
CAN RICHARD RORTY'S CULTURAL POLITICS DEAL WITH EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE?

A Feminist Critique of Rorty and a Defence of Deleuzean Empiricism

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SEPTEMBER 20, 2019
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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Thomas Charles Waterton, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, it is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____

Date: 20 September 2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On the basis of which signs within sensibility, by which treasures of the memory, under torsions determined by the singularities of which Idea will thought be aroused? We never know in advance how someone will learn: by means of what loves someone becomes good at Latin, what encounters make them a philosopher, or in what dictionaries they learn to think.

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 214-215

This thesis would not have been possible without the dedication of my two supervisors, Henry Somers-Hall and Michael Bacon, who share a rare gift: the ability to guide me where I needed to go, even when my destination was different to theirs. Both Henry and Michael went out of their way to support me professionally, academically and personally, and their ability to balance support, criticism and understanding made the always-difficult experience of writing a PhD manageable, and even enjoyable. I have been deeply fortunate to work with them.

I could not have asked for a better group of friends and colleagues to accompany me through the past four years. The Assorted Cool Kids (Amber, Emily, David and Naomi) and the Solar Squad (Beth, Julia and Sophie) have been an invaluable source of friendship and advice, as have the other PhD researchers I have had the pleasure of knowing: Laura, Ed, Josie, Laurie, Ian and Issy, and so many others. I would also like to thank Gareth, James, Yini, Liyi, Maria, the Booooook Club and the A-Z Collective for helping me to explore my ideas, enjoy life, and stay human.

None of this would have been possible without the support of my family, who have helped me to follow my dreams through their advice, conversation and financial support. John, Ruth and Becky have always pushed me to be truer to myself and helped me to work out what that meant.

Finally, thank you to Amber, whose support, feedback and advice kept me going even when nothing else would. It has been an honour working alongside you.

I dedicate this thesis to the three teachers who inspired my love of philosophy: Mark Coffey, Dan Farr and Tim Secret.

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ABSTRACT

The view that philosophers should stop trying to analyse the nature of "experience" and focus instead on our linguistic and social practices is central to the philosophical project of neo-pragmatism. In this thesis I respond to arguments made to this effect by Richard Rorty, both in his 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' (1979) and in his later political writings. Rorty is unique among neo-pragmatists in his decision, in his later work, to present this argument as a political one. This move is exemplified by his combination of Wilfrid Sellars' critique of the "Myth of the Given" with a critique of metaphysical "authoritarianism." Rorty argues that abandoning philosophical questions about experience would support pluralist democratic politics by rejecting the idea that there are sources of epistemic authority that stand outside our relationships with other people.

This thesis contends that, while Rorty's concerns about metaphysical authoritarianism are justified, his rejection of philosophical experience talk in its entirety may harm marginalised groups. I draw on critiques of Rorty from feminist theorists such as Linda Alcoff and Sonia Kruks in order to argue that Rorty's linguistic turn undermines our ability to deal with situations of "maximal hermeneutical injustice," Miranda Fricker's term for situations in which a marginalised individual or group is harmed by the insufficiency of their linguistic resources for making sense of their experience.

I conclude by offering an alternative concept of experience taken from French poststructuralist Gilles Deleuze. This concept provides the resources needed for dealing with situations of maximal hermeneutical injustice without falling into the trap of empiricist givenism. Through his revision of Kantian faculty theory and his theory of "expressionism," Deleuze allows us to talk about the experiential causes of our beliefs, desires and actions without ever treating "experience" as something that justifies beliefs. This enables us to critically examine the relationship between our experiences and our language and to assess whether the latter is adequate, without assuming that experience has contents which are communicated to our linguistic faculties.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Outline of the Thesis

The goal of this thesis is to demonstrate that Richard Rorty was wrong to urge that philosophers stop trying to analyse the nature of experience. Its originality lies both in its method and in its sources. I have sought to adopt the approach that Rorty took in his own late philosophy—an approach that I introduce in the next section as “the principle of cultural politics.” This principle holds that we should choose sides in philosophical debates based on the positive effect that a view’s being accepted would have on culture or politics. In this vein, I argue that Rorty’s estimation of the relative benefit of abandoning philosophical analyses of experience is off the mark, because he fails to appreciate the need for experience as a *contrastive* concept to language when we are evaluating potential descriptions of our lives. Specifically, I argue that Rorty’s anti-empiricism makes his brand of pragmatism ill-equipped to deal with “hermeneutical injustice,” a concept I take from Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice* (2007). I conclude by defending a non-traditional empiricism that is well-suited for dealing with such situations, while also avoiding the flaws that made Rorty dubious about philosophical experience-talk (a term that I use as shorthand for “philosophical analysis of the nature of experience” [cf. §§4.1 and 5.1]) in the first place. This is the “transcendental empiricism” of Gilles Deleuze.

The thesis has five core chapters (numbered from 2 to 6). Chapters 2-4 argue for an interpretation of Rorty in which his engagements with analytic philosophers such as Sellars, Quine and Davidson on the one hand, and his political and cultural-critical writings on the other, form a single vision of philosophy as anti-authoritarianism. Rorty’s opposition to empiricism, on this account, is of a piece with his opposition to authoritarianism. Chapters 2 and 3 lay out the core of Rorty’s philosophy and metaphilosophy, and chapter 4 explains the manner in which Rorty applies this outlook to the case of experience. These chapters follow a rough chronological trajectory through Rorty’s career. Chapters 5 and 6 set out my arguments against Rorty’s exclusion of experience as a topic of philosophical analysis, with chapter 5 defending a cluster of feminist critiques of Rorty, of which I take Linda Alcoff’s to be exemplary, explicating their most salient features using terminology from Fricker. Then, chapter 6 defends an alternative understanding of experience, taken from Deleuze, on both pragmatist and feminist grounds.

Chapter 2 begins with an extended discussion of Wilfrid Sellars’ critique of the epistemological given in his *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (EPM). Sellars’ critique is noteworthy because it set the track for Rorty’s entire career, from his early work on eliminative materialism in the philosophy of mind to his late cultural-political writings. An understanding of its nuances will be essential in my defence of Deleuze’s empiricism at the end of chapter 6—in which I argue that Rorty misrepresents Sellars’ arguments in his later work. At the core of Sellars’ critique is a repudiation of the idea of *direct apprehension* of facts, concepts or meanings, which could be separated from and used to ground and give sense to inferential knowledge. Although Sellars applies his critique to epistemic and semantic foundationalism in general (§2.1.1-2), its most influential instance is his critique of the *empirical* given (§2.1.3)—the idea that immediate *experience* is directly known. Empiricist givenism arises from the confusion of classificatory

consciousness (that is, consciousness of likenesses, kinds and concepts) with sensory consciousness (the *feeling* of sensation). This is the cornerstone of classical empiricism, which traces ideas from sense-impressions; but it is also central to 20th century movements such as logical positivism, which attempted to rigorously separate facts about immediate experience and facts about linguistic meaning—a separation that leaves us with an image of experience as epistemically basic rather than complexly interconnected with other inferential associations. Because the first of Rorty’s three arguments against empiricism is taken directly from *EPM*, I devote most of chapter 2 to the exegesis of Sellars’ critique and Rorty’s radicalisation of it. I conclude by introducing Rorty’s “social practice” theory of language, a product of his fusion of Sellars with Quine’s critique of the concept of analytic truth in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (*PMN*).

Chapter 3 tracks the development of Rorty’s social practice approach to language and epistemology through to his political philosophy in the 1980’s and 90’s—most fundamentally, in the “ironism” of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (*CIS*). In the decades following *PMN*, Rorty began to present his critique of epistemology as a *cultural-political* project rather than a merely philosophical one. It was during this decade that Rorty began to cast givenism as a kind of “authoritarianism,” and pragmatism as “anti-authoritarianism” (§§3.3.3 and 3.4.2). “Authoritarianism,” to Rorty, is the view that there is something that dictates what we must believe and what our social and epistemic practices must be, regardless of what practices our epistemic community finds useful or edifying. The paradigm for such authorities is God, but much of Rorty’s work was spent looking for and unmasking ‘God-surrogates’ (Rorty 2006b, 374) such as Reality, Being, Truth, the logic of concepts, qualia, communicative rationality or the moral law. Such an approach, Carl Sachs has convincingly argued, was a product of Rorty’s enthusiastic reading of anti-representationalist continental philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Hegel and, most importantly for Sachs, Nietzsche. Rorty’s distinctive approach was the product of a synthesis of Sellars and these anti-representationalist continental figures—that is, of combining a critique of the given/postulated distinction with a Nietzschean unmasking of the pretensions of “ascetic priests.” ‘[I]t was Rorty’s achievement’, writes Sachs, ‘to recognise that both the Given and God are species of normative violence’ (2017, 279), that is, ‘the injury committed when someone attributes to him or herself the authority to speak on behalf of the normative as such’ (278).

Chapter 3 also defends Rorty against the critiques that some of his detractors (such as Fricker and Nancy Fraser) have levelled at him—primarily, that he is a relativist or a detached aesthete. Such a defence is necessary not only to make the case that Rorty’s philosophy is politically useful, but also to establish what Rortyan cultural politics looks like in practice. This will be important for my argument in chapter 5, which examines Rorty’s theory of linguistic innovation in its potential for dealing with hermeneutical injustice.

Chapter 4 synthesises material from these two chapters, presenting the three different core arguments that Rorty makes against philosophical experience-talk throughout his career. These are (1) that philosophical experience-talk is often givenist, and always encourages givenism; (2) that philosophical experience-talk is often authoritarian, and always encourages authoritarianism; and (3) that philosophical experience-talk could be replaced without significant loss, and with significant gains, by talk of language and shared social practices. The argument of this chapter is original—while there have been many analyses of Rorty’s arguments against qualia, against classical pragmatist discussions of experience or against authoritarianism, there have been no previous analyses which combine them into a single, integrated set of arguments.

Getting the issue into focus like this is important, because although several feminist philosophers have attempted to defend experience-talk against Rortyan critiques, none have explained how their idea of “experience” is not givenist.¹

Chapters 5 and 6 present my defence of some forms of philosophical experience-talk on cultural-political grounds. I target the third argument above, arguing that there are unforeseen risks associated with Rorty’s rejection of philosophical experience-talk. These risks have been most clearly formulated in Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), and I use Fricker’s concept of hermeneutical injustice to clarify and expand a critique of Rorty made by Linda Martín Alcoff in her paper ‘Rorty’s Antirepresentationalism in the Context of Sexual Violence’ (2010b). By abandoning the philosophical thematization of experience, I argue, Rorty renders his pragmatism unable either to identify situations of “maximal present hermeneutical injustice,” or to defend linguistic innovations that are intended to remedy them. Such situations fulfil four criteria: (a) an individual’s or a group’s vocabulary lacks an term for describing an important aspect of their experience; (b) they are harmed by this absence; (c) this absence is a product of prejudice (what Fricker calls “hermeneutical marginalisation”); and (d) they are occurring in the present (i.e., they are not historic examples). Much of the chapter is devoted to arguing that such a concept would make sense to Rorty and to exploring the avenues that a Rortyan might follow in attempting to deal with these situations. Ultimately, I find none of his responses satisfactory.

Chapter 6, finally, sets out my positive alternative to Rorty’s rejection of philosophical experience-talk from philosophy. This positive alternative has two components. The first is metaepistemological: drawing from Rorty’s late paper ‘Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God’ ([2002] 2007), I argue that we can develop practices for making and evaluating claims about the nature of experience within a social-practice framework. The case I set out in this chapter, in other words, is one for *a new, better social practice* rather than *a more accurate understanding of experience*. The practice I recommend is better because it allows us to better deal with hermeneutical injustice, and thus to reduce unnecessary suffering—one of Rorty’s defining political goals.

But the question remains: what positive account of experience should we endorse? This is the focus of chapter 6. It is clear that some would be more harmful than helpful—empiricist givenism, for example. I begin by looking to the one model of conscious experience that Rorty was sympathetic to: Daniel Dennett’s “heterophenomenology” (1982), which treats explicit linguistic utterances and behaviours as a “text” which can be interpreted as relating them to a mental “world.” Such an approach shows promise (it avoids the givenist idea that we have privileged access to our mental states, for example, and it treats our mental lives as real), but it risks perpetuating hermeneutical injustice by limiting our understanding of experience to what can be found by interpreting explicit verbal utterances and deliberate actions. I argue from this point that if Rorty can accept Dennett’s heterophenomenology, he should also be willing to accept Gilles Deleuze’s account of other people as “expressions of possible worlds.” Such an account has several advantages over Dennett’s, the most fundamental of which is that it vastly expands what we can meaningfully talk about in when it comes to the nature of our experiences without resorting either to direct access nor to the “appeal to the ineffable” which characterises

¹ Timothy Kaufman-Osborn comes close (1993, 127), but his talk of experience ‘always bear[ing] some measure of sense’ (131) would strike Rorty as unacceptably givenist without a head-on defence against Sellarsian critiques. Nevertheless, Kaufman-Osborn’s concept of experience is probably the closest to my own among Rorty’s feminist critics.

much of qualophilic philosophy of mind (Rorty 1998e, 281). Deleuze is able to do this by substituting a theory of representation or reporting with a theory of *expression*.

Deleuze's expressionist empiricism, I argue, allows him to endorse several useful views. Firstly, he can accept the reality of pre-linguistic experience while denying privileged access—two necessary components of a theory of experience that can deal with hermeneutical injustice. Secondly, he can treat pre-linguistic experience as something that evolves over time and is affected by our linguistic and cultural practices—a move which retains the benefits of Rorty's historicism. Thirdly, he can preserve the hermeneutic utility of Dennett's heterophenomenology by insisting that there is nothing in experience that is not expressed. But unlike Dennett, these expressions are *involuntary* for Deleuze—experiences are expressed in tics, stutterings, gestures, unexpected behaviours and linguistic constructions as well as through reports and deliberate actions. These involuntary expressions are *blockages* of conscious, voluntary expression. Deleuze treats philosophy as a *symptomatology*—an attempt to trace atypical expressions back to their causes and discover the structures that give rise to them. This symptomatology, I argue, can be used to trace hermeneutical lacunas.

I conclude chapter 6 by establishing why Deleuze is not a givenist. By adopting a Kantian faculty theory—according to which mental faculties (such as sensibility and understanding, among others) are different in *kind*—while rejecting Kant's principle of “common sense”—which holds that these faculties communicate harmoniously—Deleuze can investigate experience without confusing it with knowledge. He can, in other words, investigate sensory consciousness without assuming it is naturally structured according to the categories of classificatory consciousness. In my conclusion, I indicate how recent work on the Deleuzian “ethics of the event” or “ethics of encounters” might be used to deal with situations of hermeneutical injustice.

1.2 The Principle of Cultural Politics

Despite being critical of Rorty's exclusion of experience as a topic of philosophical analysis, this thesis operates against a general background of agreement with Rorty—in particular, with the anti-authoritarian metaphilosophy set out in chapter 3. But there are many different Rortys. There is the brilliant analytic philosopher of mind, the imprecise iconoclastic provocateur and the popular opinion columnist. There is the romantic political philosopher of *CIS* and the hard-nosed eliminativist of his 1960s papers. There are the Wittgensteinian therapist, the intellectual kibitzer and the postmodernist bourgeois liberal. When one sets out to write a “Rortyan” thesis, then, one must be precise: which Rorty should one follow, and how compatible are they with the other Rortys?

