

Sample Thesis at Undergraduate Level on Political Philosophy: 20,000 Words

The Politics of Vocabularies



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We live in a contaminated moral environment... [but] I am not talking just about the gentlemen who eat organic vegetables and do not look out of the plane windows. I am talking about all of us. We had all become used to the [prevailing] system and accepted it as an unchangeable fact and thus helped perpetuate it. In other words, we are all – though naturally to differing extents – responsible for the operation of [its] machinery; none of us is just its victim: we are all also its co-creators... [W]e have to accept this legacy as a sin we committed against ourselves. If we accept it as such, we will understand that it is up to us all, and up to us only, to do something about it.

– Vaclav Havel¹

¹ Extract from broadcast to the people of Czechoslovakia on 1 January 1990, quoted in Montefiore, Simon Sebag, *Speeches that Changed the World*, 212.

Introduction

The Debate Over Richard Rorty

Meanwhile as old concepts crumble and new ideas are born in politics, the arts, religion and other areas of our lives, we look for new ways to describe ourselves to ourselves.

– Jean Klare & Louise van Swaaij²

Since Richard Rorty first espoused his pragmatic antiessentialism in *Philosophy & the Mirror of Nature*,³ analytic philosophy has experienced a seachange towards pragmatism. By turning his back on “Truth”⁴ as the natural target of philosophical inquiry, Rorty suggested that the philosophical tradition needed to be set in a new direction, paving the way for a new generation of pragmatic philosophers. However, proponents of the “new pragmatism”⁵ which Rorty has helped usher in rarely adopt his brand of ethnocentric liberalism. Thus whilst Rorty’s articulation of an antifoundational narrative running from Dewey to Davidson via Sellars and Quine has been instrumental to pragmatism’s revival, his vision of a thoroughly poeticised liberal culture has not been taken up in any comparable way.

This suggests that – for contemporary pragmatists at least – Rorty’s project is easily separated into two distinct stages: On the one hand, the negative move of rejecting “representationalism” – the collective term he extends to all philosophy that takes Epistemology as its defining project and Truth as its ultimate objective: On the other, his positive suggestion that we should aspire to bring about a society which embodies

² Jean Klare & Louise van Swaaij, *The Atlas of Experience*, 12.

³ PMN

⁴ Rorty is inclined to polemically capitalise the terminology he most closely associates with representationalism’s focus on the Cartesian-Kantian problematic which he objects to. The most frequent uses of capitalisation are for Truth, Reality, Knowledge, Epistemology, and Philosophy.

⁵ This is the term Cheryl Misak uses to denote contemporary pragmatists who accept that justificatory standards emerge as the products of their sociological location but want to nonetheless claim that a historically conditioned notion of objectivity is possible. It extends to thinkers including Simon Blackburn, Crispin Wright, Donald Davidson, Jeffrey Stout, John McDowell and Robert Brandom. Misak notes her “new pragmatism” should not be confused with what Ian Hacking refers to as “neo-pragmatism” – Rorty, for instance, is a neo-pragmatist but not a new pragmatist: Misak, Cheryl, ed, *New Pragmatists*, 1.

“liberal irony” – a commitment to a free and open environment within which to share ideas. That noticeably few pragmatists have taken up Rorty’s particular vision of a “post-philosophical” liberal culture seems to suggest some kind of bifurcation between the two aspects of his thinking: that his rejection of representationalism is not able to support a social vision of the sort Rorty holds. If this is the case, liberal ironism would seem to be nothing more than a convenient, but ultimately inessential, corollary to Rorty’s central philosophical project.

This essay considers current interpretations of Rorty’s stance in relation to the revived pragmatic tradition, and specifically, attempts to elucidate that relationship which draw upon Rorty’s concept of a “vocabulary” – the explanatory device through which he presents his pragmatic vision. For Rorty, “vocabularies” are justificatory frameworks which structure all linguistic behaviour. Since justification is only ever *internal* to settling the norms of a particular vocabulary, there are no normative principles which govern vocabulary selection. Suggesting that the vocabulary of representationalism no longer plays useful role in our culture, Rorty recommends that dispensing with it altogether will empower our culture to realise broadly liberal objectives.

In its radical departure from the vocabulary of representational philosophy and the justificatory framework within which philosophical discussion traditionally takes place, Rorty’s philosophy imposes unfamiliar demands upon those who wish to engage with him. Thus despite his prominence within pragmatism’s revival in the second part of the twentieth century, the Rorty’s philosophy remains elusive. The only viable prospect for engaging with Rorty is therefore by way of his own explanatory concept – the vocabulary.

This paper takes up the vocabulary idiom so as to ask whether Rorty’s pragmatic philosophical vision really stops short of being a *social* vision: Does Rorty’s thinking cogently separate prophecy and pragmatism or does he treat them as intrinsically bound up with each other? To do so, I introduce Bjorn Ramberg and Robert Brandom’s respective discussions of the importance of “vocabularies” for Rorty’s pragmatism. In as much as their willingness to defer to the “vocabulary” idiom

indicates a fundamental deference to Rorty's own constructive terms, Ramberg and Brandom are two of the most incisive expositors of Rorty's understanding of vocabularies.

Despite their common appropriation of the vocabulary idiom, Ramberg and Brandom offer diverging accounts of the significance of that motif to Rorty's political commitments. The accumulated insights of their approaches, I argue, is that Rorty's social vision is explicable as a fundamental part of his understanding of vocabularies. In the course of making this argument, I demonstrate that Rorty's pragmatic attitude to language involves a *metaphilosophical* position – a particular understanding of philosophy's cultural role – which is fundamentally different to that of the new pragmatists. This metaphilosophical aspect of the vocabulary concept, I conclude, is the salient manifestation of a continuous pragmatic vision which not only encapsulates current descriptions but also prefigures those of the future.

Structurally, in questioning the trend to differentiate Rorty's rejection of representationalism and his hopes for a liberal future, the first chapter of this paper is spent outlining Rorty's own position. Beginning with his assault on the representational approach to philosophy, the first part of this paper recounts how Rorty traces a line of critique through the analytic tradition. Moving on to his formulation of vocabularies, the second part of the first chapter shows how Rorty uses them to illustrate his vision of a culture which embraces liberal irony.

In chapter two I outline how Ramberg suggests the presence of discontinuity in Rorty's pragmatism by developing the notion of vocabularies along a line of critique made familiar by Donald Davidson. Ramberg's insights into the unique function of intentional language, I argue, seemingly show that liberalism must be kept at an arms distance from a pragmatic account of justification. In chapter three, however, I invoke Brandom's notion of metavocabularies to suggest that Rorty's distinctive metaphilosophical commitments give greater continuity to his philosophy than Ramberg and other contemporary pragmatists are prepared to admit.

Chapter 1

Rorty's Pragmatism

In the Middle Ages, we believed our lives were controlled by Providence. In recent centuries, as the idea of God began to falter, we have come to believe we are the masters (and mistresses) of our own destinies. No longer pawns in some higher game, we decide how to live and how to behave. Our choices in life are limited only by our imaginations.

– Jean Klare & Louise van Swaaij⁶

1.1 Exchanging representation for vocabularies

Before progressing to consider Ramberg and Brandom's respective analyses of the role played by vocabularies in Rorty's philosophy, expediency demands that we first examine how they fit into the broad philosophical agenda Rorty articulates in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.⁷ With this work, Rorty achieved notoriety as both one of the most influential and controversial analytic philosophers of the twentieth century by rejecting Epistemology as the definitive philosophical project and announcing that philosophy's self image as the pre-eminent arbiter of cultural worth should be superseded. With it, he sought to undermine representationalism by depicting it as an anachronistic inheritance from a time when the philosophical tradition belonged to a pervasively theistic culture, the obsolete remnants of a fascination with the mystical. By casting doubt upon the idea that norms of justification are causally independent of human social and cultural life, Rorty claimed to have provided good reason for giving up representationalism altogether, and with it epistemology.⁸

⁶ Jean Klare & Louise van Swaaij, *The Atlas of Experience*, 22.

⁷ PMN.

⁸ Whilst in PMN Rorty recommends that hermeneutics should take up the cultural role previously played by Epistemology, he withdraws that suggestion in his later work.

Vocabularies are Rorty's suggestion for what ought to replace representationalism in the forefront of our cultural as well as philosophical consciousness. Vocabularies are both Rorty's primary tool of exposition and his preferred strategy for ensuring cultural progress. Although formulated explicitly in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*,⁹ Rorty's notion of vocabularies inherit the understanding of linguistic behaviour he develops in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*¹⁰ as part of his rejection of the representational approach to philosophy. Thus in order to fully grasp the emphasis Rorty places upon the vocabulary concept, it is crucial to appreciate how he sees it as a replacement for representationalism.

1.2 The *anti-representational* strategy

Identifying representationalism as the paradigm of doing philosophy which takes Kant's lead in placing epistemology at the pinnacle of cultural endeavour, Rorty seeks to undermine the strength of its explanatory claim. He initiates his assault on representationalism by proffering an exposition of the historical role played by metaphor and imagery in the modern philosophical tradition. Following up on Heidegger's exploration in *Sein und Zeit*¹¹ of how "the West became obsessed with the notion of our primary relation to objects as analogous to visual perception",¹² Rorty traces how the image of the mind as a Mirror of Nature was sublimated into the epistemological tradition and exerted a significant role in setting the philosophical agenda.

For Rorty, this metaphor of perception – the insidious hallmark of representationalism – has assiduously beleaguered philosophy since it first grabbed hold of Descartes. The very act of viewing the mind as a mirror, Rorty remonstrates, commits one to a bifurcated account of the relationship between human beings and their environment. In the Cartesian revolution it suggested itself as the posit of a fundamental distance between the internal mind and an external world, catalysing the substitution of an epistemological "quest for certainty" for the Hellenic "quest for wisdom" as the

⁹ CIS

¹⁰ PMN

¹¹ Heidegger, Martin, *Sein und Zeit*.

¹² PMN, 162-3.

definitive philosophical calling – in the process placing a concern with “science” rather than with “living” at the centre of Western culture.¹³

Consolidated in the hands of Kant as a theory of knowledge, the image of the mind as a mirror was bequeathed to future generations: a philosophical heirloom which engendered a predisposition for epistemology. For him, the theory of knowledge as a specifically philosophical discipline relies on the idea of concepts and intuitions collaborating to produce knowledge. On this account, the external world collaborates with the internal mind to produce knowledge as a relation of correspondence between the two:

[T]he traditional picture of the human situation has been one in which human beings are not simply networks of beliefs and desires but rather beings which *have* those beliefs and desires. The traditional view is that there is a core self which can look at, decide among, use, and express itself by means of, such beliefs and desires. Further, these beliefs and desires are criticisable not simply by reference to their ability to cohere with one another, but by reference to something exterior to the network within which they are strands. Beliefs are, on this account, criticisable because they fail to correspond to reality.¹⁴

Our ability to rationally reconstruct knowledge therefore becomes reliant upon a distinction between that which is provided by the world and that contributed by the mind. That is to say, this distinction sustains epistemology. On the Mirror of Nature’s pervasive influence in clandestinely impressing this epistemological agenda upon the tradition, Rorty comments:

The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself. Without this latter notion, the strategy common to Descartes and Kant – getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror, so to speak – would not have made sense.¹⁵

¹³ PMN, 61.

¹⁴ CIS, 10.

¹⁵ PMN, 12.

i. Epistemology after the linguistic turn

For Rorty, this fixation upon epistemology as the definitive philosophical undertaking persisted beyond the linguistic turn initiated by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. The image of the mind as a mirror sees epistemology through the linguistic turn seemingly without anything more than an update in its terminology: the Cartesian-Kantian problematic is simply reformulated in non-metaphysical terms. Kantian concepts and perceptions are construed in a *propositional* form, as facts and beliefs respectively. Abandoning a metaphysical subject matter in favour of a linguistic one therefore seems, in itself, insufficiently radical to escape the mirror-imagery that threatens to make “philosophy” and “epistemology” coextensive. Indeed, Rorty suggests that self-proclaimed improvements on the received metaphysical tradition tend to be no less reliant than Descartes or Kant upon the metaphor of perception:

Without [the Mirror of Nature] in mind, recent claims that philosophy could consist of “conceptual analysis” or “phenomenological analysis” or “explication of meanings” or examination of “the logic of our language” or of “the structure of the constituting activity of consciousness” would not have made sense.¹⁶

Whilst the linguistic turn did not immediately liberate philosophy from its reliance upon perception as a metaphorical crutch, Rorty believes it did free up latitude for undercutting the representational picture. He suggests that when appropriately arranged, certain insights which arise from construing justification as a *linguistic* practice actually provide the resources to dissolve the basis for the Western obsession with epistemology. The constructive approach within which representational philosophy is trapped is therefore at its heart the product of mere happenstance.

For Rorty, the epistemological thesis which continues to reverberate after the linguistic turn is that justification— and therefore knowledge — is a matter of connecting up propositions with the world:

[T]hat the logical space of giving reasons — of justifying our utterances and our other actions — needs to stand in some special relationship to the logical space of causal explanations so as to

¹⁶ PMN, 12.

insure either an accord between the two (Locke) or the inability of one to interfere with the other (Kant).”¹⁷

This understanding of knowledge as justification according to the innate norms of the natural world, Rorty argues, makes the fundamental error of mistaking the *causal* role played by objects and facts in justification with a *normative* role. That the causally independent world is *involved* in the practice of justification does not imply that it fixes the norms *governing* that practice. As Rorty notes: “[T]he epistemological tradition confused the causal process of acquiring knowledge with questions concerning its justification.”¹⁸ Thus he suggests that the norms of justification instead emerge as the contributions of a descriptively-engaged community of inquirers, and that a holistic attitude – one which endorses “conversational justification” – is required.

