On Richard Rorty’s Ethical Anti-foundationalism

By Jon A. Levisohn

The contemporary student of philosophy (and of its history) is confronted not only by the collapse of the metaphysical systems of the nineteenth century, but also by the slow demise of the empiricisms which struggled to replace them in the first half of the twentieth. Without a secure philosophical account of what is universal, what is absolute, what is transcendent of historical, political and social contingency—whether in the realm of our moral beliefs or, more generally, our knowledge of anything at all—all we are left with is a sometimes overwhelming diversity. We observe, even within our own society but certainly across sociological and historical boundaries, a dazzling diversity of opinions and beliefs, with no apparent independent or objective criterion at hand to help us distinguish between the good and the bad, between the true and the false.

One way to articulate the point is to say that “the enterprises for providing a foundation for Being and Knowledge ... are enterprises that have disastrously failed.”¹ For those who concur with this assessment, the alternative to the foundationalism which has characterized the philosophical tradition must be some form of anti-foundationalism—that is, consciously abandoning the pretense of philosophy to discover a secure basis, from which we might construct an independent, absolute, objective criterion for truth. But until anti-foundationalism is given content, relativism or skepticism may appear inevitable; certainly, the current proliferation of fashionable relativistic notions among philosophers and non-philosophers gives us little reason to think otherwise. The question remains: Is it possible to abandon the stable plateau of foundationalism for the slippery slope of anti-foundationalism, without sliding?

Richard Rorty, for one, confidently argues that it is indeed possible to walk a fine line between foundationalism and relativism. According to the book jacket of his Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,² Rorty has been declared by none other than Harold Bloom as “the most interesting philosopher in the world today.” Whatever else such a proclamation might mean, it should certainly indicate to us that Rorty is among the most controversial figures in contemporary intellectual circles, a situation which stems in part from the fact that some of his colleagues do not share his confidence.

In what follows, I offer a reading of the first two of Rorty’s recently published collected papers, “Solidarity or objectivity?”³ and “Science as solidarity,”⁴ as points of entry into Rorty’s philosophy. In these explicitly programmatic essays, Rorty deliberately avoids discussing the technical aspects

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of his views of truth and relativism in great depth and detail; so will I. Instead, I explain Rorty’s program in his own terms, elucidating what Rorty means by solidarity and objectivity and why he advocates choosing the former over the latter. In the process, I emphasize the ethical underpinnings of Rorty’s position, and show that Rorty himself admits (albeit infrequently) that there is some sort of mysterious “ethical foundation” which takes the place, or plays the role, of a metaphysical foundation. I also show, incidentally, that Rorty’s vocabulary is surprisingly well suited to the articulation of an alternative position.

Solidarity versus Objectivity

In “SOLIDARITY OR OBJECTIVITY?” RORTY SETS OUT THE choice between the two options indicated in the title as an expression of his philosophical program, the program that he has pursued since the publication of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. In that influential book, Rorty devotes the three hundred pages of Parts One and Two to exhaustively exposing the flaws in the traditional images of the mind as a mirror of nature, of knowledge as the perspicuous representation of or correspondence to a nonhuman, description-independent reality, and of philosophy as the discipline which evaluates the claims to knowledge of the rest of our culture. In the process, he surveys the history of epistemology from its Greek origins to its recent demise, as well as the history of its putative “successor subjects,” empirical psychology and philosophy of language. Then in Part Three, he sketches an alternative picture of an “edifying” as opposed to a “systematic” philosophy, offering “hermeneutics” not in place of epistemology but merely as a name for how we might proceed without it. Thus, the tenor of his argument is that certain of the most fundamental aspects of our philosophical reflections are, in the end, merely optional.

Here, Rorty begins with the following proclamation: “There are two principal ways in which reflective human beings try, by placing their lives in a larger context, to give some sense to those lives” (21). That is, Rorty perceives some human, existential need which demands satisfaction, and the two possible ways are the quest for solidarity and the quest for objectivity. We tell ourselves stories of various sorts (according to Rorty’s preferred terminology) in order to give meaning to our lives, in order to cope; for Rorty, the exercise of rationality, of thinking philosophically, theologically, historically, even scientifically, is to be considered in terms of coping with experience. And these stories do their work by establishing a community in the one case, and by invoking an “immediate relation to a nonhuman reality” (21) in the other.