This thesis takes as its central figure the Rorty of *Philosophy as Cultural Politics (PCP)*, his final collection of articles and essays. The metaphilosophical orientation of this Rorty—which had been present since at least the 1970s, but which came more and more to the fore in the 1990s and 2000s—is summed up in the following quote, from the preface of *PCP*:

I urge that we look at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the light of our hopes for cultural change. Philosophers should choose sides in those debates with an eye to the possibility of changing the conversation. They should ask themselves whether taking one side rather than another will make any difference to social hopes, programs of

action, prophecies of a better future. If it will not, it may not be worth doing. If it will, they should spell out what that difference amounts to. (2007d, x)

This radical principle informed Rorty's entire mature philosophical outlook. It is the defining principle of his pragmatist politics, and understanding it is central to understanding many of his more surprising claims elsewhere. It is fundamentally tied with his understanding of pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism—that is, a repudiation of the idea that there is anything that transcends our culture and its epistemic practices that has the authority to override those practices. On an anti-authoritarian philosophical outlook, there are no rules of inquiry that are not the norms of our peers, and so philosophical discussions over what exists or how we should live should be understood as proposals for new social practices. There is no principled distinction between the questions “does x exist?” and “should we talk about x ?”, whether x is noble blood, God or the neutrino (Rorty [2002] 2007, 3-7). Attempting to name an authority that confirms that x exists, regardless of the value of talking about x , is either a covert shifting of the question to whether we should talk about that authority or, more often, an attempt to arbitrarily stop the conversation (cf. Rorty [1994] 1999d).

The principle of cultural politics, however, is impossible to defend in a non-circular manner. Rorty has two strategies for dealing with this. The first is to accept this, but to acknowledge that the same is true for his opponents' views. In a famous statement both of his principle and its circularity, Rorty asserts ‘that cultural politics should replace ontology, and also that whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics’ ([2002] 2007, 5). The implication here is that his opponents are committed to the view that “cultural politics should not replace ontology, and whether it should or not is itself a matter of ontology.” Because there is no argument from first principles that could decide the matter, then, Rorty happily turns to rhetoric: he describes in *CIS* and *Philosophy as Social Hope (PSH)* how the world would look if we dropped the need to ontologically underwrite our practices.²

Rorty's second strategy is to show how his opponents fall short of their own aspirations. It is this approach that animates much of his more conventional work in analytic philosophy. Such a strategy is most visible in *PMN*, in which he shows how Sellars and Quine undermined the concept/intuition and analytic/synthetic distinctions respectively, and argued that without either of these distinctions, analytic philosophy cannot fulfil the foundational role that it has apportioned itself (*PMN* 171-172). It is for this reason that Rorty continued to participate in technical debates within analytic philosophy up to his death: he saw something self-deceptive in the work of other analytic philosophers, which he thought would be a more effective launching-point for his cultural-political campaign than merely throwing rocks at the academy from outside.³

My critique of Rorty accepts the principle of cultural politics. My argument will be that the rejection of philosophical experience-talk has *harmful cultural-political consequences*, not that it gets experience wrong. Furthermore, the harms are ones that Rorty would take seriously, and I have turned to feminist philosophy to articulate them. Throughout his late career, Rorty repeatedly claimed that the feminist movement was the one area where philosophers were really improving the world beyond the academy (1992b; 1991g; 1993c, 97; 1987a, 577n16), and he consciously attempted to make his pragmatism useful to feminists, most notably in his paper ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ ([1990] 1998; cf. 1993c). This is the clearest example of an area in

² Cf. Rorty 1996b, 61-63.

³ Cf. Rorty 2010b.

which Rorty connected his linguistic historicist pragmatism to a real-world struggle, and the depth and variety of the responses make it a fruitful area in which to evaluate the potential cultural-political impact of Rorty's own philosophical outlook.

1.3 Rorty and Fricker

There have been few analyses of Rorty's relationship with either Fricker or Deleuze, and the relationships between them personally are minimal and hostile. The only sustained discussions of the Rorty-Fricker connection in the scholarly literature are by Susan Dieleman (2010, 2012, and 2017) and Federico Penelas (2019), which I analyse in §5.4.1. Dieleman's work, both on Rorty and in general, is concerned with the phenomenon of "epistemic exclusion": the exclusion of individuals and groups from epistemic communities and practices. Her writings on Rorty and Fricker are devoted to defending Rorty to feminists and critical social epistemologists like Fricker on the grounds of that his approach reveals the contingency of our epistemic practices and helps to open us to the hermeneutically marginalised. Penelas takes a similar approach, exploring and defending the ability of Rortyan linguistic pragmatism to expand the liberal *ethnos* and include the epistemically marginalised.

Neither of these thinkers, however, discuss in any detail the phenomenon that will be at the centre of my analysis: the phenomenon of "hermeneutical gaps," spaces in our shared vocabularies where better concepts could be, and whose continued existence harms the hermeneutically marginalised. Such a concept may sound distinctly un-Rortyan, but I will show in chapter 5 that it can be translated without significant loss into a Rortyan vocabulary.

Rorty never engaged with Fricker directly, and her *Epistemic Injustice* only appeared in 2007, the year of his death. Fricker, for her part, has one article on Rorty: 2000's 'Confidence and Irony,' a critique of Rorty's "ironism" as psychologically implausible. But this article is of little relevance to the subject of hermeneutical injustice, a subject that she only began to discuss in 2007.⁴ In her writings from the period that I will be discussing, Rorty's name only appears in brief, generalised dismissals of "postmodernism," which she sees as hopelessly relativistic (cf. 2007, 2 and 2017, 55-56).

My project is not to convince Fricker to endorse Rorty's linguistic historicist pragmatism (although there is much that I agree with in Dieleman's attempts to do so, and I am highly sympathetic to Shannon Sullivan's recommendation of Deweyan pragmatism to critical social epistemologists [Sullivan 2017]). Rather, it is to show that (a) the problem of hermeneutical injustice, including hermeneutical lacunas, would be *intelligible* to Rorty, and (b) that his philosophical approach would harm our ability to deal with them. Consequently, what matters is not whether Fricker would find my argument convincing, but whether Rorty would.

1.4 Rorty and Deleuze

Deleuze and Rorty said little about each other, and what they did say was largely negative. Despite his praise for the classical pragmatists, Deleuze is derisive about Rorty in his later writings, treating him as the proponent of a new school of "communication" that extracts philosophical concepts from discourse. "The idea of a Western democratic conversation between

⁴ "Epistemic injustice" makes its first appearance in Fricker 2003, but the subject of this article is testimonial rather than hermeneutical injustice.

friends', Deleuze and Guattari write in *WP*, 'has never produced a single concept' (6). This idea, they write later in the book, reduces philosophy to harmless dinner-table conversation 'at Mr. Rorty's' (144). However, it is unlikely that Deleuze ever read Rorty—the only other mention of Rorty in Deleuze's *corpus* comes in a 1991 interview, in which he writes that 'Neither "consensus" nor Rorty's "rules of democratic conversation" are enough to create a concept' ([1991] 2006, 378). To anyone who has ever read Rorty, the idea that democratic conversation has "rules" beyond the rough-and-ready practices that have developed historically is bizarre. It is likely that Deleuze simply takes Rorty to be another member of what he sees as Jürgen Habermas's "communicative" school.

As for Rorty, his engagement with Deleuze is a little deeper, but no less negative. Rorty's one sustained engagement with Deleuze is a 1983 review of *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. His verdict is that Deleuze has taken the bad side of Nietzsche—the 'metaphysical system-building side' (Rorty 1983, 619)—and reinterpreted it far enough to make it somewhat plausible, but not interesting or attractive. His verdict is that *Nietzsche and Philosophy* presents something 'very much like the "process philosophy" of Bergson and Whitehead', but a Whitehead 'whose favourite poet is Brecht (rather than as Whitehead's was, Wordsworth.)' (619-620). Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, he concludes, is but a further expression of this vision. He concludes that 'what is good in Deleuze is not particularly new, and what is new—the beginnings of the "philosophy of desire"—threatens an even more tedious "modern scholasticism" (Deleuze's own description of phenomenology) than the one it hopes to replace' (620).⁵

Although scholarly interest in the relationship between Deleuze and pragmatism is opening up (as attested to by the recent publication of an edited collection on the topic [Bignall et al 2015]), it has largely focused on Deleuze's relationship with the classical pragmatists Dewey, James and Peirce. There have been four significant articles on the connection between Deleuze and Rorty, three of which were published in *Deleuze and Pragmatism*. Of these, by far the most relevant to my project is Sean Bowden's 'Antirepresentationalism and Objectivity in Rorty, Brandom, and Deleuze' (Bowden 2015), which argues that Deleuze's philosophy of language is not givenist. Although Bowden's article was influential on this thesis, he approaches the question in a different manner from the one I have taken, for two reasons. Firstly, Bowden approaches the question of givenism as mediated by Rorty's and Brandom's neopragmatism, rather than—as I have—looking at Deleuze in connection to Sellars himself.⁶ This distinction is important, because I argue in chapter 6 that Rorty's account of Sellars is misleadingly extreme, and that turning to Sellars directly empowers us to avoid authoritarianism and givenism using much more moderate means. Secondly, Bowden derives his defence of Deleuze from his theory of linguistic sense in *The Logic of Sense*, whereas my analysis concerns the empiricism of *Difference and Repetition*.

The next two papers—Paul Patton's 'Redescriptive Philosophy' ([2010] 2015) and Barry Allen's 'The Rorty-Deleuze *Pas de Deux*' (2015)—present opposing pictures of the relationships between Deleuze's and Rorty's metaphilosophies. Patton's thesis is that 'of all the French "postmodernists," Deleuze is the one who comes closest to many of Rorty's views' ([2010] 2015, 146), whereas Allen's is that 'Rorty would find Deleuze's work repulsive, and not worth the

⁵ Interestingly, Rorty is slightly more optimistic about Deleuze's project in a brief aside in the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*—here he describes Deleuze and Foucault as walking along a path at whose end lie James and Dewey (1982b, xviii).

⁶ To my knowledge, only one other author has examined the Deleuze-Sellars connection directly: Matija Jelača in his article 'Sellars Contra Deleuze on Intuitive Knowledge' (2014), which I respond to in chapter 6. Jelača argues that Deleuze is guilty of givenism, but—as I argue in that chapter—his reading of Deleuze fails insofar as he treats Deleuze's use of the term "given" as a theory of "intuitive knowledge."

patience it would take to figure out why' (2015, 163). Furthermore, Allen does not trace this to personal preference, instead arguing that this incompatibility goes to the core of their self-conceptions as philosophers. While Deleuze praises the classical pragmatists (e.g. in [1989] 1991, 86ff. and *WP* 98ff. and Peirce throughout the *Cinema* books), he does so for exactly the reasons that Rorty objected to them: in particular, he praises James's "radical empiricism," Peirce's theory of signs and, more generally, all of the aspects in which they seem like 'process philosophers and friends of Becoming' (Allen 2015, 164). Furthermore, Deleuze emphatically rejects Wittgenstein's therapeutic orientation and the linguistic turn in philosophy—both key influences on Rorty.

Patton, on the other hand, reads Deleuze as an ironist whose constant experimentation with different vocabularies opposes him to the authoritarian search for a vocabulary in which everything can be said ([2010] 2015, 147). Although in *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari define philosophy as the creation of concepts (a term that Rorty rejects or deflates [*PMN* 155ff. and (1984) 1991b, 103]), he does not treat concepts as something that can be analysed into "meanings." Furthermore, Patton argues, both Deleuze and Rorty have a similar, pragmatic understanding of philosophy's relationship to politics ([2010] 2015, 158-159).

My thesis lies somewhere between the positions of Patton and Allen. I agree with Allen that there are important aspects of Deleuze's metaphilosophy that are irreconcilably un-Rortyan—primarily, his understanding of philosophy as the creation of problems and his metaphysical invocation of the "in-itself" (for example, difference in itself [*DR* Ch. 1] and the interiority of force [*NP* 46 {§2.6}]) (cf. Rorty 1982c and 1994c, 124-125). Furthermore, as Allen observes, he would likely respond to Deleuze's exhortation of the "objectivity of problems" (*DR* 213-214) in the same way that he responded to Stanley Cavell's psychological defence of sceptical problems in *The Claim of Reason*: he would think that Deleuze gave philosophy too much credit, and that he was trying to perpetuate a useless language-game (Rorty [1981] 1982a).

However, the core of my thesis is that there are *deep* differences between Deleuze and Rorty that are *not* irreconcilable. The view I will be defending is that Rorty's rejection of "experience" from philosophy—even in its non-authoritarian uses by the classical pragmatists—was both principled and wrong. I am not trying to argue for or against the view that Rorty was a Deleuzian, or that Deleuze was a Rortyan, or that some broad synthesis of their philosophies can be arrived at. Rather, my argument is that there is a problem that Rorty faces, which he could fix in a way consistent with his project by incorporating a Deleuzian theory of experience into his linguistic pragmatism.

The final paper is Tim Clark's 'Becoming Everyone' (2008), which argues that Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of minoritarian becomings and Deleuze's affect theory present a superior model of literary redescription than Rorty's own work does. While I find the argument persuasive, it is of little relevance to this thesis for two reasons: firstly, my interest in Deleuze is with his empiricism rather than the political works he co-authored with Guattari; and second, several of the flaws Clark identifies in Rorty's theory of description (for example, his failure to consider how solidarity with the oppressed requires that members of majority groups reconceive their own identities [Clark 2008, 39]) are overcome by Rorty in his later work (notably, 'Feminism and Pragmatism'). Since these later works are so central to my own argument, taking a further detour through Deleuze and Guattari would be unnecessary.

1.5 Why Fricker and Deleuze?

A reader of this thesis may wonder why I am basing my critique of Rorty around figures who engaged with him only superficially.⁷ Why not focus on classical pragmatist defenders of experience, such as James or Dewey, or its modern defenders such as Cheryl Misak or John McDowell?

The way I have decided to approach this thesis derives from my privileging of the principle of cultural politics in Rorty's thought. Because for him the ultimate test of a philosophical theory is its effect on practice and social change, I chose to examine the impact of Rorty's philosophy in an on-the-ground political movement that was close to his heart. As I described above (§1.3), the obvious candidate for such a movement was the feminist movement, because he specifically targeted it as a place where pragmatist philosophy could do some good. It would not be enough for me to argue, as McDowell does, for example, that philosophical experience-talk is necessary for "human answerability to the world"—I would have to show why it *matters* that we are answerable to the world. There was no such problem in looking to feminist philosophy directly, however, because it is riven through with a concern for material conditions and concrete political proposals. In looking to Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice, I have no extra problem of explaining its relevance to Rorty's core projects of increasing freedom and decreasing suffering, since the concept itself is one of a specific kind of ameliorable, harmful situation.

Why, however, have I turned to Deleuze for a useful concept of experience? In short, I have done so because he shares an insight with Fricker, and which makes him perfectly-equipped to discover hermeneutical gaps and absences in our everyday ways of describing our thoughts, experiences and lives. This is the view that it is 'philosophically fruitful to focus on dysfunction rather than [the] well-functioning' (Fricker 2017, 57). Because my analysis is about *locating sites for redescription*—in other words, locating those situations in which our language isn't serving us well and in which redescription is needed—I needed a theory that possessed the resources to make sense of situations where descriptions break down, where our linguistic and social practices aren't serving us, and where we need to break out of the expectations and inferential associations that we use in our daily lives. However, in contemporary analytic and neo-pragmatist philosophy, attention to such situations is sparse. Theorists such as McDowell and Brandom, for example, focus their attention on explaining the role of experience-reports *within* language-games or the functioning of perception in typical cases.

Deleuze, on the other hand, takes breakdown-cases as paradigmatic (*DR* 185). While his interest is not in modifying our language-games (unlike the other poststructuralists, he objects to the linguistic or discursive turn in philosophy), he provides a model of the ways experience is expressed that allows us to trace when its linguistic expression is being blocked. By prioritising the *involuntary* in thought (*PS* Ch. 8), Deleuze finds experience in what is *not* said, what is *not* reported, what *doesn't* have a place in our language-games. Furthermore, as I discuss in chapter 6 (§6.2.3.4), he presents an image—and a strategy—of philosophy as "symptomatology": a discipline that looks for these symptoms of unexpressed experiences and discovers their underlying structures. By providing a philosophy of experience in which experience's linguistic expression is *necessarily* incomplete and inadequate, Deleuze's approach is perfect for understanding linguistic and conceptual change, and for discovering where such changes are needed and necessary.