For Rorty, this much is evident from the insights into justification supplied by Sellars and Quine. Taking as their respective targets the language-fact and belief-meaning distinctions, Sellars and Quine attack from different sides the linguistic formulation of the Cartesian-Kantian notion that intuitions are given to one faculty and meaning concepts to another. On the one hand, Sellars claims that only beliefs – not uninterpreted experience – can play a role in justification and, on the other, Quine rejecting the notion that it is coherent to rely on a sharp distinction between meaning and beliefs. Together, Rorty suggests, they show that we should give up the hope that justificatory norms are to be found already present in the world, and in its place accept that “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief.”¹⁹

ii. The absence of uninterpreted data

Rorty sees Sellars’ advocacy of psychological nominalism – in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*²⁰ and elsewhere – as a prescient warning against thinking that our awareness of the world is an entirely passive process, an argument Sellars approaches

¹⁷ PMN, 161.

¹⁸ PMN, 209.

¹⁹ Id, 170.

²⁰ Sellars, Wilfrid, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”.

through the notion of givenness. On the representationalist account of justification, direct acquaintance with the world is required to provide indubitable premises upon which knowledge is justified: acquaintance with the uninterpreted world underpins the entire justificatory process.

Sellars argument is that it is an entirely different thing to be aware of our environment than it is to be able to justify utterances *about* it, and that the notion of acquaintance, at least in the sense relevant to justification, is never prior to propositional knowledge. He makes this point by distinguishing between two senses in which we talk about awareness: awareness as discriminative behaviour – in the sense of being able to respond reliably to stimuli – and awareness as being able to *justify* linguistic behaviour within the logical space of reasons. Awareness in latter sense – the sense relevant to justification – requires being able to construe the world according to a certain language – and therefore *propositionally*.

For Sellars, the expectation that the causal world can be received passively – as invariant data which is not structured by any particular descriptive framework – is entirely misplaced. Such an expectation, he argues, is susceptible to the “Myth of the Given”; the notion that “immediate experience”, not propositions, constitute the norms of justification. As Sellars notes:

“all awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short all awareness of abstract entities – indeed, all awareness even of particulars – is a linguistic affair. According to it, not even the awareness of such *sorts, resemblances, and facts* as pertain to so-called immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of language”²¹

Sellars’ insight is that justification is necessarily a social event. “It is a remark about the difference between facts and rules, a remark to the effect that we can only come under epistemic rules when we have entered the community where the game governed by these rules is played.”²² A propositional belief is justified not when it comports with facts, but when it can be implied from other propositions, and “knowledge”

²¹ Sellars, Wilfred, *Science, Perception and Reality*, 160, quoted in PMN, 182.

²² PMN, 187. Language learning is therefore the point of entry into “a community whose members exchange justifications of assertions, and other actions, with one another” (PMN 185).

arises entirely within the “logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.”²³

By acknowledging a broader contributory role for human cognisance, Sellars undercuts the basis for ascribing epistemic privilege to certain representations but not others. Obscuring the contrastive force between unconceptualised “reality” and propositional representations of that “reality” – as Sellars does – problematises the representational notion that epistemic norms can be derived from the invariant structure of the world-in-itself. Since perception necessarily involves the application of empirical concepts, there is no *uninterpreted* description of the world with which to begin.²⁴ By removing the notion of a given world from the representational picture, Sellars shows that;

we can think of knowledge as a relation to propositions, and thus of justification as a relation between the propositions in question and other propositions from which the former may be inferred. [There is] no need to end the potentially infinite regress of propositions-brought-forward-in-defense-of-other-propositions.²⁵

iii. The absence of clear meanings

Sellars’ relocation of justificatory norms from facts to language undermines the very idea that the world can be construed neutrally and that human practices have no role to play in shaping norms. The other front upon which Rorty interrogates the representational account of justification is with respect to inference. Taking up Quine’s argument against analyticity, Rorty notes that a conception of *meaning* as distinct from *belief* overdescribes linguistic practice. That is to say, in all but the most extreme cases there is no clear criteria that lets us distinguish between when we are instituting new conceptual norms – changing meaning – as opposed to when we are

²³ Sellars, Wilfred, *Science, Perception and Reality*, 169.

²⁴ This should not be confused with the claim of linguistic idealism which is sometimes attributed to Rorty – that the world only exists as our linguistic descriptions of it. Rorty readily admits that human beings are situated in the world in the sense of a collection of matter structured by space and time. The presence of the world in this sense is not at stake. What Rorty is bringing into question is the role that that spacio-temporal structure can play in the practice of *justification* ie. When we try to say things *about* that invariant spacio-temporal structure (PMN).

²⁵ PMN, 159.

simply applying them in a different way – changing beliefs. Quine’s point is that the posit of a strict distinction between meaning and belief is at best contrived.

Given that representationalism takes it for granted that we can use the facts of the world as a template for deciding which propositional meanings to endorse, Quine’s insight goes to its crux. If we cannot make sense of a stable set of meanings against which it makes sense to talk of various arrangements of belief, then the idea of matching our beliefs to the relevant representations plays no explanatory role. The very idea that underpins the representational account of inference – that we can isolate meaning from belief and, by doing so, infer from the world *which beliefs* we should hold – is therefore shown to bear little resemblance to actual linguistic practices. Without the ability to rely on any determinable fact of the matter in attributing meanings to utterances, therefore, the second prong of representationalism expires along with the first. Concomitantly, it seems equally misguided to continue to view language as the expression of something inner and to explain truth by reference to meaning. Following Quine, language users are more immediately implicated in their own beliefs than representationalism allows. The idea that speakers can compare each others’ beliefs in isolation from what they mean no longer makes sense.

Taken together, Sellars and Quine’s respective eliminations of facts and meaning from the epistemological picture serve to demonstrate that representationalism is guilty of two major naturalistic oversights. What this demonstrates, for Rorty, is not that the claims of representationalism have been *disproved* but merely that it is unrealistic to expect that such claims are capable of being either proved *or* disproved. The representationalist mistake is not that its theses are *false*, but that its internal justificatory demands simply bear no relation to actual linguistic practice: “The trouble with Platonic notions is not that they are ‘wrong’ but that there is not a great deal to be said about them – specifically, there is no way to ‘naturalize’ them or otherwise connect them to the rest of inquiry, or culture, or life.”²⁶ Thus the notion of the world in itself as something which is capable of engendering epistemic norms is severely compromised. Pointing to the resulting hopelessness of attempts to ground knowledge on any such neutral foundations, Rorty not only dismisses epistemological

²⁶ Id, 311.

foundationalism as an impotent epistemological *strategy*, but also turns his back on the very notion that epistemology is a worthwhile philosophical project.

1.3 The *non-representational strategy*

So, given the alleged inadequacy of representationalism, how are we to understand the way we use language if not as a practice of matching beliefs with parts of the world? Having dismissed an epistemological project which presumes the availability of coherent notions of belief and reality, Rorty seems committed to suggesting a different explanation of how language and justification *do* function. What he offers is the notion of a vocabulary. The notion of a vocabulary is Rorty's response to the specific problem of explaining justification. It is the concept he uses to ameliorate and displace the acute sense of loss which his attack on epistemology aroused in many analytic philosophers.

Echoing certain Wittgensteinian ideas about language-games, Rorty's notion of a vocabulary is presented as an extension of the Quinean point that meaning is indeterminate. By demonstrating that it is impossible to reliably distinguish shifts in meaning from changes in belief, Quine highlighted a difficulty involved in taking the proposition as the fundamental semantic unit. For Rorty, this problem suggests that, for the purposes of justification, we need to introduce a larger semantic unit which incorporates both meaning and belief – the vocabulary.

However, whilst Rorty's understanding of vocabularies inherits insights from Wittgenstein and Quine, it draws most heavily upon Davidsonian philosophy of language and Thomas Kuhn's notion of "disciplinary matrixes". Rorty assimilates Davidson's attack on the "third" dogma of empiricism – the notion of language as a *medium*. However, in order to work Davidson's non-representational semantics into a *metaphilosophical* critique of the philosophical tradition he generalises Kuhn's ideas on "scientific revolutions" into an account of *all* culture. In *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions*²⁷ Kuhn offered an explanation of how scientific progress occurs. Given that he views epistemology as a discipline which has achieved very

²⁷ Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions*.

little progress with respect to its central problematic, Rorty thinks that Kuhn's explanation might hold some insight into what philosophy might do to move past the disappointingly small successes of epistemology.

i. Epistemology and absolute commensurability

Epistemology's mistake, on Rorty's Kuhnian analysis, is that it models itself on the notion of normal science. A discipline of inquiry is considered "normal" if its conceptual norms are expressible as a single set of axioms; when there is a single set of rules against which observations accrue significance and hypotheses can be judged. For normal disciplines there is universal agreement as to the norms of justification for that particular type of inquiry since their axioms, taken together, constitute a kind of algorithm for distinguishing between good and bad theories. In Kuhnian terms, "commensurability" is the capacity of an area of inquiry to be brought under a single set of rules determining proper use.

It is not difficult to see how epistemology can be seen as an "area of inquiry" that seeks to fit every explanation into a single, *commensurable* disciplinary matrix. Its canonical axioms are the theses of representationalism and its defining task is to bring all areas of human knowledge under a single umbrella of norms. For epistemology, a prospective theory must be presented as an elucidation of the relation between the mind and the world. A successful epistemological theory is therefore one which gives a better explanation of what knowledge of the world consists in.

Seeing epistemology in this way, as a discipline which aspires to commensurability, helps explain the metaphilosophical attitude which accompanies the more specific claims of a representationalist position: epistemology's deference to representational axioms means that its conception of philosophical progress is always *within* the terms of the Cartesian-Kantian problematic. Since it relies upon those premises to even assess philosophical theories, it lacks the resources to justify those premises on any neutral grounds. That is to say, no answer can be given from within epistemology (and from the epistemologist's view, from within *philosophy*) to an assault on those premises; epistemology judges success entirely against set criteria. Thus Rorty takes

the arguments offered by Sellars and Quine to show not that the epistemological project gets the world “wrong” but that the very idea of getting the world right *or* wrong is simply not a particularly *useful* one.

If philosophy cannot be a normal science as epistemology supposes, then on what alternate model does Rorty suggest the use of vocabularies, and how can he suggest that they will be any more useful than the premises of representationalism? Crucially, Rorty does not think that the problem with epistemology consists in it being an inherently bad disciplinary matrix – in fact Rorty notes that as a precursor to the “hard” sciences upon which it continues to model itself, at one time epistemology did play an important cultural role. Rather the problem lies in its assumptions about what philosophy consists in – the assumption that it should be the *only* disciplinary matrix. Giving up representationalism in favour of vocabularies is not the substitution of one internally commensurable paradigm for another, but rather the realisation that a single set of rules will never be adequate to the profound diversity of things we wish to achieve in the world. This is the idea that philosophy, and culture generally, should look to effect progress by virtue of being *abnormal*.

Whilst Kuhn pointed to normal science’s use of a single set of conceptual norms to achieve progress, he also pointed to the transience of those norms. Even though the axioms of a normal science enables the worth of candidate theories to be assessed, Kuhn argued, those axioms themselves can be replaced or simply discarded according to the preferences of the epistemic community in question. A discipline’s normalisation is the result of inquirers agreeing upon the norms governing a particular area of study. However there is no set of master concepts which shape that agreement. Normalisation is not itself the result of standing in a certain relation to the world, facts, or uninterpreted evidence – there is no disciplinary matrix for choosing between disciplinary matrixes. Thus normalisation is simply the result of a sociological fact – that of whether there is agreement over what constitutes a good argument.

Correspondingly, there are also disciplines where such agreement does not exist, but whose constituent matrixes are incommensurable. Such disciplines are abnormal.

Since normality is therefore contingent, it is possible for disciplines to become more or less normal. Indeed, Kuhn's story of the great advances of science illustrate ongoing historical fluctuation between normality and abnormality; of science being brought almost to a standstill by a seemingly impassable problem, splintering into incommensurable responses to that problem, and gradually settling upon one or the other of the proposed solutions. Since epistemology fails to be decidedly useful, Rorty thinks philosophy would do better to model itself in the more conversational mould of abnormal discourse, playing of different ways of speaking against each other with the hope – but not the insistence – that consensus emerges.

ii. Vocabularies

Rorty's method for revitalising philosophy as an abnormal discourse is to extend Quine's point with respect to meaning. Quine demonstrated that treating propositions as the fundamental semantic unit leads to a problematic indeterminacy between meaning and belief. So if we try to give a semantic account in terms of propositions – as representationalism does – this difficulty will have to be either surmounted or circumvented. However, this is only an argument against a particular approach to semantics – semantic representationalism – and not semantics per se. Rorty's use of the vocabulary idiom therefore relies heavily upon the non-representational semantics of Davidson. Explaining inquiry within the vocabulary idiom should thus allow different theories or ways of thinking to be entertained simultaneously, without the perceived need for commensuration.

