THE PRAGMATIC TURN IN PHILOSOPHY

Contemporary Engagements between
Analytic and Continental Thought

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STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS
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What Knowledge? What Hope? What New Pragmatism?

"I sowed in them blind hopes."

Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*

Philosophy and Social Hope offers a restatement of Richard Rorty's themes since Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature twenty years earlier. Longstanding antiepistemological, antimetaphysical, polemically metaphilosophical themes are freshly formulated and combined with a social philosophy, which, like the very word "pragmatism," was all but unspoken in the earlier work.

1. Metaphilosophy

"I enjoy metaphilosophy." Indeed, Rorty seems never to miss an opportunity to make a polemical remark against the empty promises and fantastic dichotomies of classical and modern philosophy. This relentless attack on the respectability of philosophy may be one reason for the hostility Rorty's work sometimes encounters from his professional colleagues. He asks rude questions about the point of the expensive things they do. It is not easy to say, especially not when you are an analytic philosopher trained in a specialization whose point cannot be explained to anyone without an advanced degree. At
least scientists, equally specialized, can say they are contributing their bit to the progress of science and technology. But what should David Lewis or Crispin Wright or John McDowell say?

Looking for Rorty's latest on this long-standing interest, I find that his arguments implicitly distinguish four activities that can be called "philosophy."

1. Platonism, also known as Metaphysics. This is what Western philosophy has mostly been. It is the history of philosophy. John Searle proudly identifies it as the Western Rationalist Tradition. Rorty disparagingly calls it intellectual baggage inherited from Plato. It is a tradition of abstract absolutes (The Good, The True) and the inevitable dichotomies (appearance/reality, subject/object) they create. Metaphysical Truths, like wild orchids, are "numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few," and proudly indifferent to use.²

2. Epistemology. The history of philosophy has not really been a history of Platonism, unless "Platonism" includes the discontent that inspires Kant's critical philosophy. With Kant philosophy became conscious of itself as a special discipline standing in a special relation to natural knowledge as a whole. Philosophy as epistemology is philosophy as theory of representation, and as inspector of epistemic credentials, certifier of "objective validity."

3. Therapy. This is what the later Wittgenstein called "philosophy" and where Rorty is most comfortable with his own identity as "philosopher." In this point of view, the best philosophy undermines the feeling that there is something valuable for philosophy to do. The problem for philosophical work in this sense is simply the appearance of so-called philosophical problems. The best philosophy is one that overcomes the impulse to philosophy. As Wittgenstein said, "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions that bring itself in question."³

4. Poetry, or Imaginative Redescription. In a use of the term that cannot be related to those I have discussed, Rorty says that "philosopher" is "the most appropriate description for somebody who remaps culture—who suggests a new and promising way for us to think about the relation among various large areas of human activity." This is not Epistemology or Metaphysics, which strive for the eternal, for the deepest, for the most permanent truths. And it is not philosophical therapy, which is preoccupied not with the articulation of new alternatives but the debunking of exhausted, sclerotic, counterproductive ones. Philosophy as poetry is not what Plato did and not what Pragmatism is but, for instance, what Derrida does, and what links him in Rorty's mind to what Davidson does. "Philosophy" in this sense is an honorific term, a term of praise, and not the name of an academic specialization. As imaginative redescription, philosophy is "an aid to creating ourselves rather than knowing ourselves," and "not a field in which one achieves greatness by ratifying the community's previous intuitions."⁴
Platonism and Epistemology are distinguished for polemical refutation, and Poverty is what Rorty celebrates in the "philosophers" he most admires, while Therapy seems to be his preferred self-consciousness qua philosopher. "I agree with Dewey," he says, "that the function of philosophy is to mediate between old ways of speaking, developed to accomplish earlier tasks, with new ways of speaking, developed in response to new demands." He quotes more than once Dewey's words in Reconstruction in Philosophy (1920): "The task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day." Dewey thought that required philosophy to become more scientific and to develop a pragmatic theory of knowledge, or logic of inquiry. Rorty thinks it requires philosophy to champion fuzziness and work linguistic therapy on the urge to take Philosophy (that is, Metaphysics or Epistemology) seriously. "The particular charge of philosophy is to make sure that old philosophical ideas do not block the road of inquiry—that continued use of the normative language employed in the moral and social strifes of an earlier day does not make it harder to cope with contemporary problems."

