from it some moral values.” Yet I am dubious when he goes on to say that metaphysics “does justify some of our moral intuitions, correct some of our other intuitions, and cultivate some needed new intuitions.” Huang thinks of metaphysics as something that results naturally from a search for reflective equilibrium among all one’s various intuitions—moral, scientific, psychological, aesthetic, and so on. He describes such a search as sometimes eventuating in the construction of “a general principle to underlie our various beliefs on particular things” and seems to think of such principles as the natural result of attempts to make our beliefs on a wide variety of topics coherent with one another. He cites me as endorsing such a project when I speak of “constructing models of such entities as the self, knowledge, language, etc.” I would distinguish more sharply than Huang does between making our talk about one thing cohere with our talk about other things and formulating general underlying principles. I am less sure than he is that there is any point to the latter activity. My tastes in philosophy are for narrative and therapy rather than for system-building. So I doubt that philosophers should try to find something that underlies the realms of the moral, the scientific, the aesthetic, and the rest. I suspect they should instead concentrate on keeping these various activities from getting mixed up with one another. Much of the sort of philosophical therapy that pragmatists like myself engage in consists, for example, in saying that morality and natural science serve such different purposes that nothing that goes on in one area of culture is likely to have much bearing on what happens in the other.

Let me conclude these comments by expressing the hope that Huang is right that there is no reason for contemporary Confucians to reject “religious and metaphysical pluralism.” I doubt that Confucius and Mencius themselves would have looked kindly on Shelley’s suggestion that “the imagination is the chief instrument of the moral good,” or on the proposal that sages spend their time dreaming up radically new forms of social and political life. However, that contemporary Confucians should be able to assimilate this sort of Romanticism is no more paradoxical than that contemporary Christians should campaign for attitudes toward sex that Saint Paul would have rejected in horror.

R. R.

NOTE


Plato wanted to banish creative writers—he called them poets—from his utopia and thought that philosophy should provide the truths that shape the good society. Rorty hopes that Plato’s kind of philosophy will have vanished from his utopia and that creative writers—he calls them novelists—will provide the new stimuli that enrich individual lives. Creators of utopias between Plato and Rorty have not been much concerned with the role of philosophy in culture. For Rorty it is central. We need to see why if we are to understand his views on moral philosophy.1

Rorty’s approach to the subject is not the usual one. His interest is in what moral philosophy has done and is doing to and for individual freedom and for social stability and progress. It is useful to see him as reopening a discussion that began after the French Revolution, when philosophers and many others were searching for a comprehensive view that could help hold society together. It was widely believed that Enlightenment criticism had weakened the power of religion and that something was needed to replace it as a force for social cohesion. Hegel tried to show that a restored organic community and a new version of religion were bound to be the outcome of history. St. Simon and Comte, followed by John Stuart Mill, proclaimed that they were living in a critical or transitional period. The religious beliefs that had once held society together were now defunct; the metaphysical theories that succeeded them were bloodless and ineffective; they themselves had the task of developing a new scientific morality and a new religion. Society would then move into an organic period of stability,
peace, and prosperity.

In the very last sentence of Reconstruction in Philosophy, Dewey suggested that he was living in what he called a period of transition. Like the Comtians he had faith in science and was willing to allow that something like religion would still be available even after scientific method had been used to solve social problems. Rorty takes it for granted that the assurances once widely derived from religion and metaphysics are no longer effective. But he denies that science has the means to relieve the difficulties, and he is opposed to inventing or restoring a place for religion. We are at best in an age of transition. We are not yet in utopia.

I

Rorty describes his utopia in terms of two basic contrasts: between the ironic and the metaphysical (or as he sometimes says, commonsensical) attitude toward our vocabulary, and between private concerns and public concerns. Irony seems to have its main function in the private domain. For the public sphere, Rorty proposes that we replace the search for knowledge about how to live together with hope for how we may come to live together. The values he defends are not novel. He has the standard liberal goals: a society that gives us freedom to live as we choose so long as others have the same freedom, and justice and equality with adequate material resources for all. What is new is Rorty’s view of how we should think about these values in order to make or keep them effective.

The distinctions Rorty uses to explain irony are not to be taken as mirroring ontological differences. They are a “momentarily convenient blocking-out of regions along a spectrum.” In our private lives we each orient ourselves, Rorty says, with our own set of terms. They form the vocabulary in which we justify ourselves, praise or condemn others, and think about what matters most to us. Rorty calls this vocabulary “final,” meaning that we cannot give neutral reasons to support it against doubts that may be cast on it. Part of it will consist of what Rorty calls thin terms—“good,” “right,” “beautiful”—but most of its working equipment is thick terms such as “the Revolution,” “kindness,” “creative.” The first mark of the utopian is that she is an “ironist.” She has “radical and continuing doubts” about her own final vocabulary because she is aware that other people have different vocabularies and she knows that she cannot prove hers to be better or closer to reality than theirs. She does not think of her vocabulary as if it provided the only possible words in which to talk about important matters, and she does not think there are criteria for choosing among final vocabularies. She does not unreflectively accept common sense as giving us an adequate final vocabulary. Nor does she, like a metaphysician, think that the commonsense vocabulary—or perhaps some other—can be justified by matching it to the real essence or intrinsic nature of things.

The ironist is a nominalist who is vividly aware that vocabularies change over time. She tends to use novels to find a vocabulary for describing herself, and she invents or alters terms if old ones no longer feel suitable. She does not expect her vocabulary to feel suitable to everyone. Self-creation is her private business, not that of others.

Rorty’s utopian accepts Rorty’s view about the self. We do not need to treat the self as some sort of substance or entity beyond its beliefs, desires, moods, and feelings. We can also do without the notion of consciousness. We need not be reductionist in taking this view. And we do not need to think of some changeless part of the web of beliefs and desires as “the true self.” Some of the items in the web can be dropped or revised with few reverberations elsewhere in it; dropping others would shake the whole tangle; these latter are central to our identity at any time and give us the everyday sense of self. The utopian hopes that encounters with others will help her to construct ever richer aims and goals for herself, cast in ever more varied terms. She does not think that freedom is the essence of the self since she does not think in terms of essences. But she places great value on the freedom to think and to live her private life untrammeled by responsibility to anything outside her. She hopes to realize a self she is forever creating anew.

She is a liberal, but not because she is an ironist. She knows that Nietzsche, who repudiated liberalism with contempt, was a thorough ironist. Rorty follows Judith Shklar in making his utopian think that the worst thing one can do is to be cruel to others. What attracts him about her view is her insistence that cruelty is purely a relation between one human and another, involving no relation at all to any deity. Inflicting pain, which is nonverbal and which we share with animals, is one form of cruelty. The worst form is humiliating others: making things that are important to them seem “futile, obsolete, and powerless.” Only humans can be humiliated. Susceptibility to pain and humiliation are what unites the utopian to the rest of humanity. She knows how to identify in imagination with the feelings and final vocabularies of others. So she would like others to have her level of freedom from pain and humiliation, as well as a similar ability to elaborate their own vision of themselves.

