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Contingency and universality in the Habermas-Rorty debate

In this article the debate between Habermas and Rorty on the issue of relativism is discussed critically. Developments in Rorty's position are pointed out, for example his current acceptance of the epithet "relativist" as opposed to his earlier rejection of this self-description in view of his denial that a pragmatist such as himself has any, even a relativist, epistemology. Attention is also paid to Rorty's current denial of the relevance of the idea of "metaphors of making rather than finding" for this debate, against his earlier espousal of this distinction. His main effort is to create a vocabulary that might transcend the obsolete distinctions of "Platonism" such as truth-falsity, rational-irrational and subjective-objective. On the other hand, there is Habermas's unmasking of the undeniable and unavoidable performative contradiction in Rorty's work, as well as his argument that Rorty fails to develop a new vocabulary, but rather succumbs to the well-known Social Darwiniansm of the nineteenth century. The author shows why Habermas emerges from this debate much better than Rorty.

Kontingensie en universaliteit in die Habermas-Rorty-debat

In hierdie artikel word die debat tussen Habermas en Rorty oor die kwessie van relativisme krities bespreek. Daar word gewys op ontwikkelinge in Rorty se posisie, byvoorbeeld sy aanvaarding van die term "relativisme" teenoor sy vroeëre afwysing van dié selfbeskrywing in die lig van sy ontkenning dat 'n pragmatis soos hyself oor enige epistemologie, insluitende 'n relativistiese een, beskik. Aandag word ook geskenk aan Rorty se teenswoordige afwysing van die tersaaklikheid van "metaphors of making rather than finding", teenoor sy vroeëre motivering van sy standpunt in die lig van hierdie onderskeiding. Voorop staan sy poging om 'n woordeskat te skep wat die geykte teenstellings van "Platonisme" (bv waarheid-leuen, rasioneel-irrasioneel, subjektief-objektief) en hul gepaardgaande epistemologiese veronderstellings transendeer. Hierteenoor staan Habermas se ontmaskering van die performatiewe kontradiksie in Rorty se werk, asook sy argument dat Rorty geen nuwe woordeskat ontwikkel nie, dog bloot 'n negentiende-eeuse Sosiale Darwinisme in ere probeer herstel. Die skrywer toon aan waarom Habermas in hierdie debat veel beter daarvan afkom as Rorty.

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Richard Rorty has long been a philosopher accused of relativism.[1] Before moving to the specifics of his recent debate with Habermas, I shall briefly discuss the way in which he defended himself, in his earlier work, against this charge. I do this partly in order to indicate that his position in this regard has undergone significant changes, some due to the validity of specific charges that have been levelled against his work.

According to the early Rorty, "relativism" is a label which "realists" (rationalists) wrongly attach to pragmatists like himself. In an article entitled "Solidarity or objectivity" (Rorty 1985a) he claims that by relativism one may understand three different things. The first is the view that any belief is as good as any other — a belief which, to the best of his knowledge, no one holds and which he also rejects on the grounds of its incoherent and self-undermining nature (Rorty 1985a: 5-6; 1980a: 727). The second interpretation is that "true" is an ambiguous term, which has as many meanings as there are grounding procedures. Rorty does not have much to say about this view, although he remarks in an unpublished version of his 1985 article that it is too eccentric for him to accept. It will, however, soon become clear that his own views do not differ significantly from it.

The third view, which he claims to espouse, is that nothing can be said about truth and rationality other than to describe the familiar procedures for consistent/sound knowledge acquisition which are operative in a given community (for him, Western liberal democracies). This, according to Rorty, is the view of the kind of pragmatist that he himself claims to be: one who abandons any striving after certain knowledge, grounded facts and objective truth and who accepts that his concepts of truth and rationality do not reveal his participation in "universal human nature", but only his association with a specific community which is the heir of a specific tradition.

The pragmatist decides that striving for objectivity in the cultural history of the West (as initiated by Plato's distinctions between *epistéme* and *doksa*, appearance and reality), or attempting to identify an a-

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historical human nature by revealing "underlying structures", "culturally unchanging factors" or "biologically determined patterns", has become an chimaera and should be abandoned (Rorty 1982: 3-18). The pragmatist accepts that he is, in the first instance, a Greek or an American before he is a human being; that he can never entirely divorce himself from the contingency of being born in a specific community at a specific time, and that his concepts of truth and rationality are unavoidably ethnocentric in origin. In a more recent article Rorty (1989: 191) formulates this as follows:

> Consider [...] the attitude of contemporary American liberals to the unending misery of the lives of the young blacks in American cities. Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human beings? We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow Americans — to insist that it is outrageous that an American should live without hope. The point of these examples is that our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as 'one of us', where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race. That is why 'because she is a human being' is a weak, unconvincing explanation of a generous action.