For Wittgenstein, therapy proved to be as interminable as it was for Freud. Each problem, each confusion, each worry that perhaps the language-game is not alright just as it is, meets the same patient therapeutic response as the next resistance or transference in psychoanalysis. Wittgenstein's text is endless, never finishes with anything. Rorty is the opposite—brash, impatient, refusing to allow the therapeutic intervention to become a new way of carrying on philosophy. For Rorty, so-called philosophical problems, whether Platonic problems about appearance and reality or Cartesian problems about subject and object, are no more than artifacts of entirely optional vocabularies—and that is—or should be—the end of it.

2. UTOPIA

The "hope" of Philosophy and Social Hope has two faces. Sometimes it appears as generalized hope, the hope for hope. There is no content to this hope; it is just the hope that people are in their infinitely different ways hoping "that the future will be unspeakably different from, and unspecifiably freer than, the past." For this mood, everything good is on the highway: "The vista, not the endpoint, matters." All questions of "validity" depend not on changeless epistemological norms but the future—Is it good? Is it true? I hope so, we'll see. Hence Rorty's "principled fuzziness." Don't let worries about "validity" or "methodology" get in the way of imaginative experiments. "To say that one should replace knowledge by hope is to say . . . that one should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well-grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs."
Elsewhere the hope is filled in with social content. It becomes the utopian hope "that the human race as a whole should gradually come together in a global community, a community which incorporates most of the thick morality of the European industrialized democracies." In his antithetical manner, Rorty argues that it is not knowing the truth but trust and cooperation that are the best things we do, "where our humanity begins and ends." The hope for more perfect trust and cooperation, or for social justice, is "the only basis for a worthwhile human life."

Rorty seems to think this hope is peculiarly European or Western, perhaps even nineteenth century. He praises what he calls "European democratic ideals" and the "utopian social hope which sprang up in nineteenth-century Europe," "the liberal utopia sketched by Mill." He adds: "We pragmatists are not arguing that modern Europe has any superior insight into eternal, ahistorical realities. We do not claim any superior rationality. We claim only an experimental success: we have come up with a way of bringing people into some degree of comity, and of increasing human happiness, which looks more promising than any other way which has been proposed so far."

Europeans supposedly discovered the value of "making the particular little things that divide us seem unimportant," as well as the idea of "moral progress" as "a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things." I don't think there is much that is deeply, originally European or Western about Rorty's utopia. What he presents as the relatively recent invention of one culture and its experience can also be seen as a tradition that cannot be identified with any one culture—the five thousand-year world history of urbanism, people living in cities.

Cities are far from self-contained, self-sustaining capsules. If you want practically infinite self-sustainability, you have to go back to the farming culture of the time before cities. Cities are big parasites, major ecological strains on their environment. They are also improbable social forms: improbably dense, with people everywhere; and improbably heterogeneous, with many different kinds of people. Under other conditions the combination might be lethal, but something about cities—about the ones that last, about the culture or ethos that grows there—counteracts these potential dangers (while creating new ones) and makes the urban social form not simply viable but the most dynamic, creative, prosperous social form in one hundred thousand years of modern human beings.

Partly that is because cities transform the older culture of kinship into an urban culture of social associations. Many different ethnic folk enter into new relationships as urbanists and neighbors. Only in a city can a stranger, an outsider, become a full member of a community without having to satisfy a requirement of real or mythical kinship. Everything about a city breaks down inherited social and economic structures based on family, caste, and
status, and substitutes new urban orders, including vocational and residential contiguity. "In a small community," says a sociologist of the city, "it is the normal man, the man without eccentricity or genius, who seems most likely to succeed. The small community often tolerates eccentricity. The city, on the contrary, rewards it." Individual success is linked to performance rather than status, and the urban economy amplifies the interdependence, specialization, and synergy of the different arts and sciences. Individuals become increasingly dependent upon the community, and the community (its prosperity) likewise comes to depend on individuals, their performance, and their cooperation.

Morality is not an invention of the city, nor is there one morality peculiar to urban conditions everywhere. Instead, the city becomes a crucible of different moralities—not just the tribal differences of immigrant peoples, but also the differences of morality, or moral practice, among individuals, free to make moral choices. In folk society the moral rules bend, but cannot be made afresh. In cities the dignity of the traditional moral order may suffer, but it is because the moral order is, to some significant degree, opened up to deliberation, compromise, and the tolerance of alternatives. Taking morals in charge is one way urban culture accomplishes an essential task—the peaceful assimilation of socially heterogeneous immigrants. "Everywhere that it made its appearance—in the Middle Ages, in Antiquity, in the Near and Far East—the city arose as a joint settlement by immigration from the outside. . . . The city, thus, has always contained elements from most varied social situations."