At first glance, if we were unfamiliar with Rorty’s views, we might interpret his existential speculation as an analysis of essential human nature, as if to say, “Humans are not only Political Animals (as indicated by the desire for solidarity) but also Intellectual Beings (as indicated by the desire for objectivity).” This picture does, in fact, seem to reflect experience in a reasonably interesting, and perhaps justifiable, way. We do seem to be motivated to form communal associations, to find common agreement for our ideas and our aspirations, and we do seem motivated to search out objective justifications for those ideas and aspirations in theoretical terms; we are interested in politics and philosophy. Such a view would certainly not lack for precedent in the history of philosophical ideas.

But Rorty, of course, would deny that he is describing essential human natural laws or that he is offering a new “science of society.” For him, the stories we tell ourselves are, at best, a substitute for the “real” world that we can’t see. The “real” world, of course, is the world of our own minds and the world of the natural world. But Rorty believes that we can only know the world through our own minds, and that the only knowledge we can have of the world is what we can infer from our own minds. Therefore, the only real knowledge we have is what we can infer from our own minds.

“Rorty himself admits (albeit infrequently) that there is some sort of mysterious ‘ethical foundation’ which takes the place, or plays the role, of a metaphysical foundation.”
The concepts of 'essence' and 'human nature' are two products of the philosophy shop, two results of the neurotic obsession of the Western philosophical tradition with objectivity.

According to Rorty, the philosophical tradition of the West has been dominated, since the Greeks, by a disproportionate emphasis on one method of giving sense to our lives, namely the desire for objectivity. This desire arose, he speculates, in response to an uneasiness with diversity, the diversity that the Greeks began to notice as their consciousness of the world around them expanded. Reacting to difference, they sought out commonalities, convinced by Plato that "the way to transcend skepticism is to envisage a common goal of humanity—a goal set by human nature rather than Greek culture" (21). That is, Rorty imagines that skeptical arguments about what in the world it is possible to know, and how well we can know it, became fundamental to self-conscious intellectual life in Greece (and subsequently thereafter in the West) as a result of the new political circumstances. The antidote to the increasingly radical skeptical challenges seemed to lie in justification through increasingly expanded commonalities: universal, absolute, infallible, non-contingent truths, both about human nature and about the world, which (it was hoped) would serve as "common ground" for evaluating knowledge claims and differences of opinion. In this manner, truth—immediate and secure access to moral and physical reality—became a virtue, and objectivity an ideal.

Moreover, Rorty argues, philosophy since the time of Plato has not merely preferred objectivity, resulting in some kind of benign neglect of solidarity. Rather, the search for truth has meant the "turning away from solidarity to objectivity" (21), because it has been bound up in the desire to articulate the essence of human nature, to paint a picture of what an ideal individual and especially an ideal society would look like. Just as we seek objective knowledge about mathematics and about biology, so too we imagine an objective, universal "ultimate community":

this [objectivist] tradition dreams of an ultimate community which will have transcended the distinction between the natural and the social, which will exhibit a solidarity which is not parochial because it is the expression of an ahistorical human nature. (22)

We do care about solidarity with others—about community, about human nature, about interpersonal morality—and we believe (or believed) that by reducing it, by discovering the essence of human nature and ethics, we have understood and accommodated our concerns, while avoiding the pitfall of narrow-minded parochialism.

Rorty's analysis continues with his argument that the tradition, overly concerned with objectivity and willing to reduce solidarity to it, has had to concern itself with metaphysics and epistemology, those fields which attempt to investigate the correspondence of ideas or beliefs to reality, the intrinsic nature of things. Once an unconceptualized, description-independent, metaphysically real world is posited, then it is appropriate to ask the
question, “how does thought (or more recently, language) hook on to the world?” This has led to analyses of procedures of investigation and justification, and attempts to discover those elements of nature or of human nature which allow for this sort of objectivity. In short, every area of philosophy—from philosophy of science to political philosophy and ethics—has been gripped by the picture of knowledge as accurate representation of reality, and of truth as correspondence to reality, from Plato on.