The only “social glue” needed to unite utopians is their agreement that everyone should have “a chance at self-realization to the best of his or her abilities.” It takes the standard bourgeois freedoms to make this possible. Economic factors are necessary to make them available. This generous hope is realistic, Rorty says, “only if there is enough money around.”
although Rorty’s utopians hope everyone can share these freedoms, they
do not believe that “perfect self-realization can be attained through service
to others,” as Plato and Christianity taught. 17 The utopian as ironist is not
much use to the causes of freedom and equality. 18

There is, however, another aspect of the utopian. In our private lives we
find ourselves linked by love or affection to particular individuals. These
ties can be so intense and serious that questions of whether we “ought” to
care for those we love never even arise. But we also think of ourselves as
members of groups. There are things “we” do that “others” do not. Our
“we-intentions” (Rorty takes the term from Sellars) involve us in relations
of “solidarity” with those in our group but not with outsiders. 19 Standard
moral philosophy urged us to feel solidarity with all human beings or even
with all rational agents. It also held that the universal obligations to all
others take precedence over more limited values and commitments. Rorty
rejects both of these claims. Our own group gains meaning in our lives
precisely by being set off from groups of “them.” We help people because
they are our family, or from our village, or in our church, or fellow Amer-
icans—but not just because they are humans. Feelings of solidarity, Rorty
says, result from similarities that strike us as important; which ones those
are “is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary.” 20 Obliga-
tions to others, moreover, “constitute only the public side of our lives.”
If the public side and the private side of our life come into conflict, the
former, despite Kant, “has no automatic priority” over the latter. 21 Rorty
thus seems to accept what he takes to be Freud’s view that “a private ethic
of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation” are equally
important but not connected with each other. 22

Though our initial “we” is limited—to family, friends, village, church—Rorty insists that each of us can expand the scope of the public to which she considers herself to belong. One of the most important features of Rorty’s utopians is their constant desire to reconstitute their communities. They do this not just by reweaving the personal narratives they already live, but also by including ever more kinds of people in the “we” for whom they feel solidarity. In utopia, “everybody has had a chance to suggest ways in which we might cobble together a world (or Galactic) society.” 23 Hope for such an enlarged society replaces the old philosophical claim that moral or metaphysical knowledge can convince us that all humans or all rational agents belong in one universal society. Rorty is quite willing to talk of moral progress. 24 For him it consists in expanding the community of those with whom we feel solidarity.

Will the community be limited to intellectuals who cultivate a satis-
fied attitude toward their vocabulary, their beliefs, and the moral
principles their culture teaches? Rorty denies this. Nonintellectuals will

be “commonsensical nonmetaphysicians” lacking doubts about “the con-
tingencies they happened to be.” 25 Freud showed us that everyone is busy
creating a new self, whether conscious of doing so or not. His notion of
unconscious fantasy allows us to see every human life as a poem, or at
least, every life not trapped in poverty and pain. 26 What really matters in
Rorty’s utopia is solidarity, not knowledge. “[A]pproximations to a fully
democratic, fully secular community seem to [Rorty] to be the greatest
achievement of our species.” 27 Intellectuals are just odd beings with press-
ing needs for sublime moments of reinvention of private vocabularies. 28
They have no special place in the public life of utopia.

II

If hope for and feelings of increased solidarity are central to utopia, it
might seem that progress would be helped by a noncognitivist metaethics.
But this is not Rorty’s view. About the “cognitive status” of moral beliefs,
says Rorty, “we” are doing a “no epistemological difference between truth
about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical
difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference
between morality and science.” 29 Since he finds useless the entire discussion
of what makes true beliefs true, he sees no point in worrying about whether
there are existent entities or properties that correspond to true moral
beliefs. Moreover, once we get rid of the quasi-realism of a vocabulary
that distinguishes cognition from feeling, “emotivism will no longer
be an intelligible position.” 30

Rorty prefers what he sometimes calls a “thick” morality, couched
in such terms as “courageous” or “tolerant,” to a “thin” morality, which uses
terms like “good” and “right.” 31 He does not deny, however, that even in
utopia there will be uses for a thin normative vocabulary. 32 Yet he says
little about how normative vocabularies would operate once they have all
been freed from the deposits of religion and standard moral philosophy.
In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature he suggests that there are two senses
of “good.” There is an ordinary sense that the word has when it is used to
commend. To commend, he suggests, is “to remark that something answers
to some interest.” We will never find necessary and sufficient conditions
for applying the term in this sense. There are “too many kinds of things to
commend and too many different reasons for commending them” to get
such a clearcut account. In this “homely and shopworn” sense, therefore,
there is no definition of “good.” 33

By contrast, G. E. Moore’s famous attack on the possibility of stating
conditions for something’s being good calls on “a philosophical sense
of "good." From Plato on, philosophers have handled the term "good" so that it becomes an imaginary focus "whose whole point is not to be identifiable with the fulfillment of any set of conditions." In this sense, it is always possible to agree that something has properties X, Y, and Z and still to doubt whether it is good. But this is a philosopher's sense, which "homely" minds can only grasp if they read Plato or Moore. Here it seems that if standard moral philosophy disappeared, the meaning of key terms in ordinary normative discussion would be unaffected.

Rorty sees other normative terms differently. His account of the notion of moral obligation suggests that both standard moral philosophy and religion have had lasting effects on ordinary discourse. He is inclined to agree with Anscombe's claim that the notion of moral obligation supposes beliefs in God and a divine law. Unlike Anscombe, however, he offers a naturalistic revision of the notion. If the beliefs and desires that happen to be central to my personal identity at any time make me think that there is something that I would rather die than do, then I say that I simply cannot do it. This provides a historicized, nontranscendental counterpart to the practical necessity that Kant built into the "imaginary focus" of the rational self. Rorty uses this account to give an acceptable sense to the notion of specifically "moral" obligation. We feel morally obligated when we feel that we must or cannot do something because of our concerns for others and our desire to be in solidarity with them.

Rorty also places a restriction on the applicability of the notion of moral obligation. It would be inappropriate to use the term to think about my need to take care of my family, he says, because "doing what one is obliged to do contrasts with doing what comes naturally." My need to be sure my children are fed is closely tied to my sense of myself. But when I feel obliged to help starving Africans, "[t]he word 'moral' is appropriate . . . because the demand is less natural." If we ever managed to expand our sense of self so that we felt concern for everyone, as saints are said to, "the term 'morality' would drop out of the language."

Even with his naturalizing accounts of moral obligation available, Rorty says that he is "deeply suspicious" of the notion. He is not merely suspicious of the distinction between morality and prudence. He is positively hostile to it, at least as it is currently understood. It is, he thinks, basically a Kantian distinction. Morality is supposed to contain the voice of the eternal law of reason speaking through the essential self and overruling the desires and impulses that come from the merely empirical part of us. But Rorty wants to do without the notion of different parts within the self. Psychoanalysis helps us here because it "has blurred the distinction between conscience and the emotions of love, hate, and fear, and thus the distinction between morality and prudence." When utopians accept this understanding of the self, they have matured. The distinction between morality and prudence is at best a "transitional stage on the way to maturity."

Perhaps because we are not there yet, Rorty suggests a way of reconstituting the prudence-morality distinction. Within the shifting web of beliefs and desires that constitutes us, there are some we share with others in the community we think of as "ours." Others are personal. When someone appeals in deliberation to the overlapping shared part of herself, she is making a moral, not a prudential, appeal. Because we each belong to several communities, we may feel ourselves subject to conflicting demands. Then we may say that we face a distinctively moral dilemma.