To contain them takes more than walls. It takes particular cultural forms, infinitely various and always compromised, but recognizably practices of sensitivity to and tolerance of moral differences. And immigration is not the only source of challenges to tolerance. As Simmel observed, a city "conduces to the urge for the most individual personal existence." The improbable concentration of highly specialized, and perhaps in other ways "special," individuals in the arts and knowledges means that urban tolerance must extend not merely to the construction of ethnic neighborhoods, but to the construction of individuals. Thus does everything about cities, from concentration and density to economic activity and immigration, promote differentiation, refinement, personal distinction, and enriched public needs, as well as the ethos of urban tolerance.

The Greeks did not invent citizenship. They talked about it, wrote about it, argued it in a way that earlier citizens of earlier cities did not. It may even be said that "the culture of Periclean Athens formed a sustained hymn to the ideal of poiesis, the city conceived as a work of art." That made a big difference to historical consciousness, but it is not the origin of the idea, which is in an older urban practice the Greeks brilliantly adapted but did not invent. This original urbanity, of which every city on earth offers a variation, is defined, first, by a tolerance not only of other religions or races but of
idiosyncracy and individuality too. Thus it is secondly an urbanity of experimental freedom, the freedom of individuals to try and do things differently. One result of such freedom, and a third quality of urbane culture, is the synergy of concentrated arts and sciences. Like the symbiosis of squash and beans or wheat and clover, the desirability of this urban ethos seems to be something human beings figure out for themselves wherever they have settled in cities that last. The great discovery was that such an ethos makes the urban concentration synergistic instead of lethal, and as the world becomes more consistently and densely urban, it will increasingly become the only ethical culture that works anywhere on earth.

A city is a hope as much as it is the effects of that hope on earlier generations, building the architecture of a city's urban culture. A contemporary describes an ecclesiastical household in Jerusalem at the beginning of the twentieth century: "The kawass [principal servant] and the stable boy were Muslims, the cook and the kitchenmaid Bethlehem women (Greek Orthodox Christians, that is), the housemaid an Armenian, the gate-keeper a Moor, and the gardener as great a rogue as ever came out of the Greek Levant. They all got on excellently together, and the breezes, chiefly on religious topics, though lively at the time, were short and infrequent." Despite its history of conflict, or perhaps because of it and the memories it bequeathed, Jerusalem, continuously inhabited for over three thousand years, has contributed more to the desirability of Rorty's utopia than the collected works of J. S. Mill or the European nineteenth century. Before people were describing themselves in Mill's terms, they had been preferring and practicing what he gave formal description to. They were doing it in cities, because they found out early that it works.

I want to describe Rorty's utopia as not European or Western but originally and enduringly urban, an ethos of urbane tolerance as old and as global as life in cities, and provided I can redescribe it this way, I share his hope that a political culture inheriting the best of five thousand years of urban civilization should become the preferred one for a planet that is now practically a single global urban net. If you strip it down as Rorty does, "liberalism" reduces to urban tolerance and loses its Europeanness. The ideological liberalism or social democracy he identifies with this is a late recodification of ethics cultivated since the first cities. And while I don't expect Rorty would feel much urge to take on my redescription of his utopia, which it seems important to him to pin on Europe or the West, I find the hope resonant under my description.

The politics of cities should matter more than they do when we think that the real politics are elsewhere, on a more spectacular stage. Many of the obstacles to Rorty's utopia are wrapped up with the forces driving an urbanism with orders of magnitude more parasitic than at any time since there were cities, and on a diminished and increasingly polluted nonurban base. The
skein of cities that now envelops the planet, home to half the global human population, is the ultimate context within which we either address or evade the most pressing threat to our survival, which is simply ourselves, or more precisely, our cities.