⁷ Fricker's article on irony notwithstanding

2. RORTY'S FUSION OF SELLARS AND QUINE

2.0 Introduction

The goal of this thesis is to provide a rebuttal to Rorty's critique of philosophical thematisation of experience. Before I can provide this rebuttal, however, we must understand Rorty's critique. In chapter 4, I will argue that Rorty has three separate, but intertwined, critiques of philosophical experience-talk. The first of these is what I will call "the anti-givenist argument"; the second is the "authoritarianism argument," and the third is the "replaceability argument." Laying the bedrock for these arguments is the goal of this chapter and the next, this chapter putting forward the critique of givenism and the next introducing his concept of philosophical authoritarianism. Rorty's critique of givenism is deeply indebted to the work of Wilfrid Sellars, and especially his long article *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind (EPM)*. The importance of Sellars to Rorty's philosophical development can hardly be overstated (Miller 2011, 94). In his 'Intellectual Autobiography'—one of the last things he wrote, published posthumously—Rorty writes that "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" set me on paths that I spent the following decades trying to broaden and extend. [...] Sellars became my new philosophical hero' (Rorty [2007] 2010, 8). In chapter 4, I will discuss Rorty's use of Sellars in his early work, and in particular his adaptation of Sellars' famous "Myth of Jones," in order to defend eliminative materialism in the philosophy of mind. In the present chapter, though, I will introduce Sellars's critique of the "Myth of the Given" (to which the Myth of Jones is a response), as well as Rorty's combination of this critique with the work of W.V.O. Quine in his groundbreaking *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (PMN)*. Not only is Sellars' argument vital for Rorty's own anti-empiricism, as we shall see in chapter 4, but his marriage of Sellars and Quine will also lead him to devise his social-practice approach to meaning and justification, as well as the concept of the "final vocabulary": an essential concept for his theory of cultural change. I will examine this theory in the next chapter, and suggest some important modifications to it in chapters 5 and 6. As I will argue in the next chapter, there is a clear trajectory from this work within analytic philosophy to his public-facing political writings that dominated the rest of his career. In chapter four, I will argue that, similarly, Rorty's Sellarsian critique of givenism⁸ and his broader, political critique of philosophical experience-talk in general are likewise intertwined. Consequently, even though Sellars is no longer in the foreground in Rorty's later philosophy, his influence can be seen throughout Rorty's career.

⁸ To my knowledge, neither Rorty nor Sellars use this term, although it is common among Rorty and Sellars scholars. I explain my understanding of givenism in the next section.

2.1 The Myth of the Given

2.1.1 What is Sellars' target in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*?

Sellars' *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (*EPM*) is by far the most famous of his texts and, consequently, of his critiques of the "Myth of the Given." However, the nature of this critique is contested in the scholarly literature. This controversy comes, in part, from the seeming mismatch between the explicit target Sellars sets for himself at the beginning *EPM* and the much narrower range of views that he critiques in the article.⁹ Sellars writes that *EPM* is 'a first step in a general critique of the entire framework of givenness' (*EPM* 14 [§1])—a framework that he claims can be found in rationalism, empiricism, Kant and even Hegel. But, on the other hand, *EPM* itself is limited to the critique of foundationalist empiricist epistemologies. Given that he does not provide a single, stipulative definition of the Myth of the Given in *EPM*, how can we sort the Myth in general from its empiricist-foundationalist variant?

In this and the next two sections I will discuss four variants of the Myth: the *semantic* Myth of the Given, the *endogenous* Myth, the *epistemic* Myth and the *empiricist* Myth. I get this classification from Sachs,¹⁰ who corrects a misunderstanding that has plagued Sellars scholarship: the reduction of the Myth to just its epistemic, or even its empiricist, versions.¹¹ Needless to say, if Sellars' critique was limited to a critique of empiricist foundationalism, it would be odd to claim that Hegel and Kant had fallen foul of the Myth. While I will focus on empiricist and epistemic givenism for most of this thesis because of their significance to Rorty, the force and originality of Sellars' critique is lost if one misses its semantic aspect which, while not explicitly distinguished by Rorty, informs his appreciation of Sellars. Treating his critique as purely epistemological gives the impression that Sellars is engaged in a fairly standard critique of epistemic foundationalism, whereas his significance lies in having seen just how far the "framework of givenness" extends throughout philosophy.

All four versions of the Myth of the Given bear a common structure: in all four views, there exists some mental content x , for which x is both cognitively efficacious and cognitively independent.¹² In the semantic Myth, x 's are meanings—on this view, our understanding of the meaning of the concepts that we employ in judgments is grounded in a pre-discursive acquaintance with meanings. Plato's theory of the forms would fall into this category, as would C. I. Lewis's view that qualia are the immediate objects of conceptual denotation (Sachs 2014, 29-30; Cf. Lewis 1929, 77). In the epistemic Myth, x 's are beliefs. This view is simply epistemological foundationalism, according to which there are foundational knowings which serve as grounds for inferences, but which are immune from revision in the light of the products of those (or other) inferences.¹³ The final two Myths (the endogenous and the empiricist) are subsets of the epistemic. In the endogenous Myth, x is knowledge of the mind's own structure: the Myth of the endogenous Given is the view that the mind's structure is "given" to itself in a way that is unrevisable in light of our mental contents or empirical discoveries.¹⁴ Finally, in the empiricist Myth, x 's are sense-data, which serve as the foundations for our empirical beliefs, but whose nature is independent of what we think about them. While the epistemic Myths concern

⁹ For surveys of the various examples of the Myth in *EPM*, cf. Robinson 1975, 83-85 and Bonevac 2002, 2-4.

¹⁰ I get the endogenous Myth from Sachs forthcoming, and the other three Myths from Sachs 2014.

¹¹ Such an approach can be found in Michael Williams (2009, 152).

¹² I take this formulation from Sachs 2014, cf. p. 22.

¹³ These foundational beliefs need not be *certain*, as the caricatured Cartesian picture of foundationalism sometimes assumes. Rather, what matters is that they are epistemically *privileged* in a way that is unaffected by what other beliefs one holds. Cf. Sosa 1997, 296.

¹⁴ Sachs argues that Kant fell victim to just such a Myth (Forthcoming, 669-670).

epistemology, the semantic Myth is a *metaepistemological* view, as it concerns not what justifies our claims, but rather what must be the case in order for an individual to understand what they are talking about at all (Sachs 2014, 11).

The given, in all of its forms, is an “unmoved mover” of cognition (*EPM* 77 [§38]) by virtue of being immune from challenge by other thinkers or beliefs. When it comes to the epistemic Myths, Sellars’ contention will be that direct, noninferential knowledge cannot be placed beyond the demand for justification or inferential articulation,¹⁵ because otherwise we would have no way to distinguish direct apprehension of the given from *apparent* direct apprehension.¹⁶ As for the semantic given, Sellars’ challenge will be that such a view is incompatible with any account of language-learning that is not radically innatist, because no convincing account can be given of how concepts could consistently denote entities such as qualia, unless these entities are already given to us *as* classified under the conceptual categories that we will associate with them. Consequently, he will argue that we should abandon the idea that nonmental things or nonverbal mental episodes justify or confer sense upon beliefs, and he will treat justification and sense-making as relationships solely between beliefs and other beliefs. In the next chapter, I will show that Rorty transforms Sellars’ critique of givenness into a radical critique of epistemology and metaphysics in general.

This chapter will focus on the epistemic and empiricist Myths, as they were most influential on Rorty. As we shall see, however, despite failing to distinguish between the epistemic and semantic Myths, Rorty endorses Sellars’s critique of the semantic Myth as well. All four will feature in my defence of non-traditional empiricism in chapter 6.

2.1.2 Sellars against epistemic givenism¹⁷

Although *EPM* is a critique of empiricist givenism, I will begin by discussing Sellars’ objections to *epistemic* givenism, of which it is a subspecies. By “epistemic givenism,” I mean the view that there is such a thing as direct, unmediated knowing—in other words, that there is a basic stratum of knowledge which involves the *direct* apprehension of facts, from which we can infer *indirect* knowledge of other facts. While Sellars’ critique of empiricist givenism will be of profound importance to Rorty, examining it alone would give us an incomplete picture of Sellars’ project and Rorty’s uptake of it. It is Sellars’ rejection of epistemic givenism *as such*, along with the semantic antigivenism that emerges from it, which gives rise to the inferentialist picture that will inform Rorty’s understanding of meaning and justification.¹⁸

Although Sellars’ arguments against epistemic givenism are apparent in his critique of empiricism in *EPM*, they are more explicitly formulated in later papers such as LA and SK. In his paper “The Lever of Archimedes” (LA), Sellars describes epistemic givenism as resulting from a sharp distinction between *direct apprehension* and *belief* (LA 27 [§125-126]). Direct apprehension is where we *confront* facts; beliefs are built upon such confrontations. There is, on this picture, a special class of beliefs which get their authority from direct apprehension: these are beliefs about

¹⁵ Cf. Brandom (1994) 1998, 89.

¹⁶ Although this case is made in *EPM*, it is articulated at greater length and in greater clarity in lecture three of SK.

¹⁷ This section is indebted to Williams, M., 2009.

¹⁸ The term “inferentialist,” in the sense in which I am using here, is not Sellars’s. Rather, it was coined by Robert Brandom to describe Sellars’ privileging of inferential relationships rather than representational content in his picture of justification and meaning (cf. Brandom 1988).

what Sellars calls ‘self-presenting states of affairs’ which, on the foundationalist picture, have the following structure:

A self-presenting state of affairs is a *fact* (an obtaining state of affairs) which (a) belongs to a certain category (usually the category of occurrent mental states), and (b) is, more specifically, to the effect that a certain person is in occurrent mental state φ , of which the following is true: that if the person were to query ‘Am I in state φ ?’ they would *directly apprehend* the fact that they were in state φ . Direct apprehension is a unique cognitive act which is more basic than any believing, no matter how warranted. Direct apprehension is the *fons et origo* of the epistemic authority of *beliefs*. (LA 28 [§133])

In other words, on this view is a basic class of beliefs that gain their epistemic authority not from inference, but from some kind of encounter with facts. Further beliefs are epistemically authoritative by virtue of their inferential connection to these base-level beliefs. Consequently, in foundationalist epistemologies, every justified belief is connected by chains of inference to a direct apprehension. These chains of inference “transmit reasonableness” from eminently reasonable basic beliefs (SK 335 [§3.10]). To return to Sachs’ characterisation of the structure of givenism, episodes of direct apprehension are epistemically *efficacious*—they transmit reasonableness to other beliefs—but they are epistemically *independent*—their reasonableness is not derived from their connections with other beliefs.

Although Sellars’ clearest diagnosis of epistemic foundationalism can be found in LA, his clearest rebuttal of it is in the third lecture of SK. In this lecture, he calls basic beliefs—those that get their authority from direct apprehension—“non-inferentially reasonable beliefs” (SK 337 [§3.15]). Their reasonableness, in other words, is self-evident and epistemically independent rather than inferred. Non-inferentially reasonable beliefs, depending on one’s favoured theory of knowledge, may be beliefs about sense data, innate ideas, logical principles or the moral law. What matters is not the foundation that one chooses, but simply the structure of epistemic foundationalism.

The foundationalist encounters a problem here, however. How do we decide which beliefs are non-inferentially reasonable? In other words, how do we work out which beliefs get their authority from direct apprehension? Here Sellars turns to a formula he takes from Roderick Chisholm:

What justifies me in claiming that my belief that a is F is reasonable is simply the fact that a is F .¹⁹

My belief that a is F gets its authority from the *direct apprehension* of a fact, rather than from any other belief. But, Sellars observes, this formula simply passes the buck. Despite not getting its authority (so the foundationalist claims) from another belief, “ a is F ” still gets its authority from *something* else. It is not self-justifying. In fact, in order to establish that it is truly, rather than apparently, non-inferentially reasonable, we must make the following inference:

It is a fact that a is F ;
So, it is reasonable to believe that a is F (SK 337 [§3.19])

¹⁹ SK 337 [§3.18]. This principle is adapted from the following principle from Chisholm’s *Theory of Knowledge*: ‘What justifies me in counting it as evident that a is F is simply the fact that a is F ’ (Chisholm 1966, 26).

This inference can only transmit reasonableness if the first premise is, indeed, reasonable (SK 338 [§3.20]). We must, then, have *genuinely* directly apprehended that *a* is *F* (SK 339 [§§3.23-25]). To unpack the inference further, we get:

It is reasonable to believe it to be a fact that *a* is *F*;
So, it is reasonable to believe that *a* is *F* (SK 338 [§3.20])

Sellars writes that this is ‘obviously unilluminating’ (Ibid.). In order to establish that a belief is non-inferentially reasonable, we must make inferences. We cannot appeal to “direct apprehension of facts” to establish the reasonableness of a belief, because we can only know that we have directly apprehended a fact (rather than apparently apprehended it) if we have justified our belief that it is, in fact, a fact. Otherwise, “direct apprehension of facts” is simply an ‘*ad hoc* regress-stopper’ (SK 339 [§3.25]).

Such is Sellars’s (fairly standard) critique of epistemic foundationalism as viciously regressive. However, it is important for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that Sellars’ critique of epistemic foundationalism can be extended beyond a critique of *empiricist* foundationalism. And secondly, understanding Sellars’ response to the failure of foundationalism is the gateway into his inferentialism.

The lesson that Sellars takes from the failure of foundationalism is not that all of our beliefs are products of inference. The foundationalist is correct that when I think “Lo! Here is a red apple” (Sellars’ example, from SK 342 [§3.33]), I am not inferring this from sense data, beliefs about the external world, or anything else—the belief is genuinely spontaneous. However, Sellars does not take this spontaneity as a sign that it is *justified*. Rather, he writes, spontaneous IPM [Introspection, Perception, and Memory] judgments are likely to be true, [...] Simply on the ground that unless they *are* likely to be true, the concept of effective agency has no application’ (MGEC 180 [§83]). In other words, unless our IPM judgments are generally reliable, we are not in the position of epistemic agents at all. If they *are* reliable, we can use them to learn about ourselves and the world so as to discover *why* they are reliable, and in which situations they aren’t.²⁰ To discover, for example, that things look different in different light conditions, or after one has eaten certain types of mushroom, one must play off some IPM beliefs against others. We can improve, modify, and reconstruct our epistemological framework, but we do not have the option of rejecting it wholesale. In order to be in the position to evaluate it, we must commit ourselves to it.²¹

Sellars is neither foundationalist nor wholly coherentist in his approach. He thinks that our knowledge really does rest on IPM reports, and that these reports really are spontaneous. However, while any given IPM judgement is not *produced* by inference, in order to count as a *belief* it must be taken up in inferential relationships with other beliefs. In other words, Brandom writes, one must ‘have practical mastery over the *inferences* it is involved in—to know, in the practical sense of being able to distinguish, what follows from the applicability of a concept, and what it follows from’ ([1994] 1998, 89). One’s ability to make reliable IPM judgments is inextricable from one’s status as an epistemic agent—that is, as a knower—and so such judgments can only be taken *as* reliable if one is able to articulate them within a web of belief (MGEC 179-180 [§§78-86]). Hence, Sellars rejects the core thesis of foundationalism: the view

²⁰ This is a core conclusion of Sellars’ insistence on the logical priority of *is*-talk over *seems*-talk—a central theme of his work: cf. EPM 32-53 [§§10-23] for its most famous articulation.