Needless to say, Rorty views the tradition as a failure. It failed in all its metaphysical and epistemological projects, as each one in turn stepped up to bat and struck out swinging. As Rorty exhaustively describes in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the tradition itself has produced the criticisms which have undermined that objective ideal (and its corollary essentialism and representationalism) in the work of Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Kuhn, Putnam. And as he notes in this essay, “the best argument we . . . have against the realistic partisans of objectivity is . . . that the traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn’t working anymore. It isn’t doing its job” (33). That is, from our late twentieth century perspective, the tradition has not succeeded in producing a lasting, widely acceptable, independent or external philosophical justification for our desire for objectivity—or, for that matter, for any of our other moral, political, or intellectual “habits.”

But there have been pockets of resistance to this futile reductive endeavor, those who have recognized that solidarity—the agreement of community, or better, the role that community plays in determining those realities and those procedures for investigation and justification—cannot be reduced to objectivity. Among those hardy souls are the pragmatists, and they have no need and no desire for metaphysics or epistemology. Instead, according to Rorty, they abandon the quest for objectivity and take up the quest for solidarity with renewed commitment, confident that the justification of our habits lies with our fellow humans, not with correspondence to some objective ideal of the Good or the True. Instead of grounding solidarity in objectivity, they confidently reduce objectivity to solidarity. By this, Rorty intends the abandonment of the pretensions of the Western philosophical tradition to search for transcendent truth—and the conceptual baggage of “correspondence” and “representation” and epistemology and metaphysics in general—and the acceptance instead of the historical and pragmatic nature of truth. Instead of conceiving of truth as “corre-
Instead of conceiving of truth as 'correspondence to a nonhuman reality,' truth is simply what it is better for us to believe, here and now.\(^\text{10}\)

At this point, the picture has become a little muddled; before going any further into the pragmatist account of truth, the notions of objectivity and solidarity themselves require clarification. After all, Rorty began by considering them as human desires, social phenomena—not "natural" or "essential," to be sure, but at least relatively common and in some sense fundamental. However, they soon became transformed, in his account, into ideas or ideals, or maybe into values. Perhaps most importantly, in this transformation from social phenomenon to concept they seem to have lost their implied parallelism; instead, either solidarity is "grounded" in objectivity or objectivity is "reduced" to solidarity.\(^\text{11}\) Rorty often refers to the pragmatists as "we partisans of solidarity," diametrically opposed to the objectivist tradition and the realists who have yet to escape it. So what started out as twin and compatible inclinations seem to have become entrenched as competitive, mutually exclusive ideals, and this transformation requires some explanation.

According to Rorty, the ideals of objectivity and of solidarity are mutually exclusive because each may be seen as appropriating the desire for the other, the value expressed by the other, to serve its own ends (so to speak). Thus, in grounding solidarity in objectivity, the realists transformed the desire for community into a "dream of an ultimate community," thereby attempting to explain away the values of community—of tolerance, mutual respect, even love—in terms of a transcendent community, "the expression of an ahistorical human nature" (23). (This is the project of traditional foundationalist political philosophy.) And in their reduction of objectivity to solidarity, the pragmatists redirected the desire for objectivity to be "simply the desire for as much intersubjectivity as possible" (23), explaining away truth without recourse to any notion of objective reality.

Two Versions of Rationality: Algorithm versus Ethic

In "SCIENCE AS SOLIDARITY," RORTY CLEARLY SETS OUT the opposing sides, in terms of the related question of rationality. He begins by confronting the familiar philosophical problem of the relationship between the natural sciences and the humanities, a problem which is bound up in our demand for rationality. Our Western, Enlightenment culture is gripped by a picture of the sciences as inquiring after objective truth, of corresponding to reality; indeed, the physical sciences are taken as the model of investigation into objective reality and therefore "scientific method" is taken as the epitome of rationality. The difficulty which then arises, given that the humanities (and even the social sciences) do not seem to accomplish quite so much, is a result of our slavish obsession with the "strong" sense of rationality. That is, we believe (according to Rorty) that to be rational and scientific means to adhere to prepared criteria, criteria established prior and external to the inquiry which we are currently undertaking and which are, therefore, not tainted by subjectivity or contingency. Science, then, is merely a matter of following the rules, simply and methodically; while this account will struggle to find a place for innovative creativity in the pursuit of science, it nevertheless gains by eliminating any subjective "value judgments" from the pursuit of objective, scientific truth. This, of course, is the popular algorithmic model of "the scientific method," a mysterious entity whose essence eludes
philosophers and scientists, but which inevitably reveals itself, in all its splendor, exclusively to high-school science teachers.\textsuperscript{12}