3. Knowledge

_Philosophy and Social Hope_ includes the text of three lectures, previously published as separate books in German and French, called “Hope in Place of Knowledge: A Version of Pragmatism.” It is an admittedly idiosyncratic version and makes no pretense to being faithful to the thoughts of either James or Dewey. Elsewhere Rorty describes it as “a version that delights in throwing out as much of the philosophical tradition as possible.” All that is “new” about the so-called new pragmatism, of which Rorty’s work is so large a part, should, he says, “be viewed merely as an effort to clear away some alder and sumac, which sprang up during a 30-year spell of wet philosophical weather—the period that we now look back on as ‘positivistic analytic philosophy.’” The difference from classical pragmatism is, first, the linguistic turn, whereby pragmatism takes on the nominalism of Carnap and Quine; secondly, its openness to the critique of positivist philosophy of science, especially by T. S. Kuhn. This second legacy has made practically every version of the new pragmatism averse to the idea, common to Peirce, James, and Dewey, of pragmatism as a more perfect application of “scientific method.” Another difference, peculiar to Rorty, is his “conviction that James’s and Dewey’s main accomplishments were negative.” This surely distinguishes Rorty’s pragmatism from that of Hilary Putnam. Rorty works hard to make pragmatism say as little as possible, and one may be forgiven the suspicion that the result is something the founders of American pragmatism never dreamed of—a philosophy for those who have lost faith in the value of philosophy.

Rorty begins these lectures with the unexpected claim that “there is no reason why a fascist could not be a pragmatist, in the sense of agreeing with pretty much everything Dewey said about the nature of truth, knowledge, rationality and morality.” I can’t picture it. Fascists believe in will, “unshakable determination,” a _Führerprinzip_; and in all consistency reject democracy in politics, individuality in ethics, and experimentalism and fallibilism in the theory of knowledge. Where is the room for consensus with Dewey’s pragmatism? A pragmatic Nazi would have to prefer democracy as the most consistently modern form of government. A pragmatic Nazi would have to be a fallibilist; he would have to have the capacity, notably lacking in the biography of every Nazi I’ve read, to say that he made a mistake, that he was wrong, that events proved him fallible, that unshakable will turns out not to
be nearly so effective as Mussolini and Hitler led him to believe. The only Nazis who admit this are ex-Nazis.

Dewey viewed pragmatism as the most consistent working out of the implications of the revolutions of modern science and democracy. He was convinced that democracy was the right politics for a scientifically sophisticated and consistently pragmatic culture. In both its methods and results, modern experimental science smiles on democracy and withers under alternative regimes. Why was Greek science so limited, formal, and useless? Slavery. Why were the European Middle Ages so indifferent to discovery and innovation? Feudalism. Fascism, by contrast, wanted to be an alternative modernity, a different path to a different future. What has been called the “reactionary modernism” of German fascism “succeeded in incorporating technology into the symbolism and language of Kultur—community, blood, will, self, form, productivity, and finally race—by taking it out of the realm of Zivilisation—reason, intellect, internationalism, materialism, and finance”—in other words, relieving technology of everything that pragmatism celebrates and reinscribing privileged knowledge in an esoteric elite.17 The only way I can imagine a Nazi “agreeing with pretty much everything Dewey said about the nature of truth, knowledge, rationality and morality” is if “pretty much everything” means only something negative, a claim about what truth, knowledge, rationality, and morality are not. Even then I think a reflective Nazi may have qualms, but I suppose it was on the assumption that Dewey’s best thought on these subjects was entirely negative that Rorty could imagine this unlikely comparison.

Certainly one of Dewey’s arguments has this negative quality, when he says that “knowing” is not the best thing we do, not the noblest activity of our highest faculty. Knowledge is not a contemplative, self-sufficient, intrinsically valuable end-in-itself. It is a good thing, to be sure, but it is not The Good. Knowledge is a tool kit with which individuals and groups can construct their many and different goods. Rorty is very close to this position, and may even claim it for his own, but there remains a characteristic difference. His argument is only partly Dewey’s, that knowledge is not intrinsically good, not an end in itself; knowing the truth, knowing reality, is not the most distinctive, praiseworthy thing we do. He goes on, though, to develop this point in a way more his own when he says that we should trust and cultivate hope in place of knowledge. Knowledge is not merely demoted but replaced outright. It is our capacity to hope, trust, and cooperate, not to know, that is the source of all value or validity in ideas. What is important about an idea is the solidarity it inspires, the community it serves, the consensus it builds. The epistemological virtues—validity, objectivity, foundation, rationality, certainty—are unimportant, indifferent, distinctions that don’t make a difference.

Rorty will say he has no theory of knowledge, only the suggestion that a theory of knowledge is not required. Yes, if “theory of knowledge” means
a classical sort of theory about a classical sort of knowledge, in other words, a theory of representation. But give the expression a less procrustean reading, to mean something like "philosophical idea of knowledge," and this pragmatism is a theory of knowledge too, though one that tries to hew an entirely negative, debunking, deflationary line, and nearly succeeds. The reason it cannot do so entirely is simply because Rorty does have an idea about what knowledge positively amounts to. "There is no activity called 'knowing' which has a nature to be discovered, and at which natural scientists are particularly skilled. There is simply the process of justifying beliefs to audiences." Setting aside the bit about scientists, why isn't "the process of justifying beliefs to audiences" an "activity called 'knowing' which has a nature to be discovered?" This activity, this justification, these audiences are where Rorty finds the good of knowledge, what makes it worth taking seriously, and that is a philosophical idea about knowledge, about what it is—namely, agreeable, justified discourse.