As we come to feel loyalty to a larger group, we extend the range of those for whom we feel we have duties of justice. Rorty proposes that we think of duties of justice only in terms of strong loyalties—feelings of solidarity strong enough so that we cannot bring ourselves to refuse equal treatment to everyone in the group. Rorty does not offer his own theory of justice. He himself is mainly interested in the personal side of "morality," the search for self-perfection, rather than the public side. "Morality as the search for justice," he says, is the "relatively simple and obvious side of morality . . . often referred to as 'culture' or 'repression.'" He seems to accept Rawls's theory as adequate enough to make it unnecessary for him to invent his own view. Not surprisingly, he particularly likes Rawls's claim that his theory is not metaphysically grounded and expresses only the consensus of liberals in modern Western societies. But Rorty also suggests that he accepts the two substantive principles Rawls proposes.

Even if Rorty accepts them, he cannot think that they would be of much use in increasing freedom and equality. He has a low opinion of all statements of moral principles. In deliberating, he says, "We usually do not apply criteria at all. We just deliberate about various advantages and disadvantages." More specifically, we ask ourselves what sort of person we wish to become or, for questions of justice, what sort of society we want to belong to. Rorty sees principles as summing up decisions and practices that have been accepted by one's culture. Neither rules nor principles can be more than accounts of "habits of the ancestors we most admire." Particular decisions call for emotional sensitivity; general principles track our decisions and do not help us make them. To insist "that there must . . . a legitimating principle lurking behind every right action amounts to the idea that there is something like a universal, super-national court of law before which we stand." However, Rorty's hope that we can "emanicipate our culture from the whole philosophical vocabulary" is contained in his attempts to break our habit.
of calling on such universal principles. In the section of Philosophy and Social Hope called "Hope in Place of Knowledge," the chapter on morality is entitled "Ethics without Principles."

III

Although he allows that we can speak of moral truth and moral knowledge, Rorty says little about giving reasons in normative discourse, either now or in utopia. But the topic is particularly important to him because it leads to the question of relativism. And that is an issue—the only commonplace metaethical issue—to which he repeatedly returns.

Rorty thinks that we can give reasons for what we think and do only to those with whom we share some beliefs, attitudes, and vocabularies. The extent to which people share beliefs is purely contingent. There is no standpoint outside the conversations of actual interlocutors that everyone can or must accept as rationally authoritative. Rorty frequently calls on Thomas Kuhn's views about scientific revolutions to bolster his claim that it is impossible to argue for the replacement of one vocabulary with another. He also extends Kuhn's views to cover reasoning about practical matters. The accepted commonsense morality of a period is analogous to Kuhnian "normal science." Within it, rational argument is possible. The interlocutors share principles and agree on criteria for the successful resolution of a moral disagreement. Reason-giving in this situation is as conservative as it is unproblematic. But we cannot refute a Nietzsche or a Loyola, and if we say that they are just crazy, their rejoinder is simply that they use different criteria of sanity and have no desire to be the sort of person we consider sane. To this we have no reply.

Rorty denies that statements like these amount to ethical relativism because he thinks that the contrast between relative and absolute makes no sense. No one, he says, has managed to come up with indubitable grounds of the kind required to give point to the claim that some beliefs but not others are merely relative. Science in particular does not provide the alternative. Scientific beliefs are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling some kinds of events; normative beliefs are used in other ways, such as for coordinating behavior. Since neither is usefully understood as putting us into privileged contact with "the world as it really is," the contrast between relative and absolute loses sense.

Rorty also rejects the idea that because of the special objectivity of its results science provides the contrast we need with other domains of belief. Objectivity is not a matter of mirroring objects. To seek objective beliefs is to seek "beliefs which will eventually receive unforced agreement in

IV

the course of a free and open encounter with people holding other beliefs." The main live question about beliefs concerning values is whether we want to keep the ones we have or replace them. We can allow that this question may be a practical issue about any of our norms, and thus be properly fallibilistic, without supposing that we must live up to something beyond ourselves in order to get our values right.

Pragmatists need suffer no diminution of emotional attachment to norms that are recognized as lacking the sort of grounding that realists desire. They can be "just as morally indignant as the next philosopher." Pragmatists can hold that their own moral views are true, meaning that they would be the outcome of free and open discussion. Hence they are as able as the "absolutist" to condemn practices in other cultures. They can be as "furious at moral evil" as the absolutist and as "morally serious." Holding that Nazis cannot be argued into becoming liberals does not force pragmatists to allow that liberalism and Nazism are equally good. That conclusion could follow only if there were some neutral method by which to judge, but no one in the debate can prove that she possesses such a method. Cultural differences certainly exist, but they seldom present live options for us. We can be as confident of our moral as of our scientific beliefs. We can also be as open-minded about genuine practical possibilities as scientists are about genuine alternative theories.

Rorty's revisionary explanations of the moral vocabulary clarify his animus against traditional moral philosophy. He does not claim that his accounts of obligation and morality are analyses of current usage. On the contrary: since we have been raised to have the "intuitions" that moral philosophers appeal to, we need to change the vocabulary and the intuitions supporting it. We need to give up the Kantian attempt to replace a divinized world with a divinized self. Derrida, he says (in italics), is "suggesting how things might look if we did not have Kantian philosophy built into the fabric of our intellectual life." Common speech proceeds as if "the ‘I’ is distinct from its beliefs and desires" and is committed to the existence of "the ‘True Self’, the inner core of one’s being." These Kantian thoughts are presumably part of the "metaphysics" that is "woven into the public rhetoric of modern liberal societies." Despite the efforts of James and Dewey, our nation is still not free from "the religious culture in which it began and which still permeates its public life." The practical issue for pragmatists is whether their own favored vocabulary "can take the place in our moral lives of notions like 'the world', 'the will of God',
‘the moral law,’... ‘what makes our beliefs true.’”75 “Most nonintellectuals are still committed either to some form of religious faith or to some form of Enlightenment rationalism.”76 MacIntyre is right in saying that “contemporary moral discourse is a confusing and inconsistent blend” of old Aristotelian notions and newer mechanistic notions.77

Moral language in its present condition prevents us from seeing ourselves as the creators of the normative world in which we live, from taking responsibility for it, and from altering ourselves and it as we see fit. Any appeal to a fixed human nature or essence constrains self-development. Only if we give up such ideas can we see moral reflection “as a matter of self-creation rather than self-knowledge.”78 The typical supporter of universal moral principles is a moral realist. And moral realism discourages us from trying to invent new social possibilities.79 The chief tool for enriching one’s self is the creative misuse of language, which both of these standard philosophical views inhibit. Only Rorty’s particularistic decision-making would open the way to a community of self-developing creative agents who hope to make moral progress by continually widening their solidarity.

V

John Dewey, according to Rorty, “was one of the few philosophers of our century whose imagination was expansive enough to envisage a culture shaped along lines different from those we have developed in the West during the last three hundred years.”80 Rorty sees himself as trying to take the Deweyan enterprise further. His strategy is to urge us to use a new vocabulary to talk about our private as well as our public lives. We might put this by saying that Rorty’s proposal follows a Kuhnian paradigm shift of moral terminology as a solution to the main problem about morality that faces us in the present transitional period. Citizens of advanced industrial societies are unable to avoid awareness of the multiplicity of moralities lived by groups they can no longer dismiss as simply barbaric or uncivilized. Even those who are still comfortable with an inherited morality tied to a religion are aware that they cannot expect the world to come to unforced agreement with them. However reluctantly, most people accept tolerance as the only modus vivendi. But many are haunted by the promise that religion held out, of providing “a fixed point in a changing world.”81 “The ‘common sense’ of the West,” Rorty says, “is still infected with the Greek idea that things have an essence and that if we could only discover the essence of humanity... then we would finally know what we should do with ourselves.”82 If we do not allow ourselves to be affected by the plurality of views all around us, and continue to rely on traditional religious or philosophical outlooks, we limit our own freedom unnecessarily. We think our fixed human nature closes off options for our private lives that we might otherwise find attractive. We may think that eternal moral rules or principles require us to be harsh to women or gays or African-Americans, or else feel guilt for failing to live up to burdens we cannot carry. Those who have no religion or philosophy to turn to may find themselves still wishing for a certainty they cannot find. Their realization of the contingency of their beliefs makes them feel dispirited about remaking either themselves or their social world. Like Comte, Rorty wants to clear out the ghosts of the bygone theological and metaphysical ages and help us move into a fresher, freer future.