Instead, Rorty prefers the “weak” sense of rationality, where to be rational does not involve algorithmically following pre-existing guidelines, but rather merely being “reasonable” or “sane” or “civilized.” That is, to be rational means to “eschew dogmatism, defensiveness, and righteous indignation,” opting instead for “tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force” (37). Rationality is not a method in the sense of an algorithm, but rather a method in the sense of an ethic—though perhaps we should not bother to reinterpret the word “method,” but should discard it altogether. In this way, the perceived (and problematic) essential distinction between the sciences and the humanities dissolves, since neither “corresponds to reality” but each can be pursued “rationally.” Once we recognize that both the sciences and the humanities are equally rational, and that there is no essential epistemological difference between them, then we will feel free to differentiate on the basis of other factors—such as what we would like each to accomplish—without devaluing one or the other.\textsuperscript{13}

As should be clear, the outmoded, problematic “strong” rationality is a product of the philosophical tradition, which (as we know) was gripped by the ideal of objectivity. The “weak” sense of rationality, on the other hand, is a reflection and an embodiment of the ideal of solidarity. At times, Rorty adopts the slogan “unforced agreement,” instead of “solidarity,” but in general, this paper abounds in familiar expressions of the choice which he is laying out.

Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity—the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves—with the desire for solidarity with that community. (39)

The desire for “objectivity” boils down to a desire to acquire beliefs which will eventually receive unforced agreement in the course of a free and open encounter with people holding other beliefs. (41)

Differences in formulation notwithstanding—the desire for objectivity is to be “replaced” in one metaphor, “boiled down” in the other—Rorty clearly considers the dichotomy of solidarity and objectivity to be bound up in two contrasting views of science, scientific method, and rational inquiry. (Once we understand that Rorty intends to set the search for objective truth over against the ethics of solidarity, the distinctions among his metaphors no longer seem confusing. Objectivity may be reduced to solidarity, because the old “strong” rationalism is supplanted by the new “weak” rationalism. It may be reinterpreted as intersubjectivity, because the desire for greater and greater degrees of justification gets expressed as the desire for wider agreement. It may be dismissed as “scientism” (26), since it implies a slavish worship of the false god of algorithmic, objective science. It may be considered to reflect the “fear of death” (32), since it demonstrates the desire to escape from the contingent to the absolute and universal. Or it may simply be dropped altogether.) Thus, according to Rorty’s view of the traditional, metaphysically realist ideal of objectivity, rationality constitutes rigid adherence to a predetermined algorithm; according to the pragmatist ideal of solidarity, it involves muddling through towards intersubjective agreement
on the basis of a non-foundationalist ethic.

**Why should we accept Rorty’s story?**

There are good reasons to question Rorty’s historical account, a device familiar from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* but carried out here with a great deal of haste. For example, Rorty seems to neglect the role played by the developing disciplines of mathematics and geometry in the evolution of Greek metaphysics, so that he emphasizes the importance of the *immediacy* of knowledge: objectivity is the idea that one may be “in touch with the nature of things, not by way of the opinions of the community, but in a more immediate way” (21). But this reconstruction may not do justice to the Platonic texts, where it seems that the growth of metaphysics, in particular the central idea of true knowledge as more than mere opinion, owes a greater debt to the apparent *security* of knowledge that had recently been demonstrated in those new and blossoming fields.

Furthermore, Rorty casually jumps from the origins of the quest for objectivity in Greek thought to picking up the threads of the story with the Enlightenment, a familiar move but also a problematic one: aside from stressing the development of modern science as the model of rational inquiry (and the scientist as the ideal intellectual), Rorty does not sufficiently differentiate the contributions of the ancient and the modern periods to the story. And it is not clear exactly how the historical event of the emerging awareness of diversity and the corresponding “fear of parochialism” is supposed to have produced the desire for objectivity. According to Rorty, skepticism seems to be central to the story, perhaps forcing the Greeks to challenge themselves, provoking that existential need to give sense to their lives. But this explanation will not satisfy Rorty. After all, he wishes to explain the origin of only one of the ways that we give sense to our lives—namely, the desire for objectivity—not both.