Another argument about knowledge concerns what Rorty calls the relativity of descriptions. Because "all the descriptions we give of things are descriptions suited to our purpose," any claim to know the true description of anything inherits this linguistic and social relativity. Philosophically, epistemologically, practically, all that is at stake in the question whether a given claim is "knowledge" (not rather opinion, mere belief, error, and so on) is whether the description works, or perhaps merely whether one hopes that it may work.

Rorty thinks he is free of the reductive penchant because he thinks that reductive thinkers reduce everything to one vocabulary, like Quine's idea that only the language of fundamental particles tells unvarnished news, every other vocabulary merely repackaging its ultimate truth. Because Rorty believes nothing like this, he regards himself "as cleansed of reductivist sin." But that is not the only or even the most objectionable way thinking may be reductive. What "reductive" really means is an aggressive indifference to differences. Reductive thinkers don't want a complicated picture, don't want distinctions, don't see differences, want things neat and simple. And this reductivism is no stranger to Rorty's pages.

We describe relative to a point of view, but is that point of view determined, conditioned, straightened by "needs and interests" or "utility"? I can use it, I can do something with it—that is not always a perception of need or interest or utility. Rorty's reference to "needs and interests" is either so bland as to say no more than that the descriptions that work in the way we call knowledge are called knowledge, or it is a reductive utilitarianism after J. S. Mill's heart, which may be how Rorty regards it. It is reductive because it flattens out differences and imposes a simplifying, rationalizing unity over the entire field of knowledge.

For another example, Rorty states: "the only thing that is specifically human is language. But the history of language is a seamless story of gradually
increasing complexity." It is poor evolutionism to say that "language" is the only human distinction, because you cannot separate language from the organism that speaks. You cannot separate language from the neurology that makes speech possible, and you cannot separate that neurology from the entire evolution that made it possible. What distinguishes us is the distinctness of our species, which is to say its genealogy, the whole evolution of the whole organism. To set all of that aside and hold up "language" as the difference is an aggressively simplifying indifference to differences that, in the case of human evolution, made all the difference in the world.

Reductive linguistification is practically ubiquitous in Rorty's work. It seems to be important to be able to say things like "thinking [is] simply the use of sentences," or "language provides our only cognitive access to objects," or "all our knowledge is under descriptions." Of course we enjoy no direct, intuitive, spontaneous, unmediated cognitive contact with anything. Thoughts, awareness, choice, intention, and action are invariably mediated—by artifacts, symbols, preferences, neurology, culture, ecology, evolution. But why set all of that aside, single out "language," and attribute all mediation (or all that matters to knowledge) to that late and specialized formalism? The ubiquity of mediation obviously implies the ubiquity of media, but that does not mean (just) language. Cognitive, intelligent, effectively knowing mediation is neither invariably nor preeminently linguistic, nor are the values realized by the accomplishment of knowledge limited to the conversational or discursively articulated.

"Psychological nominalism" is Rorty's antidote to mystery, mystification, and the notorious obscurity of a philosophy of "consciousness" or "pure experience." He believes he has banished the ineffable from philosophy, meaning by ineffable "an appeal to a kind of knowledge that cannot be rendered dubious by a process of redescription." However, that cannot be a useful way to use the word "ineffable." Consider any interestingly complex accomplishment of knowledge. There are many to choose from! It could be a challenging yet successful surgical operation, or one of the bridges designed by Robert Maillart, or Darwin's accomplishment in _The Origin of Species_. How should we imagine any of these being "rendered dubious by a process of redescription?"