At various places, Rorty suggests that he is using an argument about means to an end: utopia is the end, getting rid of traditional philosophy the means.83 Elsewhere he rejects this move, saying that he has no knockdown arguments for his views,84 or that the end cannot be precisely stated,85 or that he thinks of himself not as arguing but as giving a narrative redescription that will convince us to accept his views.86 However, he is often quite definite about the goal. As a utilitarian and a pragmatist, he says, his hope is not that people will become more religious or more rational. The hope is rather that people in the future will enjoy more money, more freedom, more social equality and that they might develop more imagination or fantasy, more sympathy, so that they may be in a better position to transform themselves into other people. The hope is that people will become more decent as the material circumstances of their lives improve.87

Rorty’s opposition to philosophical foundationalism is based on practical grounds: that kind of philosophy stands in the way of progress. Whatever it did in the past, it is no help now.88 Opposition to it is warranted as a means to an end that Rorty thinks we can be brought to share if we do not already embrace it.89

VI

Rorty offers his utopia as a response, and perhaps even as a contribution, to moral philosophy. We should try to assess it as such. But in ethics as elsewhere, he wears a Teflon coating that makes objections roll off without getting him wet. He frequently says that exercising cruelty, especially the cruelty of humiliating people, is the worst thing we do. But he offers noth-
ing in defense of the claim, nor does he seem to care whether the term can be used to systematize our other convictions. Our commonsense beliefs or "intuitions" are themselves in need of revision. So even if we could get a principle that articulated many or all of them, we would not have gained much. If the new accounts he offers of how we might understand some of the terms in the common sense moral vocabulary do not capture ordinary usage, it would not bother him. He is proposing accounts of a vocabulary we will not share until utopia is realized, and Rorty says we cannot be precise about the details ahead of time. If we ask whether a society built around his historicist and fallibilist reworking of the moral vocabulary is even possible, his reply is that we should not argue about it on a priori grounds. We should try it and see. Thus, the kinds of criticism that philosophers direct at new ethical theories seem beside the point.

Rorty cannot so easily shrug off the question of how well he has succeeded in extending Dewey's effort to create a new vision of culture. To what extent would the moral life in Rorty's utopia differ from the life we lead now? If we get clear on this, we will be in a position to ask whether there might still be a place in utopia for some of the standard endeavors of moral philosophy.

How new, to begin with, is Rorty's self-creating ironist? If we think of Montaigne, we will be reminded that "self-fashioning" is hardly a new endeavor. There were other self-fashioners before Montaigne, but he was responding to traditional moral philosophy more fully than they. Indeed, it is hard to think of anyone else who so explicitly responded to so many philosophical and religious images of life. His endless effort to find or make himself—like Rorty, he blurs the distinction—led him to reject as useless all previous models. He got no guidance from eternal principles or common essences either. The only essence he found was his own unique individual essence. He found in it a powerful repugnance to some things—cruelty was one of them—but he did not get much positive guidance from it. The Pyrrhonic skeptics, Rorty remarks, were proto-pragmatists. If so, then Montaigne was one as well.

Kant was neither skeptic nor pragmatist, but he advocated self-perfection as strongly as Montaigne. And like Montaigne, he held that there is no positive guidance for it. Rationalist perfectionists like Malebranche and Leibniz held that the core of advance in perfection was increase of knowledge. Kant held that we should develop our talents and abilities as well as improve our moral character. Moral philosophy shows that this is required, but it can say no more. It certainly cannot give instructions about which talents to develop or about how energetically to pursue any sort of self-improvement. Moreover, Kant had serious doubts about the availability of self-knowledge. He therefore did not think that we could get guidance even about our talents from an examination of our own nature, let alone from human nature in general. Of course—as with Montaigne—there are limits to what we may do: we must not transgress the categorical imperative. Otherwise, it is all up to us.

I need only mention John Stuart Mill and Nietzsche to show that a concern for self-invention going beyond models and principles continued to be a concern of moral philosophy after Kant. That Rorty, like his non-Nietzschean predecessors, accepts limits on self-invention is made clear by his insistence that his utopian self-inventor confines her innovations to her private life and does not inflict her oddities on others in any harmful ways.

What makes Rorty's self-inventor different from those of Montaigne, Kant, and Mill is her ironism. Her irony does not consist in her saying one thing and meaning its opposite. Nor is it Socratic irony, which, as Nehamas describes it, is "a form of silence." The Socratic ironist says something while leaving us with no way of knowing just what she means. But Rorty's ironist is not talking to others. She uses her idsosyncratic vocabulary, first of all, to talk to herself. Moreover, she is not working with knowledge claims. She is not trying to get others to acknowledge a truth. She is not even insisting on her own ignorance. What distinguishes her from other self-inventors is just her "radical and continuing doubts" about her special vocabulary.

What are we to think of this? The "crackerbarrel pragmatist" in me wants to ask what difference in her life is made by her doubt. What exactly is the ironist doubting?

If she is an antifoundationalist, then she takes all her beliefs to be ungrounded and so tied to time and contingency. How then will she confine her doubt to her private final vocabulary? Rorty says that she combines her political commitments with a sense of contingency. But she rejects relativism, feels passionate about her ideals, and can be indignant or outraged about political matters. If the sense of contingency generates her doubts, the same sense—given Rorty's view of science—will spread over her commitments in physics and biology as well. But Rorty does not say that the ironist has radical doubts about science. Moreover, she actually settles on a private vocabulary, at least for some time. Her doubt thus seems to be without effect. How can a pragmatist ironist make sense even of her doubt about her private vocabulary?

Rorty surely does not want his ironist to be seen as a merely compulsive doubter, forever washing her words. She models a doubt that we can share. But what is it? Is it like the doubt about the possibility of success in a new life? She might wonder whether she will make it as a poet if she gives up her successful career in banking. Such doubts cannot always be
resolved by learning more about oneself or the world, and a decision has to be made. But even if reasons and arguments are insufficient or irrelevant when choosing a new vocabulary or a new mode of life, it does not follow that one is in doubt about the choice. The fact that one makes the choice shows just the opposite.96 Worries like this, moreover, have nothing to do with any sense of the contingency of a final vocabulary. The ironist’s doubts cannot be settled. But if someone really tries a new career, she will find out whether she made a good choice. This case does not help us understand the ironist.