The Rortian pragmatist's way of accounting for the meaning of his existence is, therefore, to tell the story of his contribution to his community, instead of trying to relate his relationship with a universal human (and therefore also superhuman) reality. In short, rationality and truth have meaning for the pragmatist only from within his solidarity with his group, and not on the basis of any intuition that objective knowledge is an attainable ideal for all human beings:

> My position entails that feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities [ie between me and my dog, a robot, an Eskimo or a fellow South African, AvN] strike us as salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary (Rorty 1989: 192).

The pragmatist does believe his view to be better than that of the realist who clings to the universalist ideal of truth, but not because it "corresponds better" to the way things "really" are. It is not clear to Rorty why his ethnocentric concept can be typified as "relativistic":

> For the pragmatist is not holding a positive theory which says that something is relative to something else. He is, instead, making the purely negative point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between

> truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term
> for well-justified beliefs. The reason that the realist calls this negative
> claim 'relativistic' is that he cannot believe that anybody would se-
> riously deny that truth has an intrinsic nature. So when the pragma-
> tist says that there is nothing to be said about truth and that each
> of us will commend as true those beliefs which he or she finds good
> to believe, the realist is inclined to interpret this as one more positive
> theory about the nature of truth: as a theory according to which truth
> is simply the contemporary opinion of a chosen individual or group.
> Such a theory would, of course, be self-refuting. But the pragmatist
> does not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one. As a partisan
> of solidarity, his account of the value of co-operative human inquiry
> has only an ethical basis, not an epistemological or metaphysical one.
> Not having any epistemology, *a fortiori* he does not have a relativistic
> one (Rorty 1985: 6).

To say of a statement that it is "true" or "rational" is therefore nothing more than to pay someone a compliment, to "scratch his back" because he uses statements that you find acceptable within the conventions of your contingent, historical and linguistic community. Of course, with a view to the effective functioning of a community, it is necessary that there should be consensus on a significant number of things, so that "truth" may be distinguished from "falseness". But this is at most a pragmatic arrangement with nothing more than an ethical basis; it is necessary for the well-being of the community that such consensus should exist. It is, however, not in the least necessary for the essence of the "human race"; for Rorty this would be a fiction and every attempt to lend any substance to such a claim merely degenerates into the presentation of concepts of "humanness" which are clearly orientated towards the pre-ferences of the community from which they derive. From this we must conclude that Rorty still has much more sympathy with relativism, in the sense of incommensurability, than he is ever prepared to admit. Truth and rationality — concepts he attempts to reject elsewhere, or proposes we should abandon — ultimately have meaning and content relative only to a specific group, and are therefore ambiguous concepts which attain different meanings in different communities or universes of discourse.

With these brief remarks, we may take our leave of the earlier Rorty. In a much more recent article (Rorty 1996a:), he again commences by pro-viding meanings — this time four, and for the term "relativist":

> The term 'relativist' is applied to philosophers who agree with Nietzsche
> that 'Truth' is the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations.

The term 'relativist' is also applied to philosophers who agree with William James that "the 'true' is simply the expedient way of believing" and to those who agree with Thomas Kuhn that science should not be thought of as moving toward an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. More generally, philosophers are called 'relativists' when they do not accept the Greek distinction between the way things are in themselves and the relations which they have to other things, and in particular to human needs and interests (Rorty 1996: 31).

In contradiction to his earlier work, Rorty is happy to acknowledge that he is a relativist in these terms. He eschews the Greek distinction and believes that we ought to "abandon the traditional philosophical project of finding something stable which will serve as a criterion for judging the transitory products of our transitory needs and interests" (Rorty 1996: 31). According to Rorty, the fundamental difference between these relativists and their "foundationalist" opponents (and of course each side to a dispute will do its utmost to describe its opponent in the most unfavourable terms possible) concerns the correspondence theory of truth. To the traditionalists, this theory is "so obvious, so self-evident, that it is merely perverse to question it". Rorty and company, on the other hand, consider it

… barely intelligible and of no particular importance […] not so much a theory as a slogan which we have been mindlessly chanting for centuries. We pragmatists think that we might stop chanting it without any harmful consequences (Rorty 1996: 32).

Relativists like Rorty are fond of claiming that many of what we regard as the intuitions of common sense are not really "found" or "discovered" but actually "made" or "invented". This theme is already discernible in Rorty's early work. In the more recent article which I am currently discussing, he acknowledges that his claim that "metaphors of making" ought to replace "metaphors of finding" in our reflection on reliable knowledge, is subject to one serious criticism: is the validity of the claim itself something that has been "found" by pragmatists to be the case? If so, then they are contradicting themselves, if they also claim that nothing of lasting validity can be found!