²¹ Cf. EPM 78-79 [§38], quoted at the end of both SK and MGEC.

that ‘certain *beliefs* can have an epistemic authority which is not a matter of their inferential relation to other *beliefs*’ (LA 27 [§126]). The authority of IPM beliefs *is* a matter of their inferential relations to other beliefs: not only because it takes inference to defend them from challenges, but also because *being a reliable reporter of introspection, perception and memory* and *being an epistemic agent* presuppose each other.

The mistake made by foundationalists such as Chisholm, Sellars concludes, was to confuse the lack of an *origin* of some beliefs in inference with a lack of requirement for inferential *articulation*. ‘It is,’ writes Sellars, ‘precisely this feature of the unique pattern of justification in question which, misinterpreted, leads Chisholm to formulate [...] his principle for the “directly evident”’ (SK 342 [§3.36]). For inferentialists such as Brandom, it is this subtle distinction between inferential origins and inferential articulation which makes Sellars so revolutionary: ‘one of the most important lessons we can learn from Sellars’s masterwork’, he writes, ‘is the inferentialist one that such noninferential reports must be inferentially articulated’ (Brandom 2000c, 47; cf. [1994] 1998, 219-220). As we shall see later in this chapter, Rorty will take Sellars’ inferentialism as a pragmatist doctrine, especially when fused with the Quinean critique of analytic truth.

2.1.3 Sellars against empiricist foundationalism

Sellars’ most sustained and influential attack on foundationalism and givenism takes *empiricist* epistemological foundationalism as its target. This kind of foundationalism takes *sense data* as its “givens” (that is, its objects of direct apprehension). The critique of empiricist givenism in particular will be of huge significance for Rorty, and it will motivate his most significant break with his philosophical hero John Dewey: the rejection of experience-talk from philosophy.

On the view which I am calling empiricist givenism, empirical knowledge is built on the direct apprehension of sense data. For example, if I look at a ripe tomato in standard conditions, I will directly apprehend (I will be *given*) sense data of redness and roundness; if I touch it, I will experience sense data of smoothness and solidity; if I dream about it, I will also be given such sense data. Whatever else the facts are, I know that I am having these experiences, and I know what kind of experiences they are—the moment I attend to them, I am instantly aware of the fact that they are of such-and-such a nature. The advantage of empiricist givenism to epistemology is that it gives us a reliable source of true beliefs,²² since on this view beliefs about sense data are self-authenticating. I may not know that there is a red tomato in front of me (I may be dreaming), but I *can* know that I am experiencing something much like what happens when I experience a tomato. Beliefs about sense data are, therefore, epistemically *independent* despite being epistemically *efficacious*.

Sellars’ critique of empiricist givenism specifically targets the link between sensing and knowing. The empiricist givenist’s key claim is that *by* sensing things, we non-inferentially acquire knowledge. This is not just a claim about the causes of beliefs (it is not givenist to say that having sensory episodes is a necessary condition of perceptual knowledge); it is a claim about what *justifies* those beliefs. To the givenist, our non-inferential knowledge of the nature of our sense contents is justified solely and irrefutably by those sense-contents themselves.

²² Empiricist givenism need not start from *certain* beliefs; all that is required is that they are epistemically independent. Cf. note 6 to this chapter.

There are two ways in which we might parse this (*EPM* 16 [§3]). Either sense data *constitute* knowledge (sensing is a kind of knowing) or they *entail* knowledge (you can't have sense data without also knowing their nature). Regarding the first option, the givenist faces a dilemma. Sense data are curious in that according to sense-datum theory they function both like facts and like particulars. '[A]ccording to sense-datum theorists, it is *particulars* that are sensed [...] [but] what is *known*, even in non-inferential knowledge, is *facts* rather than particulars' (*EPM* 15-16 [§3]). A particular may be red, but a fact cannot. So the only way for the first option to be preserved is to take the implausible step, either of radically revising our account of sensing by claiming that we *sense* facts, or by claiming that sensory knowledge is non-linguistic, non-conceptual and non-propositional. Neither of these are attractive: the first deprives sense-datum theory of its original appeal (since it purports to provide an account of knowledge that revolves around our encounters with *things*, not with abstractions like facts); the second deprives sensory knowledge of the very property that allowed it to be taken as foundational—its ability to justify propositional, conceptual claims.

Sellars devotes most of his energy to responding to the second option: the view that sensing *entails* knowing even if it doesn't *constitute* it. Such an approach faces its own difficulties. If sensing sense contents of a particular kind entails knowing their nature, then one could never experience sense data *without* knowing their nature. But typically, the ability to *have sensations* is taken to be unacquired, whereas the ability to categorise sense data (or anything else) into kinds is taken to be learned. If this is true, then sensing could not *imply* knowing, since some beings presumably experience sensations without knowing their nature. Babies, on the traditional view, can *sense* and *feel*, but they cannot assent to propositions of the form x is y (e.g. *this object is red*). The upshot of this, according to Sellars, is that sense-datum theorists find themselves committed to the following inconsistent triad of claims:

- A. X senses red sense content s entails x non-inferentially knows that s is red
- B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired [i.e., even babies can sense red sense contents]
- C. The ability to know facts of the form x is φ is acquired [i.e., babies cannot know facts of the form *this object is red* or *this sense content is red*]

A and B together entail not-C; B and C entail not-A; A and C entail not-B. (*EPM* 21 [§6])

Rejecting either B or C is unappealing to Sellars. Rejecting B is unappealingly extreme—the easiest way to do so would be to endorse eliminativism about sense contents, although one could reject B by arguing that the ability to *feel* (in a brute, non-epistemic sense) is acquired along with the acquisition of concepts. To reject C would not only contradict the nominalism of the empiricist tradition, but would, again, commit us to a view that is unappealingly extreme even for non-empiricists: a version of innatism in which a vast number of empirical concepts are inborn (for example, colour categories).²³ If one rejects C one is no longer an empiricist, since one's epistemology comes to rely heavily on inborn concepts or innate knowledge. The upshot of the trilemma, then, is that *empiricist givenism* is incoherent, since empiricism and givenism are mutually exclusive. One cannot treat sensation as logically implying propositional knowledge at the same time as endorsing nominalism.

²³ This view is yet further threatened by the variation of colour categories across languages, and the discovery that variations in colour categories come with corresponding differences by speakers of different languages in ease of discriminating between different colour stimuli (cf. Kay and Regier 2009, 439).

Sellars, for the rest of *EPM*, chooses to defend C and reject A—this allows him to avoid the extremes of both innatism about concepts and eliminativism about pre-linguistic sensations. On the other hand, I will argue that Rorty vacillates between rejecting A and rejecting both A and B.²⁴ To take Sellars’ approach (rejecting A) is to affirm that if we have non-inferential knowledge of the nature of our sense contents, it is not *simply* by virtue of us sensing them. On this view, ‘the sensing of sense contents becomes a noncognitive fact’ (*EPM* 21 [§6]). This event may be necessary for knowledge, but it cannot be sufficient for it, since knowledge also requires the *training* that enables us to classify our sense contents. I will begin by exploring the rejection of A further, before briefly explaining Sellars’ defence of C.²⁵

The mistake of the empiricists, which led them to endorse A, was to confuse two different kinds of consciousness. I will call these two kinds of consciousness sensory consciousness and classificatory consciousness, after Sellars (*EPM* 20 [§6]). The first of these is the kind of consciousness that we have simply by virtue of being awake.²⁶ Babies have sensory consciousness (claim B above), as (presumably) do many nonhuman animals. Unless we are behaviourists, functionalists or the like, sensory consciousness is a necessary condition of being in pain, seeing colours, and so on. Even though a baby does not *know* what pain is, we think that pain is unpleasant even for babies. *Classificatory* consciousness, on the other hand, is the consciousness of kinds and resemblances, as well as the abilities that presuppose these (such as abstract thought, logical inference and judgment). This is consciousness that one is seeing red, that one is in pain, or that an object has changed colour. Classificatory consciousness is a necessary condition of empirical knowledge—not just sensory consciousness, as the empiricist would have it (*Ibid.* §7). But if we reject A and affirm that *classificatory consciousness is acquired but sensory consciousness is not*, the latter cannot logically entail the former.

In LA, Sellars describes the basic givenist principle he wants to reject as the view that ‘If a person is aware of an item which has categorical status C, then the person is aware of it *as* having categorical status C’ (44). In other words, the epistemic givenist affirms (whether openly or tacitly) that if someone is aware, for instance, of a red thing or of red sense contents, they are aware *that* they are red. On such a view, the language-learning child may not know the *names* of these categorical statuses, but they nevertheless have a prelinguistic understanding of the appropriate categorical divisions.

This is the view that Sachs calls the Myth of the *semantic* Given: ‘the thesis that cognitive significance, objective purport, require something with a *semantic* status, or a kind of *meaning*, independent of and yet bearing upon the meaning of objectively valid judgements’ (2014, 29). In other words, this is the Myth that when we learn a language, we are learning the *names* for categories, similarities and relations that we had already grasped pre-linguistically. When we learn the term “red,” for instance, we understand its meaning when we learn to associate it with red sense-contents.

The semantic Given is semantically *independent*—it is both logically and developmentally prior to linguistic usage—and semantically *efficacious*—it confers meaning on the words we use.

²⁴ This is a controversial reading of Rorty, and I defend it in chapter four and section 6.1.2.

²⁵ Sellars spends little time defending B, although he clearly endorses it and believes that his rejection of A renders it unproblematic. It is also clear in the “Myth of Jones” section of *EPM*, which I discuss in chapter 4, that he believes rejecting B to be an extreme response to a problem that can be solved with more moderate resources.

²⁶ I will bracket positions that dispute the possibility that babies (or even other adults) may have such consciousness, such as HOT theory or scepticism about other minds, although I will examine Rorty’s apparent rejection of it in §§2.5, 6.1.2, and chapter 4.

Sellars' approach is an explicit repudiation of this "Augustinian" view of language-learning, according to which we are born with the ability to recognise colours, shapes, types of objects, feelings etc. and simply have to discover their names.²⁷ On the Augustinian—that is, the semantic givenist²⁸—view, we have something like classificatory consciousness from birth. Moreover, Sellars accuses many avowedly nominalist philosophers of having become accidental Augustinians by endorsing claim A. Such philosophers have assumed, like Augustine, that there is something *behind* the categories which we use to classify our sensations that mirrors their structure and gives sense to them—something primitive, private, and pre-linguistic, which can be appealed to in order to distinguish *understanding* a word from correctly *using* it.

In its most common form, the semantic givenist view is the view that even before we learn how to *recognise* the nature of our sense contents, we have a dim awareness that the difference between seeing and hearing which is more fundamental than that between seeing red and seeing blue; or that we are born able to recognise that crimson and scarlet are similar; or that we naturally oppose hot to cold. In our attempts to explain classificatory consciousness, we often smuggle a version of it into pre-linguistic consciousness, leading us to imagine that our empirical concepts and the relations between them exist independently of our languages. Semantic givenism depicts the pre-linguistic child occupying the 'structured logical space in which we are home' (*EPM* 65 [§30]); it assumes that 'the process of teaching a child to use a language is that of teaching it to discriminate elements within a logical space of particulars, universals, facts, etc., of which it is already indiscriminatingly aware' (*Ibid.*). The givenist can appeal to this logical space to explain (a) our own awareness of kinds and resemblances, and (b) (if we endorse claim A above) our *knowledge* of the nature of our sense contents.²⁹ Sellars does not explicitly *refute* this fill-in-the-boxes account of language learning, but he does reveal the sheer volume of presuppositions it involves and the corresponding poverty of its explanations. For the Augustinian view criticised here is a form of innatism, in which we are born already *knowing* (a) how to divide up the world (into objects, properties, resemblances, and so on), and (b) the nature of our sense contents at any given moment. Such a view is irrefutable, but undesirable—and if Sellars can show us a plausible account of the acquisition of classificatory consciousness that avoids this vast array of assumptions, it is likely a preferable one.

2.1.4 Sellars' alternative to empiricist givenism

Sellars' alternative to the empiricist-givenist picture—the rejection of claim A—is twofold. Firstly, as we have seen, he distinguishes sensory from classificatory consciousness and connects the acquisition of the latter with the acquisition of a language. Secondly, he associates knowledge and other epistemological concepts with the latter rather than the former, making perceptual knowledge dependent on language-learning. His reasoning for this is that if we are to avoid innatism then acquaintance with a particular sense content cannot logically imply having knowledge of its nature (or even knowledge of its distinctness from or resemblance to other sense contents). Such knowledge can only appear when we enter into a community of language-users and begin to make, defend and challenge claims. '[T]he primary connotation of "psychological nominalism" [Sellars' position] is the denial that there is any awareness of logical

²⁷ Cf. Augustine (397) 1998, 10-11 (§viii), which is famously quoted and ridiculed at the beginning of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

²⁸ The Augustinian picture is not the only form of semantic givenism, but it is a particularly exemplary and insidious one (Sachs 2014, 35).

²⁹ These moves commit one to semantic and empiricist givenism respectively.

space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of a language' (*EPM* 66 [§31]). This priority of language-acquisition is both logical and temporal. Consequently, we must produce an account of knowledge that has a different source from knowledge by acquaintance, as well as an account of perception that avoids the Augustinian picture of 'meaning by acquaintance' (Sachs 2014, 59; cf. *EPM* 18 [§4]).

Sellars' response treats knowledge normatively and intersubjectively. Rather than treating knowledge and understanding as particular relations of epistemic subjects to particular objects (e.g. to sense data, qualia, or propositions), Sellars treats them as successful linguistic behaviour, as judged by one's peers. One's peers may decide that one has knowledge *by virtue* of judging that one stands in the appropriate relationship to the appropriate object, but this relationship would not be sufficient to make one a knower without their judgment. This is not to say that one only has knowledge if one's peers have made a positive judgment about one's claims, but it is to say that they must have identified one as the *type of person* who could know and understand—in other words, who could defend his or her claims and application of terms when challenged.³⁰ One must be recognised as having *epistemic agency*—as being someone who is capable of taking responsibility for their beliefs, of following the relevant epistemic norms, and of correcting one's epistemic behaviour when one gets things wrong. It is this social character of knowing, and of reason-giving, that distinguishes knowers from the other kinds of things that can respond reliably to particular kinds of stimuli (such as thermostats).³¹ One does not know by acquaintance but by performance; knowledge on this account is not a natural kind but a social status:

in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. (*EPM* 76 [§36])

To treat a claim as knowledge, then, is to treat the claimant as capable of providing (good) reasons when asked to defend their claim, whether that claim is "I can see something red right now" or "there is life on Mars." This is more than simply being able to discriminate between stimuli (which a baby or a thermostat can do)—it is essentially intersubjective, and requires not only that the claimant is able to communicate with us, but also that we are able to communicate with them. We may, of course, interrogate our *own* knowledge-claims, but unlike on givenist or pre-Wittgensteinian accounts, this is a second-order affair: first we learn how to justify our claims to other people, and only then can we apply the same procedure to ourselves by, for example, evaluating how reliable our judgments about the objects of our sensations have been in the past (cf. Parsell 2011, 273). It is this intersubjective-first account of knowledge and justification that leads Rorty to take from Sellars 'the thesis that justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice' (*PMN* 170).

Sellars puts forward his own account of sensory knowledge, which avoids both Augustinianism and eliminativism. While the Augustinian empiricist claims that we have immediate, certain knowledge of the nature of our sense contents because their presence *entails* such knowledge, and the eliminativist denies that we have sense contents altogether, Sellars argues that in order for them to be knowable, they must articulated in linguistic categories that we have learned. '[A]ll awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair' (*EPM* 63 [§29]). Since

³⁰ This approach is what Brandom has called the "default and challenge" model of justification, which he takes as central to Sellars' inferentialism (Brandom [1994] 1998, 117; cf. Williams, M. 2009, 177).