Some real doubts may be much more pervasive. Loss of religious faith, discovery that the Party has proven wrong, learning that one’s spouse has had lovers all through a long marriage—these can indeed give rise to practical consequences. One may doubt one’s power of judgement as well as the terms in which one has thought about life. Some never recover from such upheavals. William Hale White’s character Mark Rutherford is a classical portrait of a life almost ruined by a shattering loss of religious belief.99 This seems much more like the loss of confidence in one’s capacity to understand one’s life that Rorty’s doubting ironist feels. And Rorty sometimes suggests that crisis situations of this sort are models for making decisions with no criteria.100

Elsewhere, however, he presents a much calmer ironist: “Irony is often associated with indifference and distance. I have tied something else to this word. I wanted it to point to the insight that every self-inventor is always a creation of time and contingency.”101 This is another way of saying that the ironist’s doubt comes from her realization that innumerable final vocabularies are in use and that choices among them cannot be proven to be right. But if the ironist does not expect convergence on final vocabularies,102 why does she feel doubt about hers? Peirce says that the disagreement of others tends to make us doubt our own views, but that is when we are looking for the fixed beliefs we take to be good candidates for truth. The ironist is not looking for truth in choosing a final vocabulary. She is creating, not discovering. What is the point of doubt here?

The answer may be that the ironist once had, let us say, faith in a God who called her to a particular profession and then lost her faith. She may feel nostalgic about the assurance she once had about being a doctor serving the poor. Now (especially if she reads philosophy and becomes an antifoundationalist), she cannot really see just what that assurance rested on, but occasionally she misses it anyhow. She is a nostalgic fallibilist. Rorty accepts this: “an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself. Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to feel alienated.”103 If Rorty’s utopia ever arrives, no one will have had the sort of upbringing that generates ironic nostalgia. If no one thinks ordinary language gets the world right, or that some better language might, Rorty’s ironist will vanish.

This is not a criticism. Rorty thinks ideals have a point in a given cultural situation, not for all time. But unless we can understand his ironist’s doubts we cannot see why she is an ideal for our situation. We cannot understand what “ironist theory” is, even when we admit that it is a ladder we will eventually throw away.104 Beyond revealing nostalgia for a sense of certainty that the ironist now realizes was illusory, the doubts make no pragmatic sense. Irony as realization that there are many vocabularies opens doors to self-creation, but irony as doubt and its anxieties changes nothing in the project. Rorty has not gotten us beyond Mill.

VII

Rorty’s distinction between public and private does not get us beyond Mill either: Rorty says, “The core of my book (Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity) is a distinction between private concerns, in the sense of idiosyncratic projects of self-overcoming, and public concerns, those having to do with the suffering of other human beings.”105 Like that of Mill, Rorty’s distinction is suggestive but not very clear.106 Mill at least had no objection to sharp distinctions. Rorty does. But the boundary between words that may be privately up for grabs and those that are not is too indefinite to be useful. The ironist’s dictionary includes thin terms like “good” and “right” that are used across the border. And the ironist cares about spouse and children and is not wholly narcissistic.107 Rorty might embrace this kind of unclarity as showing that his distinction is blurry after all. The problem is that he does not tell us how to limit irony to a part of life that does not affect others. We cannot tell the private self from the public one.

Suppose, however, that we could make the distinction clear enough to work with. And suppose Rorty got his wish for a liberal utopia, in which “ironism...is universal.”108 Would his Deweyan project be advanced by the ironist’s attitude toward commonsense morality?109

Common sense, Rorty tells us, is the opposite of irony. The man of common sense uses the common vocabulary as if it were both unquestionable and sufficient for any judgments he might wish to make. If his position is challenged, he does not change it; he stubbornly sticks to it and then finds himself driven to metaphysical statements about how things really are. The believer in commonsense morality turns out to be an inflexible Babbitt.110 Rorty wants to say that the ironist has a different attitude. She
worry that the “process of socialization” that gave her a language may have given her the “wrong language” and turned her into “the wrong kind of human being.” At the same time, Rorty says that he “cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to be make them dubious about their own process of socialization.” If Rorty is to sustain his claim that he is not a relativist, he has to say this. But it is unclear how it fits with the hope for ironyism for all. And the pragmatist’s question about what the ironist’s worry amounts to in practice is no easier to answer for the public than for the private life. There are two points here.

First, what would it take for the ironist to be reassured that she is using the “right language” of morals? In her public capacity, she is as steadfast in her devotion to liberal ideals as anyone else. That leaves room for criticism of commonsense morality, of course—for commonplace moral argument touching on one thing at a time. Has the ironist who asks if she has the wrong vocabulary mistaken a question that makes sense about a particular point inside common sense morality for one that makes sense when asked about the whole of it? Rorty would not be happy about that, but I do not see what else can give the ironist her doubts here.

Second, according to Rorty, tolerance is the chief virtue of the ironist because she knows that there are so many ways of talking and that none is better rooted in or closer to reality than others. Rorty tells us that Nietzsche was an intolerant ironist and that if the ironist is tolerant, it is not because of her ironism. It is because of her commitment to liberal ideals. But then the pragmatist has to ask: what is the difference between the Babbitt of commonsense or metaphysically assured morality and the youth who are not raised to be doubting ironists? A calm fallibilist may indeed be more likely to be tolerant than the Babbitt of commonsense morality. The fallibilist will bethink him that he may be mistaken. But unless he has some specific reason to suppose that in the case at hand he is mistaken, he will act with just the assurance that Rorty as antirelativist attributes to him.

Does antifoundationalism then make no difference at all to the moral life? Is Rorty wholly off on the wrong track? On the contrary: I think he has seized on a feature of growing importance in our culture—the ever-growing awareness of moralities other than our own. But he has not thought through his response to it. He should say that what we need is to take the nostalgia out of fallibilism. We need citizens raised knowing that there are limits to how far arguments about morality can go. They will agree with Rorty that you cannot convince people with whom you do not share at least some important moral views. Then they will have to hope that those whom they oppose are at least willing to try to get along with a minimum of violence. In the worst possible case, they may be forced to see that they have no alternative but to fight.

If such citizens are raised without stories that promise more than this, they will not see the ultimate need to fight as grounds for doubt about their common sense morality. They will say, with Rorty, that there is no standpoint beyond all morality and beyond all language from which to prove that their own moral vocabulary is the right one and that of their enemies wrong. If someone asks for such a proof, they will be puzzled. “Look,” they will say, “we stand for decent treatment of all people regardless of race, gender, or sexual preference, for letting people live their private lives as they wish, for making everyone better off. They stand for keeping women illiterate, for tormenting or killing gays, and for suppressing dissent by torture. Where are you?” There is no other question to ask.

It will be difficult, no doubt, to change our education so that nostalgia for an incomprehensible grounding vanishes, but no more difficult than—to use an example of Rorty’s—getting religion out of public education was. John Stuart Mill called for educational reforms to make the working classes use birth control and enjoy nature instead of gin. If Rorty is right about the threat foundationalisms pose to free self-creation and social cohesion, one practical consequence of his concern might well be a call for a new kind of education. We can view his own widely-read essays as a step in this direction. He sometimes says he is doing as much.

VIII

Rorty thinks that moral philosophy is now a major support for the language embodying a need for “the not ourselves that makes for righteousness” for which Matthew Arnold hankeredy. Rorty admits to taking Plato and Kant as the key figures in his vision of the history of the subject. But his remarks about them never amount to serious discussion, and he is usually content, like Dewey, to dismiss the enterprise without examination as tending to reinforce the social status quo. This view of the history of the subject cannot withstand scrutiny.