Put broadly, a vocabulary is Rorty's term for Kuhn's "disciplinary matrix" generalised to all of culture. Vocabularies are linguistic frameworks which encompass both meaning *and* belief – adopting a vocabulary involves not simply picking up certain linguistic tropes but also norms for their use. This vision of language use – one which treats beliefs as inextricable from language itself – comes into sight if we realise that language is not a medium *through which* entities in the world are encountered. Saying that the notion of a mind independent world is incoherent is not to be taken as an expression of idealism – that the world is comprised by the function of our minds: It should not be taken as an ontological

claim about the *world* at all, but rather as a claim about *us*, the inquirers. That is, we can't understand the world in any neutral sense because understanding is only possible when aimed at a particular goal, and the world itself is silent with respect to such a goal.

This much, Rorty argues, is what Davidson achieves by rejecting the scheme-content distinction that sustains the idea that language is always *about* something.

Consequently, vocabularies do not involve all ontological commitments since they do not involve an analysis of an alleged connection between language and the world²⁸.

Rather, Davidson thinks semantics can only hope to clarify the inferential connections *between* different parts of language. Davidson's argument takes the form of a repudiation of the representational understanding of justification which involves assessing the relationship between a language – a particular conceptual scheme – and that which it describes – worldly content.

Sellars' insight was that our understanding of the content in question is always predicated upon the adoption of a particular language, and thus there is no natural standard to which to defer. Davidson extends this line of critique by arguing that not only is there no *natural* way of dividing the world, but that it makes no sense to talk of language as dividing anything at all. As Rorty notes:

No roads lead from the project of giving truth-conditions for the sentences of English (English as it is spoken, containing all sorts of theories about all sorts of things) to criteria for theory-choice or to the construction of a canonical notation which "limns the true and ultimate structure of reality." Correspondence, for Davidson, is a relation which has no ontological preferences – it can tie any sort of word to any sort of thing. This neutrality is an expression of the fact that, in a Davidsonian view, nature has no preferred way of being represented, and thus no interest in a canonical notation. Nor can nature be corresponded to better or worse, save in the simple sense that we can have more or fewer true beliefs.²⁹

For Davidson, as a process occurring within a preferred conceptual scheme justification has no *ontological* resonance whatsoever. Rather, what allows us to

²⁸ Whilst Rorty invokes Davidson in developing his understanding of vocabularies, Davidson himself does not employ "vocabularies". Davidson is content to simply talk of "languages".

²⁹ PMN, 300.

justify our commitments to fellow language users, he argues, is the presence of an overwhelming congruity of beliefs.

In Davidson's analysis of languages qua conceptual schemes, our ability to converge with other language users in the "passing theory" we use to translate their linguistic behaviour into terms we can understand relies upon fundamental similarities: in our beliefs, purposive interests, and in the way we pick out salient features of the world. On this view, linguistic concepts appear as part of a predictive account of fellow language users; they are tools which abet our attempts to *cope* with our surrounds. Linguistic norms can therefore no longer be thought of as grounded in nature itself:

We should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally. For there are no rules for arriving at passing theories that work... There is more chance of regularizing, or teaching, this process than there is of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data – for that is what this process involves.³⁰

Thus the common-sense idea of a language is thrown into doubt, and in its place can understand languages only as vocabularies – ways of speaking that we adopt because they suit our particular purposes. Davidsonian semantics show how the representational language-world relation must be supplanted by a three-place relation; between language, world, and *language user*. Vocabularies are therefore assessed not only on their ability to meet the demands of the world but also the demands of language users. That is to say, vocabularies are endorsed or rejected depending on how well they serve purposes. It therefore makes little sense to talk of trying to commensurate vocabularies. Reconciling vocabularies at a theoretical level – making them commensurable – would be tantamount to comparing the respective purposes they serve to see which is more important. Without presuming a global uniformity of purposes amongst all language users, such an attempt simply looks misplaced.

In this sense vocabularies prevent the web of inferential beliefs particular to one project to be brought into tension with those of another. Rorty commends the notion

³⁰ Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epigraphs", in LePore, Ernest, ed., *Truth and Interpretation*, 446, quoted in CIS, 15, Rorty's emphasis.

of vocabularies so as to accommodate for the role of human interests in setting justificatory norms, yet at the same time he does not want to go so far as to affirm the relativist notion that *no belief* can be deemed better than another. He is therefore committed to articulating a line of demarcation between instances where justificatory criteria are available and those where they are not. Rorty's solution is to make the process of justification internal to a particular way of speaking and its conceptual norms. Beyond those norms, we can only account for changes in vocabularies causally, by describing them in terms of shifting interests and preferences.

By showing that justification is always *internal* to a conceptual scheme and therefore reliant upon the similarities in language users' beliefs, Davidson shows that the natural world does not provide an equally natural scheme for its own description. Consequently, the understanding of truth as correspondence which dominates epistemology is equally compromised. In taking reality as the sole determinant of truth, representationalism presumed that the norms of justification arose univocally from the world. Whilst Sellars and Quine provide reason to think that representationalism *should* be set aside, Davidson gives some suggestion as to *how* that should be done – by accepting that truth as correspondence cannot play a revelatory role, and instead viewing languages as tools for coping with other language users.

On this account, justification is something which occurs entirely within a particular vocabulary. Between different vocabularies there is simply no intrinsically “right” choice to be made:

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. The realisation that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not, however, lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us. The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of

“arbitrary” choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another.³¹

Once we get representationalism out of the way we see that justification is entirely internal to particular ways of speaking, and that – outside these contexts – no criteria for theory choice is available. Rather, at the level of vocabulary choice we can only distinguish between those subjects upon which we agree and those which we don’t.

The concept of “truth” therefore gains purchase only in situations where agreement over the appropriate vocabulary exist: “Only in the context of general agreement does doubt about either truth or goodness have sense.”³² “Truth” is thus shown to be a term of expediency which indicates agreement over which vocabulary applies to a particular situation. The insight – that there is no context outside that of *agreement* by which we can test conceptual schemes – executes the final move in the process of demonstrating that justification cannot be explained as a relation with “reality”. Instead, truth only arises *within* the strictures of a particular vocabulary. When it comes to trying to decide which vocabularies to adopt though – which purposes to pursue – the notion of truth is simply not in play.

1.4 Public and private uses of vocabularies

Understanding linguistic behaviour in terms of mutually incommensurable vocabularies therefore jettisons the notion that there are inherently better or worse ways in which to describe the world. Since vocabularies are deployed in the service of particular purposes, they can only be assessed in relation to their efficacy in achieving those purposes. Where two vocabularies serve different purposes then, there is no need try reconcile their axioms, because they belong to different parts of human life. For Rorty, this contingency of language has significant repercussions for the way we view culture as a whole in that we are no longer tempted to ask for *justification* for entire vocabularies. Abandoning the expectation that vocabularies must be commensurable with each other means that vocabularies can legitimately adopted so long as they serve the purposes of the language users in question.

³¹ PMN.

³² Id, 309.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*³³ Rorty took up the implications of a contingent view of language to elucidate the possibilities it enables. In reconsidering the basis upon which vocabularies are taken up, he looks to demonstrate that cultural significance is not restricted to those matters upon which there is general agreement over how to proceed. Reconfiguring the distinction between normal and abnormal discourse as one between *public* and *private* uses of vocabularies, Rorty seeks to open up discursive space to commend the use of vocabularies which do not serve interests shared by the entire linguistic community. In doing so, he hopes to put the soft discourse of the humanities on an equal cultural footing with the hard discourse of the natural sciences.

His insistence that public and private deployments of vocabularies are both culturally significant arises as a corollary to his understanding of the contingency of language, with public uses of vocabularies being modeled upon Kuhn's idea of normal science. Viewing linguistic behaviour as vocabularies means that whilst we are not committed to choosing between incommensurable vocabularies, we can continue to account for shared vocabularies whose use is publicly agreed upon. Deprived of the ability to justify choices between vocabularies in a way which would be *universally* acceptable, language users nonetheless continue to choose between competing vocabularies, and do so according to the purposes which those vocabularies serve. Where the relevant purpose is shared widely within the epistemic community the vocabulary in question is deemed acceptable.

Rorty calls this deference to the epistemic norms of one's local community *ethnocentrism*. Epistemology's fault lay in its ignorance of the ethnocentric basis choosing vocabularies, in reading a special privilege into a paradigm of rationality which Sellars, Quine and Davidson showed to be a *human* creation. Accepting the ethnocentric basis for choosing between vocabularies, Rorty thinks, helps us to be less precious and more fallible about our particular ways of speaking. If we cannot presume the innate superiority of any one vocabulary over all others, he reasons, then we must regard all vocabularies as contingently held.

³³ CIS.

By this he does not mean, however, that we should cease to believe in anything at all. Treating vocabularies as ways of speaking which are only contingently held is not anathema to continuing to use them. Truth is no longer available to commend our choice of vocabularies, yet its absence also means that there is no basis apart from usefulness upon which to *criticise* them. Once we realise the ethnocentric quality of our ways of speaking, external justification is not a demand which can be imposed upon them. Rather, we simply need to be able to talk of other language users as sharing the purpose for which we employ a particular vocabulary.

The legitimacy of vocabularies is thus based upon the *solidarity* with which they are met by the descriptive community, not a set of invariant principles. Being “justified” in deploying a certain description simply depends upon whether or not that description is one which our fellow language users also use. In as much, vocabularies which enjoy a stable place within culture – typically the vocabularies of the natural sciences which we are inclined to think of as truth-apt – can retain that place with a comparable degree of stability. So long as human beings have a continuing interest in predicting and controlling the world around them, therefore, the vocabularies of the empirical sciences will continue to be employed. However, since ethnocentric solidarity is the only requirement that we place on vocabularies which are to be deployed publicly – in the service of purposes common to the epistemic community at large – we can also endorse vocabularies which are not truth-apt.

Specifically, Rorty suggests that if we are to be genuinely ethnocentric about our choices of vocabularies, then as members of liberal democracies we should consider a broad version of liberalism to be an equally stable. Liberalism in the sense of thinking that cruelty – of a social, biological or economic form – is the worst thing that human beings can do to each other is a vocabulary which for Rorty attracts the same kind of ethnocentric solidarity as the natural sciences. If ethnocentrism is the only basis upon which we can endorse vocabularies, then liberal purposes cannot be considered any less important than scientific purposes simply by virtue of the fact that they are historically a more recent advent. On this basis Rorty thinks that by replacing representationalism with vocabularies we expand the range of vocabularies

which we see as publicly valid ways of reasoning. A distaste for ethnocentrism means that whilst it remains the basis upon which we endorse vocabularies serving public purposes, we do so with an awareness of their contingency.

Rorty's refers to this particular brand of liberal ethnocentrism – one which is characteristically suspicious of ethnocentrism – as “liberal irony”. Rorty's liberal ironist is someone who possesses a final vocabulary – a set of preferred vocabularies – which includes a broad commitment to liberal goals. Whilst the liberal ironist adopts the substantive commitments of their final vocabulary without feeling any need to justify them, they experience recurring doubts as to whether they would be better off if they adopted a different final vocabulary.³⁴ That is to say, liberal ironism is an ethnocentrism which is open to reconsidering its own choice of vocabularies, and can account – at least in causal terms – for choices in vocabularies which differ to its own. With respect to public uses of vocabularies in particular, being prepared to see all ways of speaking as fundamentally contingent means that liberal ironists no longer try use differences in subject matter to divide culture into categories such as hard and soft. Rather, since a coincidence of purposes is all that is required to deploy a vocabulary publicly, then it is no longer appropriate to evaluate a liberal vocabulary against that of a natural scientist. All that can be said of their respective cultural contributions is that they are used by the members of that culture to achieve different purposive objective.

The notion of ethnocentric solidarity is therefore a litmus test for whether a vocabulary can be deployed publicly; that is, with the expectation that other language users will find its use acceptable. The vocabularies which comprise our collection of public vocabularies are therefore those which serve purposes common to that entire community. However, not all vocabularies serve purposes which are entertained so widely, and Rorty wants to point out that such vocabularies can still be useful. Public endorsement of a vocabulary is only necessary if the conceptual norms of that vocabulary are expected to hold throughout the entire community. However this does

³⁴ This notion of a final vocabulary captures the fact that from the everyday perspective of language users themselves there are no clear lines of demarcation dividing vocabularies into discrete conceptual frameworks. From the immediate perspective of language users engaged in the practice of justification, their different ways of speaking and the purposive interests served by them are overlapping and interdependent.

not exhaust the range of purposes for which we use language. Certain vocabularies are also deployed by lone individuals in the service of particular idiosyncratic goals. Such vocabularies are, for Rorty, typified by vocabularies which can be utilised in the service of the Nietzschean notion of *self-creation*; a practice of searching for new strategies for realising one's potential.

The value of the soft abnormal discourse of literature should not, on this account, be seen to be less than that of the sciences simply because its vocabularies are not socially useful. The purposes served by writers such as Nabakov and conversationalist philosophers such as Nietzsche, Sartre, Levinas, Derrida, Heidegger, Foucault and Gadamer are inherently personal – the invention of new vocabularies which attempt to answer to the individual's challenge of finding new ways to define their place within their cultural tradition. One will only disparage such thinkers as pessimists, solipsists, or idealists by taking applying their thoughts to a criteria of public rather than private usefulness. However for Rorty the incommensurability thesis means that such vocabularies, providing they do not interfere with the public vocabularies shared by the wider community, cannot be dismissed simply for failing to attract widespread solidarity. Their unsuitability to public ventures should not be taken to imply that they are not useful in any sense, but simply that they should be used in the service of individual rather than communal goals.