The bulk of the 1996 article then deals with Rorty's effort to explain in how he thinks the distinction between making and finding, so prominent in his earlier defence of his brand of pragmatism, can be abandoned. He writes:

> I think it is important that we who are accused of relativism stop using the distinctions between finding and making, discovery and invention, objective and subjective. We should not let ourselves be described as subjectivists or social constructionists. We cannot formulate our point in terms of a distinction between what is outside us and what is inside us. We must repudiate the vocabulary our opponents use and not let them impose it upon us (Rorty 1996: 33).

Rorty thus wishes to maintain that relativism is a charge of which one can ony be guilty in the context of adherence to the discourse, conceptual apparatus and fundamental distinctions of Platonically inspired philosophy: "We do not call an inquiry 'philosophical' unless it revolves around some of the distinctions Plato drew" (Rorty 1996: 33). The central challenge that he therefore identifies is to question and replace the vocabulary inherited from Plato and Aristotle. He writes:

> [O]ur efforts at persuasion must take the form of gradual inculcation of new ways of speaking, rather than of straightforward argumentation within old ways of speaking (Rorty 1996: 34).

This claim is central to Rorty's position. The question is whether he himself is successful in developing the kind of new discourse to which he alludes without remaining stuck in "straightforward argumentation within [the] old ways of speaking". I shall return to this issue in due course.

Rather than simply accepting the epithet "relativist" or "irrationalist", Rorty's preferred self-description in his later work is "anti-dualist" (Rorty 1996: 34). An anti-dualist is not against the use of all binary oppositions, but does object to the validity or usefulness of the traditional Platonic distinctions (subject and object, found and made, absolute and relative, real and apparent). Rorty's effort to transcend this "Platonic vocabulary" is to suggest a Darwinian discourse for our understanding of the processes of making sense of our world and of making progress in our intellectual enterprise. According to him, the American pragmatist tradition, of which he is part, is inspired by such a Darwinian discourse, which makes a point of collapsing the distinctions between philosophy, science and politics.

In the Darwinian discourse that Rorty proposes, knowledge claims make sense only in relation to the functions and purposes — in short, the utility that they have for people at that specific stage of their development and interests. It is in this sense that he claims that the vocabulary in which the traditional problems of Western philosophy were formulated has lost its utility (Rorty 1996: 37). The "reality/appearance"

distinction must be replaced by one between "more useful" and "less useful". The Platonic distinctions were, he says, useful to our ancestors, but are no longer useful to us:

> Our ancestors [...] climbed up a ladder which we are now in a position to throw away. We can throw it away not because we have reached a final resting place, but because we have different problems to solve than those which perplexed our ancestors (Rorty 1996: 37).

Pragmatists, according to Rorty, are the thinkers who relinquish the Cartesian-Lockean "anxiety" of endless concern about how we could know, with certainty, that the images we have of the world in our minds correspond with what is actually "out there".[2] Rorty (1996: 38) writes:

> So they start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment — doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain.

Words count among the most important tools that these "animals" use in an attempt to cope with their environments; they are not representations of the intrinsic nature of things, but rather "nodes in a causal network which binds the organism together with its environment" (Rorty 1996: 38).

Drawing on Dennett and others, Rorty furthermore argues that beliefs and desires are neither pre-linguistic modes of consciousness nor immaterial events. He prefers to call beliefs "sentential attitudes", or "dispositions on the part of organisms, or of computers, to assert or deny certain sentences" (Rorty 1996: 39). Rorty particularly likes Charles Sanders Pierce's definition of a belief as a "habit of action". That means that to ascribe a belief to someone is "simply to say that he or she will tend to behave as I behave when I am willing to affirm the truth of a certain sentence" (Rorty 1996: 39). Thus, when I utter a sentence such as "I am thirsty", I am not revealing something about my inner self that is inaccessible to others, but merely assisting other people to predict the way that I am bound to behave. The important question to ask is not "What is really the case?" but rather "For what purposes might it be useful to hold that belief?" According to Rorty, this is ana-

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2   Cf Rorty 1980: 129-312. Cf also Bernstein 1983: 16-25; 165-169 and Luijpen 1976: 88-112, who refers to this as the "critical problem".

logous to the question "For what purposes would it be useful to load this program into my computer?" In the view he is suggesting, a person's body is analogous to the computer's hardware, and his or her beliefs and desires to the software (Rorty 1996: 39).