If we are trying to find the origins of the attempt to get away from making “answerability to the world” central to our thinking, we could do worse than start with modern moral philosophy. It certainly did as much for this enterprise as modern metaphysics and epistemology. From Montaigne on, there was a line of thinkers whose aim was to limit the role of God and nature in determining morality and to put human constructions in their place. Pufendorf, read by all of Europe, saw our making of what he called “moral entities” as the task assigned us by God. God’s sole command is that we are to develop our social dispositions. How we do this is
up to us; God equipped us to improve ourselves and our society. Morality, which holds only in this world, is our construction of rules that show how to do it. Hume plainly makes morality depend on our responses to ourselves and other people, with no role whatever for God. And even Rorty’s villain, Kant, sees God as entering our lives not as the source of morality but as an imaginary focus demanded by the morality our own reason imposes on us.

What these philosophers and many others were doing was to work out a vocabulary for governing ourselves that was tied neither to religion nor to positive law. They invented the conceptual space we think of as morality and made its language part of the commonsense vocabulary of Europe. They were not fallibilists, and they defended universal principles, but many of them were not, pace Rorty, “moral realists.” Nor were they all defending the social and political status quo, though some certainly were.

An example or two must suffice. One of the most significant of the views to emerge in modern moral philosophy is the claim that every normal adult is able to think through moral issues without needing an expert guide. This view challenged the claim of the clergy to have a privileged position in the moral life, and it was hotly opposed. Kant, taught by Rousseau, defended the equal ability view. And against a strongly hierarchical society, he argued that every man deserved respect equally, regardless of rank or station. If anyone engaged in the kind of creative misuse of words that Rorty thinks comes mainly from literature, Kant surely did: witness the generations of commentators who have struggled with his terminology, not least the central metaphor of autonomy.

If moral philosophy is what its history contains, then it is hardly the merely spectatorial, backward-looking, essentially conservative enterprise that Rorty’s narrative usually makes it out to be. The history of the subject, therefore, gives us no reason to keep it out of utopia. Rorty tells us that philosophical progress occurs when we integrate old views of the world and morality with new thinking due to science and social change. Rorty hopes that scientific and social change will continue and that old ways of living will forever need to be adjusted to fit new ideas. As its history makes plain, and as even Rorty occasionally admits, moral philosophy has been one of the tools we have used for doing this. Why stop using it now?

IX

Rorty particularly dislikes the attachment philosophers have to universal moral principles. His attitude rests in part on his view that principles are only summaries of what has been found acceptable in the past. But he does not consider how even summary rules can be used. And he never takes note of Rawls’s distinction between practice-defining and summary rules. If he had a better appreciation of the varied jobs for which we use principles, he would not be so quick to dismiss philosophical discussions of them.

We can see this if we consider what I take to be the most significant of Rorty’s innovations. This is his claim that the hope of including more and more people in the social consensus behind our liberal morality can substitute for the effort to prove that our morality is True in some metaphysical sense. Against Rorty, I want to argue that if we take this hope seriously, we will have to look for universal principles.

Classical first principles of morality were meant to give final epistemological grounding to the rest of morality and to provide a way of determining right and wrong in every case. Any pragmatist would abandon the first of these assignments. And there are relatively few philosophers now who suppose that a principle could provide an acceptable algorithm for all moral problems. What, then, might a pragmatist expect formulations of moral principles to do?

We can agree that principles by themselves do not permanently settle particular issues. But where the parties to a debate agree on them, principles put the burden of proof on those who propose acts that violate them. If the burden cannot be met, the principle is dispositive for the case. A fallibilist moralist will think that getting the case at hand settled with the particular arguments available at the time may be enough. We do not have to suppose that a principle settles matters with certainty forever. New reasons against applying the principle as we did may, of course, turn up. Then we have to say that we made a mistake. But absent actual evidence that we have done so, the mere possibility gives no reason for doubt.

Statements of principles understood as assigning burdens of proof have several uses. One, of course, is to help in making decisions and resolving disputes about what to do next. Another is to help in explaining who “we” are. They articulate the ground rules to which people have to agree if they want to be one of us. They give specifics about the kind of solidarity we hope to have with more people. We use them among ourselves in the moral education of our children. And from time to time, we remind ourselves as adults about what holds us together. We learn to understand the differences between our community and others in part by studying the way they articulate the moral principles they take as basic. Statements of principle are not the only way to do this. Histories and exemplary narratives are others. But over time such statements have served this function reasonably well: those embodied in the Bill of Rights are good examples.

Considered as spelling out who we are, statements of principles help
preserve continuity and security in the community. Abstract principles, precisely because they are remote from particular areas of dispute, are well suited for this function, even if at times appeal to them becomes mere posturing. But when it comes to truly troubling social issues, we need statements that are less abstract. Appeal to liberty and justice for all will not settle questions about aboriginal rights, the environment, or abortion. Formulations that enable the parties to the dispute to reach agreement are likely to be couched in terms relating to local matters. But in order to allow for equity when similar cases arise elsewhere, we need to be able to spell out a principle of some degree of generality. And in the best case, we want a settlement that we can see to be in accord with the more general principles that we use to say who we are.

Rorty’s insistence that no particular vocabulary is the one we necessarily have to use is valuable here. We can invent new ways of carrying on discussion of divisive issues. Instances where the parties agree can be creatively redescribed and general statements constructed to cover them under the new descriptions. As the history of moral philosophy shows, philosophers invent new moral terminologies all the time. The endless variety of moral theories does not show a failure on the part of philosophers to come to consensus in the way scientists do. It suggests rather that it is not useful to suppose that there must be one settled formulation of principles to be used in every discussion.

Our articulations of even the most general principles cannot be held to be unrevisable. The American founding fathers probably did not think of women and African-Americans when they said that all men are created equal, but we use the old words in more inclusive ways. We thus preserve continuity while allowing change. If the difficulties of specific cases pull us toward a variety of formulations of principles, the need for continuity and security pulls us back toward old tried-and-true formulations. Philosophy is useful not only in inventing new articulations sensitive to new and complex issues. It is also useful in arguing that older formulations around which stability has been built can be related to the newer ones that enable us to handle new issues.

I said earlier that as a last desperate recourse, we have to be willing to fight if we cannot reach agreement in a serious matter. And of course, if the other party is not content with law courts or politics and is unwilling to share the world unless we agree with them, then fight we must. Leaving out of consideration the horrendousness of warfare, and staying at the philosophical level, this will look to the pragmatist like blocking the road of inquiry. Keeping the road open, in moral matters, means not giving up the hope of putting our position in a way that allows us to reach agreement with our opponents. We should not feel certain that there is no way to continue the discussion. We should continue to try to explain who we are in ways that allow both sides to think themselves included. To do so, we may have to revise the way we state our principles. We cannot expect the others to do all the accommodating. As pragmatists, we should assume that we as well as our opponents are able to revise our statements of principle so as to enable us to continue living together peacefully. To allow that anyone may join the discussion, we need to have principles that could apply to anyone. For some purposes, pragmatism requires principles stated in universal terms.

Whether useful universal principles can be formulated using Rorty’s favored terminology of avoiding cruelty and humiliation or whether—as I think—it would be more helpful to use a terminology calling for respect for personal projects that respect the projects of others is a question of the sort philosophers are good at debating. Nonnostalgic fallibilists can enter these debates wholeheartedly. Rorty’s work on moral philosophy helps us see how.

J. B. SCHNEEWIND

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

JANUARY 2003

NOTES

I am grateful to Richard Rorty for his comments on earlier versions of this paper and for many years of discussion of the topics on which it touches. My thanks to Sean Greenberg and George Kateb for suggestions which I have tried to take into account. I have benefitted also from the discussion of the paper with the Princeton Political Philosophy Colloquium.