However, the point of the account is not its historical “accuracy,” which justifies, to a certain extent, Rorty’s liberties in telling his story. Rather, Rorty’s purpose is to show how the quest for objectivity arose at a certain time and place. In this way, he devalues or undermines objectivity, by showing it to be not a natural or essential desire, but merely an optional and contingent one. Moreover, he is now free to argue, it is a *failed* option: “the best argument . . . against the realistic partisans of objectivity is that the traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn’t working anymore” (33).

So why choose solidarity? Apparently, because the desire for solidarity is more *fundamental* than the desire for objectivity. After all, in Rorty’s account, it was the values associated with solidarity that gave rise to objectivity in the first place; this is why he emphasized the role played by the need
“to envisage a common goal of humanity” and by the “fear of parochialism,” while diminishing the significance of mathematics and geometry in the story. In Rorty’s view, the emergence of the ideal of objectivity was inspired by ethical considerations which we retrospectively recognize as values associated with solidarity. The effect is to suggest that, from the very beginning, objectivity was simply solidarity gone wrong.

But what does Rorty accomplish by this line of argument? After all, even if we concede that solidarity is (in some sense) more fundamental than objectivity, there is no reason, in principle, why a similar story cannot be told about the historical, contingent development of solidarity as well. Given his thoroughgoing anti-essentialism, Rorty must certainly concede the point that solidarity can no more be an essential or necessary desire than objectivity can, that solidarity too is simply an option open to us. But if this is so, if both solidarity and objectivity are nothing more than options, then we should ask again: why choose solidarity? At this point, Rorty must (and does, briefly) acknowledge a positive reason for his allegiance to solidarity. All along, he has claimed that his position is merely a negative one, but now he must come out from behind that shield; not surprisingly, this is his most vulnerable point. There is, in fact, a positive basis to Rorty’s views—not a metaphysical basis, but an ethical one.

**Ethical Anti-foundationalism**

From the very beginning of *Solidarity or Objectivity*, we may notice that (what may be called) a concern for ethics is, obviously, fundamental to Rorty’s view. His discussion of the twin desires is cast in ethical terms; after all, the satisfaction of desires is a notorious source for the violation of ethical principles, whatever those principles may be, so we should have reason to beware. Rorty points out the specific potential violations associated with solidarity and objectivity:

> Insofar as a person is seeking solidarity, she does not ask about the relation between the practices of the chosen community and something outside that community. (21)

That is, the desire for solidarity—considered here as the concern with maintaining the cohesion, structure, or even the very existence of a community, as well as preserving one’s own membership within the community—obstructs the potential inquiry into whether the practices (or standards, or rules) of that community are unjust, as we might say. One imagines that Rorty has in mind such examples as the phenomena of patriotism (in the political realm) and peer pressure (in the psychological). The ethical problem, then, is not the specific activities undertaken in pursuit of solidarity—again, here the term is used in the fundamental sense in which it gives meaning to life—for these may be justified by various arguments. Rather, the ethical problem here is with the obstruction of inquiry, with the fact that the desire for solidarity may potentially blind and deafen the seeker of solidarity to ethical challenges, to the cries of the wounded from outside the community. Not every challenge, not every wound, deserves to derail the search for solidarity, but in the long run and on the whole, every challenge deserves to be heard.

So much for the potential ethical violations due to the desire for solidarity. Regarding the desire for objectivity, Rorty writes:

> “The emergence of the ideal of objectivity was inspired by ethical considerations which we retrospectively recognize as values associated with solidarity.”
Insofar as [a person] seeks objectivity, she distances herself from the actual persons around her not by thinking of herself as a member of some other real or imaginary group, but rather by attaching herself to something which can be described without reference to any particular human beings. (21)

The first thing to note is that the potential ethical problem here does not seem to involve other people, at least not initially. Rather, the seeker of objectivity seems to violate an ethical obligation to herself: by denying her own membership within a community, she is denying her own humanity. However, the reader already hears a hint of a further objection. Not only does this scientist or philosopher “attach herself” to something non-human, but by doing so, according to Rorty, “she distances herself” from others. Thus, the ethical implications seem to involve not only herself, but others as well; by distancing herself in the independent pursuit of objectivity, she can no longer hear the ideas—or the cries—of others.