If beliefs are not seen as representations but as habits of action, it becomes pointless, in Rorty's view, to ask whether, when acquiring a belief, one is inventing, making or finding. He uses what has since become quite a controversial example: that talk about giraffes — an example of an alleged "object in the natural world" — is similar to talk about a bank account — an alleged "social construction" — in the sense that both are descriptions emanating from our needs and interests (Rorty 1996: 41):

> … it is not clear that any of the millions of ways of describing the piece of space-time occupied by what we call a giraffe is any closer to the way things are in themselves than any of the others (Rorty 1996: 41).

Consequently, the question "Are we describing it as it really is?" according to Rorty, is one "we never need to ask. "All we need to know is whether some competing description might be more useful for some of our purposes" (Rorty 1996: 41).

Although much more could be said about Rorty's views on relativism, the scope of this article does not allow me to pursue his arguments further. I turn now to Habermas's main response, found in the same volume as Rorty's more recent articles.

Habermas situates Rorty's position within the larger framework of an effort, inspired by Platonism and the dialectical responses of the history of ideas, to come to grips with the ever-increasing range of contingencies in human experience. Habermas argues that both Greek philosophy and the great religions of the world owe their origins to the efforts of the human spirit to develop an ever more encompassing and transcending perspective on the world, a kind of "God's-eye-view". The standard distinctions of the philosophical tradition — such as "finite/infinite", "necessary/contingent", "universal/local", "rational/irrational" and "true/false" — derive from this effort to develop a theoretical or rational perspective on a reality experienced, since the Greek enlightenment, as an emancipation from the mythical world. The experience of human life thus becomes a "curriculum for catharsis and salvation".

However, as early as Plato's own time, according to Habermas, an anti-Platonism emerged, inspired by frustration with the Platonic idea that reason is a mere reflection of the infinite *logos* and the ideal order of things. This anti-Platonic reaction came into being together with the emergence of reason as the ability to handle the bizarre contingencies of the mythical life-world. It points, *contra* Plato, to the emancipatory potential of "lost contingencies". It rejects Platonic idealism along with the idea that its constructions (eg the realm of the forms) are a "given" or can be "found". Nietzsche is modernity's great exponent of this anti-Platonism. Rorty's ideas, with his original emphasis on replacing the metaphors of "finding" with those of "making", also fit within this framework.

The development of the dialectic of Platonism, anti-Platonism and anti-anti-Platonism is worked out by Habermas in greater detail than can be rehearsed here. What is interesting, however, is Habermas's claim that, in their criticisms of Western rationality, Rorty and Derrida differ in one important respect. Derrida belongs to a tradition in which it is believed that Platonism will be overcome only by remaining within the sphere of philosophy itself — by remaining sensitive to the self-undermining means provided by metaphysics (for instance, Derrida's deconstructive enterprise in respect of the "traces" recovered in writing). In contradistinction to this idea that the critique of metaphysics is best facilitated by the means provided by metaphysics itself (the "deconstructionist" strategy), we find the "assimilationist" strategy, which no longer understands interpretation as the integration or fusion of different horizons (Gadamer), but rather as either the extension of my own horizon to consume that of my adversary, or a succumbing to a superior tradition, as suggested by the work of MacIntyre.

Rorty stands outside both the latter strategies. His claim is, as we have seen, that "we must opt out of the Platonist and anti-Platonist moves" since both remain the victims of philosophy itself and "modern societies will fare better without philosophy". This, then, is Habermas's judgment: Rorty chooses not to criticise the Platonist tradition "from within"; he would rather "finish it via the *fiat* of a new vocabulary" (Habermas 1996: 19).

Habermas, along with a host of other authors, has repeatedly pointed out the performative contradiction in the attempts of Rorty and many other postmodern thinkers to transcend the discourse of Western philo-

sophy.[3] For example, Lyotard presents his theory of language games as a criticism of Habermas's notion of consensus. He posits, as an alternative, that dissension or "paralogy" is the *telos* of speech (Lyotard 1984: 65-6). The question, however, is: how are we to account for the status of Lyotard's own statement? Lyotard, like Rorty and others, is making a point against Habermas in an argumentative manner, providing reasons for his contentions. Nevertheless, we cannot agree with the propositional content of what he says without simultaneously denying the validity of the statement. If the purpose of legitimate discursive speech is not to establish some form of consensus between speaker/writer and listener/reader (by providing reasons for what is being said), I fail to see any basis on which anyone should take Lyotard's contentions seriously. In short, he cannot consistently maintain an argument that seeks to convince us that arguments do not aim at our consent. As Habermas points out, certain unavoidable assumptions accompany any argument, and the propositional content of the argument cannot contradict them. Lyotard's claim concerning dissension is thus left with two equally distasteful alternatives. As Holub (1991: 143) writes:

> Either we take the claim seriously, and fall into a performative contradiction, or we do not admit that Lyotard is offering an argument and therefore do not have to bother with assent or dissent.[4]