I suppose Darwin could be "redescribed" in something like the way Einstein redescribed Newton, though it was the confirming experiments that rendered Newton dubious, and even then not so much dubious as simply not the last word. But what "redescription" would make Maillart's bridge less an accomplishment of knowledge? What redescription would render the surgical operation dubious? Even if its techniques or technology should seem crude by future standards, that doesn't mean it never was an accomplishment of knowledge. It seems to me that much perfectly respectable knowledge is "ineffable" according to Rorty's definition, while nothing that could be "rendered dubious" by a process of redescription was ever knowledge in the first place.
Hope can be more or less realistic, as hoping shades into dreaming, dreaming into fantasy, fantasy into obsession. To propose the formula “hope in place of knowledge” is to liberate hope from the constraints that make it realistic. According to the myth, Prometheus gave people both their best, most effective knowledge and the capacity for blind hope. Hope is good because knowledge, good as it is, cannot overcome tragedy. Prometheus stole as many tools as he could for us, but not even our best technology can overcome tragedy or make us immortal. Thus the great supplement of blind hope. For Rorty, though, hope is not a supplement but a substitute for knowledge. Hope is liberated from the reality principle and set free on the seas of poetic imagination. Which is fine for poets, but is it a good philosophy for a technological civilization on the brink of ecological catastrophe? Hope is all very well, but only as a supplement, and never in place of knowledge.

4. Politics

I suppose hope wouldn’t be hope if it were dissuaded by improbability. Rorty hopes for “a utopia in which everybody has a chance at the things only the richer citizens of the rich North Atlantic democracies have been able to get—the freedom, wealth, and leisure to pursue private perfection in idiosyncratic ways.” That can be read two ways. Read one way, freedom, wealth, and leisure are classic urban values, enjoyed (or withheld) in as many different ways as there are and have been cities. Read this way, Rorty hopes for a global urbanity as the fitting political culture of a global urban economy or system of civilizations. Like Rorty, I think that would be wonderful. But his utopia also has connotations of what John Dunn calls facile eudaemonism: “Advanced capitalist society cultivates in its citizens a mood which may very fairly be described as one of facile eudaemonism. To hope to extend such happiness as it makes available within itself to the vastly increased population of the world as a whole in the future without the most drastic political reorganization of this world and without considerable modification of the concept of happiness which it has fostered is not a coherent project.”

Perhaps when hope takes the place of knowledge it doesn’t have to be realistic. Yet Rorty does sometimes confront the improbability of the global Western-style affluence he hopes for. In “Love and Money,” for instance, he writes: “The fear that is beginning to gnaw at the heart of all us liberal gentlefolk in the North is that there are no initiatives which will save the southern hemisphere, that there will never be enough money in the world to redeem the South.” Undisguised pessimism is rare in Rorty, and he doesn’t try to redescribe the problem away. What he does instead (“all I can offer”) is to suggest “that we Northern gentlefolk at least keep ourselves honest . . . love is not enough.” It’s going to take power, not just eloquence and good intentions.
Insofar as they imagine they may change the things they denounce, the work of "intellectuals" (teaching, writing, research, critique, deconstruction, problematization) is impotent love, hysterical and self-deceived. "All the love in the world, all the attempts to abandon 'Eurocentrism,' or 'liberal individualism,' all the 'politics of diversity,' all the talk about cuddling up to the natural environment will not help."\(^{26}\)

Rorty apparently wants to chastise those who engage in any sort of critical examination of the instruments or effects of Western domination—our technology, our ecology, our eurocentrism, or individualism. What should "intellectuals" do, if they can't do that? "The most socially useful thing we can do is to continually draw the attention of the educated publics of our respective countries to the need for a global polity."\(^{27}\) "Know yourself" is emphatically not a motto of this pragmatism. Don't engage in demoralizing cultural introspection. Don't ponder what went wrong. Don't doubt yourself (or your culture). Look instead for ways to keep alive the hope that the people with power and money will do what the intellectuals of impotent love know that they should.

When hope takes the place of knowledge, failure loses its disconfirming value. Just because something failed doesn't mean it wasn't the Right Thing, the to-be-hoped-for thing. Failure is disappointing, but must not be demoralizing. If "intellectuals" want to be socially useful, they should work on hope rather than stoke the will to know what went wrong. Rorty singles out critics of "technology." The urge to question this dimension of our culture and ask whether serious alternatives can be realistically imagined is "a nervous, self-defeating reaction to the realization that technology may not work." "Maybe technology and central planning will not work. But they are all we have got. We should not try to pull the blanket over our heads by saying that technology was a big mistake, and that planning, top-down initiatives, and 'Western ways of thinking' must be abandoned. That is just another, much less honest, way of saying what [E. M.] Forster said: that the very poor are unthinkable."\(^{28}\)