1. For the aim of outlining a utopia see e.g., PP, 2: 47.
2. Rorty sometimes uses the terminology of transition: see: PP, 3: 183, where Kant is said to be working in a transitional period. Also, Rorty refers several times to the “social glue” that holds society together.
3. PP, 1: 84; Richard Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xix (hereafter cited as PSH); Richard Rorty, Philosophie und die Zukunft (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), 165 (hereafter cited as PUZ).
5. Ibid., 74.
6. Ibid.
8. Rorty does not discuss our ability to attribute and take responsibility for our past and future actions or the ways in which this ability is tied to our understanding of the self.
12. Ibid., 89.
13. Ibid., 92.
14. Dewey thought that widespread acceptance of scientific method would hold society together. Rorty thinks this optimism is misguided and rejects “the claim that human societies cannot survive without widely shared opinions on matters of ultimate importance.” Rorty, *CIS*, 84.
18. Ibid., 94; *PP*, 1: 200.
20. Ibid., 192.
21. Ibid., 194.
29. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), 163 (hereafter cited as *CP*). See also *PP*, 3: 7–8, 61; Rorty, *CIS*, 54 n8.
32. Rorty takes over this distinction from current discussions without examining it. But if Judith Jarvis Thomson (here in line with views of Geach and Foot) is on the right track about ‘good,’ then it—and ‘right’—will turn out not to be notably different from so-called thick terms. For something to be good, it must be good of a kind or good in a way. All by itself, ‘good’ is, as it were, incomplete, and when we specify the way or kind we have in mind, we have as much linkage to the facts that warrant this assessment as we have in so-called thick terms. See Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Goodness and Advice*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), part 1. Rorty’s remarks in his reply to Ramberg suggest that he may be willing to drop the distinction between thick and thin normative terms (Robert B. Brandom, ed., *Rorty and his Critics* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000], 374–75, hereafter cited as Brandom).
35. Brandom, 61.
37. Rorty, *CIS*, 194–95. Elsewhere, Rorty broadens his account of obligation. Freidnans, he tells us, see themselves as needing to become conscious of the “unfamiliar persons” who are part of the web of their beliefs and desires and kill them off. To carry out the task the goal of which Freud stated as “where id was, there shall ego be” is a moral obligation for them—emphatically not to others, but to themselves (*PP*, 2: 148). Rorty does not explain how this Kantian-sounding duty to oneself fits into the previous account of obligation.
39. Ibid., 79. After all of Rorty’s denunciation of appeals to what is natural, it is surprising to see the term used here, with no explanation.
40. Ibid.
41. Brandom, 61. See also Rorty, *PMN*, 177–78.
42. Rorty, *PSH*, xvi, 73–75.
44. Brandom, 24.
46. *PP*, 1: 200–201. Rorty does not consider conflicts arising within a single community—for instance, family issues, such as a conflict between obligations to one’s parents and those to one’s spouse and children.
49. He has stronger reservations about Rawls’s views on international justice: see the article cited in n47 above.
50. PP, 1: 175–96.
51. PP, 2: 159.
52. Niznik and Sanders, 61; Festenstein and Thompson, 30–31.
53. PP, 2: 155, 163.
54. Rorty, PSII, xxix. See also CIS, 194 n6, and Rorty, PP, 3: 66.
55. PP, 3: 171.
56. Rorty, PSII, xxx.
57. Niznik and Sanders, 27.
58. Rorty, PSII, 72–90.
59. He rejects more general charges of epistemological relativism in many places: see, e.g., PP, 3: ch. 7.
60. Rorty, PSII, ch. 12, 175–89. For a concise summary, see “The Notion of Rationality,” Niznik and Sanders, 87.
61. PP, 1: 189–90; Rorty, CP, xlii.
62. See, e.g., Brandom, 16.
63. PP, 1: 41.
64. Ibid. See also PP, 3: 7.
65. PP, 1: 42.
66. PP, 3: 2–4. I am not clear about how, if at all, Rorty’s concessions to Ramberg (Brandom, 374–76) would affect his views on the truth of moral beliefs. In the second point made on p. 376, he says that “I should not speak of ‘norms set by our peers.’” This refers to norms governing factual statements, but as he thinks there is no important difference between these and practical normative statements, the point may hold more broadly.
67. PP, 1: 42; Rorty, PSII, 15; PP, 3: 83.
70. PP, 1: 35.
71. Rorty, CP, 98.
72. PP, 1: 123.
73. Rorty, CIS, 82.
74. PP, 1: 63.
75. Ibid., 42.
76. Rorty, CIS, xv.
77. PP, 2: 159.
78. Ibid., 155.
79. PP, 3: 205, 207, 211.
80. Rorty, CP, 85.

81. Rorty, PuZ, 179.
82. Ibid., 184.
83. Rorty, CP, xxi; Rorty, CIS, 44, 78, 197; PP, 1: 33, 193; Rorty, PSII, 68–69; PP, 3: 172.
85. Rorty, CIS, 60.
86. Rorty, CIS, 9, 55; PP, 3: 303; Rorty, PSII, 65–66.
87. Rorty, PuZ, 165; cf. Rorty, CIS, 86.
88. Rorty, CIS, 68; PP, 3: 305.
89. The means are not separable from the end in view: rejection of classical moral philosophy would be part of an achieved utopia.
90. Festenstein and Thompson, 31.
94. Rorty, CIS, 73.
95. PP, 3: 151.
97. Rorty, CIS, 61, 68.
98. Qualifications are in order here. One might choose hesitantly, fearing regrets later, or reluctantly, mourning lost options. But for the pragmatist, doubt involves blocked action, and where a choice is made, action is not blocked.
99. William Hale White, The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford, ed. Don Cupitt (London: Hodder and Staughton [1881] 1988). The editor gives a passage from White’s Journal: “What are the facts? . . . The facts for most of us are a dark street, crowds, hurry, commonplaceness, loneliness, and worse than all, a terrible doubt which can hardly be named as to the meaning and purpose of the world”
(xvii).
100. Festenstein and Thompson, 30–31.
102. Rorty, CIS, 76.
103. Rorty, CIS, 88.
104. Ibid., 97.
106. For criticism of Rorty’s distinction see Alexander Nehamas, The Art of Living, p. 141 and n44 on p. 241, as well as the article there referred to; and p. 254 n62.
107. This despite the remark that “The ultimate political synthesis of love and justice may thus turn out to be an intricately-textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism” (PP, 1: 210).
108. Rorty, CIS, xv.
109. Rorty’s reply to Ramberg complicates the matter. He there says that he should accept Davidson’s point that “most of our beliefs about anything (snow, molecules, the moral law) must be true of that thing” (Brandom 374).
110. Rorty, CIS, 74.
111. Ibid., 75.
112. Ibid., 87.
114. Rorty tells us that commonsense “moral intuitions” need to be changed, but he does not tell us which ones to alter. Plain nonphilosophical folk can change their views and get rid of “intuitions” as well as fallibilists. The general claim that we must alter our intuitions thus seems to have little pragmatic meaning.
115. Rorty, PuZ, 184.
118. PP, 3: 175, 179; Rorty, PuZ, 166.
120. One of Locke’s arguments against innate ideas is that by giving us the senses and memory God gave us all the equipment we need to think our way through life. Since innate ideas are unnecessary, he would not have implanted them.
122. PP, 2: 154 ff, 145.
123. PP, 3: 5; Rorty, PSH, 66.
124. Once again the reply to Ramberg may signal a change of view. “Because norms are not regularities,” Rorty says, “you can only get right what you can get wrong” (Brandom, 375). The point is not developed.
REPLY TO J. B. SCHNEEWIND

Jerome Schneewind asks what my liberal ironist’s “radical and continuing doubts” amount to. He points out that she does not have doubts about a lot of things—common sense, and science, for example. Presumably, Schneewind says, she is not just a “merely compulsive doubter, forever washing her words.” So what exactly is she doubting? Perhaps she is merely indulging, histrionically, in what Peirce called “make-believe” doubts—doubts which, like those of the Cartesian skeptic about the external world, never bear on practice?