The same goes for Rorty. The important question is: what is the status of Rorty's arguments? Is he trying to convince Habermas and those of us who allegedly cling to the metaphysical, Platonist argument? If so, he himself is unavoidably still playing the game that he is trying to revoke. Habermas points out that Rorty may not be trying to convince us but merely using rhetorical devices with the intention of making Habermas (and us) change our behaviour; some bystander might realise that this is indeed Rorty's game (1996: 19). If Rorty's activities in "arguing" with Habermas and others are indeed reducible to such persuasive manoeuvres, questions about truth and rationality become meaningless. "But Rorty could only manage to accomplish all of this by deploying an alternative — which in fact turns out to be a new —

3   Cf Holub 1991: 133-61; the dispute with Lyotard is at issue, but the point remains the same.
4   I am also indebted to Holub's discussion of this point in more general terms.

vocabulary" (Habermas 1996: 19). Of this "new language" we must then say that its "success" does not depend on a successful self-criticism of metaphysics. It does not enjoy the peculiar legitimation of being the result of a deconstruction of an old and illusionary vocabulary. As Habermas (1996: 19) says, "Its legitimacy depends on nothing but expediency".

The question is: is this what Rorty is in fact doing when he writes articles like the one discussed above? The answer is an emphatic no. As Habermas rightly points out: Rorty's "new language" — the language in which the Platonic dualisms are to be intentionally avoided — is "neither new nor particularly functional". It is not new since it boils down to little more than the Darwinian discourse of the nineteenth century, in terms of which Rorty tries to explain that all that we achieve in the name of knowledge, truth, and so on is nothing more than a set of "coping mechanisms" in terms of which we survive.[5] This is a well-known "language game". The question remains: why must we accept it? Must we do so because it is based on "successful science"? If so, we would still require an argument to justify accepting the authority of science. Rorty cannot avoid developing some philosophical argument as to why we ought to take him seriously. As Habermas (1996: 20) writes:

> If philosophy, literature, science, and politics do not form different genres but provide as many tools for coping with changing environments, as Rorty assures us, scientific success would, however, stand as just one among several criteria for legitimating new vocabularies.

In addition to his criticism of the performative contradiction and Rorty's clearly unsuccessful effort at developing a "new language" in which Platonic dualisms can be avoided, Habermas develops three additional and, to my mind, quite strong arguments.

5   Rorty (1996: 44) writes in this regard: "But to us pragmatists moral struggle is continuous with the Darwinian struggle for existence, and no sharp break divides the unjust from the imprudent, the evil from the inexpedient. What matters for pragmatists is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness. This goal is not written in the stars and is no more an expression of what Kant called 'pure practical reason' than it is the will of God. It is a goal worth dying for, but it does not require backup from supernatural forces. The pragmatist view of what opponents of pragmatism call 'firm moral principles' is that such principles are abbreviations of past practices — ways of summing up the habits of the ancestors whom we most admire".

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First, we could expect Rorty to claim that his "new vocabulary" is not in need of any justification, since "justification" is a requirement of the Platonic vocabulary that he wishes to abandon. He could, possibly, simply claim that his new language "works", invoking its "reproductive fitness" and its "functional success". He could, in other words, simply point out that his new style of post-Platonic discourse helps people cope, and is thus its own, and the only required, "justification".

But if the "it-survives-because-it-helps-us-cope" argument is to be taken seriously, Habermas rightly observes that it would hardly help Rorty; in fact it would seriously undermine his position in its own terms (*ie* regarding "mere survival" as a satisfactory self-justification). The reason for this is that the "new language" then hardly compares, in terms of mere staying-power, with the Platonic discourse, which has survived for the better part of two and a half millennia and continues to work pretty well for most of us. If we accept the validity of Rorty's own pragmatist criterion for taking vocabularies seriously, there is hardly a discourse that could compare with the Platonic one which he wishes to "replace".

The second argument that Habermas develops emerges from Rorty's collapsing of the boundaries between the predicates "-is true" and "-is justifiably held to be true" (*ie* truth as "warranted assertability"). For Rorty, nothing more can be said about truth than that it is constituted by the moves that a certain community — our own — makes in order to legitimise its claims. But for Rorty, as we have seen, truth is no more than the paying of a compliment, of scratching someone's back when he or she says something that we agree with. There is no non-circular way of justifying truth claims beyond the conventions of a historically contingent community.