³¹ Cf. Brandom (1994) 1998, 89 and 214.

the category of “red” becomes meaningful only *after* we have acquired a language, we cannot treat it as picking out a class of sensations that we were able to recognise pre-linguistically. Perceiving something to be red involves us acquiring the ability to *identify* it as red, to treat it as the kind of thing which provokes us to make reports of redness, and this can only be learned through making defensible claims to other language-users. Hence, the red things must be public. This is not to deny that we have sense-contents,

For one can certainly admit that the tie between “red” and red physical objects—which tie makes it possible for “red” to mean the quality red—is *causally* mediated by sensations of red without being committed to the mistaken idea that it is “really” sensations of red, rather than red physical objects, which are the primary denotation of the word “red.” (EPM 64 [§29])

What Sellars’ view *does* deny is that sensations of red are *themselves* red. This would be a category mistake akin to claiming that the adrenaline that causes us to feel anxious is itself anxious. In essence, this is the mistake of treating sensation as a proto-language, rather than as a causal precursor to linguistic utterances—a mistake that Rorty warns against in particular in his reading of Sellars (cf. Rorty [1970] 2014b, 204). For Sellars, sensations of red are merely *sensations*. Our sensations cause us to make claims (or acquire dispositions to make such claims), but this should not be confused with justifying or conferring sense upon those claims. To treat such a relationship as one of justification or sense-making is either to become an innatist, for whom the referent of “red” is an immediately-known and language-independent red sense datum, or to confuse causes with reasons.

We may, of course, use our own linguistic categories in interpreting the behaviour of pre-linguistic infants or animals. We may legitimately say that an infant is in pain, for example, so long as we don’t imply that they know they are in pain. In his later work, Sellars attempts to thread this needle by adopting an adverbialist position: one which replaces talk of “sensations of X” with talk of “sensing X-ly.” This makes it easier to separate out the idea that *babies have sensations of different kinds* from the idea that *babies are aware of the differences between their sensations*. ‘[T]o sense blue-ly’, Sellars writes, ‘is no more to be aware of something *as* blue (roughly, that something is blue) than to breathe sneeze-ily is to be aware of something *as* a sneeze’ (LA 31-32 [§152]).

When it comes to *knowing* our sensations, for Sellars what is public—for example, physical objects—is logically prior to what is private (for example, sense-impressions). The categories of classificatory consciousness are created through the necessarily public processes of teaching and linguistic evolution. Consequently, the basic units of sensation-talk are not indubitable claims about sense-impressions, but fallible claims about physical objects. This is not to deny the existence of sense-impressions (or “*sensa*,” as Sellars calls them in his later work [cf. SSIS and ICP]), but to treat them as theoretical posits which are necessary to explain observable behaviour (like the force of gravitation, repressed memories, or subatomic particles). I will discuss this point in greater length in chapter 4.

For Sellars, our ability to introspect our sensations is parasitic on our beliefs about the world—we learn to apply colour terms to the world before we learn to recognise *ourselves* as having episodes of a particular type. The problem that the concept of “sense-impressions” addresses, however, is a real one—it concerns the question “what is the common descriptive

content between S seeing that x is red, x looking red to S , and x merely looking red to S ?³² This is different from the common *propositional* content of these cases (which is simply the introduction of the claim *x is red*, which is endorsed in the first case and rejected in the third). A sense-impression of redness can reasonably be introduced to explain this common descriptive content. One only falls into givenism if one neglects to add that the ability to have sense-impressions of redness—that is, the ability to group sensations into colour-categories—is a product rather than a precursor to language-learning, and that sense-impressions are not intermediate entities between us and the world but rather states that we enter into which dispose us to produce reports about the world.

In *EPM*, Sellars systematically undermines the attempt to formulate a quasi-mechanical, causal explanation of the genesis of knowledge. He treats knowledge not as a natural but as a social kind—as inhabiting the “space of reasons” rather than the “space of causes.” To treat someone as *knowing* something is not first and foremost to place them in a certain relationship to the world or to themselves, but to treat them as capable of engaging in a certain social practice. This is the practice of providing public reasons for one’s claims.

2.2 Rorty’s fusion of Sellars and Quine

2.2.1 Sellars’ Kantianism and Scientific Realism

Rorty’s reading of Sellars was central for his development of the most enduring positive contribution of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: the theory of epistemological behaviourism. Sellars’ critique of givenism—especially empiricist givenism—was deeply important to Rorty. However, in his mature work Rorty accuses Sellars of not going far enough in his critique. He complains of Sellars’ ‘unfortunate slide back into representationalism’ ([1988] 1991b, 152), Rorty’s name for the idea that truth is a relationship of isomorphism or agreement between beliefs and non-linguistic things.³³ This is because Sellars attempts to develop new tools to answer the questions that givenists had attempted to answer—questions such as “do visible physical objects really exist, or only their microstructural components?” and “does my language fit the structure of the world?” Sellars attempted to answer these questions by isolating the ways in which speech and thought are isomorphic to states of affairs in the world, a decades-long project of delimiting the appropriate way to reduce the “manifest image of man” to the “scientific image,” and a theory of truth as “semantic assertibility.”³⁴ It will be Rorty’s contention that the questions these tools were manufactured to answer rely on assumptions that, if one follows the critique of givenism to its logical conclusions, are untenable.

In order to explain why Rorty took this stance, I will briefly outline the “Kantian” side of Sellars that Rorty found objectionable. Sellars, Rorty writes, described his project ‘as an attempt to usher analytic philosophy out of its Humean and into its Kantian stage’ (1997a, 3). Such a characterisation, whether or not Sellars actually made it, is enlightening for a number of

³² Cf. *EPM* 51 (§22).

³³ Cf. §3.3.1. Rorty’s use of the term “representationalism” is different from Sellars’s, which I will discuss later in this section.

³⁴ ‘[F]or a proposition to be true is for it to be assertible; not capable of being asserted (which it must be to be a proposition at all) but *correctly* assertible; assertible, that is, in accordance with the relevant semantical rules’ (*SM* 101 [§IV.26]). This approach is different to the theory of truth as *warranted* assertibility, which dispenses with any notion of correctness that transcends the judgments of the relevant speech community.

reasons.³⁵ Firstly, Sellars understands the rejection of empiricist givenism as a Kantian move. In his paper ‘More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence’ (MGEC) Sellars observes that none of the great pre-Kantian epistemologists were fully consistent in their “representationalism” (a term that Sellars uses differently to Rorty, to refer to the view that our knowledge of the world is mediated by cognitive [*re*-presentational] acts [MGEC 169 (§3-6)]). The pre-Kantian epistemologists (such as Descartes and Locke) invariably introduced some form of “direct apprehension” into their theories of knowledge. Kant, on the other hand, ‘might well have been the first thorough going [sic] representationalist’,³⁶ because of his unwavering avoidance of this move. The argument of *EPM* may productively be described—as, for example, by Delaney (1977, 4) and Rorty (1997a, 3)—as the application of Kant’s insight that ‘intuitions without concepts are blind’ (Kant [1781/1787] 1998, A51/B75). Without some conceptual framework, we would have no way of getting *knowledge* from our sensations. There would only be brute causal pressure.

There is also a second respect in which Sellars is a Kantian, which—although visible in *EPM*—is far more prominent in his later work: what Rorty calls his ‘insistence upon the transcendental ideality of the perceptible world’ (1970, 66). This view holds *simultaneously* that (1) there is truth and falsity with regard to our everyday way of describing things, and (2) the things and properties that we talk about are not real. It is the product of two Sellarsian commitments: “extreme scientific realism” and the doctrine of “picturing.”

Extreme scientific realism. Extreme scientific realism is the view that ‘all physical objects and all persons have as constituents and properties only the objects and properties referred to by certain of the pure theoretical scientific terms that are required for the best scientific explanation of the observable behavior of the objects and persons’ (Cornman 1970, 419, quoted and endorsed in SSIS 396ff.). To put this more succinctly, Sellars’ ontology takes as genuinely *real* only those entities, processes and properties that will be postulated by completed physical science. (*Truth* and *falsity* are, by contrast, relative to conceptual schemes.) This scientific realism, writes Rorty, ‘is basic to Sellars’ position, and is itself unargued for’ (1970, 66). I will discuss Rorty’s objections to it in the next section and the next chapter.

Picturing. Sellars’ doctrine of picturing is the upshot of his attempt to combine his extreme scientific realism with his Wittgensteinian view of linguistic meaning as assertibility according to the rules of a particular language-game (SRLG; *SM* 101 [§IV.26] and 140-141 [§V.71]). If truth is language-game specific, then how could objects referred to in the language games we play be unreal? Sellars deals with this problem by distinguishing between *referring* and *picturing* (*SM* ix).

‘Truth,’ Sellars writes, ‘is not a relation. Picturing, on the other hand, is a relation, indeed, a relation between two relational structures’ (*SM* 135 [§V.56]). Whether or not a claim is true is dictated by the semantic rules of the relevant language game—it is a phenomenon of the space of reasons. However, language can *also*, Sellars claims, be examined *causally* by treating it in terms of its structure rather than the meanings of its

³⁵ Although in this section I will describe Sellars’s resonances with Kant, it should be borne in mind that Sellars believed that his critique of the Myth of the Given was applicable to Kant (*EPM* 14 [§1]; cf. Sachs Forthcoming, 669).

³⁶ MGEC 170 (§8). Because of the different meaning that he gives to the word, Sellars’ understanding of the relationship between “representationalism” and givenism is the opposite of Rorty’s. For Sellars, thoroughgoing representationalism is an *anti*-givenist view, whereas for Rorty givenism is inherently representationalist.

concepts. The relation that the structure of a language has to the structure of the world is what Sellars calls “picturing.” But ‘pictures, like maps, can be more or less adequate’ (*SM* 135 [§V.56]). Sellars takes the language of finished science as an *ideally* adequate picture, and argues that we can treat such a language (which he calls ‘Conceptual scheme Peirceish’ or ‘CSP’ [*SM* 140-142 {§§V.69-75}]) as one whose relational structure is *isomorphic* to the structure of the world. Combining both his account of picturing and his extreme scientific realism, then, Sellars is able to endorse the claim “‘there is a brown table in front of me’ is true” while also endorsing “there are no such things as brown tables.”

Describing his position, Sellars writes that ‘I agreed with Kant that the world of common sense is a “phenomenal” world, but suggested that it is “scientific objects”, rather than metaphysical unknowables, which are true things-in-themselves’ (*SM* 143 [§V.79]). This radical revision of Kant converts the thing-in-itself from *intrinsically* unknowable to *not-yet* known, while also—Sellars hopes, and Rorty will question—avoiding the semantically givenist idea that we directly apprehend the meanings of the words we use or the concepts we employ.

2.2.2 Rorty’s Quinean Critique of Sellars

Rorty’s main reason for distancing himself from this Sellarsian project is his appreciation of the significance of the work of W.V.O. Quine. Quine is so central to his reading of Sellars that for much of *PMN* the two are hyphenated as “Sellars-Quine” or “Quine-Sellars.” This is because Rorty sees each as having overcome an untenable empiricist distinction while being beholden to the one overcome by the other thinker: whereas Sellars escapes the given-postulated dualism, he remains wedded to the distinction between *analytic and synthetic truth*, which was overcome by Quine (*PMN* 171). Thus, in order to discuss Rorty’s appropriation of Sellars I must take a brief digression through Quine.

Quine’s ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism,’ writes Rorty, ‘opened a door that led into a larger intellectual world’ (2001c). It did this by undermining the concept of “analytic truth” that was central to the original self-conception of analytic philosophy. The “two dogmas” critiqued by Quine are, firstly, the view that we can sharply distinguish analytic from synthetic statements, and, second, the reductionist view that ‘each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience’ (Quine [1951] 1980, 20 [§0]). In brief, Quine’s argument goes as follows. Traditionally, “analytic” statements were held to be verifiable or falsifiable purely by investigating the meaning of the terms used; a paradigm example of an analytically true statement would be “No bachelor is married.”³⁷ The truth or falsity of *synthetic* statements, on the other hand, can only be established by examining something else in addition to the meaning of the relevant terms; an example of such a statement would be

³⁷ Strictly speaking, this is what Quine calls a “synonymously true” or “second order” analytic statement. Quine also briefly speaks of “logically true” first order statements such as “No unmarried man is married” (1951) 1980, 22-23 [§3]). This distinction is important because proponents of analyticity may argue that the truth of synonymously true analytic statements is parasitic on the truth of logically true ones (e.g., “No bachelor is married” is analytically true because “no unmarried man is married” and “‘Bachelor’ means ‘unmarried man’” are analytically true). “No unmarried man is married” will remain true, the proponent of analyticity will claim, even if the meaning of the word “married” changes, whereas “No bachelor is married” may not. The argumentative thrust of Quine’s paper is aimed at the analyticity of synonymously-true statements and their connection to logically true ones, rather than the truth of logically true ones themselves; but he hints that his conclusions may be extended even to the first order (cf. *Ibid.* 43, 45 [§6]).

“John is a bachelor.” Common candidates for this “something else” required to verify or falsify a statement are “experience,” “the facts of the matter,” “the way things really are” (even “the naturally given”), and so on.

While Sellars attacked our understanding of the experiential component of *synthetic* judgments, Quine begins ‘Two Dogmas’ by questioning the coherence of the idea of *analyticity*. He finds that defences of this concept invariably employ the notion of *synonymy*, or sameness of meaning. “No bachelor is married,” for example, is taken to be analytically true because of the supposed synonymy between “bachelor” and “unmarried man.” However, Quine argues, upon closer inspection one finds that synonymy (and substitute notions to it, such as “sameness of definition” or “common paraphrasability in an artificial language”) cannot be given sense unless we beg the question and assume that there are such things as analytically true statements. The analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine argues, relies on the ungroundable assumption that ‘in general [...] the truth of a statement is somehow analysable into a linguistic component and a factual component’ (Ibid. 36 [§4])—analyticity being defined as a property of those statements which are evaluable entirely on their basis of their linguistic component. However, ‘for all its a priori reasonableness,’ Quine writes, ‘a boundary between analytic and synthetic statements has simply not been drawn. That there is such a distinction to be drawn at all is an unempirical dogma of empiricism, a metaphysical article of faith’ (Ibid. 37 [§4]). Without drawing this distinction, Quine concludes, the second dogma of empiricism—the dogma that we may reduce meaningful statements to logical constructs upon terms which refer to experience—collapses as well. For this dogma similarly rests on the idea that a statement may be analysed into a linguistic component which deals with meanings, and a factual component which deals with referential content. ‘The two dogmas are,’ Quine writes, ‘at root identical’ (Ibid. 41 [§5]).

If we find Quine’s case convincing, then we will find Sellars’ mature project of analysing the relational structures of linguistic meanings misguided, and his attempt to discover an isomorphism between thoughts and states of affairs a non-starter. This is because the picturing relation that supposedly holds between linguistic structures and the structure of the world (or the structure of CSP) can only be analysed if one can separate it from the *referential* relation that holds between descriptions and states of affairs. Let’s take the example of “there is a brown desk in front of me.” Sellars thinks that this sentence (i) is true, and (ii) refers to unreal things (colours and desks). The *truth* of this sentence is a matter of its reference according to the rules of semantic assertibility of our own conceptual scheme. In other words, it is synthetic: it is a judgment about a state of affairs. But the *reality* of the components of the conceptual scheme it employs, while not an analytic matter in its own right (one has to make scientific observations to discover what CSP will look like, for example), requires taking the *sentence* analytically. First, one must convert the sentence into a linguistic *kind* (in Sellarsian notation, one should treat it as a sentence of the “‘there is a brown desk in front of me’-kind”), which includes all synonymous sentences (which have the same rules of semantic assertibility), such as “in front of the author of this sentence, there is a brown desk” and “*il y a un bureau marron devant moi.*” This involves taking the sentence away from its use in a language game and to its place in the relational structure of a language as a whole. Then, one must ask whether there are true propositions of the same kind, or of the same “propositional family,”³⁸ in CSP. If there are true propositions of the same kind in CSP, the proposition in our own language is “ideally true” (it is both true and refers to real objects). If there are true propositions of the same family CSP, the proposition is true and refers

³⁸ *SM* 141 (§V.73). Families of propositions ‘are the counterparts of each other at different stages in the development’ of a scientific theory (*SM* 133 [§V.52]).

to real objects, although we are not conceiving of them correctly. If there are neither true propositions of the same kind or of the same propositional family in CSP (as is the case with the sentence “there is a brown desk in front of me”), the proposition is true for us, but it does not refer to real objects at all (*SM* 149 [§V.98-99]).