As such, bearing in mind the purposes a vocabulary is offered in service of allows for what is in a certain sense a more flexible set of criteria. "Public" and "private" are Rorty's names for two extremes of solidarity; for public vocabularies solidarity is extensive, allowing for the kind of intersubjective agreement familiar to, although not restricted to, the empirical sciences. At the other extreme private vocabularies attract minimal solidarity, and as such can only be used as part of individual projects which do not come into tension with the concerns of the wider community.

1.5 Conclusion

By drawing upon the insights of Sellars, Quine and Davidson, this chapter has outlined, Rorty makes claims that the representationalist preoccupation with

Epistemology as the central philosophical project cannot be sustained in the face of three key observations about linguistic behaviour. As an undertaking which seeks to draw a correspondence relation between the determinate structure of the external world and mental contents, Epistemology's explanatory claim is predicated upon the cogency of those notions. Rorty demonstrates that whilst Sellars endangers one side of this picture with the claim that the world cannot be understood except propositional description, Quine threatens it from the other side by showing that the fixed meanings which allow beliefs to be matched up to Reality cannot be guaranteed. In turn, Davidson argues that justification is a sociological activity whose norms are *socially* fixed.

As such, Rorty sees no reason why philosophy must continue to view representationalism as a useful paradigm for accounting for linguistic behaviour. A more advantageous explanation of language use, he argues, is one which appropriates Kuhn's notion of disciplinary matrixes as linguistic vocabularies. Taking up the vocabulary idiom, Rorty suggests, makes it possible to account for justification as a distinctively anthropocentric practice which necessarily occurs within an settled web of meanings and beliefs – a vocabulary.

When it comes to vocabulary selection there are no normative principles which guide our choice of descriptions, and nothing prevents language users from abandoning vocabularies except their ethnocentric commitment to the interests served by particular ways of speaking. As such, for language users who belong to the Western liberal democracies, their ethnocentric commitments are characteristically liberal ones. By taking up a position outside of the representationalist tradition, therefore, Rorty is not obliged to accept that culturally valuable disciplines are those which enjoy widespread agreement over the relevant justificatory norms. Thus he is able to use the notion of vocabularies to create discursive space for liberal ironism.

However, since liberal ironism, like every vocabulary, is only ever contingently endorsed by a descriptive community, Rorty's predilection for liberalism seems to be just the preference for one particular political vocabulary above all others. This would suggest that whilst vocabularies are certainly the tool through which he

explicates his particular vision of a society which places cultural weight upon both public and private uses of vocabularies, they do not *imply* that political outlook. If this is the case then it seems that one could readily adopt the vocabulary idiom without subsequently becoming a liberal ironist. This possibility is one I explore in the following chapter by developing the idea that Rorty's partiality for liberalism lies behind his divergence from other contemporary pragmatists on the issue of truth.

Chapter II

Vocabularies and Deflationism

Death: What are you waiting for?

Knight: Knowledge... What will become of us, who want to believe but cannot? And what of those, who neither will nor can believe? I want knowledge. Not belief. Not surmise. But knowledge.

– *The Seventh Seal*³⁵

2.1 Pragmatism's internal dispute over *rhetoric*

Rorty's critique of epistemology as a severely outdated philosophical approach orients him as a key precipitant of the late twentieth century resurgence of pragmatism.³⁶ In rejecting the representational picture, he provides impetus to reconsider the thoughts of the classical pragmatists with the benefit of the linguistic turn. Thus the latter decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of an expanding field of new pragmatists who – whilst remaining selective in their adoption of Rortyan positions – generally agree that *foundational* epistemology³⁷ is an unproductive venture and ought to be given up. Cumulatively, these contemporary pragmatists have helped marginalise representationalism³⁸, hastening the ascendancy of pragmatism as a “radical challenge to the received philosophical tradition and to the culture in which ideas from that tradition circulate.”³⁹

³⁵ Bergman, Ingmar (Dir.), *The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)*

³⁶ Other important contributors to the pragmatic resurgence include Quine, Davidson, Putnam, and Goodman.

³⁷ Whilst Rorty rejects all forms of epistemology out of hand, other pragmatists think that all that is required is to rehabilitate the epistemological project so as to revise its aims.

³⁸ I do not mean to suggest that contemporary pragmatists are univocal in their rejection of all forms of representationalism. In fact, the issue of whether a rejection of epistemological foundationalism entails a concomitant rejection of representationalism is frequently an issue of disagreement between Rorty and other pragmatists. Brandom, for one, argues that semantic representationalism does not in itself commit one to epistemological foundationalism: Brandom, Robert, *Vocabularies of Pragmatism*, in Brandom, Robert B., ed, *Rorty and His Critics*. Therefore, in order that confusion does not arise over my use of the term “representationalism”, please note that its appearance without an epithet indicates that it is being used in the Rortyan sense; to indicate a specifically foundationalist philosophical attitude.

³⁹ Stout 8

However disagreement persists between Rorty and some of his closest antirepresentational allies over the exact implications of taking up a pragmatic attitude. Whilst certain of these disputes question his elision of politics and “scientific” inquiry, a large number can strike one as so minor as to be merely aesthetic; over the use, for instance, of specific words such as “fact”, “rationality” or “true”. For many commentators it is tempting to dismiss these latter disputes as trivial; terminological quibbling over what a pragmatic formulation will *look* like, rather than what it will say. In many ways this class of dispute is perhaps best typified by Rorty’s disappointment with Davidson, who refuses to take up a deflationary attitude to the notion of “truth” despite holding that no substantial explanation of the concept can be offered. Davidson thinks that it is important to be able to say that certain beliefs are true even though “truth” itself means nothing more than being justified to the best standards on offer. On the contrary, Rorty thinks that admitting that truth plays no special role in the practices of justification makes it an entirely redundant notion.

In the preceding chapter I presented Rorty’s notion of a vocabulary as an explanatory tool which, unlike epistemology, is sensitive to recent naturalistic insights into linguistic employment.⁴⁰ Vocabularies, conceived as mutually incommensurable frameworks of justification, were meant to replace the image of the mind as a Mirror of Nature as the dominant cultural trope through which we explain our relation with the world we inhabit. In this chapter I would like to explore how this notion of vocabularies is refined by Ramberg in light of certain considerations which arise out of the Rorty-Davidson disagreement over the use of the term truth. In particular, I outline how amending our understanding of vocabularies in line with Ramberg’s suggestion of a “vocabulary of agency” places pressure on Rorty’s ability to present his political concerns as an inseparable part of his pragmatic vision.

The heart of the present chapter is concerned with the emergence of a rhetorical issue between two heavyweights of contemporary pragmatism. This entire paper, broadly conceived, draws out Rorty’s rationale for pursuing what from certain perspectives

⁴⁰ Rorty’s acceptance of each of the three dogmas of empiricism relies is made on naturalistic grounds: Sellars, Quine and Davidson each seek to undermine or replace parts of the representational picture by drawing attention to incongruities between the representational account and the actual trends present in linguistic behaviour.

seems to be an inconsequential point against Davidson. At its most ambitious it ruminates on how this disagreement poses questions about the strictures involved in taking up a pragmatic attitude at all.

I present the dispute between Rorty and Davidson over truth as one which not only occurs against a background of extensive mutual agreement, but emerges from fundamental dissonance over *rhetoric*⁴¹. Rorty's relatively late concession to Davidson over the privileged status of intentional language, I argue, demonstrates that truth does fulfill a particular role for Davidson, and even Rorty's own explanatory idiom – the concept of a vocabulary – offers no pragmatic basis for resisting Davidson.⁴² Even on his own terms, I conclude, Rorty's remonstrations can be made to seem entirely somewhat insubstantial. In making this argument I hope to present as plausible the view that downplays the import of the Rorty-Davidson discord and questions the centrality of politics to pragmatism. In doing so, I set the scene for the next chapter, where I reconsider the way the vocabulary concept is employed, endeavouring to make greater sense of the perplexing obstinacy and sometime insouciance with which Rorty typically approaches the issue of rhetoric.

2.2 Truth: minimalism and deflationism

The issue between Rorty and Davidson over truth, it is crucial to note, becomes noticeable only as an *irregularity* – amongst a wide collection of shared commitments between himself and Davidson. Rorty sees Davidson is a key strategic ally in fleshing out what he sees as a pragmatic alternative to the tired obsolescence of representational philosophy. As the purveyor of a *non*-representational semantics which offers an account of linguistic practice not parasitic upon a representational epistemology, Davidson plays a pivotal role in Rorty's account of an ever-widening gap between philosophy and cultural relevance. This admiration, borne out in an embryonic form in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,⁴³ so matured in *Objectivity*,

⁴¹ What is in question is not how epistemic norms are accessed – indeed, as I argue, considering Rorty's concession with respect to the role of intentional language, on that point Rorty and Davidson agree entirely. Rather, the dispute is over whether the term "truth" should play any role in our account of the social constitution of justificatory norms.

⁴² Rorty makes this concession in *Response Bjorn Ramberg*, in Brandom, Robert B., ed., *Rorty and His Critics*.

⁴³ PMN.

*Relativism and Truth*⁴⁴ that Rorty labeled Davidson as not only his “*favourite* philosopher of language”⁴⁵ but, alongside Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey, as one of the four “most important philosophers of our century.”⁴⁶

This enthusiasm can be put down to the fact that, as canvassed in the preceding chapter, Rorty sees him as firming up a line of *antirepresentational* critique evident within the analytic tradition itself.⁴⁷ Pointing to the insights of Sellars and Quine in particular, Rorty looks to what he sees to be the cumulative effect of – having taken the linguistic turn – dispensing with the respective language-fact and belief-meaning distinctions. On this account Davidsonian philosophy of language extends these ideas, crystallising and building upon a continuity of iconoclastic insights into the epistemological project. Rorty is especially admiring of Davidson’s rejection of the idea that we can cogently talk of truth as a relation of correspondence between propositional beliefs and worldly states of affairs. Like Rorty, Davidson dismisses the representational premises which sustain foundationalist epistemology, decrying the notions that the world is the sole determinant of epistemic norms, that concepts can be delineated from that which they structure, and that truth consists in correspondence. What Davidson takes his dismissal of the image of language as a medium to show is that a semantic account can only ever be offered as part of a particular language, or in Rorty’s terms, from within a certain vocabulary. Therefore truth can only ever be explained by reference to how it manifests itself within a particular set of conceptual norms. Beyond those norms, however, nothing interesting can be said about it.

Most importantly, this means that truth can play no role in choosing between vocabularies. As Davidson notes, truth adds nothing to an account of justification which is not already given by talking about the specific type of evidence involved:

The trouble is that the notion of fitting the totality of experience, like the notion of fitting the facts, or being true to the facts, adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true.

⁴⁴ ORT.

⁴⁵ Id (my emphasis). Indeed, Davidson plays such a large part for Rorty that he comprises an important section in PMN and provides much of the impetus for the thoughts presented in Rorty’s first volume of collected papers, ORT.

⁴⁶ PMN, 5.

⁴⁷ It should not go unnoticed that Rorty also draws upon continental thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Gadamer in articulating his objection to representationalism as the dominant approach within analytic philosophy: PMN. In later works these figures are joined by Heidegger, Lyotard, and others: EHO.

To speak of sensory experience rather than the evidence, or just the facts, expresses a view about the source or nature of evidence, but it does not add a new entity to the universe against which to test conceptual schemes.⁴⁸

On this point, Rorty comments similarly:

We have to see the term “corresponds to how things are” as an automatic compliment paid to successful normal discourse rather than as a relation to be studied and aspired to throughout the rest of discourse. To attempt to extend this compliment to feats of *abnormal* discourse is like complimenting a judge on his wise decision by leaving him a fat tip: it shows a lack of tact.⁴⁹

For both Rorty and Davidson then, truth does not allow vocabularies to be assessed against the type of neutral framework supposed by epistemology. Rather, it is simply a term we employ to denote beliefs that we consider well justified. As such, Rorty considers Davidson and himself bound up in a common undertaking, purposively united in the project of superseding an outmoded philosophical paradigm.

Rorty and Davidson, however, have diverging opinions on the implications of this attitude. Having clarified that truth is philosophically unremarkable, Davidson is content to continue to use it as a minimal notion which, although not the subject of any explanatory account, nonetheless plays a role in semantic theory as an indefinable concept. Davidson even goes so far as to say that: “Correspondence, while it is empty as a definition, does capture the thought that truth depends on how the world is.”⁵⁰ Rorty, on the other hand, thinks that once we acknowledge that truth is not a relation of correspondence – that it serves no unique *use* – then we have no reason to continue to use it at all. On his view, Davidsonian semantics would lose none of its prescience if characterised as a “theory of complex behaviour”⁵¹ rather than a theory of truth: the use of “truth” provides no additional benefit.

Thus while Rorty clearly approves of Davidson’s focus upon the inferential relations which constitute language, his continuing reference to truth spikes Rorty’s ire, even

⁴⁸ Davidson, quoted in PMN.

⁴⁹ PMN, 371-2.

⁵⁰ Davidson, Donald, in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, 71.

⁵¹ TG, 286.

though it is invoked as an unexplained primitive instead of a matter of correspondence. From where Rorty stands, the only good reason for using a concept of truth would be if it served some particular purpose. That is, it would need to be a *useful* concept.