Habermas's (1996: 21) response to this claim warrants extended quotation from his discussion:

> The problem with any epistemic conception of truth is how to draw and maintain this clear-cut meaning difference without falling back into some sort of Platonism (or realism). Can we do justice to the undeniable moment of unconditionality that we, by the forceless force of grammatical rules, in fact link with the use of the truth-predicate, without taking recourse to any kind of idealization? If truth is explained in terms of rational acceptability [as Rorty claims] and if the cautionary use of the truth-predicate reminds us of the fact that what is 'justified' by our best available standards might still not be 'true', we must not assimilate truth to rational acceptability. We have to build

> some reservation into the notion of rational acceptability if we want to bridge the gap, but we must not blur the line between '-is true' and '-is justifiably held to be true'. We must stretch the referent of the idea that a proposition is rationally acceptable 'for us' beyond the limits and the standards of any local community. We must expand the universe of 'all of us' beyond the social and intellectual boundaries of an accidental bunch of people who just happen to gather under our skies. 'True' would otherwise merge with 'justified in the present context'.

What Habermas is arguing in this regard is that in any discourse in which the concept of truth is meaningfully espoused, we are of necessity required to engage in idealisations about the maximisation of the community that is called upon to redeem truth claims. Habermas's (1996: 21) claim in this regard is that "if somebody states 'that p', he or she must (implicitly at least) be prepared to justify 'p' by appealing to a rationally motivated agreement of other publics, not just ours, a public of experts, an ever wider public of reasonable persons, or a public of people who are 'better versions of ourselves'". The necessity of "idealizations" therefore simply means that, if we want to use language intelligibly — and truth claims are, as extensively argued by Habermas (1976: 1-68) in his earlier universal pragmatics, an essential part of all intelligible language — we must accept the existence, somewhere, of an "ideal public" (*focus imaginarius*) that must be able to vindicate the legitimacy of what we claim outside of the confines of the specific public addressed in a given discourse.

The third criticism that Habermas levels at Rorty concerns the latter's claim that the fundamental reason we accept anything is that we find it useful, the claim that intellectual discourse ought to be conducted primarily for ethical (which, for Rorty, means utilitarian), and not for epistemological reasons. Compare Rorty's example in which he claims that we do not believe Ptolemaic astronomy like our ancestors, because to believe in the literal meaning of the Bible is no longer important to us; our needs are better served by practices based on other knowledge claims. Habermas's rather mischievous response to this is that he himself, for one, would not have minded much if a "salvator God" did, indeed, exist; think of the sense of security that such a reality could provide us with. He would even gladly forfeit the knowledge that people could actually land on the moon in favour of the idea of God's existence. However, the reason why Habermas does not accept God's existence, and does accept Copernican-based astronomy, is that the latter accords with

what really is the case, while the former does not. The reason certainly is not that the latter agrees better with what Habermas would regard as his most important needs as a human being!

Habermas's (1996: 24) own suggestion of the solution to this dispute comes to the fore in the closing passage of his article:

> I would propose, instead, that the interaction between world disclosure and innerworldly learning processes works in a symmetrical way. Linguistic knowledge and world-knowledge interpenetrate. While one enables the acquisition of the other, world-knowledge may, in turn, correct linguistic knowledge […] Relevant parts of a world-disclosing knowledge that first enables speakers and actors to look at, cope with, and interpret in a specific way anything that might occur to them can well be revised in the light of what they had learned from their innerworldly encounters. There is a feedback between these results of learning processes and those linguistic conditions which make this learning possible in the first place. This repercussion is owed to the context-transcending range and context-bursting force of criticizable claims to validity on the intersubjective — but fallible — recognition on which our daily communicative practices depend.

In Rorty's (1996a: 24-9) brief answer to these arguments, he identifies his most important agreements and differences with Habermas. Habermas is correct in noting that Rorty is advocating a view according to which we should emancipate our culture from the "whole philosophical vocabulary clustering around reason, truth, and knowledge". There is not so much wrong, Rorty (1996a: 27-8) now claims, with the ideas of reason, truth and knowledge:

> ... all that is wrong is the Platonic attempt to put them in the center of culture, in the center of our sense of what it is to be a human being.

Rorty wants to detach the notion of rationality from that of truth. In a significant departure from his earlier work, he now acknowledges the importance of rationality, but then only in the sense of the habit of striving after or securing ends "by persuasion rather than force". "As I see it, the opposition between rationality and irrationality is simply the opposition between words and blows". He sees a significant convergence between Habermas's substitution of communicative reason for subject-centred reason and what he calls the "Protagorean/Emersonian tradition" which he himself prefers (Rorty 1996a: 28).