It should be clear by this point that the concept of picturing, and in particular the ability to evaluate the adequacy of picturing, relies fundamentally on the analytic-synthetic distinction and the ability to identify two sentences in different conceptual schemes as synonymous. In fact, in Rorty’s review of *Science and Metaphysics*, he critiques exactly this aspect of the book, complaining that Sellars provides no answer to the question of how to employ the notions of linguistic kinds and propositional families consistently between different conceptual schemes (1970, 68-69).

This repudiation of Sellars’ doctrine of picturing is at the core of his Quineanisation of Sellars. In a discussion of Quine’s significance for Rorty, Brandom writes that ‘[i]f Quine is right, then we should not commit ourselves to a way of talking about our linguistic practices that distinguishes between languages, as structures of meanings, and theories, as structures of beliefs’ (Brandom 2000b, 157 [§1]). We cannot, in other words, apply the analytic/synthetic distinction to structures any more than we can apply it to statements. We should not separate the synthetic component of the sentence “there is a brown table in front of me” from the analytic component (which can be analysed as a kind and compared to similar propositions in other conceptual structures). Combining the insights of Sellars with those of Quine, Rorty repudiates the Kantian distinction between ‘two sorts of representations—intuitions “given” to one faculty, and concepts (or meanings) “given” to the other’.³⁹

On the pre-Quinean picture, changes in our beliefs are distinguishable from changes in the meanings of the words we use. An example of a change in belief would be ceasing to endorse the statement “John is a bachelor” when one finds out John has a wife; an example of a change in meaning would be ceasing to hold it to be true because one no longer accepts that “bachelor” is synonymous with “unmarried man.”⁴⁰ However, once one abandons the analytic/synthetic distinction, one can no longer treat changes in meaning and changes in belief as different in kind. ‘[I]t becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements [which concern belief], which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements [which concern meaning], which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make dramatic enough changes elsewhere in the system’ (Quine [1951] 1980, 43 [§6]). The difference between changes in meaning and changes in belief, then, is a difference in *degree*—in the degree of the size of adjustments required elsewhere in our ways of speaking if we are to re-evaluate a particular statement, and in degree of our willingness to make such adjustments. ‘The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs,’ writes Quine, ‘[...] is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience’ (Ibid. 42 [§6]).

Sellars’ Kantianism and extreme scientific realism are only possible because he retains the pre-Quinean distinction between empirical statements and their place within a structure of

³⁹ *PMN* 180. Sellars, however, reads Kant differently on this point, arguing in chapter 1 of *SM* that intuitions have their own conceptual content for Kant.

⁴⁰ During his 2013 lectures on Quine at the University of Essex, Wayne Martin provided just such an example. At the time, same-sex marriage was not yet legal in the United Kingdom, although civil partnerships had been introduced in 2005. If, in 2013, John had been a man in civil partnership with another man, one might have been willing to endorse the claim that “John is an unmarried man” but not the claim that “John is a bachelor,” thus rejecting the truth of the supposedly analytically true claim “all and only bachelors are unmarried men.”

meanings. It is only in virtue of this distinction that one can evaluate a conceptual scheme's translatability into CSP, and consequently it is only in virtue of it that one can separate the truth of a statement and the reality of the things it purports to talk about. To update Sellars into Sellars-Quine, then, we must first recognise the analytic/synthetic distinction as one of degree rather than one of kind. Following Quine, we will treat beliefs holistically, adjusting and being adjusted by transformations elsewhere in the web of belief. This web is constantly being adjusted at the edges by the flux of experience, but—following Sellars—we should not treat this adjustment as a case of experience giving us new, directly apprehended beliefs from which to build inwards.⁴¹ Rather, experience is something that provokes reactions in us, which have repercussions throughout the web.

Rorty's radicalization of Sellars through the synthesis with Quine takes the form of total embrace of holism, rather than the partial embraces he sees in each thinker individually. Holism, in this context, is the view that meaning and semantic rules are not atomistic (for example, they are not a property of individual words or concepts) but rather that they operate at the level of a whole language and its context of use.⁴² Sellars makes this move by rejecting the view that there are individual private entities that bear meanings (for example, sense data)—one does not know meanings in *any* sense before one can justify one's claims to others, which in turn requires that one knows a relatively complete language. As Rorty puts it with characteristic provocativeness, on a holist analysis 'knowledge, awareness, concepts, language, inference, justification, and the logical space of reasons all descend on the bright child somewhere around the age at four, without having existed in even the most primitive form hitherto' (*PMN* 187)—because it is at around this age that children first become able to provide *reasons* for the claims that they make. Rorty expands on this holism by combining it with Quine's approach, a holism that rejects the view that the meanings of words can be distinguished from the synthetic content of the claims that they are employed in. On such a view, there is no such thing as a claim that is intrinsically justified by virtue of the meanings of the words it employs. Rather, every claim is justified by something beyond itself.

Rorty sees the joint rejection of the given/postulated and the analytic/synthetic distinctions as undermining any justification for scientific realism. This is because, for Sellars, scientific realism was articulated in terms of the translatability between a given conceptual scheme and CSP—a project that required distinguishing the conceptual scheme from one's particular beliefs about empirical objects. Quine's scientific realism, by contrast, relied on building a web of belief that was adequate to the evidence provided to us by sensory stimuli—a view that became untenable following Sellars' observation that even the non-inferentially reported must be inferentially articulated. The only motivation for scientific realism post-Sellars and Quine, Rorty will later write, is the view that he derisively calls "scientism," which I will discuss in the next chapter.⁴³ We will see that Rorty treats such a view not only as unnecessary, but as "authoritarian."

To Rorty, in a post-Quinean, post-Sellarsian world, the need for an *ur*-discourse is unnecessary. The ability to distinguish accurate from inaccurate representations of the world came from two impulses, he argues, one of which is untenable after Sellars and the other after Quine. The first of these is to look at the *causes* of our beliefs in order to determine if they were

⁴¹ This is the complaint Rorty makes about Quine's approach, and in particular his attempt to naturalise epistemology by seeing brute sensory stimuli as a source of *information* or *evidence* (Quine 1969c).

⁴² On givenism as atomism, cf. Rorty (1963) 2014, 102-103.

⁴³ Cf. Rorty (1988) 1991b, 226 and Rorty 1986, 752.

accurate representations of the world—this was found to be a mistake in Sellars’ critique of givenism, which took the articulation of beliefs to be key, rather than their origin. The other was to delimit the architecture of meanings and conceptual relations, a project undermined by Quine in his blurring of meaning and belief. If these impulses are shown to be unfruitful, we are condemned either to radical scepticism—since we have no way to gauge the accuracy of our linguistic representations of reality—or to turn to other theories of truth and meaning. Where Rorty continues, but Quine and Sellars do not, is to argue that if there are neither analytically true sentences nor foundational self-authenticating episodes on which to base empirical knowledge—if, that is, we are confined to a holistic, social practise account of language and meaning—then there is no need to select an area of culture that does a better job of describing the nature of the world than all the others.

It is by appealing to Quine that Rorty does away with the Sellarsian notion of truth as semantic assertibility, understood as *correctly* following the rules of a language. This is not, however, to say that “anything goes” for Rorty.⁴⁴ Rather, it is to say that the rules of reasoning that we follow are not derived from intrinsic conceptual meanings or direct apprehension, but rather from the social practices that we have built up historically and culturally—as I shall explain in the next chapter. Such a view is what Rorty calls “epistemological behaviourism” (*PMN*, Ch. 4). Epistemological behaviourism is to meanings as Rylean behaviourism was to consciousness: it is the view that once we have explained everything about how a word or concept is used in a particular social practice, we do not need to posit ghostly entities like “meanings” or “sensory givens” to explain how such uses are justified. They are justified if we can provide good reasons for why we used them as we did to other practitioners.

In the next chapter, I will explain in detail how Rorty takes the approach of epistemological behaviourism and applies it to questions of politics, morality and the conflicts between different cultures or social practices. He will repudiate any attempt to justify one vocabulary against another by appealing to (supposedly) neutral criteria, or to specify an *ur*-vocabulary which has more claim to truth than other vocabularies, as “authoritarian.” Then, in chapter four, I will explain how Rorty takes up the critiques of givenism and of authoritarianism in his arguments to the effect that philosophers should abandon “experience-talk” altogether.

⁴⁴ In a now-infamous formulation, in *PMN* Rorty defines truth as ‘what Dewey called “warranted assertability”: [...] what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying’ (*PMN* 176). He later described this sentence, however, as ‘incautious and misleading hyperbole’ (2010c, 45). I expect that the sentiment that Rorty was trying to communicate in *PMN* was one along the lines of the one with which he opened *ORT*: ‘I read Dewey as saying that it suits [...] society to have no views about truth save that it is more likely to be obtained in Milton’s “free and open encounter” of opinions than in any other way’ (1991a, 1).

3. RORTY'S CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS IN *CONTINGENCY, IRONY, AND SOLIDARITY*

3.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we saw how, in *PMN*, Rorty fused the Sellarsian critique of givenism—the idea that we directly apprehend facts and meanings—with the Quinean critique of the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths, to develop a radical critique of epistemology in general. If there are no ‘self-authenticating nonverbal episodes’ (*EPM* 77 [§38]) to which we can appeal for justification, then epistemology must turn to the study of *language*. But if there is no such thing as *intrinsic* linguistic meaning then the study of language must also be the study of the web of practices and projects in which language is used. We are left with Rorty’s position of “epistemological behaviourism,” according to which once we have done the descriptive work of describing a community’s epistemic practices, there is nothing else for epistemology to do (except, perhaps, to imagine alternative possible practices). ‘Epistemological behaviorism,’ in short, ‘is the claim that philosophy will have no more to offer than common sense (supplemented by biology, history, etc.) about knowledge and truth’ (*PMN* 176).

The trajectory of Rorty’s career following *PMN* was to expand this critique into a reevaluation of philosophy in general. Although this critique had been present in the final part of *PMN* and several papers from the same period,⁴⁵ it is vastly expanded in his second monograph, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (*CIS*).⁴⁶ The project of *CIS* is to create a philosophy that will serve democracy—one which seeks neither to be the arbiter of truth and knowledge, nor to provide the “ground” for liberal democratic values. This chapter shall focus on Rorty’s vision of pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism, as exemplified in *CIS*. This concept of philosophical “authoritarianism” will be central to the argument of chapter 4, in which we examine Rorty’s claim that empiricism is authoritarian.

One distinctive feature of Rorty’s metaphilosophy in *CIS* is his decision to foreground the motivations of different kinds of philosopher, rather than just the arguments supporting their theories. This approach is borne of a fundamentally pragmatist and Nietzschean approach to philosophy, in which we drop the idea that philosophy names an unchanging essence (*CIS* 83), acknowledge that it is created and practiced by different people at different times, in different ways and for different reasons, and accept that no one can ever fully escape their era. This is the Nietzschean view of philosophy as ‘a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir’ (Nietzsche [1886] 2002, §6). Some of the metaphilosophical characters Rorty discusses are

⁴⁵ For example, Rorty (1978) 1982 and Rorty (1981) 1982c.

⁴⁶ Rorty himself repudiated the metaphilosophical speculations of the final part of *PMN* as ‘a false start’ ([2007] 2010, 13).

heroes, some are villains, some are tragic victims of particular obsessions—but all represent for Rorty a particular type of philosophical thought.

The core two figures of *CIS* are the *metaphysician* and the *ironist*. Both of these philosophical types are defined by their relationship to the “authoritarian” impulse to find some extra-human authority that entitles them to override democratic consensus: metaphysicians embody it, and ironists resist and undermine it. Because of his focus on character, I will divide my discussions of the metaphysician and the ironist into two halves: one which examines their philosophical views, and one which examines their attitude or aspirations.

First, though, it is important to get to grips with a prior concept, which Rorty calls the “final vocabulary.” This concept is essential for understanding the aspirations of the metaphysician and the ironist, and it will be vital for the arguments of chapters 5 and 6, in which I discuss and evaluate Rorty’s vision of cultural change and moral progress.

3.1 The Final Vocabulary

The characters of Rorty’s *CIS* are all, ultimately, definable in terms of their attitude to a single Rortyan concept: the *final vocabulary*. Their relationship to this can be used to explain whether Rorty sees them as authoritarians or anti-authoritarians.

In a brief explanation of his concept of the final vocabulary at the beginning of the fourth chapter of *CIS*, Rorty defines it as the ‘set of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives’ (73). Although final vocabularies vary from person to person, the overlap between the final vocabulary of an individual and that of their neighbour will be very large—if things were otherwise, we would simply be unable to communicate. This is especially true regarding what Rorty calls the “thin” words in our final vocabularies, such as “true,” “good,” and “useful.” Whether we agree or disagree about what truth or goodness is and how to achieve it, justifications such as “I told you that because I thought it was true,” or “I did that because I thought it was the good thing to do” are near-universally intelligible—even if we do not agree about *what* is true or good, almost everyone will appeal to “thin” values like truth and goodness in their everyday lives.

There are also, no less importantly, “thick,” local terms in our final vocabularies such as “Christ,” “the revolution” and “professional standards.” While these lack the ubiquity (in 21st century Britain) that “true” and “good” did, they operate in a similar way when we justify our actions to ourselves or our peers in a specific social sphere. In a revolutionary cell, “I did it to serve the revolution” is a *terminus* of justification. The only intra-cell critical response to such a justification would be along the lines of “but that won’t support the revolution.” To question whether we *should* serve the revolution is to distance oneself from that community and its final vocabulary.

A final vocabulary is *final* in the sense that one cannot justify its contents except by appealing to other words within it: ‘beyond them there is only helpless passivity or the resort to force.’⁴⁷ If someone questions why we should value truth, either we can appeal to another word in our final vocabulary (“because it’s good to value truth”; “because it is pleasing to God”) or

⁴⁷ *CIS* 73. Bacon emphasises that the final vocabulary is final in a justificatory sense, not in a historical one: ‘finality indicates that we have gone as far as we can go with language *for now*, not that we will be unable to go further at some point in the future’ (Bacon 2017, 960).

something extra-discursive (“because if you don’t I’ll fire you”; “well, if you think like that I don’t see the point in continuing this conversation”). This is what separates the words in our final vocabularies from our smaller, situationally specific vocabularies: if someone throws doubt upon things we say using these vocabularies, we can justify them by switching to another vocabulary. For example, in writing a research funding application, I might defend my use of a specialist technical vocabulary by switching to a more general academic vocabulary (“we repeated the study for ourselves to mitigate the effects of publication bias”), which I can then justify by switching to a shared final vocabulary (“eliminating publication bias helps us to make sure we are genuinely discovering the truth”).