2.3 Bjorn Ramberg: Why vocabularies get things *right*.

This dispute between Rorty and Davidson over whether a pragmatic outlook is able to admit a moderate notion of truth is taken up by Ramberg, who suggests that Rorty misunderstands Davidson's reason for being a minimalist about truth. What Ramberg sets out to demonstrate is that a minimalist conception of truth – such as the one proffered by Davidson – does in fact play a role in explaining justification. Ramberg suggests that the notion of truth, in the sense that it denotes an idea of getting one's subject matter *right*, helps account for the sheer possibility of linguistic behaviour. The most striking part of Ramberg's discussion, however, is that he invokes Rorty's notion of vocabularies in constructing his argument. That Ramberg develops his contention from within Rorty's own explanatory device not only brings to light some of the finer implications of talking in terms of vocabularies, but goes a long way to accounting for why Rorty feels compelled to *agree* with him. Coached in terms of vocabularies, Ramberg wants to argue that the attitude that good descriptions get things right is in fact utterly crucial to *all* descriptive vocabularies in that it is only in virtue of such an attitude that description is able to take place.

i. The related dispute over intentional language

Although it is Ramberg's intention to show that there is a notion of getting things right – of being true – which is more general than simply the standards of a particular vocabulary, he does not think this point can be gotten at directly. Thus his defense of Davidson involves taking up a second issue – the status of intentional language – which will inform the issue of truth. Besides their differences over the use of truth, Rorty's other point of contention with Davidson is that he commits himself to the idea that there is an important *philosophical* distinction between the vocabulary of propositional-attitude ascription – the vocabulary of intentionality – and the

descriptive vocabularies of the empirical sciences. In *Objectivity, Relativism & Truth*⁵² and *Truth and Progress*⁵³, Rorty is of the opinion that a strict delineation between the mental and the physical – such as that required to sustain Davidson’s talk of the irreducibility of the intentional – is simply the infelicitous remnants of Quinean physicalism. For Rorty, this attempt to confer explanatory priority upon one particular vocabulary – the vocabulary of intentionality – offends the naturalistic insight that every vocabulary is contingent and none privileged. It must be replaced, Rorty argues, with a more thoroughly naturalistic sense of contingency which regards *every* vocabulary, even the intentional one, as contingent.

For Ramberg, Rorty’s contention with respect to truth emerges as a corollary to his misunderstanding of Davidson’s position on intentional language. Ramberg therefore sets out to clarify Davidson’s attitude to intentional language by re-envisaging it as a vocabulary in the complete Rortyan sense of the term; a vocabulary of *agency*. Ramberg’s claim is that this vocabulary of agency reveals that the alleged irreducibility of the intentional is not, as Rorty thinks, an ontological claim about the descriptive primacy of one particular way of speaking, but rather a pragmatically inoffensive observation of the *pervasiveness* of intentional language. Intentional language, on Ramberg’s vocabulary of agency account, becomes a sophisticated predictive theory of linguistic behaviour, underpinning the normative impositions that make descriptive vocabularies possible. This, Ramberg argues, makes the vocabulary of agency *inescapable*: using the vocabulary of agency to reconfigure Davidson’s distinction between the vocabulary of propositional-attitude ascription and the descriptive vocabularies of the empirical sciences in this way allows Ramberg to circumvent Rorty’s contentions and, as I will demonstrate, account for why Davidson continues to invoke the notion of truth.

ii. Intentional language and agency

How then does Ramberg use the vocabulary of agency to trace a causal connection between the use of intentional language and the claim that it confers normative strictures upon descriptive vocabularies? Ramberg goes about this by first asking

⁵² ORT.

⁵³ TP.

what it means – pragmatically – for a vocabulary to be at all normatively binding. For descriptive vocabularies to be adequately deployed at all by a linguistic community, he claims, they must not only describe salient features of the world, but also *prescribe* rules as to their proper use. That is to say, they must be rule-governed. Indeed, the very constitution of a vocabulary is as a web of normatively binding inferential relations.

Integral to any project of description, this normativity manifests itself as the susceptibility of descriptions to criticism by other competent language users; descriptive norms are only ever intelligible as socially-enforced rules. In this sense normativity is both constituted and encountered *socially*. Ramberg explains that the normative dimension of every vocabulary is only made possible by the existence of a descriptively-engaged community which holds its members to those standards of linguistic performance:

The basis of knowledge, any form of knowledge, whether of self, others, or the shared world, is not a community of *minds*, in the sense of mutual knowledge of neighbouring belief-systems... Rather, it is a *community* of minds, that is, a plurality of creatures engaged in the project of describing their world and interpreting each other's descriptions of it.⁵⁴

As such the ability of an epistemic community to hold the use of descriptive vocabularies to a *normative* standard is intrinsic to being able to deploy those vocabularies at all. Specifically, deploying a descriptive vocabulary requires that language users be construed in a very particular way – as purposive obeyers of norms. Only by appeal to intentional language, Ramberg argues, is it possible to provide an adequate account of purposive agency as a regulative notion: “[D]escriptions emerge as descriptions of any sort at all only against a taken-for-granted background of purposive – hence normatively describable – behaviour on the part of the communicators involved.”⁵⁵

In treating language users as actors who take up purposive attitudes, intentional language qua vocabulary of agency makes it possible to assess linguistic action

⁵⁴ Ramberg, Bjorn, *Post-Ontological Philosophy of Mind* in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, 361-2. Original emphasis.

⁵⁵ Id, 372.

against a purposive background; as utterances aimed at attaining certain descriptive norms rather than mere emissions of noise. As Ramberg puts it:

With agency-vocabulary, by contrast, we are characterizing a domain of kinds of objects (language-users) with a vocabulary not *just* geared toward prediction of the behaviour of that kind – or perhaps we should say that the predictive interests that are expressed in the dynamics of agency-vocabulary are of a very peculiar sort – they turn on revealing the kinds of traits that allow us *to recognise ourselves* in what we are talking about, and to bring to bear all those complicated considerations that we gesture at with the moral notion of a person... Davidson's distinction appears as a way to distinguish the interests that intentional-language serves from those interests that vocabularies of scientific explanation serve.⁵⁶

Intentional language therefore constitutes a uniquely useful vocabulary of linguistic agency, offering a sophisticated predictive theory of linguistic behaviour. Within a vocabulary, the intentional regularities articulated by this vocabulary of agency crystallise as the relevant norms of description.

As a vocabulary of agency, intentional language thus functions as the device by which communities of language users regulate linguistic performance; the conduit by which the purposive social context confers normative constraint upon description:

“*Describing* anything... is an ability we have only because it is possible for others to see us as in general conforming to the norms that the predicates of agency embody.”⁵⁷

By tracing the string of practical relations by which descriptive communities enforce the normativity of their preferred vocabularies through the vocabulary of agency, Ramberg demonstrates that to understand vocabularies in a thoroughly naturalistic way is to see intentional language as *inescapable*. Ramberg's account of the vocabulary of agency therefore legitimates Davidson's special attitude to intentional language by presenting it as intrinsic to explaining description as a normative process.

iii. A prompted concession

Using the vocabulary of agency to reinterpret the basis of Davidson's prioritisation of intentional language in this way, as a naturalistic claim about the necessary conditions

⁵⁶ Id, 366.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

for the employment of descriptive vocabularies rather than an ontological one, Ramberg compels Rorty to reconsider his treatment of Davidson. Rorty concedes that reading the irreducibility of the intentional as an essentialist claim unfairly problematises Davidson's position, acknowledging that the "Brentanian irreducibility of the intentional is an unfortunate distraction from the inescapability of the normative."⁵⁸ Abandoning his contention with Davidson over intentional language, Rorty endorses Ramberg's account of the role of intentional language as a vocabulary of agency which explains that language users can aspire to the attainment of the norms of description only on the condition of agency. By making an account of justificatory standards continuous with an account of agency, Rorty notes, Ramberg shows that the intentional vocabulary is inextricable from the notion of agency by which descriptive communities understand and enforce the use of vocabularies, helping Davidson bring together the vision of the intentional language user with that of a person with responsibilities to the normative standards of their community.⁵⁹

In reinforcing Davidson's claim that there is an important philosophical difference between the vocabulary of intentionality and other vocabularies, Ramberg's argument reverberates throughout the broader debate between Davidson and Rorty over the notion of truth. By drawing a connection between intentional language and description as a whole, talk of a vocabulary of agency lends credibility to Davidson's continuing use of truth qua standard of objective correctness. Ramberg's approach resolves the dispute in Davidson's favour by making correctness a relation between linguistic behaviour and a set of norms which – despite being socially indexed and therefore variable – are acknowledgeable from the perspective of any competent language user. Assessing linguistic performance against a descriptive community's purposive interests, as Ramberg's account of Davidson does, bypasses the notion of the world-in-itself which so thoroughly problematises the representational account of objective correctness as truth by correspondence. As such Rorty is able to accept that the vocabulary of agency explains a cogent sense in which language users get their subject matter "right" according to intersubjectively available terms.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Id, 370-1.

⁵⁹ Rorty, Richard, "Response to Bjorn Ramberg" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, 372.

⁶⁰ Id, 374.

2.4 The rhetorical difference

Ramberg, by showing that the notion of correctness plays an important role in justification, seems to show that a minimal construal of truth is in fact useful. Thus Rorty's continuing refusal to admit a useful role for truth seems to be under pressure. In this section I will show that a minimal conception of truth remains objectionable to Rorty only because of its particular *terminology*. This section fleshes out this claim – Rorty's rhetorical argument – so as to demonstrate that it is not contained within the notion of a vocabulary, and that any explanation of Rorty's philosophy that takes vocabularies as its fulcrum will inevitably be forced to play down his political agenda. This will prepare the scene for the final chapter, in which I examine ways in which to alleviate the constructive tension surrounding the rhetorical argument.

By conceptualising intentional language in Rorty's own terms – as a vocabulary of agency – Ramberg demonstrated that descriptive norms themselves are a product of being able to make assessments of correctness. On this basis Rorty acknowledges that since getting things right is an important human interest, the vocabulary of agency is crucial to vocabularies *generally*. However it is clear from Rorty's comments on the vocabulary of agency that he does not think that accepting a notion of correctness requires a concomitant acceptance of truth. Whilst he is satisfied that language users must appeal to a notion of correctness in order to regulate each others' linguistic behaviour, he does not think that endorsing correctness is the same as being a minimalist with respect to truth.

However, if Rorty accepts that language users try to get their subject matter right, why does he not join the minimalist in saying that they are aiming at truth? For the minimalist truth denotes something more similar to the notion of correctness that Ramberg shows to be integral to practices of description than to the correspondence relation Rorty abhors. This insistence that there is an important difference between the two similar notions – correctness and a minimalist conception of truth – indicates that the criterion of usefulness is not sufficient to make sense of Rorty's position. Whilst the formal properties of the two concepts are largely – if not entirely – interchangeable, Rorty still seems to see daylight between them. Given the way in

which Ramberg's illustration of a vocabulary of agency strengthens the claim that minimalism with respect to truth is pragmatically uncontentious, Rorty's resistance of truth seems entirely terminological. That is to say, Rorty's objection to minimalism about truth seems to turn not on the role it plays in Davidson's philosophy, but on its use of a particular locution.

How should this claim be understood? For Jeffrey Stout, Rorty's insistence that there is an important difference between a commitment being correct as opposed to being true is nothing more than an *aesthetic* distaste for "the rhetoric of 'objectivity'"⁶¹ which characterised representationalism.⁶² On this story Rorty's aversion to all uses of truth is an inconsequential eccentricity which is rooted in nothing more than a parochial dislike for certain terminology. However, it is clear that such an attitude fails to capture the insistence with which Rorty rails against the continuing use of representational terminology. Pragmatic rehabilitation of traditional epistemological expressions, he maintains, offers inadequate protection against the connotative baggage accrued by terms such as truth. Thus in order to clarify his resistance to minimalism about truth I will now outline Rorty's "rhetorical" argument.

Rorty's rhetorical argument is his articulation of the real disadvantage he associates with the philosophical retention of the term truth.⁶³ For Rorty, simply updating the inferential connections of particular expressions through philosophical surgery is no guarantee that the puzzles surrounding that expression will be left behind. Rorty took up the notion of rehabilitating representationalist terminology in a response to a recent paper of Brandom's.⁶⁴ Though that paper was ostensibly concerned with rehabilitating the notion of facts, the response it elicited from Rorty applies equally to

⁶¹ Rorty, Richard, *Comments on Jeffrey Stout's Democracy and Tradition*, 6.

⁶² Stout, Jeffrey, "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right" in Misak, Cheryl, *New Pragmatists*.

⁶³ In fact for Rorty it is three distinct arguments, all adapted from the classical pragmatists. Firstly Rorty is afraid that talk of truth will lead to backsliding. Since justification is the only test we have available this is misleading to talk of a higher normative standard. Secondly, we can't see the point where coping becomes representing. Thirdly, use of truth encourages the use of an evaluative distinction between hard and soft culture: Rorty, Richard, "Response to Robert Brandom" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.) *Rorty and his Critics*. The first two are simply that we are tempted to take up epistemology, the last the political point about the need to prevent "scientific" inquiry from obtaining a cultural hegemony. I focus on the third for the simple fact that it constitutes the central claim of the rhetorical argument. The first two not only apply to restricted situations (for instance where the rehabilitated term is taken to be used in its redundant sense) but also fundamentally inform the third claim.