Thus, we might characterize the ethical problem with the pursuit of solidarity as the prior restriction of entitlement, suffrage or representation to those within the community, while the ethical problem of objectivity involves the prior restriction of ethical challenges, in general. The point here is that the two issues are not parallel: the problem with solidarity is specific, while the problem with objectivity is general. Moreover, Rorty views solidarity as fundamentally ethical, while objectivity is fundamentally non-ethical (although not necessarily unethical). That is, the ethics of rational inquiry—such as tolerance, openness, reliance on persuasion instead of force—are predicated on the value of community, the value of solidarity. In this light, the specific pitfall of restricted representation is a problem of the community not fulfilling its own ethic. The quest for objectivity, on the other hand, constitutes a denial of the value of community, and therefore does not support a non-foundational ethic (even though it may attempt to develop a foundationalist ethic, as it attempts to ground the desire for solidarity). The result is that, in Rorty’s view, the former problem can be (and is) overcome, while the latter problem cannot be. As the two desires develop, objectivity becomes mired in its ethical flaw, formalizing its non-ethic into an amoral scientistic method. But solidarity, on the other hand, acknowledges its own flaws (so to speak), abandoning this vulgar parochialism or base ethnocentrism. Picking itself up by its bootstraps, solidarity develops into a non-parochial ethnocentrism, an ethic of the community which is open even to those without.

Therefore, Rorty casts the choice between objectivity and solidarity as the choice between an algorithm and an ethic, between a supposed (but in fact empty) “intellectual virtue called ‘rationality’” and the actual “moral virtue” of the ethics of inquiry (39). The mysterious positive basis for choosing solidarity is not a metaphysical foundation or justification, for Rorty repudiates metaphysics altogether. There is no positive position on metaphysics or epistemology lurking anywhere in the area. Nevertheless, Rorty acknowledges that he does have a justification for his views, an ethical justification.

Any description of justifications—or grounds, bases, or foundations—treads on thin anti-foundational ice, so Rorty is always careful to contrast his own view to a foundational one. Thus, he says that “the pragmatist’s account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base,
What is this suggested “ethical foundation”? We know, pretty well, what it is not: it is not a real foundation, because it is not justified by any external or prior criterion. The tension over just what this ethical foundation is is evident: in this passage, Rorty suggests it as a substitute for a metaphysical foundation, but almost immediately wishes to retract the phrase and replace it with something less prone to misinterpretation.

The practical grounds that Rorty refers to here are the collapse of traditional metaphysics and epistemology, as he states explicitly at the (unquoted) beginning of the paragraph, so the pragmatist suggestion should be considered as the only alternative still open to us. But actually, that is not quite true. More precisely, Rorty considers solidarity to be the only option available “in order to avoid . . . the bad side of Nietzsche” (33).21 The contrast with Nietzsche is intended to confirm that, indeed, solidarity is optional. But if we desire to be ethical, to consider other people, to be tolerant and avoid cruelty—if we desire solidarity—then solidarity is the only option available. This circularity, common to anti-foundationalist philosophers, should not be taken as a criticism, of course. It merely serves to indicate that, in the end, Rorty relies upon an intuition—his own intuition—about ethical obligations to others.22

Thus, metaphysically or foundationally speaking, Rorty’s position is simply a negative one; in denying objectivity, he denies the search for metaphysical foundations. However, in affirming solidarity, he affirms the presence of a rationality without metaphysical foundation, and more importantly, an ethic without a metaphysical foundation. Instead, that “weak” rationality and the ethics of solidarity rely upon an intuitive, ethical foundation—which is to say, they rely upon themselves. His ethnocentric position is positive only ethically, and may be justified only non-foundationally. Solidarity may indeed be optional, contingent, an historical development, but it is the ethical option; in the absence of any satisfactory justificatory account, but in the presence of our intuitions, we should just be ethical. ϕ

ENDNOTES

6 I characterize this statement as existential because of Rorty’s talk of the need to “give some sense to [our] lives.” Why is this a need? Why do we need a “larger context” (with all the religious implications of that phrase)? One is tempted to answer in terms of existential loneliness, or some such. Rorty, however, makes this existential statement merely as a psychological or sociological observation of human behavior.
7 I accept Rorty’s self-designation as a pragmatist, given his uncontentious similarities to the leading figures of the tradition, and despite his controversial differences. And in any case, to indicate where Rorty misinterprets this or that philosopher would beg all the interesting questions, since, as Hilary Putnam has noted (in lecture), the philosophical dispute (between Rorty and him) may be interpreted as a struggle over the legacy of pragmatism, a struggle which reflects the complexities present in the tradition from its inception.