Although Rorty’s definition of the final vocabulary only occupies two paragraphs on page 73 of *CIS*, our understanding of a concept this important should look beyond it to its context in Rorty’s work as a whole. In particular, one must resist the temptation to read into this section of *CIS* an overly formal “theory of linguistic meaning.” When read alongside *PMN* and Part 1 of *CIS*, it is clear that Rorty’s choice to describe vocabularies as sets of *words* is something of a red herring—he is not suggesting, for example, that meaning resides in words rather than sentences and propositions (in fact, given the holism we examined in the previous chapter, his view is quite the opposite). The best way to flesh out Rorty’s final vocabulary concept is to look at what he is opposing: (1) the view that words have meanings that can be analysed independently from the particular situations in which they are used, and (2) the view that our thoughts and statements are constrained by particular “conceptual schemes.”

The first of these views is the one that we examined in the previous chapter (§2.4). It is the first of Quine’s two dogmas: that we can distinguish the analytic component of a statement, which operates entirely at the level of linguistic meaning, from its synthetic component, which cannot be evaluated without empirical observation of the world. In *CIS* Rorty takes Quine’s critique further by incorporating Donald Davidson’s work on the philosophy of language. Of particular relevance to us here is Davidson’s ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ which, although it is not cited in *CIS*, was frequently praised by Rorty from as early as 1973.⁴⁸ In this paper, Davidson claims to identify a ‘third dogma’ of empiricism unacknowledged by Quine: the ‘dualism of scheme and content’ (Davidson 1973, 11). This paper is likely what Rorty is talking about when he describes Davidson as ‘cultivat[ing] [Quine’s] central insight by stripping it of accidental accretions’ (1997a, 8n10). In his paper, Davidson warns that Quine’s invocation of “experience” at the end of ‘Two Dogmas’—as in his claim that “The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs [...] is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience” (Quine [1951] 1980, 43 [§3])—falls into a trap which is both problematically Kantian and problematically relativist. By specifying *experience* as an ultimate object of beliefs, and treating the continuum between changes in meaning and changes in belief as a matter of greater or lesser proximity to the experiential boundary of a web of belief, Quine assumes that there is a common type of *content* spoken about by all of our languages.⁴⁹ This assumption is Kantian insofar as it assumes that language and beliefs organise something that we encounter pre-linguistically and pre-conceptually, and it is relativist insofar as it treats truth as relative to the way in which a

⁴⁸ For Rorty’s praise of this paper, cf. Rorty 1989b, 335-336; (1973) 1982, 17n4; *PMN* 259n3, 302n35; and (1995) 1998b, 331.

⁴⁹ In Quine’s defence, Davidson does not explicitly accuse Quine of making this mistake—rather, Davidson treats ‘Two Dogmas’ as inviting it through its unfortunate choice of language. However, he is less forgiving of Quine’s later papers, such as Quine (1957) 1969. Cf. Davidson 1973, 9 and 13.

conceptual or linguistic scheme organises its stimulus rather than the nature of the stimulus before organisation.⁵⁰

In his paper, Davidson emphatically rejects the dualism he attributes to Quine, which he calls the ‘dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized’ (Davidson 1973, 11). Using a strategy similar to the one that we saw at work in Quine in the last chapter, Davidson argues that the notion of a “conceptual scheme” is unintelligible without the supporting notion of “untranslatability” between schemes. The notion of a conceptual scheme performs an explanatory function only if there are *rival* schemes. However, if we treat these schemes as entirely intertranslatable, there does not seem to be any significant difference between a “scheme” and a “language,” or even a “technical vocabulary.” So, if it is meaningful to talk about conceptual schemes at all, we must accept that they are not translatable without remainder into each other’s terms.

Davidson ultimately finds that “untranslatability,” much like “synonymy” in Quine’s paper, can itself only be understood if we assume the conceptual scheme hypothesis. We would have no way of knowing, Davidson argues, that a truly “untranslatable” language was a language at all, because the way we work out that something is a language is by working out *what is being said*. And without the idea of an *untranslatable language*, we cannot get a grip on the notion of a conceptual scheme.

Furthermore, in the case of *partially* untranslatable conceptual schemes, we would be unable to describe what was being left unintelligible by our translations unless this missing content were, by some method, no matter how circuitous, translatable. There is a performative contradiction in many discussions of untranslatability—for example, when Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, “be calibrated,” uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences.⁵¹ Ultimately it often becomes apparent that what the conceptual scheme theorist meant by “untranslatable” was “really hard to translate.”

If we combine Quine’s argument with Davidson’s, we find two ungrounded dualisms in the philosophy of language. The first, dismantled by Quine, is the dualism between analytic and synthetic propositions—between propositions whose truth-value can be ascertained by simple analysis of meanings and those whose truth-values depend upon a combination of such meanings and empirical facts. More succinctly, one may call this the dualism of meanings and beliefs. The second dualism, attacked by Davidson, is that between scheme and content—between, on the one hand, the framework through which we interpret the world and, on the other hand, what is given by the world prior to our interpretations of it. This “given” is typically called “experience.” In other words, Davidson argues that the scheme-content dualism commits us to givenism.⁵²

Robert Brandom defines a dualism as ‘A distinction [...] [whose] components are distinguished in terms that makes [sic] their characteristic relations to one another ultimately unintelligible’ ([1994] 1998, 615). The scheme/content, given/postulated and analytic/synthetic dualisms all fit this definition. The problem is not that philosophers *distinguish* meanings from beliefs, for example. Rather, it is that they distinguish them in such a radical way that it becomes

⁵⁰ This latter proposition is explicitly endorsed by Quine in his ‘Ontological Relativity’ (1969b).

⁵¹ Davidson 1973, 6; cf. Whorf (1936) 1956, 58; and (1940) 1956, 214-215.

⁵² McDowell even claims that “dualism of scheme and Given” would be a clearer term than Davidson’s “dualism of scheme and content” (1994, 4).

impossible to describe how changes in meaning might influence our beliefs, or how changes in our beliefs might influence the meanings of words. Rorty's response to all three dualisms is to treat them as poles on a continuum—we cannot always distinguish meanings from beliefs in a principled way, but we can usually work out which end of the continuum we are dealing with.

Rorty requires a new way of talking about language in order to overcome this dualistic approach, and he finds it in his concept of “final vocabulary.” Brandom writes that, for Rorty, the final vocabulary is a “successor concept,” which builds upon Quine's web metaphor to treat meanings, beliefs, noninferential experience-reports, inferences, theories and languages as part of a single holistic picture. For example, ‘where before taking Quine's point on board we would have had to distinguish change of language or meaning from change of theory or belief, in Rorty's recommended idiom we can just talk about change of vocabulary (Brandom 2000b, 15 [§1]). We can save the terms in the above dualisms for application only in the cases in which they would be useful to talk about. As Brandom notes, this is ultimately part of an anti-foundationalist strategy on Rorty's part—an attempt to do away with the philosophical search for transcendent, stable grounds for our beliefs (a search which, we will see, he calls “metaphysical”). By following Quine and Davidson, Rorty undermines the positivist idea of “truth by definition.” By following Sellars, he undermines the empiricist idea of indubitable first-person knowledge. In all of these moves, Rorty sees himself as ‘breaking with the traditional Cartesian subject-object model of knowing [...] on which one entity reproduces within itself the essence, or the structure, or some intrinsic characteristics, of another entity by the help of, or despite the interference of, a medium or scheme’ (1986, 750), and substituting a holistic “vocabulary” or “epistemological behaviourist” model in its place.

Building on Quine's metaphor of language as a ‘field of force’ (Quine [1951] 1980, 42 [§6]), in *CIS* Rorty treats language and linguistic meaning as something constantly readjusted and being readjusted by linguistic innovation, changes in our social practices, conventionalization and empirical discoveries. On Rorty's Wittgensteinian picture (*CIS* 21), culture and language—or, to put it another way, the things that we do and believe and the words with which we talk about these practices and beliefs—become impossible to separate.

Rorty was, then, imprecise in his definition of a final vocabulary as a “collection of words,” since the words in an individual's final vocabulary cannot be separated from their web of beliefs, habits, desires, unconscious associations, and so on. It is a collection of words only in the sense that a society is a “collection of people.” A “word” for Rorty can only be understood by looking at the different ways it is used by and with members of a linguistic community, as well as its relation to the evolving set of other words used by that community. In short, language is ‘a variety of human behavior’.⁵³ A final vocabulary is not a *medium* through which beliefs and desires are expressed, but a rich cultural product woven through with ‘the sorts of beliefs and desires [which are] typical of its users’ (*CIS* 79).

Understanding a final vocabulary also means understanding the beliefs and desires which are *atypical* of its users and would be met with derision, revulsion, confusion or scepticism (for example, “aeroplanes don't exist” or “torture is always morally good”)—there is *more* to understanding a final vocabulary than there is to understanding a language. When someone makes one of these claims, a Rortyan would be unable to say definitively whether the person

⁵³ Rorty 1986, 750. Cf. *CIS* 11ff. and Rorty (1994) 1999b.

saying them truly believed these things or whether they misunderstood the meanings of the words they were uttering.⁵⁴

In saying that one has no way of defending the words in one's final vocabulary if doubt is thrown upon them, except for by appealing to other words within one's final vocabulary or resorting to force, Rorty is claiming that we have no non-circular way of justifying the *set* of beliefs and desires we hold, seen holistically. For example, Rorty acknowledges that he has no way of defending his own fundamental conviction that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do'⁵⁵ in terms that his detractors would be rationally required to accept. Brandom sums up Rorty's view as the view that 'Normative relations are exclusively intravocabulary. Extravocabulary relations are exclusively causal.'⁵⁶ Justification is the normative relation *par excellence* here—what Rorty is arguing is that we cannot *justify* the decision to use one vocabulary rather than another, or to switch to another vocabulary, in terms which are neutral between the two vocabularies. All justification, for Rorty, is "ethnocentric"—it privileges the standards of our own vocabulary over those of other vocabularies—for reasons which I will go into in section 3.4 (especially 3.4.3). Rorty rejects the idea that there is something beyond our vocabularies that can *legitimately* (rather than just causally) limit the scope of vocabulary-change. This is why final vocabularies are final: they are the point beyond which justification goes no further. 'The finality of Rorty's final vocabularies,' writes Bjørn Ramberg, 'is *not* the finality of a set of premises, a framework, or a set of concepts. It mirrors the experience of the concrete individual of her finitude—her insufficiency and her limited powers' (Ramberg 2014, 159).

The key characters of *CIS*—who Rorty calls the "metaphysician" and the "ironist"—will be defined by their differing orientations towards their final vocabularies. For the remainder of this chapter, I will analyse and defend Rorty's conception of these two figures and their associated kinds of philosophy. Doing so is essential for understanding his critique of "authoritarianism," a key challenge for my own argument in chapters 5 and 6.

3.2 *CIS* as Narrative

In *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, David Hall writes that *CIS*, unlike—or at least, more strongly than—Rorty's earlier works such as *PMN*, Rorty is 'explicitly narrativist. He argues now by telling a story, replete with "good guys" and "bad guys"' (1994, 9). This is in keeping with the conceptual landscape of *CIS*, since Rorty often emphasises that narrative is one of the most effective tools for causing people to change their vocabulary.⁵⁷ While Hall's description may have slightly overstated his point (there are still some conventional premise-conclusion arguments in *CIS*, e.g. on p. 21), it is a useful heuristic tool. In *CIS*, as well as later works that I will examine in the next couple of chapters, Rorty is involved in a battle on two fronts. These are what I will call the "philosophical" front and the "political" front. Politically, Rorty stands with "liberal" good guys against non-liberal bad guys of every stripe (reformist

⁵⁴ Cf. Rorty (1990) 1998, 203. This idea has roots even in Rorty's earliest writings, for example in Rorty (1965) 2014, 44.

⁵⁵ *CIS* xv and 146. Cf. *CIS* 91. Rorty takes this minimalist liberal maxim from Judith Shklar (1984, 44).

⁵⁶ Brandom 2000b, 160 (§4), cf. Ramberg 2001, 28-31. This is one of the key conclusions of *PMN*, especially chapter 4 ('Privileged Representations'), and it is one which is resisted by Brandom through the bulk of his paper. On this topic, however, I am in agreement with Rorty, and I will defend it throughout this chapter and in chapter 6. Cf. also Rorty 2001b, 257.

⁵⁷ *CIS* xvi, 60; cf. Rorty 2001b, 257 and 2010b, 584.

neoconservatives, revolutionary Marxists, anarchists, fascists, and so on)⁵⁸; “philosophically,” he stands with a group of philosophers who he calls “ironists” against those who he calls “metaphysicians.” Much of the drama of his later career comes from the increasing intricacy of these battle-lines—for example, when Rorty negotiates his strategic alliances with figures like Habermas (a liberal metaphysician) and Foucault (a non-liberal ironist);⁵⁹ when he discusses treacherous figures such as the “ironist theorists,” who he suspects of harbouring secret sympathies for metaphysics; or when he finds himself caught in the middle of political culture wars between different groups of non-liberals (as in Rorty [1992] 1999a, 16-18).

Rorty’s contention in *CIS* is that even though one finds liberal metaphysicians and non-liberal ironists, ironism is an outlook that is uniquely well-adapted for liberal democratic values. Although metaphysical language was instrumental in originally articulating and propagating those values, it has—Rorty contends—outlived its usefulness. Metaphysics now stands as an *obstacle* to Rorty’s democratic utopian vision, since it expresses a fundamentally “authoritarian” impulse. Because philosophical ironism is a reaction *against* metaphysics and the authoritarian attitude it entails, I will describe the latter first.

3.3 The Metaphysician

3.3.1 Metaphysics as a tradition

Rorty’s “metaphysician” is a slippery character. On the one hand, Rorty sometimes treats the metaphysician as a kind of philosopher, one who takes the “Plato-Kant canon” (*CIS* 96) at face value. On the other hand, he writes that ‘metaphysics is woven into the public rhetoric of modern liberal societies’ (*CIS* 82). This difficulty is further complicated by the fact that Rorty often rubbishes the idea that metaphysics has any importance to culture at large (*CIS* 82; 1990, 636; [1984] 1991b, 101).

This difficulty is diminished if we pay attention to the context and content of *CIS*. It is something of a collage, with Part 1 (on the importance of recognising contingency for our self-image as liberals) and Part 2 (on irony, metaphysics, and the success of various philosophical ironist attempts to overcome metaphysics) having been originally written and presented separately. Although I am not claiming that they should be *read* separately, it is helpful to bear in mind that *CIS* is a synthesis of several projects and, when faced with an apparent contradiction, to ask whether it can be resolved by looking to this diversity. The meaning of “metaphysics,” on the view that I shall be advancing, is a clear case of such a resolvable contradiction, since the metaphysician appears as a foil both in the utopian political project of Part 1 and in the metaphilosophical project of Part 2. In this section and the next, I will distinguish two senses of “metaphysics” that Rorty uses: metaphysics as a philosophical *tradition*, more clearly visible in Part 2, and metaphysics as an *attitude*, which I associate with Part 1. In the next section (§3.3.2) I will explain how to resolve the tensions in the above paragraph. Then, in the following section (§3.3.3) I will explain what Rorty thinks these different senses of “metaphysics” in common.

⁵⁸ Rorty’s liberalism has far more in common with highly redistributionist systems associated with Nordic social democracy than neoliberalism, which he saw as both an immense danger to democracy and as a triumph of greed over solidarity. For example, in a 2005 interview, he claims that he ‘think[s] that democracy only works if you spread the wealth around—if you eliminate the gap between the rich and the poor’ (Rorty 2005b, 73). Cf. 1997b, 18 and 1991a, 15n29.

⁵⁹ *CIS* 61. Rorty presents a somewhat more nuanced view of Foucault in Rorty (1988) 1991c, in which he treats him as having both liberal and illiberal moments.