I doubt that any serious person holds the view that "technology may not work." Which technology? Whose work? Rorty's devastation of a straw man evades the issue, which is not as easily dismissed. I don't understand why, at the very point where the difficulties are unprecedented, where one might think nothing short of a revaluation of tenacious presumptions stands a chance of working, Rorty forgets about imagination, diminishes the power of redescription, and dismisses the work of those who try to make serious alternatives seem urgent if not always hopeful. "Maybe technology and central planning will not work. But they are all we have got." When was that decided? Why is Rorty sure that here, where we most need it, hope for something different must be rebuked and dismissed? And why is he convinced that only "some as yet unimaginable bureaucratic-technological initiative, [and] not a revaluation in values," will give the reeming billions of the southern hemisphere a place at the table in utopia?\(^{29}\)
Much of the best work Rorty dismisses as "anti-technology talk" tries to do the very thing he elsewhere (and more characteristically) praises. It tries to "understand how we tricked ourselves in the past...exhibiting the unexpected and painful consequences of our ancestors' attempts to do the right thing." Writing elsewhere, with different concerns, he praises the poetry that "make[s] invidious comparisons between the actual present and a possible, if inchoate, future," and "appeal[s] to a still dimly imagined future practice." I don't understand what happens to this hopeful experimentalism when it comes to questions like world government, central planning, or the International Monetary Fund or World Bank. I don't understand why there is nothing to learn from the spectacular failures of central planning, whether Stalin's collectivism or Le Corbusier's city of Chandigarh; or from the devastation wreaked by the top-down bureaucratic initiatives that destroyed indigenous farming in so-called Third World countries, only to replace it with the expensive and unsustainable (but immensely profitable) methods of Western agribusiness. I think these suggest something badly wrong with the sort of initiative, the sort of bureaucracy, the sort of planning, and the sort of government that was responsible for them. To Rorty that's defeatism. "The rich democracies of the present day already contain the sorts of institutions necessary for their own reform." They are not distorted "by anything more esoteric than greed, fear, ignorance, and resentment." We don't need new directions, new alternatives, new values. All we need is for people not to be greedy and resentful, and let Western institutions finally do the right thing.

"Every top-down liberal initiative, from the abolition of slavery through the extension of the franchise to the establishment of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, has been driven by the hope that someday we shall no longer need to distinguish gentlefolk from those others, the people who live like animals." You can't buy publicity like that! To favorably compare the moral achievement of abolition and suffrage to predatory institutions indifferent (when not openly hostile) to democratic governance is another example of Rorty's aggressive (reductive) indifference to differences. In a text he cites elsewhere, the American social-gospel thinker Walter Rauschenbusch (Rorty's grandfather), condemns those "servant[s] of Mammon...who drain their fellow man for gain...who have made us ashamed of our dear country by their defilements...[and] who have cloaked their extortion in the gospel of Christ." Change "gospel of Christ" to "gospel of Globalization" or "gospel of Free Trade" and you have a good description of what Rorty blandly compares to the struggle against slavery and disenfranchisement.

Far from having to "redeem" the South, we are presently witnessing what UN Undersecretary-General Maurice Strong calls "the first stages of a major shift of economic power from North to South." In 1955 Southern Hemisphere developing countries contributed 5 percent to world manufacturing; today it is 60 percent. The same countries now account for 33 percent
of world energy use, a figure expected to rise to 55 percent within thirty years. The same South that already has 75 percent of the world’s population will increasingly account for a larger share of economic growth. Economically the South is taking off (however unevenly). It is poised for wealth, and if it pursues it the same way we did, it will destroy us, and them, and life as we know it. The problem is not how to redeem the South. It is how to prevent the coming economic take-off in the South from driving our kind to extinction. It is how to persuade not just southern or so-called developing countries, but all countries and transnational corporations everywhere, to conform to a system of international agreements designed to keep economic predation (“growth”) within limits that respect the ecological and humanitarian conditions of human life on earth.

Rorty believes that “achieving a liberal utopia on a global scale would require the establishment of a world federation, exercising a global monopoly of force,” and this too is very much to be hoped for. Because we already have the right values, because it is merely a question of applying them with renewed determination, hoping for a lucky break, hoping people will be less greedy and resentful, it is logical that Rorty should envision the universalization of present-day institutions. It is one thing to hope, as both Rorty and I do, “that the human race as a whole should gradually come together in a global community,” one which incorporates what Rorty calls “the thick morality of the European industrialized democracies,” and what I would call the best of the global traditions of urbanism. It is something else to hope for a world-state or a global administrative-enforcement apparatus, such as what Rorty once called “half a million Blue [UN] Helmets.”