8 Does this mean that philosophy has come to end? Yes and no. Rorty would be happy to discard Philosophy, with a capital P, as an academic discipline with pretensions to grandeur. (He sometimes calls this “the end of Philosophy 101.”) However, Rorty claims that the end-of-philosophy label is unfair, for he advocates a transformation of philosophy along pragmatist lines. He hopes that people will continue to read Plato and Kant, but he wishes that they would stop trying “to sucker freshman into taking an interest in The Problem of the External World and The Problem of Other Minds” (as he writes in “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” forthcoming in the Journal of Philosophy). To a certain extent, then, the transformation of philosophy involves emphasizing texts over problems. Unfortunately, it is not at all clear why people should continue to read the great dead philosophers, if all they have to offer is bad ideas—ideas which we will find dumber and dumber, as time and our post-Philosophical culture go on. [See Rorty’s essay “The historiography of philosophy: four genres” (in Richard Rorty, ed., Philosophy of History, Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1984), 73, and Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, 389-394.]

9 In response, we may question whether or not this has really been the goal. Rorty, however, certainly believes that it was.

10 The distinction between equating “truth” with “what is good to believe” in the way that this slogan does, on the one hand, and merely associating them or emphasizing their relationship, on the other, cuts to the heart of the struggle over the pragmatist legacy. Investigating this distinction, however, requires further analysis of Rorty’s views on truth and relativism—a worthy project, but one which lies outside the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it should at least be mentioned that Rorty
objects to the caricature of pragmatism which holds that the pragmatists viewed truth as simply made by agreement with one’s cultural peers; he insists that truth is not made by anything, and that truth is not the sort of thing about which we should have a positive, explanatory theory.

By making this transformation explicit, I also mean to suggest—without any justification, at this point—that it might be optional. That is, an alternative conception might avoid the reduction of either objectivity or solidarity, but rather allow each to rest upon its own “foundation.” In this way, Rorty’s original formulation of solidarity and objectivity as twin desires is surprisingly well suited to the expression of an alternative position.

Obviously, this is something of a caricature. Nevertheless, the difference between this caricature and actual scientific investigation might easily be attributed to the difference between ideal conditions and real ones (by someone who holds to a sharp fact/value dichotomy). Scientific creativity, then, might be conceived of as the ability to imaginatively eliminate such pervasive factors as human error, in order to construct theories which correspond to reality as it is in itself, and which would be confirmed by ideal data.

At least, except insofar as some goals (e.g., finding a new drug, or building a new bridge) are considered by us to be more important, while other goals (e.g., reinterpreting a passage in Milton) might be considered less so. As Rorty points out, the strength of science is that its institutions—experimentation, public and free debate, etc.—embodies this weaker rationality, at least ideally.

While Rorty’s account in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* goes into a significant degree of depth and detail, he is no more averse to employing caricatures of the great dead philosophers. In his own defense, he might argue that he is not at all concerned with what Plato or Descartes or Kant actually believed, but rather with the roles that they played in the development of the tradition—which is to say, with the way they were perceived, coopted, responded to, etc. (See note 16.)

For example, “Plato’s claim that the way to transcend skepticism is to envisage a common goal of humanity” (21) and the post-Enlightenment dream of “an ultimate community which will have transcended the distinction between the natural and the social, which will exhibit a solidarity which is not parochial because it is the expression of an ahistorical human nature” (22) seem to do similar work in the argument.

