemic communities, these differences are permitted only insofar as they enable us to do different sorts of intellectual work. Different vocabularies for inquiry allow us to do different things. Vocabularies which don't let us reach a new set of interests, however, are redundant in Rorty's perspective. Coping, then, limits the extent of Rorty's endorsement of cognitive relativism.

This notion of coping is also behind Rorty's rethinking of academic progress. As we examined in the last chapter, Rorty wants to think of progress as progress from our historical ancestors rather than progress towards a focus imaginarius. Rorty's notion of progress thinks of progress in terms of our needs being fulfilled. Because our needs may change at any given point, this notion of progress is not necessarily culminate. It does, however, give us a sense of our goals and whether we're meeting them. It's not like Rorty has just give up on progress.

Now let's look at the charge that Rorty is an idealist. In contrast to the charge of cognitive relativism, Rorty answers the charge of idealism much more straightforwardly.⁴

Rorty admits that one of the basic problems for anti-representationalists "is to find a way of putting their point" which avoids sounding like they claim that there is "a force which shapes facts out of indeterminate goo, constructs reality out of something not yet determinate enough to count as real" (ORT, 1991: 5). Rorty clearly argues that giving up the idea of an objective world, a world independent our beliefs about it, does not lead to idealism.

So, what is Rorty's argument? Rorty claims, as we got into in the last chapter, that we don't need representationalist notions of an objective world in order to have a vibrant sense of the world's causal power over us. The mistake that representationalists make is that they conflate two different senses of the world's independence. On the one hand, the world's independence can be construed in metaphysical terms: the world is independent of our beliefs about it, it exists in a certain way regardless of how we think the world exists. In this sense, some of our beliefs may accurately represent the world and others may not depending upon whether those beliefs correspond to the real features of the world or whether they don't. On the other hand, the world's independence can be construed in merely causal terms: the world is independent of our beliefs about it, the world may behave in unexpected ways regardless of what we believe. Rorty suggests that the first sense of independence is useless, but the second is very useful, because it

⁴ There are many places where Rorty looks at the question of whether he is an idealist very closely.

reminds us that we always will have to cope with the world. Unlike the idealists, Rorty doesn't think we can control the world through our beliefs.

Rorty's response to the charge of idealism is that the bounds of inquiry are not free from the hold of the real world, but neither are they collapsible into this real world. Inquiry, including scientific inquiry as well as other forms, is an attempt to find beliefs that can harness the real causal forces of the external world. It's hasn't proven helpful, according to Rorty, to think of this harnessing in representationalist terms. All we can do is check our expectations against experience. All we can do is experiment with these beliefs, and these ways of justifying beliefs, to see if they bring us back the outcomes we hoped for. Inquiry, then, is one part our interests and another part the causal interactions between our beliefs and the world. We can't separate one out from the other, so we might as well adopt a pragmatic attitude towards inquiry and think of ourselves as organisms trying to cope with our world, not as organisms trying to plant our hands on the truth, on a metaphysical reality that transcends us.

Rorty is not an idealist because he retains a notion of the world's causal independence from our beliefs about it. Believing in these sorts of causal forces allows the anti-representationalist to be "in touch with reality" (RP, 1995: 224); she is no more "free from pressure from the outside, no more tempted to be 'arbitrary,' than anyone else" (ORT, 1991: 101). In fact, this sense of causal independence is central to his understanding of why we have to cope with the world.

So, we can see that Rorty is not an extreme relativist or an idealist. Inquiry, in Rorty's view, is not as susceptible to the arbitrariness of fancy - either a relativistic

arbitrariness or an idealist whimsy - as the representationalist might suppose. While a certain level of dispersion of epistemic communities will naturally come about, a disbursement related to the divergence of our cultural interests, Rorty's focus on coping will constrain the centrifugal tendencies unleashed by this relativism. Additionally, Rorty's notion of the world's causal forces, an assumption that is central to the vibrancy of the coping question, will limit the excesses of whimsical groups of inquirers.

Different epistemic communities will derive different conclusions about the world, but they will not be able to derive any conclusion they want – they will not be given license to author the world. Because Rorty is not an idealist, because he accepts the causal thatness of the world, he delimits the conceptual space for epistemic communities.

Epistemic communities may have different standards of justification and these may lead to different conclusions, but, insofar as they have common interests, there will be reasons to assume common assumptions and limitations.

So, Rorty does have a way, though he fails to stress it, to answer this charge of relativism. Rorty's rejection of idealism and his focus on the "coping" question sets bounds on his relativism. Rorty's post-metaphysical position moves him beyond the charge of cognitive relativism, because it legitimizes the divergence of epistemic communities. Epistemic communities should be different, because they have different interests. This does not mean that our practices of justification create truth, but it does mean that total agreement between epistemic communities is not a good. Rorty's response, then, to the relativistic charge when it comes to issues of cognitive relativism, is to urge that we give up some of the metaphysical functions of the representationalist's

question and then refill the function-positions left with some neo-pragmatist, post-metaphysical content.

In Summary

Rorty turns away from notions of metaphysical grounding and embraces our community as the basis for moral and epistemic decisions. While Rorty is right that the charge of relativism doesn't make sense except from a post-metaphysical standpoint, the charge of relativism does illustrate some new facets of the metaphysical worldview that Rorty does need to countenance. Fortunately, Rorty's position has the resources to reconstruct a response to this side of the relativist charge. In regards to ethical/political matters, we can say that Rorty endorses a certain level of diversification in moral visions, constrained by the liberal democratic mentality. When dealing with groups who don't buy into this liberal democratic assumptions, Rorty's position suggests that we work to broaden the acceptance of the liberal democratic value framework utilizing the most causally efficacious means available: the manipulation of sentiment. While in regards to matters of inquiry, including the scientific sort, Rorty also embraces the variability of different epistemic communities insofar as those different communities provide different insights in inquiry. Rorty recognizes that the validity of these different epistemic practices will be checked by the degree of causal success they enjoy.