⁶⁴ Brandom, Robert, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*.

all epistemologically-loaded terminology, including truth.⁶⁵ In it, Rorty indicated that the basis of his concern over retaining the term “truth” is imminently connected with his social vision. The real disadvantage with rehabilitating philosophically pregnant terms such as “true”, he argued, is that it encourages backsliding into the epistemological conception of a pre-divided reality.⁶⁶

In Rorty’s eyes, representational terminology such as “truth” not only fails to serve any useful purpose but actually exerts a regressive influence on culture. Even if truth is denuded of its status as a correspondence relation between mental contents and reality, it still perpetuates a cultural hierarchy which privileges truth-apt discourse. To use the label of “truth” in practices of justification as the ultimate commendation is to equate the cultural respectability of a discipline with its truth-aptness. For Rorty, such a move continues to invoke the representationalist presumption that it is philosophy’s role to arbitrate between different areas of culture. As such it fails to recognise that discourse need not be fact-stating in order to be culturally useful:

It is misleading because it suggests that our better vocabularies cut at the joints, and our less good vocabularies gerrymander. This suggestion provokes attempts to divide culture into the good fact-finding parts and the less good non-fact-finding parts, the “objective knowledge” part and the other part.⁶⁷

The retention of the term “true”, Rorty argued, suggests that truth-apt discourse is the paradigm of cultural respectability and ignores the valuable social role played by discourse which is *not* truth-apt; literature, politics, sociological inquiry. That is to say, he is concerned that the continuing use of the term true – even without construing it as correspondence – will further entrench the evaluatively-charged distinction between hard and soft culture.

Thus whilst Rorty acknowledges that a minimal conception of truth might be used uncontentiously, he is nonetheless reticent to embrace it for fear that it will not be applied with sufficient philosophical discipline. In Rorty’s opinion, the ease with

⁶⁵ “[T]ruth’ and ‘facts’ are pretty nearly equivalent notions.”: Rorty, Richard, “Response to Robert Brandom” in Brandom, Robert, (ed.) *Rorty and his Critics*, 184.

⁶⁶ Rorty, Richard, “Response to Robert Brandom” in Brandom, Robert, (ed.) *Rorty and his Critics*, 185.

⁶⁷ *Id.*, 185-6.

which one could use truth to perpetuate a preference for hard culture over soft culture makes the risk of taking it up at all prohibitively large. However the rhetorical argument, on this account, is not so much a *formal* objection to minimalism about truth as a warning against philosophical carelessness. Rorty realises that it is indeed possible to apply a minimal version of truth without exhibiting a bias for scientific as opposed to sociological disciplines. Construed so that it applies indiscriminately to both hard and soft culture – a minimal notion of truth would be unremarkable.⁶⁸ His rhetorical argument is thus less an argument than a warning of the risks associated with using a term as philosophically pregnant as “truth”. His concern that soft culture will be disregarded simply because of the latent implications of terms such as “true”, “objective” and “fact” is the expression of:

[The] fear that countenancing these dangerous idioms will be taken as a concession by the bad guys: the people who still use perceptual experience as a model for “hard facts,” and who think that photon-talk is somehow harder than talk about comparative aesthetic worth.⁶⁹

Having distilled Rorty’s resistance to minimalism about truth down to the rhetorical argument, it seems apparent that Rorty does not seem to be able to demonstrate that the notion of a vocabulary is at odds with a minimalist attitude towards truth. It would also seem that doing away with truth is not the natural result of talking in terms of vocabularies.

By using Ramberg’s suggestions as to how the concept of a vocabulary might be refined as a background for a cross-examination of Rorty’s refusal to be a minimalist about truth, I have made the argument that Rorty must seemingly rely on an extraneous – rhetorical – argument to maintain his position. That is to say, it seems that the source of Rorty’s distaste for even the most innocuous construals of truth cannot be found in his notion of a vocabulary. In reformulating Davidsonian ideas about intentionality through Rorty’s own understanding of vocabularies, Ramberg demonstrated that a minimal notion of truth might be able to play an important role in justification. Truth, it seems, is only removed from the picture once vocabularies are supplemented with the rhetorical argument – the concern that ranking areas of culture in terms of truth-aptness might be counterproductive.

⁶⁸ Id, 186.

⁶⁹ Id, 187.

The intention of this discussion is not to adjudicate the issue between deflationary and minimalist attitudes to truth by assessing the success of the rhetorical argument. The rhetorical argument, as I have pointed out, is not intended to persuade. Rather it can only be used to bring attention to certain social commitments already in a speaker's possession, not to *instil* them. As such, any evaluation will necessarily beg the question of its adequacy. Instead, I hope to have articulated laid out the view that presents Rorty's rhetorical argument as separate from his notion of a vocabulary. By drawing it into the open for further questioning, I hope to have provided good reason to reconsider the centrality of vocabularies to Rorty's philosophical project.

2.5 Conclusion

The preceding chapter presented Rorty's notion of a vocabulary as the key to understanding his pragmatic account of justification and his commitment to a liberal utopia as two sides of a single coin. Vocabularies, on this account, allowed Rorty to traverse seamlessly from a rejection of epistemology to a particular vision for a post-representationalist culture. Considering the importance of the notion of a vocabulary to Rorty's thinking, I outlined how vocabularies might be said to underpin his entire project. They can be seen, I argued, as the point of departure for every one of his central philosophical and metaphilosophical commitments.

In this chapter I have brought into question the connection between vocabularies and Rorty's social vision. By using Ramberg's notion of a vocabulary of agency to flesh out the concept of a vocabulary in greater detail, I presented as plausible the view that it is not an understanding of vocabularies which compels Rorty to be strictly deflationary about truth. Rorty, Davidson and Ramberg, I have shown, are in fundamental agreement when it comes to accounting for how language is used. For explanatory purposes Rorty finds their analyses almost entirely compatible with his own. Ostensible tension arises, however, between that shared project of using vocabularies to explain the contingency of all justificatory frameworks and Rorty's simultaneous claim that a certain political vocabulary is preferable to all others.

Commenting on the difficulty Ramberg's vocabulary of agency causes for Rorty, Jeffrey Stout notes that:

Revisionist pragmatists all try to walk a fine line between correspondence theory and the old Rortyan rhetoric that entails reducing inquiry to an exercise in social conformity – collective narcissism. If Rorty is serious about getting right the idea of getting something right within the context of a pragmatic account of inquiry, then he is trying to walk the same line. Of course, walking fine lines is not what prophets are all about; neither is consistency their primary virtue... The confusion generated by Rorty's recent writings appears to result from the difficulty he has walking Ramberg's Apollonian fine line while also dancing the prophetic dance of Nietzschean self-reliance. His Apollonian and Dionysian performances appeal to somewhat different audiences, but when taken together they leave his considered views unclear.⁷⁰

Thus a problem emerges if we try to view Rorty's political commitments and his understanding of language continuously. Specifically, his insistence on deflationism over minimalism seems to be explicable only by appeal to an additional premise – the rhetorical argument. This would appear to be the only way to make sense of his claim that if vocabularies must be exorcised of any characteristically representational rhetoric.

Once Rorty's rhetorical argument and the social concerns expressed within it are acknowledged as additional – rather than inherent – to his notion of a vocabulary, doubts begin to emerge over the strength of the connection between his semantics and his social vision. If the concept of a vocabulary can't encapsulate Rorty's political commitments in addition to his linguistic ones, then what basis remains for seeing those political commitments as anything more than a "peripheral frill"⁷¹ to his thoughts on justification? What reason remains for thinking that Rortyan pragmatism contains a vision for all social practices and not simply those of justification? And even if such a vision is possible, the insights provided by Ramberg certainly cast doubt on the idea that it could be explicated by the notion of a *vocabulary*. Having brought these issues into consideration, I would like to use the final chapter of this paper to explore how the concept of a vocabulary might be reconstrued so as to better communicate the idiosyncratic nature of Rortyan pragmatism. It is in fact possible, I argue, to accommodate his stipulation about rhetoric within the notion of vocabularies.

⁷⁰ Stout, Jeffrey, "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right" in Misak, Cheryl, *New Pragmatists*, 28-9.

⁷¹ Brandom, Robert, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*.

Chapter III

Redescription in Progress

Sow an act and you reap a habit.

Sow a habit and you reap a character.

Sow a character and you reap a destiny.

– *Proverb*

3.1 Re-conceptualising vocabularies

Rorty has long acknowledged that being a pragmatist does not automatically require one to also be a social liberal. Pragmatism, he acknowledges, does not impose a particular political or social agenda. Even a fascist, Rorty notes, could be a pragmatist. Thus it is entirely possible to be a pragmatist about justification, accepting as Rorty does the contingency of all language, without also accepting his liberal convictions. However, as the first chapter of this paper made clear, this is not the type of pragmatism which Rorty purports to subscribe to. Rather, he advocates a brand of pragmatism which is characteristically liberal, emphasising the importance of poetic redescription for pursuing the goals of both Enlightenment liberalism and Nietzschean self-creation. In that discussion I presented Rorty's concept of a vocabulary as an explanatory device which allows him to traverse between an idiosyncratic social vision and a pragmatic account of justification.

In chapter two I questioned whether it is possible to put Rorty's political convictions down to his understanding of vocabularies. Taking into consideration Ramberg's clarification of the precise implications of explaining pragmatism in terms of vocabularies, I suggested that vocabularies themselves don't appear to be inherently liberal. Rorty's rhetorical objection to the use of representationalist terminology seems to flow not from his understanding of vocabularies, I argued, but rather from his wider political and social commitments. The possibility that this suggests is that

vocabularies are not a tool which is specific to Rorty's brand of pragmatic liberalism, but rather can be invoked by pragmatists of any political persuasion.

On this understanding of vocabularies, they espouse a pragmatism which is politically ambivalent; proffering a viable naturalistic account of justification but stopping short of embodying the specific normative commitments of liberal ironism. As such, it seems that vocabularies themselves continue to be beholden to the characteristically *Kantian* distinction between cause and justification:⁷² vocabularies give a causal explanation of the process by which beliefs are justified, but do not provide justification for any beliefs in particular. On choosing beliefs – be it in scientific, political or social matters – they are silent. Understanding vocabularies in this way suggests that Rorty remains captivated by a broadly Kantian picture which dictates how philosophy ought to be done.

However, seeing Rorty's idea of a vocabulary as constructed in characteristically Kantian terms would seem to be inimical to the unfettered animosity he consistently expresses towards Kant. In the Rortyan narrative of how philosophy became transfixed by the image of the mind as a Mirror of Nature – detailed in chapter one – Kant is a central villain and responsible for engendering the presumption that epistemology is the foremost philosophical project. As such, if Rorty's metaphilosophical claim – that philosophy would do better to escape from the Cartesian-Kantian problematic entirely, and that he is attempting precisely that – is taken seriously, it is hard to see why he would place so much store in what seems to be a broadly Kantian tool.

To my mind, it seems more plausible that something is missing from our explanation of vocabularies; that somewhere along the line our understanding of Rorty has gone awry by absorbed a certain Kantian quality which creates tension with Rorty's cultural politics. The *causal* explication of vocabularies furnished by the preceding two chapters thus seems to leave no room for the *normative* commitments Rorty insists upon with respect to a liberal political attitude. An acute tension thus seems to

⁷² See Brandom, Robert, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, xv

exist within Rorty's philosophy, so much so that his political commitments seem intelligible only if construed as extraneous to the notion of a vocabulary.

In this, my final chapter, I would like to explore how vocabularies might be construed so as to relieve this tension by taking up a different relation to the cause/justification distinction. Brandom's notion of metavocabularies, I argue, offers a way of seeing greater exchange between causes and norms, thereby providing a strategy for easing the constructive tension which makes it difficult to incorporate Rorty's normative investment in liberalism into his causal understanding of linguistic behaviour.

Metavocabularies suggest that, if we move away from the idea that we should always individuate between vocabularies according to the discrete purposes they serve, a pragmatic vision formulated in terms of vocabularies can be seen as embodying certain political commitments. Brandom, I argue, therefore makes it possible to reconcile the explanatory notion of a vocabulary with the particular normative commitments of Rortyan liberalism. Ultimately, the way out of a strict divide between cause and justification suggested by the metavocabulary approach casts Rorty's importance within contemporary pragmatism in new light.

3.2 Metavocabularies

The understanding of vocabularies that I've been developing has as a central point that vocabularies are formulated in the service of particular purposes. A vocabulary is *useful* therefore, if the purpose it serves is valued by the relevant descriptive community. On this account justification necessarily appeals to ethnocentric, not universal, criteria. We should therefore be able to explain what purpose is served by talking of vocabularies at all. If every linguistic act must occur within a vocabulary, it seems there must be some other vocabulary which is used to formulate the very concept of a vocabulary. This is precisely the problem Brandom takes up by arguing that Rorty's suggestion that vocabularies are the most appropriate idiom for explaining linguistic behaviour occurs at a *metavocabulary* level. For Brandom, talking within a metavocabulary is what enables Rorty to account for why the concept of a vocabulary is well-suited to explicating linguistic behaviour.