These are very good questions, and I do not have good answers to them. Reading Schneewind’s contribution to this volume has made me realize that my description of the liberal ironist was badly flawed. I conflated two quite different sorts of people: the unruffled pragmatist and the anguished existentialist adolescent. I made it sound as if you could not be an antifoundationalist and a romantic self-creator without becoming a Sartrean, ever conscious of the abyss. But one can be both and remain, as far as philosophy goes, a placid Deweyan—someone who is nominalist and an historicist, but not much troubled by doubt either about philosophical doctrine or about her own moral or political outlook. It was a mistake to suggest (as I did at p. 87 of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity) that all ironist intellectuals were afflicted with such doubts.

In making this mistake, I was doing something for which I have often criticized other philosophers (particularly Heidegger). I was suggesting that giving up on religious and Platonic hopes that one’s choices can be legitimated by a nonhuman authority necessarily brings on a sort of emotional or spiritual crisis (or at least that it should bring on such a crisis). Cautioned by Schneewind, I now recognize that he is right in saying that my description of the liberal ironist does not get us beyond Mill. Neither does my distinction between the public and the private. My attempt to imagine a composite figure called “the liberal ironist”—half Mill, half Nietzsche—was misguided.

Schneewind is right that all antifoundationalism can do, when it comes to the moral life is “to take the nostalgia out of fallibilism.” We can, for example, tell Zarathustra that the news that God is dead is not all that big a deal. We can tell Heidegger that one can be a perfectly good example of Dasein without ever having been what he calls “authentic.” Nor should we wring our hands over the absence of the moral absolutes that our ancestors invoked. We should try to produce, as Schneewind puts it, “citizens raised knowing that there are limits to how far arguments about morality can go.” The best way to do this, I think, is to teach them to think of our community’s morality as something slowly and painfully cobbled together in the course of history, to persuade them to be nominalists and historicists.

In a later section of his essay, Schneewind points out, correctly, that I tend to run together a belief in universal moral principles with “moral realism”—the claim that these principles accurately represent some sort of moral reality. He is right about that too. I have often written as if anybody who proposes a moral principle must be illegitimately claiming some sort of authority for it, usually the authority of Reason. In doing so, I have, as Schneewind points out, a distorted impression of the history of modern moral philosophy.

The figures whom Schneewind describes in his magisterial The Invention of Autonomy were much concerned with secularizing European culture—getting ecclesiastical authority off the backs of the intellectuals, and dreaming of a time when it would lose its influence over the masses. In the period from Montaigne to Kant, moral philosophers tried to tell us how morality might look if we bracketed God and Scripture. It is tempting to see Mill as the culmination of this secularizing movement. So perhaps Schneewind and I could agree that the only question on which he and I still differ is whether, after Mill, there was anything left for moral philosophy to do. Maybe nobody is going to take us beyond Mill. Maybe moral philosophy has gone about as far as it can go.

Once we give up on the utilitarian calculus as an algorithm for moral choice, the difference between Mill and Dewey no longer seems very important. Neither do the differences between Mill’s liberalism and that of either Rawls or Habermas. It is hard to make differences among these four philosophers’ views relevant to debates between alternative social policies, much less to the moral dilemmas which individuals sometimes face. The great moral progress that has recently been made in the rich democracies—the surprising recent successes in overcoming racism, sexism, and homophobia—owes little to their writings, or to those of any other moral theorists. So I am tempted to suggest that moral philosophy may have served its turn, and had its day.

Schneewind argues that even in utopia there will be a use for moral
principles. I take it he thinks of moral philosophy as the area of culture responsible for propounding such principles. I can grant the first claim, but am dubious about the second. If principles are viewed as summaries, rather than foundations, of practices, then I agree that they often come in handy. In debate, you may well be able to shift the burden of proof to your opponents by citing a principle they would be reluctant to forswear. Formulating principles does indeed, as Schneewind says, help to clarify our self-image. So even in utopia, we shall doubtless still be cobbling principles together.

But finding pithy little formulae in which to sum up the convictions and practices of the day, or those of an anticipated better day, does not seem to require training in a special discipline. Poets, novelists, and social prophets are all good at coming up with formulae of this sort. All that moral philosophers can claim is the way of special expertise is a somewhat greater familiarity with past formulae, gleaned from reading the great dead philosophers.

So I think it an open question whether moral philosophy—conceived as a distinctive cultural activity, one whose practitioners are recognizable as the heirs of Aristotle, Epicurus, Aquinas, Kant, and Mill—will survive. It may come to seem, as natural theology now does, to have been a transitional genre—one that served its purpose, but now has no great influence on the way people think, either about their own moral obligations or about their political choices.

Natural theologians played an important role in helping Western intellectuals make the transition from theism to deism, and thence to agnosticism or to a simple lack of interest in religion. But works of natural theology no longer have many readers. Maybe a similar obsolescence would, in a pragmatist utopia, afflict moral philosophy. Inhabitants of that utopia are likely to find the issues currently discussed by moral philosophers—moral realism, the nature of moral motivation, and the points of disagreement between consequentialism and Kantian constructivism—of as little interest as most contemporary intellectuals now find the Problem of Evil and the Cosmological Argument for the Existence of God. But it is possible that by then the moral philosophers will have come up with more interesting topics.

R. R.

CONVERSATION STOPPERS:
POLITICS, PROGRESS, AND HOPE

21

William L. McBride

THE CONTINGENCY OF STYLE

Let me set a few of the terms of this brief essay. First, out of deference to Professor Rorty's linguistic prejudices against the notion of "criticism," I shall try to reconceive what I am about to write as something else—say, commentary, or ... conversation. Second, without meaning to be really critical, let me immediately take issue with his demurrer, in an interview, to the effect that Achieving Our Country (meaning the one south of Canada's border, as I helpfully pointed out once in a review of another book!) "doesn't deal with philosophy at all. It's just a political polemic." Despite his numerous efforts to break down lines between philosophy and other types of intellectual enterprise, Rorty still apparently retains some fairly dubious, restrictive (and to some extent also incompatible) notions about what philosophy is and/or ought to be—notions that we are not required to accept; and despite his famous exhortation in that very short book to "kick the philosophy habit" he still manages to refer to a number of philosophers in it, at times even identifying a few of their ideas. Third, since offering a literal refutation (by finding contradictions, over-generalizations, or whatever) of many of Rorty's offhand, often playful, claims and suggestions, such as those I just cited, is itself child's play and no challenge, I propose instead simply to comment on, or to converse about, the Rortyan style of thinking and writing as it is manifested in both published interviews and essays.

Near the beginning of one of his generally appreciative discussions of the work of Jacques Derrida, Rorty points out that "Like Heidegger's, Derrida's work divides into an earlier, more professorial period and a