This raises the question of whether Rorty is fair to claim, by implication, that force is always implied when truth is in dispute. There

certainly are many examples in history. However, I think that the very existence and endurance of the institution of the modern university falsifies this Rortyan claim. Without suggesting that universities were devoid of violence in the past, it remains a fact that, in spite of isolated examples to the contrary, history has largely borne out Jaspers's (1960: 21) celebrated definition of the university as "an institution uniting people professionally dedicated to the quest and transmission of truth in scientific terms". That such an institution exists and has endured is the best example of the compatibility of truth-seeking and non-violence that we have.

Rorty (1996a: 28) concludes by pointing out that the principal differences between himself and Habermas concern the notion of universal validity:

> I think that we can get along without that notion and still have a sufficiently rich notion of rationality. We can keep all that was good in Platonism even after we drop the notion of universal validity. Habermas thinks that we still need to keep it.

But, says Rorty (1996a: 28),

> ... compared to the similarities between my Emersonian secularist romanticism and his notion of rationality as the search for undistorted communication rather than as an attempt to get from appearance to reality, this difference may not be so very important.

Let me conclude with a few evaluatory remarks. As indicated, I think that the criticisms leveled by Habermas at Rorty are very persuasive. Rorty has always created the impression that the only way out of the quandary in which accusations of performative contradiction have landed him is to insist that he does not want to play the Platonic (read: traditional philosophical) language game, and that he therefore has to develop a discourse transcending that game. In this enterprise, I think that he has failed dismally. Habermas's sharp observation that what we get from Rorty, is not a new language, but a refurbished version of social Darwinism, is quite accurate. In addition, it might be remarked that Rorty's desire to abandon Platonic dualisms — in fact Platonic discourse — creates the impression that he also wishes to attain some discourse that transcends the whole business of philosophical argumentation as we know it from the tradition. If so, the onus is on him to explain what comes in its place. But, even if this is Rorty's intention, it must also be

noted that he never complies with it. Rorty is arguing, and in terms of the canons of traditional philosophical rationality. He develops arguments and clearly wishes to persuade his readers, including Habermas. What the basis is for that activity, given his reservations about the appropriateness of the whole enterprise of rational argumentation for the propagation of his brand of "pragmatism", is entirely unclear. In arguing to convince us that Western rationality and its concomitant search for truth are humbug and ought to be abandoned, Rorty is falling into the same old trap of the performative contradiction that has caught relativists since the time of Protagoras.

Let me add two critical remarks to the valid points raised (directly or by implication) by Habermas. The first concerns Rorty's highly controversial claim that all knowledge claims serve purely pragmatic (which for him implies utilitarian) purposes. This comes to the fore, for example, in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980), where he tries to annex Gadamer for this very same programme. Rorty interprets Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" in conjunction with his own view of the insights of the post-empiricist philosophy of science (about which Gadamer does not express himself) as a sufficient excuse to abandon the traditional distinction between the natural and the human sciences.[6] According to Rorty (1980: 362), there are no essential differences between these two enterprises; they are merely different "coping mechanisms" by means of which we find our way through life. The natural sciences owe their stature and status in our culture entirely to the pragmatic use to which they can be put within the needs-structure of a particular kind of society, such as Western liberal democracies. There is no non-circular way to demonstrate either the "truth" of the knowledge that these sciences yield or the "universal validity" of the criteria used to legitimate their claims (Rorty 1985: 12). Other "coping mechanisms" are valid in other cultures with other needs (for instance, magic for the Zande). Thus Rorty claims that there is no way in which we are able to prove the superiority of our ways of knowledge; in fact, the search for the grounding of knowledge types is itself a product of our culture, and not something that, as such, is even attempted or considered important in other cultures.

6   For some of the insights that follow, I draw on the discussion of these matters by Warnke 1987: 139-66.

Rorty is justified in drawing on Gadamer in support of his claim that the natural sciences are not, in any ahistorical sense, valid.[7] But he is not justified in invoking Gadamer's authority for the claim that knowledge and truth, as aims/ends of intellectual inquiry, must simply be abandoned because of the fact that the natural and the human sciences are both historically localised. As Warnke (1987: 159-63) persuasively shows, the distinction between the natural and the human sciences remains valid and important for Gadamer exactly because he wishes to show that there are other forms of knowledge (and thus truth), and that it is not legitimate to force the kind of requirements appropriate for the natural sciences onto these other knowledge forms.