Rorty uses a *causal* metavocabulary to offer a naturalistic explanation of vocabularies as historically evolving coping strategies which serve both the fundamental demands of human survival as well as the broader purposes of their employers. On this causal account, vocabularies are linguistic tools which gain purchase within a community on the basis of their efficacy in pursuing the purposes of that community, and are superseded as competitor vocabularies are proven to be more productive with respect to the purpose at hand. Brandom puts the point thus:

As determinately embodied organisms, we come with interests in survival, adaptation, and reproduction. Vocabularies can be useful tools for pursuing those inbuilt ends – particularly the causal vocabularies that enable prediction and secure control over the natural environment. Broadening the focus somewhat, *whatever* it is that we find ourselves wanting or pursuing – whether rooted in our biology, in the determinate historical circumstances under which we reproduce our social life, or in idiosyncrasies of our individual trajectories through the world – deploying vocabularies can be a useful means for getting what we want.⁷³

The causal metavocabulary explains vocabularies naturalistically – as descriptive tools designed to fulfill human purposes which are therefore ultimately contingent upon a descriptive community's choice of purposes. Within the causal metavocabulary, the story of human progress is a story of new ways of speaking superseding older ones, where these shifts occur because the newer vocabulary demonstrates a more fruitful strategy for achieving a particular purposive goal. On this account, the respective shifts from Newtonian to quantum mechanics, Ptolemaic to heliocentric astronomy, or Aristotelian to quantificational logic are all instances of an obsolete vocabulary being replaced by one which can better achieve a particular task. Thus the causal metavocabulary explains how we came to prefer our current vocabularies, explaining how vocabularies are picked up or disregarded for others according to which best serve a particular set of interests. By explaining vocabularies causally, as linguistic strategies fulfilling a set of canonical purposes, it therefore also explains their worth in causal terms. As such, a descriptive community's preferred vocabularies are those which can be explained as most adequate to its interests.

⁷³ Brandom, Robert, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, 169. Original emphasis.

Thus the naturalistic account of vocabularies provided by the causal metavocabulary can also be put to use as a predictive tool which assesses the adequacy of a vocabulary to its ostensible purpose. In the process of considering which vocabulary will best satisfy a particular set of purposive adjustments, using a causal approach allows all available vocabularies to be ranked in a hierarchy on the basis of efficacy; according to their comparative ability to achieve that purpose. Situations where descriptive communities decide whether a new vocabulary is better suited to a certain task than a current one, the causal metavocabulary provides the criteria for discerning between them. In such instances the worth of a new descriptive vocabulary is determinable *prospectively*.

As a tool for choosing between vocabularies, however, Brandom points out that the causal approach is of limited use. The causal metavocabulary only has the resources to deal with the *prevailing* purposes of the descriptive community since the purposes against which vocabularies are assessed must be in place prior to the evaluative process. Unless the purpose served by a new vocabulary is already expressed within the descriptive community's current vocabularies, no endorsement is possible. The causal metavocabulary can only explain why some vocabularies are preferred over others by taking for granted a prevailing set of purposive interests. It empowers descriptive communities to justify their choice of a vocabulary as the most expedient means of achieving a certain purpose but stops short of justifying the purpose *itself*. That is to say that descriptive communities can't use the causal metavocabulary to explain the normative hold of their current purposes – for seeing them as *worthwhile* purposes.

So whilst it is clear that the causal metavocabulary is used to detect which vocabularies will best serve our preferred interests and in doing so account for why we choose to adopt certain ways of speaking, this naturalistic approach fails to account for the value the interest served by those ways of speaking. To explain the normative worth of descriptive purposes, Brandom argues, a second metavocabulary must be used; the *vocabulary* metavocabulary. Rorty invokes the vocabulary metavocabulary when he talks of vocabularies not just as coping tools which serve existing purposive interests, but as distinctive ways of speaking that make it possible

to formulate *new* purposes. Brandom notes that a purpose is incapable of being expressed – and therefore entertained – unless there is a vocabulary capable of articulating it. Thus when vocabularies are used creatively, to bring into existence new purposes through their very expression, justification of that vocabulary's purpose can only be expressed from within the very same vocabulary. Whereas the causal metavocabulary makes a naturalistic point, the vocabulary metavocabulary is used to a *historicist* one: That justification of a particular descriptive purpose can only ever be given from within a vocabulary in which that purpose is formulated. Purposes are unintelligible until one possesses a vocabulary in which to express them.

Rorty therefore uses the vocabulary metavocabulary when he makes the argument – canvassed in chapter one – that language users necessarily defer to ethnocentric criteria when justifying their choice of descriptive purposes. Preference for certain purposes arises simply from possessing vocabularies in which to defend those vocabularies as good ones. Whereas Brandom acknowledged that the causal metavocabulary makes it possible to assess vocabularies prospectively and compare them as alternate tools for achieving a single goal, no such futural determination is possible when contrary purposes are at stake. Since being able to defend a descriptive purpose relies on possessing a suitable vocabulary, vocabularies can only ever be justified *retrospectively*.

As such, the vocabulary metavocabulary tells us, attempts at justification have nothing to say about whether adopting a genuinely innovative vocabulary would be worthwhile. This metavocabulary therefore allows Rorty to dispense with the idea – common to representationalism – that the only useful vocabularies are those whose worth can be determined prospectively. Since neither metavocabulary empowers us to see the adoption of a novel purpose as progressive *or* regressive – except post facto – there is no reliable way to effect social progress except by experimenting with different vocabularies. The vocabulary metavocabulary is thus the descriptive framework Rorty invokes to make the normative claim that *conversation* should be the paradigm for both philosophy and wider culture. Our best chance for improving both ourselves and others, the vocabulary metavocabulary suggests, is to make available as large a range of vocabularies as possible; to avail ourselves of the

marketplace of ideas. That is to say, our culture should take up the project of bringing into existence an unprecedented number of previously unconceived vocabularies and submitting them as contributions to an open-ended cultural conversation.

3.3 Metavocabularies and liberal politics

In this way the vocabulary metavocabulary leads us to think that our best hope for improving our culture lies in the practice of enlarging the range of vocabularies to which we are exposed.⁷⁴ Without a predetermined understanding of what it will mean for us to move forward, we can only aspire to maintain vibrant and diverse conversation. Brandom notes that, once the vocabulary metavocabulary is used to show that opportunities for cultural advancement increase when we open ourselves to the myriad possible cultural projects, a broadly liberal attitude is inescapable. A commitment to progress, he argues, implies a concomitant obligation to guarding against those empirical arrangements which choke off and inhibit creative possibilities. For Rorty, this means minimising *cruelty*, since creative fancies can only be readily indulged within a secure physical and social environment.⁷⁵ Thus Rorty's encapsulation of his political convictions in the claim that cruelty is the worst thing we can do to each other flows from a commitment to meeting the minimal conditions for both participating in and being receptive to the cultural conversation.⁷⁶ By unpacking this notion of cruelty into two key protections, we are able to explain why Rorty sees public and private uses of vocabularies as equally vital to conversation.

On the one hand, Rorty's causal metavocabulary accounts for why he finds famine, assault, and other tangible forms of privation unacceptable. For descriptive communities who explain human beings in biological terms, pain is the canonical affront to such creatures. From the causal perspective, therefore, the possibility of conversational exchange requires a *public* vocabulary which calls for all varieties of pain to be eradicated. On the other, by utilising the vocabulary metavocabulary to

⁷⁴ Cornell West takes up this point to observe that in opening up discursive space by destabilising the incumbent mode of discourse, creates opportunity and argumentative leverage for those on the "underside of history".

⁷⁵ Rorty, Richard, "Justice as a larger loyalty" in PCP.

⁷⁶ CIS.

describe linguistic behaviour we are committed to viewing fellow conversationalists as discursive creatures. In this context, cruelty manifests itself as *humiliation*; the social harm inflicted by depriving language users of the idiosyncratic vocabularies through which they achieve self-expression. On this account, cruelty is only prevented by a public commitment to discursive pluralism at the level of *private* vocabularies. Brandom sums up the implicit connection between Rorty's understanding of vocabularies and his particular normative commitments thus:

What matters about us *morally*, and so ultimately, *politically*... is the capacity each of us discursive creatures has to say things that no-one else has ever said, things furthermore that would never have been said if we did not say them... Our moral worth is our dignity as potential contributors to the Conversation. This is what our political institutions have a duty to recognize, secure and promote. Seen from this point of view, it is a contingent fact about us that physiological agony is such a distraction from sprightly repartee and the production of fruitful novel utterances. But it is a fact, nonetheless. And for that reason pain, and like it various sorts of social and economic deprivation, have a second-hand, but nonetheless genuine, moral significance... The vocabulary [meta]vocabulary brings into view the possibility that our overarching *public* purpose should be to ensure that a hundred private flowers blossom, and a hundred novel schools of thought contend.⁷⁷

Metavocabularies therefore make it difficult to see Rorty's liberal commitments as just one political vocabulary amongst others. By casting them as the minimal conditions for the exchange of new linguistic practices, Brandom's metavocabulary approach suggests that Rorty's social vision is imminently connected with his use of the vocabulary idiom to explain language. When descriptive communities who explain their linguistic behaviour in terms of vocabularies turn their attention to the issue of what purposes they would do best to pursue, that is, they become implicated in a broadly liberal normative outlook.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Brandom, Robert, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, 179.

⁷⁸ In as much as the vocabulary metavocabulary accounts for his specific liberal commitments within the notion of vocabularies themselves, it makes available a new argument against those who criticise what they see as the vagueness of Rorty's liberal commitments. Cornell West, for one, criticises Rorty's failure to propose a concrete plan for liberal reform, decrying his failure to offer a practical agenda for reform. Similarly, Richard Bernstein criticises Rorty's liberal ironism as merely rhetorical: Bernstein, Richard J, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward: Richard Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy". By showing that Rorty's liberalism arises as a corollary to his pragmatic understanding of linguistic behaviour, the vocabulary metavocabulary demonstrates that it only emerges as a set of *minimal* conditions. The import of this insight is that it demonstrates that Rorty is not engaged in the project of

3.4 Abandoning the external perspective

The contribution of analysing Rorty in this way – in terms of metavocabularies – is therefore to suggest an imminent connection between his notion of a vocabulary and his liberal politics. That kind of sharp split between a causal account of language and the normative attraction of liberalism, Brandom has shown, overdescribes the way vocabularies account for linguistic practice. So whilst Rorty keeps the distinction between cause and justification in place, he does not attribute to it the status of a *dualism*. “A dualism”, Brandom notes, “is a distinction drawn in such a way as to make unintelligible the relation between the two sorts of thing one has distinguished.”⁷⁹ Since the vocabulary metavocabulary traces a connection between a vocabulary-based explanation of language and a commitment to liberalism, Rorty’s formulation of pragmatism allows for exchange across the cause/justification distinction.⁸⁰

The vocabulary metavocabulary in particular succeeds in partially eliding this distinction by rejecting the idea that causes and norms exert no influence upon each other. Rather, the use of metavocabularies to “step back”⁸¹ shows that vocabularies don’t neatly separate the question of how language *is* used from the question of how it *should* be used. The notion that the vocabulary idiom effects a clear demarcation between cause and justification, we can surmise, emerges only because of a

proffering a consummate political vision. Thus whilst this realisation dispenses with the criticisms of West and Bernstein, their conjectures nonetheless demonstrate the fundamental limitations of Rorty’s political commitment to broadly liberal objectives.

⁷⁹ Brandom, Robert, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism” in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, 167.

⁸⁰ Brandom explores the interaction between cause and justification by arguing that no novel utterance ever fits neatly within a vocabulary. Rather, than fitting neatly on one side of the cause/justification divide, he argues, novel utterances present themselves at particular points on the spectrum between familiar and unfamiliar uses of language. As such, he notes, the very act of using a vocabulary is indistinguishable from that of changing it: [I]t is simply a mistake to think of the antecedent norms as *determining* the process [of justification]. In exploring the inferential significance of novel claims, we are not simply tracing out paths already determined in advance. For the inferential norms that govern the use of concepts are not handed down to us on tablets from above; they are not guaranteed in advance to be complete or coherent with each other. They are at best constraints that aim us in a direction when assessing novel claims. Brandom, Robert, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism” in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, 176 Original emphasis. Use of the cause/justification distinction, pragmatically conceived, therefore seems to become least useful when we are presented with uses of language which seem to fall down somewhere towards the middle of the cause/justification spectrum.

⁸¹ Brandom, Robert, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism” in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, 167.

temptation to think that the causal metavocabulary succeeds in adopting a completely *external* view of language.⁸²

The causal metavocabulary purports to survey language from an external position, dividing linguistic behaviour into discrete vocabularies in an attempt at a thoroughly naturalistic outlook. This use of an external perspective was meant to foster an awareness that that a vocabulary is only ever held contingently. Understanding vocabularies externally uses the distinction between causes and norms to analyse the causal relation between language use and the interests of particular language *users*, suggesting that since shifts between justificatory paradigms can only ever be accounted for in non-normative terms.

The vocabulary metavocabulary inherits this understanding of vocabularies, using it to put the historicist uses of vocabulary-talk under a description which explains the normative attraction of current vocabularies. However, since justification necessarily occurs from an internal perspective – from within the final vocabulary of a particular individual (or culture) – it is accompanied by a sense of its own fallibility: Regardless of the substance of the commitments involved, an ironic attitude to those commitments is required. Thus the concept of a vocabulary initially seemed to be ambivalent with respect to all substantive commitments. On the back of this presumption, Rorty's presentation of liberalism alongside his talk of vocabularies seemed to generate some kind of constructive friction. As I demonstrated in chapter two, his understanding of vocabularies appeared to be entirely independent of his political agenda. Since his resistance to the use of truth is only possible by making use of justificatory criteria internal to the vocabulary of liberalism, I argued, there is ostensibly tension between understanding language in terms of vocabularies and his specific political commitments.