Rorty’s brief account (and those elements of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to which it corresponds) fits his own characterization of “the big sweeping *geistgeschichtlich* stories,” in his article, “The historiography of philosophy: four genres”:

In contrast [to the genre called ‘rational reconstruction’], *geistgeschichtliche* works at the level of problematics rather than of solutions to problems. It spends more of its time asking ‘Why should anyone have made the question of — central to his thought?’ or ‘Why did anyone take the problem of seriously?’... It wants to give plausibility to a certain image of philosophy... The question of which problems are ‘the problems of philosophy,’ which questions are philosophical questions, are the questions to which *geistgeschichtliche* histories of philosophy are principally devoted... The moral to be drawn [from this sort of history of philosophy] is that we have, or have not, been on the right track in raising the philosophical questions we have recently been raising. (56-59)

Rorty’s own *geistgeschichte*, of course, concludes that we have not been on the right track. The particular image of philosophy to which it wishes to give plausibility is one in which all of the important problems are seen as pseudo-problems, and moreover one which refuses to replace those problems with a new set. Instead of coming up with a new answer to the question of “which questions are philosophical questions,” it responds by denying that there exists such a class of privileged, fundamental, foundational questions at all. It is, therefore, an anti-*geistgeschichte*, or perhaps a *geistgeschichte* with no *geist*.

This Nietzschean or skeptical sort of argument also opens the door for another alternative, already mentioned in note 11 above, of not reducing either of these contingent but fundamental desires or intuitions to the other. Once we put both factors on an equally tenuous footing, we can either reject them both, or learn to live with the tenuousness (i.e., with the absence of a secure foundation) of each.

Does desiring after objectivity also entail denying one’s membership even in the widest possible community, the community of all humans? This question, of course, gets to the heart of the issue. Rorty would say that it does, that Plato’s instinctive response to the challenge of skepticism and diversity was fruitless because there is no such community, no essence which binds all humans together.

This is somewhat paradoxical: the natural, widely-found human impulse to search after objectivity itself constitutes a denial of humanity. Rorty escapes the paradox by denying that objectivity is essential to humanity. An alternative position might argue that the desire for objectivity is as “natural” an intuition as the desire for solidarity, and should be maintained. The escape from the paradox might then be to deny that the desire for objectivity involves a denial of one’s humanity—for objectivity is not inhuman. To desire objectivity is not, as Rorty claims, to attach oneself “to something which can be described without reference to any particular human beings” (21). Rather, objectivity may be considered something less than an unconceptualized inhuman reality, but more than mere intersubjectivity.

As mentioned above (in note 11), a further aspect of this alternative position is one that is suggested by Rorty’s conceptual framework, i.e., the non-reduction of either objectivity or solidarity, the validation of both. Perhaps each may be considered as relying on its own foundation, as Rorty considers solidarity alone to be. Of course, to suggest an alternative picture is not the same thing as to refute the original picture; however, such an alternative would have the merit of not dismissing what had originally seemed to be an authentic human impulse to objectivity.

What is remarkable about foundationalist “ethics,” especially of the empirical sort, is how non-ethical they sound. On this point, cf. Rorty, *Introduction to Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv. Rorty characterizes the typical consequentialist questions “Is it right to deliver n innocents over to be tortured to save the lives of m x n other innocents? If so, what are the correct values of n and m?” or the question “When may one favor the members of one’s family, or one’s community, over other, randomly chosen, human beings?” as “hopeless.” He continues, “Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question—algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort—is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician.”

Rorty’s mischievous use of the controversial term “ethnocentrism” seems intended to rile his political opponents on the left, for the *ethnos* he has in mind is (flawed, imperfect, but nevertheless successful) Western liberal democracy: “The liberal culture of recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantage of ethnocentrism [by making] openness central to its self-image. This culture is an *ethnos* which prides itself on its suspicion of ethnocentrism—on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters, rather than on its possession of truth” (*Introduction to Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 2).

Emphasis added. Nietzsche’s insight that objectivity lacked metaphysical foundations is taken (by Rorty) to be his “good” side, while his parallel observation about solidarity is considered less charitably.

Rorty, in general, impatiently scorns the appeal to philosophical intuitions. In his struggle to eliminate the magical from our conceptions, he cannot suffer (what he interprets as) attempts to retain elements of the metaphysical tradition, hidden underneath talk of intuitions, responsibilities, or obligations. Nevertheless, he privileges the ethical intuition towards solidarity, because he believes that this obligation at least, the obligation towards other individuals, does exist. It should therefore be clear that Rorty has opened himself up to criticism regarding this privileging of one intuition over another, and that his philosophical views are in fact dependent upon a particular picture of what is and what is not fundamental to human nature.