Not only does utopian global urbanity not require such an entity, it would probably be incompatible with it. There are unquestionably issues alive in the world today that transcend national frontiers and cannot be solved in the context of the old nation-states. But the answer is not a global state-like power. Instead, we need agreements on new contexts in which state power can form and exercise new alliances with other states, as well as with local powers, business, and civil society. We need serious internationalism recognized as a necessary ingredient of sound national policies. We need more effective local-global linkages. Perhaps the most hopeful (though unlikely) development would be for the city to eclipse the nation-state, in a global urban network that links the most local level of governance with similar localities all over the planet. Strong local cities together with effective global institutions and agreements, possibly under a reformed UN, may be the ideal implementation of the principle that government is most effective and should be carried out at the level closest to the people its decisions affect.

I think Rorty paints himself into the corner of defending the indefensible in order not to seem to betray the poor. Yet it is not the armchair radicals of the academy, or not them alone, but also those who have been
closest to it, who have directed its operations, who tell us that large-scale, top-down, bureaucratic (i.e., nondemocratic) initiatives don't work. It's just not a good way to get people to cooperate, or win their trust, or improve their lives. To acknowledge that does not consign them to the unthinkable. It challenges us to find new ways to think and act.

If there are to be real solutions to the dangerous problems of ecology and poverty in the Third World and globally, they lie in a democratic process, not a management process, especially not an imposed, top-down, bureaucratic one enforced by a global state-like power. Such management despises democracy almost as much as it does seriously new alternatives. Its instinctive reaction to anything from outside its own structures is to say No; to cast suspicion on innovation; to accuse new ideas of naivety or ignorance; to respond to error by refusing to admit it and denying responsibility. Thus, as the stakes get higher, it becomes increasingly improbable that a top-down bureaucratic initiative, however unimaginably bold, could do more than accelerate collapse.

The problem with world-state power, aside from the extraordinary violence that would go into its realization and the fact that nothing useful it might do could not be achieved by agreements among more human-scale polities given the political will to do so, is that it would be a death trap for the human species. The tendency of bureaucracies to proliferate has been called "perhaps the best example of a unidirectional trend furnished by any class of social phenomena..." There may be no increase in corruption, rigidity, incompetence, extravagance, or willful inefficiency, yet less gets accomplished. Imagine that on a global scale: a global bureaucratic authority would drown in its own garbage. A world state would be the least efficient, most destructive polity in the history of civilization. It would be impossible to sustain, and as crisis set in it would become the hollow shell within which the final, and most violent, phase of the human species plays out under an increasingly hot and radioactive sun.

NOTES


4. Rorty, Social Hope, 175, 187.

6. Social Hope, 120, 28, 34.

7. Ibid., xxxii, xv, 204.

8. Ibid., 86, 81.


14. To regain its historical individuality liberalism has to become a good deal more ideological than Rorty likes. What is specific and different about “liberalism” in Western political thought is to elevate to a principle of rational politics the suspicion that we govern too much, a critique of the irrationality peculiar to excess government. See the summary of a course on liberalism by Michel Foucault, Ethics, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 1:73–79; and my “Foucault and Modern Political Philosophy,” The Later Foucault: Philosophy and Politics, ed. Jeremy Moss (London: Sage, 1998).


17. Jeffrey Herli, Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 16. Writing in Deutsche Technik, March 1939, Goebbels says, “National Socialism never rejected or struggled against technology. Rather, one if its main tasks was to consciously affirm it, to fill it inwardly with soul, to discipline it and to place it in the service of our people and their cultural level . . . National Socialism understood how to take the soulless framework of technology and fill it with the rhythm and hot impulses of our

18. Social Hope, 36.
19. Ibid., xxvi.

20. Truth and Progress, 94: "I define reductivism as the insistence that there is not only a single web [of causal relations] but a single privileged description of all entities caught in that web ... I regard myself as cleansed of reductivist sin."

21. Social Hope, 74–75.
22. Ibid., 55, 48; Truth and Progress, 298.
23. Ibid., 281.


25. Social Hope, 226.
26. Ibid., 227.
27. Ibid., 233.
28. Ibid., 228.
29. Ibid., 217, 228.


32. Truth and Progress, 326.


34. Maurice Strong, Where on Earth Are We Going? (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2000), 37, 38, 368, 370.

35. Social Hope, 274. I don't know how to square these remarks with what Rorty says elsewhere: "The current leftist habit of taking the long view and looking beyond
nationhood to a global polity is as useless as was faith in Marx's philosophy of history, for which it has become a substitute." *Achieving Our Country*, 98.


37. This is Strong's "principle of subsidiarity." *Where on Earth*, 313.