⁸² In *Contemporary Pragmatism: Conversation between Philosophy and Life*, Nikolas Kirby argues that since Brandom's discussion of metavocabularies demonstrates that purposes can only ever be justified retrospectively, the metavocabulary fails to account for how language users are ever able to identify unfamiliar purposes *as purposes* prior to adopting them. In making this argument, Kirby takes the vocabulary metavocabulary as performing a purely normative function, and suggests that the Wittgensteinian notion of *weight* might be used to help out from under the cause/justification distinction which, on his account, makes it impossible to identify unfamiliar purposes. As I argue here, the vocabulary metavocabulary already blurs any sharp distinction between cause and justification, and thus a solution is available using the notion of metavocabularies themselves.

However, it is only possible to draw this tension between the two parts of Rorty's philosophy if they can be coherently separated; by accepting that talk of vocabularies successfully takes up a perspective broader than that of the liberal commitments he favours. Brandom's distinctive contribution to discussion of Rorty is to show that no such separation is possible. The unique insight provided by the vocabulary metavocabulary is that describing language in terms of vocabularies involves taking up a position within a liberal vocabulary. Thus analysing language in terms of vocabularies never adopts an entirely external perspective. Liberalism, the vocabulary metavocabulary reveals, enjoys a unique privilege in being fundamentally incidental to such an account. Explaining language in terms of vocabularies, this demonstrates, is situated within a political commitment to specifically *liberal* ironism.

By casting the political commitments of liberalism as corollaries to the very notion of vocabularies, Brandom demonstrates that Rorty's description of language is never completely external to those substantive commitments. An ethnocentric attachment to talking in terms of vocabularies therefore involves a concomitant attachment to liberal ironism. Since a liberal attitude is therefore the implicit corollary of deploying the concept of a vocabulary, we realise that talking in terms of vocabularies is never external to that particular political attitude. Thinking that vocabularies take up a completely external point of view therefore obfuscates the liberal commitments which are inherent to Rorty's formulation of the vocabulary concept.

If discussion of vocabularies always occurs within a political vocabulary which champions the prospect of a poeticised culture, then our attempts to take up an external point of view can never be completely successful. Whilst our efforts to use vocabularies to divide language into distinct justificatory frameworks are sufficiently external to help explain our *current* ways of speaking, they are inclined to ignore their own orientation within a broadly liberal outlook. As such they bear little relation to the liberal predispositions assumed by language users who explain their own linguistic behaviour in terms of vocabularies. These language users, it seems, are unavoidably committed to incorporating a normative commitment to liberalism into their explanation of language use, especially when dealing with the novel dilemmas

posed by unfamiliar vocabularies: Vocabulary-talk commits them to adopting *liberal* ironism as an integral part of their final vocabulary.

So it would appear that the apparent difficulty of explaining Rorty's liberalism as cohesive with an understanding of language in terms of vocabularies comes down to mistakenly trying to maintain a completely external perspective on language. Given that a liberal attitude is inherent to the idea that linguistic practices can be split up into vocabularies, understanding Rorty's distinctive brand of pragmatism requires us to accept that certain normative commitments already inhere within his seemingly causal explanation of language, relaxing the notion that causal explanation is completely indifferent to what we find normatively compelling. Since the concept of vocabularies facilitates a particular political bias rather than supplying a neutral explanatory framework which preferences all purposes equally, it is incapable of furnishing us with an entirely external point of view. Rather, even at the level of metavocabularies we're already *inside* a particular normative paradigm. The external perspective that leads us to divide language into fallible vocabularies is therefore inclined to overlook the significance of liberal commitments to this picture.

Metavocabularies therefore show the limitations of trying to formulate vocabularies from an external perspective; that using vocabularies to talk about how we address the needs of cultural progress inescapably involves adopting the commitments of liberal ironism. As such, we can readily give up the idea that it is only from an external perspective that we can say useful things about vocabularies. Indeed, what we take from Brandom's discussion of metavocabularies is the realisation that Rorty never commits himself to a completely external perspective. This puts us in a position to accept that, so long as we are using the vocabulary idiom, we are already within the normative constraints of liberalism.⁸³ Sanctioning Rorty's particular brand of

⁸³ Having noted that the vocabulary concept is central to Rorty's philosophical project, Brandom is prepared to construe it as part of a project of "modest metaphysics": Brandom, Robert, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism" in Brandom, Robert, (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, 179. Whilst the 'modesty' of this construal seems unproblematic – Brandom continues to hold that talk of vocabularies is itself revisible – it nonetheless strikes me as troubling: A conception of vocabularies as modestly metaphysical seems to encourage the presumption that we are best served by thinking of language from the most external perspective which remains available.

The danger of this approach seems to be that it plays down the fact that when actively engaged in the process of justification external perspectives of any grade have no relevance for us. The understanding of language which we invoke in such instances is rather that provided by the notion of a final

liberalism therefore involves no additional commitment to that which we make to talk in terms of vocabularies in the first place: So long as we claim to possess a final vocabulary, it is necessarily that of a liberal ironist.

3.5 Metaphilosophy and the cultural role of pragmatism

Having dispensed with the allegation that Rorty's preference for liberalism is not a natural consequence of his understanding of vocabularies, it becomes possible to trace a new degree of conceptual continuity through the entirety of his pragmatic vision. Insofar as this newfound consistency tells us something about what can feasibly be achieved by the way we formulate a pragmatic attitude, it reorients the way Rorty is understood at a *metaphilosophical* level; telling us something about the kind of cultural role that pragmatism can fulfill. Most importantly, it shows that pragmatism has the potential to make a broad cultural contribution – one which is not restricted to the interests of naturalism.

Rorty's novel metaphilosophical approach comes into view as a byproduct of acknowledging the thoroughly political quality of his pragmatic vision. Recall that one of the motivating insights behind taking the 'pragmatic turn' is the recognition that the representationalist account of justification fails to satisfy certain naturalistic demands.⁸⁴ Once representationalism is supplanted by an adequately naturalistic explanation of linguistic behaviour, pragmatists argue, we realise that our interests as inquirers inform our choice of descriptions. Consequently, pragmatists take it as a platitude that every descriptive choice is in principle revisable. Rorty takes this

vocabulary which enables us to assume an entirely *internal* perspective to our justificatory norms. To my mind, construing the concept of a vocabulary as a modest metaphysics seems to flirt with the danger of losing sight of the importance of the internal perspective provided by final vocabularies. It suggests that the formulation of a vocabulary must be systemised so as to be identical for both the task of explaining the function of linguistic norms as well as that of justifying their worth. Connotation aside, however, since Brandom is engaged in the process of putting language under a description, it is understandable that he tries to adopt an external perspective to language. His treatment of vocabularies as modestly metaphysical simply needs to be qualified with an insistence that the metaphysical dimension of vocabularies must be disregarded when actively engaging in the practice of justification.

⁸⁴ Huw Price articulates the difference between the type of naturalism invoked by representationalism and that satisfactory to pragmatists by the introduction of a distinction between "object naturalism" and "subject naturalism" respectively. Whilst the move away from representationalism involves repudiating object naturalism, "subject naturalism" is a specific variety of naturalism which comports well with the pragmatic attitude that all commitments are only ever endorsed on a contingent basis: PCP.

awareness of the contingency of language further than most of his fellow pragmatists by refusing to accept that, simply because it allows us to get past representationalism, the naturalistic stance is the *only* outlook we need for doing philosophy. For him, the realisation that human beings are solely responsible for furnishing themselves with descriptive purposes indicates that there is never just *one* way of putting linguistic behaviour under description. Given that we widen or constrict the range of purposes available to us simply by changing the way we speak, we are now faced with the very real possibility of a philosophical description of language which can be deployed in the service of a particular cultural agenda. Moreover, there is nothing obligating us to place language under a purely naturalistic description.

Rather, Rorty demonstrates the possibility of formulating a description of linguistic behaviour which helps sediment the cultural importance of certain liberal goals and preclude illiberal possibilities. Thus whilst contemporary pragmatists utilise a broadly naturalistic perspective to articulate their respective visions for post-representational philosophy, Rorty is distinctive in that he seeks to meet the demands of liberalism as well as those of naturalism. Indeed, it is his acceptance of this further set of constraints that exposes Rorty to the challenges that have been explored throughout this paper.

In articulating his pragmatic vision, therefore, Rorty takes full advantage of the power of redescription by formulating the concept of the vocabulary in a manner which comports with his liberal vision of a poeticised culture. By redescribing language in a way which exhibits a preference for liberal ironism, Rorty adopts the metaphilosophical stance that philosophy is capable of being a proactive tool for pursuing a particular social vision. Vocabularies, as Rorty formulates them, are not a politically ambivalent tool but rather a specific way of describing language so as to put forward the opinion that the liberal political attitude is most conducive to social progress; an active strategy for sublimating a specifically liberal brand of ethnocentrism into a culture's very understanding of the way it uses language.

Of course, describing language in terms of vocabularies is still only ever endorsed on an ethnocentric basis, and nothing in Rorty's account compels those who do not share

his political commitments to adopt liberal pragmatism. So whilst he does successfully amalgamate a liberal political attitude into his pragmatic account of language, Rorty offers no *argument* which mandates the assumption of liberal – or even pragmatic – commitments. The importance of formulating pragmatism in terms of vocabularies is not to convince, but simply to offer a tool for bringing together liberal commitments with our naturalistic understanding of ourselves as social creatures.

However, even from Rorty's liberal point of view, the new pragmatists can play an important role in catalysing the exodus from representational attitudes to broadly pragmatic ones. The issue at stake between them is not over how language is used, but rather a fundamental disagreement over what constitutes an appropriate self-description for philosophy: Whether it should be interested in which political outlook will best facilitate cultural improvement, or should be happy to leave such questions to the social sciences and political discussion. Since to argue in favour of either side would involve adopting its particular norms, to do so would beg the question.

As such there seems to be no way of resolving the issue in a manner which would be acceptable to both sides. From the metaphilosophical perspective of the new pragmatists Rorty's rejection of representational rhetoric is simply a whimsical aesthetic preference, whilst from the Rorty's liberal point of view his new pragmatist opponents fail to recognise that naturalism does not exhaust the notion of cultural worth. Thus whilst this particular question must be put to one side, what *is* clear is that Rorty's liberal pragmatism provides a way of speaking which blurs the line between who we are and who we want to be. By incorporating a political vision within an explanation of linguistic behaviour he expounds a conception of pragmatism that is squarely committed to putting philosophy to work in the service of the descriptive community. In doing so, he adopts an idiosyncratic metaphilosophical approach which adds nuance to contemporary debate within pragmatism and adds a novel inflection to Hegel's description of philosophy as "its own time comprehended in thoughts."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Hegel, G.W.F., *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, 21.

Conclusion

A philosopher's duty is not to pity the unhappy – it is to be of use to them
– Voltaire

A philosopher who is not taking part in discussions is like a boxer who never goes into the ring.
– Ludwig Wittgenstein⁸⁶

In the first chapter of this paper I explained that Rorty's suggested replacement for the epistemological picture is the idea of a vocabulary. I also introduced his preference for ethnocentrically selecting vocabularies according to specifically liberal criteria. In chapter two I sought to refine this understanding of vocabularies in a way which suggested that they share no special connection with a liberal political persuasion. On this argument, vocabularies account for Rorty's pragmatic explanation of inquiry but not the political dimensions of his thinking. The notion of a vocabulary, I argued, seemed to be a constructive device which is politically ambivalent.

By introducing Brandom's contribution to this debate in the final chapter, I argued that his notion of metavocabularies does not only explain how we tell the story of how particular vocabularies became important to us given certain purposes whilst explains why we are inclined to see those purposes as valuable in the first place. Rather the metavocabulary approach, I argued, demonstrates that an explanation of language which takes vocabularies at its heart can never extricate itself from certain liberal commitments.

Taken together, Ramberg and Brandom's opposing contributions to the debate over the function of the vocabulary concept in Rorty's philosophy represent two different stages in pragmatism's emerging realisation of the possibilities philosophy is presented with once it dispenses with the residues of the representational approach. Rorty's departure from representationalism, as I outlined, occurs as a set of realisations that gain purchase by showing the linguistic behaviour is more thoroughly

⁸⁶ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, "Conversations 1947-48".

complex and elusive than representationalism presumes. In much the same way as Sellars, Quine, and Davidson were able to exploit representationalism's oversights, Brandom shows that Rorty too pushes our understanding of language in new directions by demonstrating the malleability of the cause/justification distinction which survives the fall of representationalism.

Brandom succeeds Ramberg's explanation of vocabularies – the claim that the idiosyncrasies of his Rorty's pragmatic vision could not be anything more than aesthetic tweaks to a widely accepted formulation of pragmatism – with an explanation which moves beyond a sharp divide between cause and justification. In doing so he not only succeeds in pointing out that Rorty's rhetorical preferences constitute a meaningful point of difference between him and the rest of the pragmatic field, but also that philosophical realisations of the type made by Sellars and Quine will continue to be made. As such philosophy must stand ready to respond and adapt to these changes as they transpire.

Moreover, Brandom demonstrates that Rorty's concept of a vocabulary is able to actively engender a particular set of purposive interests by making it difficult to explain language in terms which do not immediately take up certain normative commitments. In as much, the distinctive contribution of his discussion of metavocabularies is to suggest that pragmatism's challenge to our accepted ways of doing philosophy might be significantly more radical than simply acknowledging the importance of purposive interests to the act of inquiring.

This paper has argued that Rorty's notion of vocabularies not only succeeds in escaping representationalism but also formulates a specifically liberal social vision which cannot be detached from vocabularies themselves. At a metaphilosophical level, vocabularies therefore suggest that our descriptions of language are never entirely neutral. As such, this seems to also provide an strong imperative to guard against those explanations of language which are not identifiably serving cultural objectives that we approve of.

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