It is indeed the case that Gadamer, like Rorty, rejects the idea that philosophy is to be identified with epistemology; Gadamer also envisions a different role for philosophy. For Rorty, this different role is "edification" and "conversation": no longer the search for foundations, but at most an explication of "how things hang together" (Rorty 1982: xl). Sometimes, as shown by Warnke (1987: 162), Gadamer seems to be making the same point. However, his problem with modern philosophy's epistemological orientation is not the fact that philosophy attempts a justification of knowledge. The problem, rather, is the fact that, in modern philosophy, there is an unjustified tendency to elevate the scien-

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7   Gadamer illustrates this, among other things, by referring to tact, taste and judgment, *ie* forms of (practical) knowledge that cannot be methodically grounded, and that consequently do not belong to the sphere of modern science practice, but that nevertheless remain forms of knowledge on the basis of which it is possible to demonstrate our capacity to recognise truth. Differently put: they represent "coping mechanisms" (Rorty's term) that cannot be "epistemologically grounded" and that thus remain part of the plurality of alternative "coping mechanisms" of which *Bildung* as "edification" (also Rorty's term; cf his 1980: 357-89) makes us conscious. But it is exactly as alternative "coping mechanisms" that they, nevertheless, remain forms of knowledge, in the sense that they continue to presuppose our capacity to distinguish truth from falsity. For Gadamer, two aspects of tact, taste and judgment are important: all three presuppose our ability to discriminate, *ie* to place value, importance or relevance in some order of priority, and all three are not purely individual capacities, but must be accountable or justifiable, or must be able to attain legitimacy, within a community. Somebody has tact, taste or judgment, not because he or she thinks so, but because other people do (cf Gadamer 1975: 10-39, and Warnke 1987: 159-60).

tific justification of knowledge to the model or paradigm of all processes of justification and for all kinds of knowledge.

Gadamer contrasts this tendency in modern philosophy with the much older philosophical tradition of practical philosophy. In this tradition, the issue was not primarily the identification and legitimation of the conditions of knowledge, but to give an account of the way in which different forms of knowledge address different needs of people (cf Gadamer's (1975: 278) explication of *techne* and *phronesis*). In the latter, the issue is not the objectivity of facts, but the facilitation of social aims, *ie* the design of projects by means of which one can successfully orientate oneself in the world and thus come to a harmonious understanding and *modus vivendi* with one's fellow men and women (Warnke 1987: 162). For Gadamer, the problem with modernity is thus not science as such, but the absolutised faith in the possibilities of science (Warnke 1987: 163).[8]

The main problem that I have with Rorty's claim that all knowledge serves pragmatic, utilitarian purposes is that if this were the case, it would become a serious problem to devalue the knowledge status of statements such as "Jews are trash" or "Blacks are inferior", since they clearly serve pragmatic purposes for anti-Semites or apartheid racists. The irony about Rorty is, among other things, that he consistently pleads that epistemological discourse ought to be replaced by public recognition of its ethical underpinnings, and yet he does not seem to be sensitive to this kind of implication. He makes me nervous when he applauds Dewey's statement that "every evil is a rejected good" (Rorty 1996: 43), and continues:

> For if evil is merely a lesser good, if all moral choice is a compromise between conflicting goods, then [the critics] say there is no point in moral struggle […] But to us pragmatists moral struggle is continuous with the Darwinian struggle for existence, and no sharp break divides the unjust from the imprudent, the evil from the inexpedient (Rorty 1996: 44).

This is the necessary outcome of judging all knowledge claims by pragmatic criteria; the only question that then becomes important is: "useful for whom?". It reminds me of Rorty's earlier approving reference to Feyerabend's chilling claim:

8   For the discussion of the last few paragraphs on the relationship between Rorty and Gadamer, I draw an earlier article of mine. Cf Van Niekerk 2002.

> Objectively there is not much to choose between anti-semitism and humanitarianism. But racism will appear vicious to a humanitarian while humanitarianism will appear vapid to a racist. *Relativism* (in the old and simple sense of Protagoras) gives an adequate account of the situation which thus emerges (Feyerabend 1978: 9, his emphasis).

I have serious problems with any intellectual stance that flirts with the validity of such claims.

My final remark concerns Rorty's aversion to the idea that there is a universal community of human beings to which we might appeal for the redemption of knowledge claims: Habermas's idea of "an ever wider public of reasonable persons, or a public of people who are 'better versions of ourselves'". Habermas insists that the coherence of the language in which valid knowledge claims are made requires this idealisation. In that, I think he is correct. The presupposed idealisation does not in itself require that such a community ever be empirically established. But the point may be taken further. The universal community of human beings is, in addition, a necessary regulative idea for the establishment of an international moral order — the kind of moral order which must be accepted for the formulation and execution of international law — the kind of international law that, increasingly in the world, is making it more difficult for despots like Milosevich and Saddam Hussein to persist in their atrocities. It is this same moral order that enabled the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa to do its work and to accomplish, as was quite persuasively argued by Antjie Krog (2004) in a recent article, the moral progress that it contributes to the history of moral deliberation. Rorty's entire intellectual disposition problematises the possibility of the kind of international moral consensus presupposed by such acts and events. That, to me, shows both its intellectual and its moral poverty.

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