Rorty's understanding of the metaphysical tradition is taken from Derrida and Heidegger (*CIS* 111), and it covers roughly the same series of thinkers as Heidegger's "onto-theological" tradition and Derrida "logocentric" one ([1995] 1998a, 309). In his first substantive description of "metaphysics" in *CIS*, Rorty describes it as follows:

Metaphysics, Derrida says, is the search for "a centered structure . . . the concept of play as based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude. [sic] which is itself beyond the reach of play" [...] Metaphysicians look for continuities—overarching conditions of possibility—which provide the space within which discontinuity occurs. (*CIS* 25n2, quoting Derrida [1967] 2001, 352)

This quotation is useful because it brings together what unifies both the metaphysical tradition and the metaphysical attitude, which I will discuss in the next section. It also brings together what I argue are the key three characteristics of the metaphysical tradition: representationalism, grounding and necessity.

Representationalism, which we examined briefly in §2.2.1, is the view that a sentence or belief is true if it represents a fact. Facts, on this view, are independent of our linguistic and social practices. 'For representationalists,' Rorty writes in the introduction to *ORT*, "making true" and "representing" are reciprocal relations: the nonlinguistic item that makes *S* true is the one represented by *S*' (1991a, 4). Grounding, of which givenism is the most exemplary form, is the attempt to isolate those places where our practices and beliefs are *authenticated*—for example, those episodes where we directly apprehend a fact. But Sellars's own doctrine of picturing was also an example of grounding, as it attempted to ground conceptual schemes in their isomorphism to reality. Necessity, finally, is the denial of contingency to those areas of culture which accurately represent reality—for example, on this view, insofar as our scientific knowledge accurately represents reality, it could not have turned out differently.

Within the tradition of metaphysical philosophy, these three motives have manifested in the building of great systems—either those put together by individuals (like Kant's) or on a more piecemeal basis (like the collaborative project many of the logical positivists saw themselves as embarking on). What unites metaphysicians in the philosophical sense is the attempt to create a vocabulary in which everything can be said,⁶⁰ and according to which truth could be distinguished from falsity and sense from nonsense. For the metaphysician, 'a philosophical vocabulary [must] be *total*, in the sense that anything literally or metaphorically sayable in any other vocabulary can be literally said in it' ([1984] 1991b, 92). But also on this picture, 'metaphysics [...] emerges out of epistemology' (*PMN* 134), since in order to develop such a vocabulary, one must already know the conditions of accurate representation. Metaphysicians 'take the paradigm of philosophical inquiry to be logical argument' (*CIS* 77), because of all of the areas of culture, logical argument seems to come closest to seeming to provide a matrix for all inquiry.

3.3.2 Metaphysics as attitude

A few pages after Rorty makes the claim that metaphysics is woven into our public rhetoric, he clarifies that the public is not committed to particular answers to metaphysical questions: "The

⁶⁰ I take this phrase from Brandom 2000b, 180.

idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me ludicrous' (*CIS* 86). Nor is there a "structure" or "system" implicit in common sense, a meta-vocabulary into which any claim could be translated. So, what is metaphysical about our public rhetoric?

What Rorty takes to be metaphysical in public rhetoric is the way in which our political intuitions and hopes (such as the intuitions that freedom is good and cruelty is bad) are justified, and the ways in which people are socialized to respond when they are challenged. When pushed, people still turn to rhetorical strategies that emphasise necessity, representation and grounding.

The "metaphysics" of common sense is the tendency, when one's final vocabulary is threatened, to appeal to some fact in light of which one is justified in speaking it. This fact must be something that transcends the differences between different vocabularies, so that, if a speaker of another vocabulary was aware of it, they would be rationally obligated to admit that they are wrong. Rorty writes that

the best evidence for it [this commonsensical metaphysical attitude] is that we philosophers are still called on to "answer Hitler," and abused if we confess our inability to do so. We are supposed to prove Hitler wrong by finding something beyond him and us—something unconditional—that agrees with us and not him. It might be said that a culture in which such demands are incessant is still structured by metaphysical ways of thinking (Rorty 1990, 636).

The idea that we know what Hitler was mistaken about, and that if only he had known this fact he would have been rationally obliged to abandon his hateful ideology, is a characteristically "metaphysical" attitude. This is different from the idea that it is conceivable that one might *convert* or *persuade* Hitler or a committed Nazi, which Rorty happily accepts—one might, for example, show the Nazi 'how his Führer can plausibly be redescribed as an ignorant paranoid rather than as an inspired prophet' (*Ibid.*, 637). But the metaphysician is not content with mere conversion, because the problem with conversion (unlike refutation) is that it requires one's opponent to cooperate. They must *be* converted. But if the Nazi, having listened to all of the liberal's redescrptions, their defences of their own principles, their presentation of the other side of the argument and their description of the horrors of genocide, remains a Nazi? At this point, Rorty admits no further recourse. '[I]here is no way to "refute" a sophisticated, consistent, passionate psychopath—for example, a Nazi who would favor his own elimination if he himself turned out to be Jewish' (*Ibid.*, 636).

But the metaphysician needs such a recourse, some fact in light of which they are right and the Nazi is wrong, even if they cling stubbornly to their ideology. The metaphysician needs refutation. They need to show how the Nazi's beliefs were unjustified, fallacious, or empirically false (unlike the liberal's beliefs, which are justified, coherent and empirically true). In other words, they must find some authority which is binding over both them and the Nazi, whether that be the nature of reality, the rules of logical argument, the categorical imperative or the will of God. This is, as we will see in the next subsection, why Rorty calls the metaphysical attitude an "authoritarian" attitude—it is the desire to have something powerful on one's own side. Metaphysicians share 'an assumption common to Plato, Kant, and Habermas: that there is such a thing as "the better argument"—better not by reference to its ability to convince some particular audience, but because it better tracks universal validity' (Rorty 2005c, 13).

There is, Rorty thinks, a widespread and unquestioned tendency in contemporary culture to treat all forms of discourse as in principle commensurable—as talking, at bottom, about the

same kind of thing, which some areas of culture get more right than others. Nowadays, the most visible form of this approach in our public sphere is “scientism.” Rorty defines scientism as ‘the doctrine [...] that something about natural science puts it in closer—or at least more reliable—touch with reality than any other human activity’ (Rorty [1994] 1998b, 294). In its most extreme form, this is the idea that the discoveries and methods of natural science are a template for all truth, and that other areas of culture should be ranked (and, if necessary, revised) according to their resemblance to or commensurability with the techniques and findings of natural science (cf. Rorty [1997] 1999). Scientism also, because of its insistence that there is such a thing as “reality” which is paradigmatically discovered by science, resolves any contradictions between the results of natural science and the claims made in other areas of culture in science’s favour. A scientist might argue, for example, that Freudian analysis in literary criticism is wrong because Freud’s theories have been discredited in empirical psychology, or that science fiction stories which depict impossible events such as faster-than-light travel are worse than those which don’t. This attitude has, if anything, become even more pronounced in the Anglophone world since Rorty’s death, with the rise of crude popular movements such as New Atheism (cf. Pigliucci 2013), many proponents of which seek to use the tools of science *alone* to decide questions in other areas of culture, such as which moral values to hold (Harris 2010) or whether God exists (Stenger 2007 and Dawkins 2006, Ch. 2). But scientism is not the only popular form of this metaphysical attitude. The idea of the ultimate commensurability of all (legitimate) discourse can also be found in, for example, those strands of organised religion that reject scientific discoveries that do not agree with literal interpretations of scripture. Whatever one’s privileged discourse, if one is a metaphysician in this sense one will take it to deal with Reality, while the other discourses are stuck at the level of Appearance (or something equally secondary, such as “opinion,” “emotion,” “practicality,” “pseudoscience” or “the merely subjective”).

In this attitude, we find the three characteristics of metaphysics: *representationalism* in the idea that it is the job of our discourses to get reality right; *grounding* in the idea that connecting our discourses to an *ur*-discourse like science, which divides reality at the joints, is the appropriate way to ascertain their value; and *necessity*, in the idea that this ideal *ur*-discourse would be one beyond the contingencies of particular cultures or historical periods.

The metaphysical attitude that I have discussed should not be confused with the *tradition* of metaphysics, despite the predominance of the metaphysical attitude among (professional, academic) metaphysicians. The metaphysical *tradition*, to Rorty’s mind, is neither necessarily authoritarian, nor important to culture beyond the academy. His preferred definitions of metaphysics-as-tradition are sociological: “metaphysics” and “epistemology,” he writes, are ‘little more than the names of pigeon-holes into which curricular odds and ends can be stuffed’ (Rorty 2000c, 213-214). These curricular odds and ends, however, are not necessarily metaphysical in *attitude*—one can give answers to metaphysical questions in a pragmatist attitude.⁶¹ For example, Rorty writes that ‘one’s categories in metaphysics should be the categories of the sciences of one’s day. But that’s simply to say what a boring subject metaphysics is’ (Rorty [1986] 2006, 27). Finally, when he introduces his theory of “panrelationism,” he places it within the domain of ‘what might, somewhat misleadingly, be called metaphysics’⁶²; and it is an answer to a metaphysical question (“is the identity of a thing the product of its relations with other things, or are these relations derived from their respective identities?”). Panrelationism, however, is not

⁶¹ One might consider Brandom’s “modest metaphysics” (Brandom 2000a, 180) as an example of this.

⁶² 1996c, 11. The reason, I suspect, for the phrase “somewhat misleadingly,” is that Rorty’s theory of panrelationism answers metaphysical questions in a way that makes it impossible to distinguish between metaphysics and physics.

Rorty's attempt to determine the ontological status of identity, but rather, how we may most productively think about identity. So although panrelationism falls within the tradition of metaphysics, it is not an expression of the metaphysical attitude. And while Rorty occasionally answers metaphysical questions, he is not a *metaphysician*.

What is toxic to Rorty in the tradition of metaphysics is the pride of place given to the appearance-reality distinction (*CIS* 110), and in a late response paper, he writes that he regrets his use of the term "metaphysics" in *PMN* when what he had really meant the appearance-reality distinction. This distinction is also essential to the metaphysical *attitude*, for it is *reality* that stands beyond our particular discourses and measures their accuracy of representation. What the metaphysician (qua attitude) does is take the unproblematic local distinctions between, say, *being* a fish and merely *appearing* to be one (as, to the untrained eye, a dolphin might); or between *being* a genuine Matisse and *appearing* to be one (as a good forgery would), and hypostatize them into Appearance and Reality (Rorty 1992d, 41). Once this distinction has been made, it becomes an intelligible project to sort out our discourses into those that represent reality and those which are stuck at the level of mere appearance (*PMN* 3).

When Rorty writes that 'metaphysics is woven into the public rhetoric of modern liberal societies' (*CIS* 82), then, he is not arguing that contemporary debates around, for example, the nature of time have deep cultural importance. Rather, he is arguing that the idea that one's final vocabulary must be legitimated by something universal is a part of our common sense. Both the historical concerns of the debates between metaphysicians and the common sense metaphysical attitude revolve around a distinction between Appearance and Reality, but this should not lead us to think that the former is responsible for the latter. "The claim, shared by Heidegger and Derrida," Rorty writes, "that the "ontotheological" tradition has permeated science, literature, and politics—that it is central to our culture—is a self-deceptive attempt to magnify the importance of an academic speciality" ([1984] 1991b, 87).

The metaphysical attitude manifests in many different forms. The distinction between Appearance and Reality is expressed in many of the distinctions frequently discussed and employed by philosophers and non-philosophers alike—such as the distinctions between the literal and the metaphorical (*CIS* 28) or the objective and the subjective (*PMN* 268-269). The difference, however, is that while Rorty wants to reject the distinction between Appearance and Reality wholesale (retaining only their local, non-capitalized, adjectival forms), he is happy to retain these other distinctions. While a metaphysician might understand the literal/metaphorical distinction as that between apparent and real meaning, or the objective/subjective distinction as that between the way things really are and the way they appear to be, Rorty happily redescribes these distinctions in terms that preserve their everyday usage while rejecting their metaphysical interpretation.⁶³ On these topics, he urges 'that we continue to speak with the vulgar while offering a philosophical gloss on this speech which is different from that offered in the Realist tradition' ([1993] 1998a, 44).

So, in conclusion, while Rorty does not believe that any particular philosophical discipline or doctrine stands at the centre of our culture, he does believe that when our values are threatened, we are all-too-frequently inclined to appeal to some feature of reality that justifies our final vocabularies but not our opponents'. It is this attitude or tendency that leads Rorty to say that metaphysics is woven into our public rhetoric. For the rest of this chapter, when I refer to

⁶³ Respectively, Rorty interprets these distinctions as those between the familiar and unfamiliar uses of words, and between the achievement of intersubjective agreement and the failure to achieve it ([1985] 1991).

“metaphysics” or “metaphysicians,” unless otherwise specified, I will be referring to this attitude or those who exemplify it rather than any philosophical discipline or movement. While Rorty sees the discipline as fairly useless, he sees the attitude as dangerous, as we shall see in the next section.

3.3.3 Metaphysics as authoritarian

Rorty eventually came to regret his use of the word “metaphysics” to refer to what I have been calling the “metaphysical attitude.” The reason for his regret was that using the weighty term “metaphysics” risked obscuring his meaning by tying it to the thorny question of disciplinary definitions and boundaries (2000c)—for example, by implying that all “metaphysicians” care about debates going on in journals of metaphysics, or that everyone who participates in such debates is a metaphysician. For this reason, from around the mid-1990’s, Rorty begins to use a new term for the metaphysical attitude: “authoritarianism.”⁶⁴ Although I shall continue to use both terms, examining why Rorty chose the term “authoritarianism” can help to illuminate why Rorty found the metaphysical attitude so objectionable.

Rorty’s contention that the metaphysical attitude is authoritarian is presented most clearly and succinctly in his article ‘Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism’ (1999c). In this article, Rorty begins by comparing the religious notion of sin with the philosophical notion of Appearance. Sin, Rorty argues, can only be understood in relation to some authority whose will transcends human desires, interests, practices or cultures. One sins against God, not against Man. This is clearest when the reason for some practice’s being forbidden is opaque—for example, ‘When trying to acquire a sense of Sin, it helps a lot if you can manage to think of a specific sexual or dietary practice as forbidden, even though it does not seem to be doing anybody any harm’ (Rorty 1999c, 8). One refuses to eat cloven-hooved animals, or to listen to music, or to use contraception, not because of some specifiable harm or benefit to people but rather because it offends the divine. For example, even though people’s lives would be easier, safer and more fulfilling if they could decide when to have children, using contraception would still be sinful. In fact, even framing the issue in this way is supposedly dangerous, because it foregrounds those attractive features of contraception which tempt us into sin.

Rorty argues that this attitude to sin is analogous to the Realist conception of truth: truth as Reality, opposed to and superior to Appearance. If we are happy to simply believe what it is useful to our community to believe, and to adopt the epistemic practices that have discernible, practical results, we have shown that we do not love Truth itself—so says the Realist. We have, they complain, given up on knowledge and limited ourselves to the level of *doxa*, and in doing so we have degraded ourselves. Just as a happy, fair and altruistic society may be living in sin, the metaphysician believes that it may be lost in a realm of mere appearance.

‘The best way to get into this way of thinking’, Rorty writes, ‘is to become an epistemological sceptic—to start worrying about whether human language is capable of representing the way Reality is in itself, whether we are calling Reality by the right names’ (1999c, 8). This is what, for example, Descartes did in his first *Meditation*. Though he found himself in a scientific culture in which he and his peers were discovering more and more about anatomy,

⁶⁴ The emergence of “authoritarian” as a core Rortyan concept can be traced to around 1996, when which he presented a series of lectures at the University of Girona entitled “Anti-Authoritarianism in Epistemology and Ethics.” Many of the lectures from this series were later published in *TP*, *PCP* and *PSH*.

physics, cosmology and mathematics, he was compelled to investigate whether this knowledge—which was already showing concrete practical results in areas like seafaring and medicine—had a secure foundation. Just as a kind and happy culture may be living in sin, an advancing and productive science might have been trapped at the level of mere (and hence *false*) appearance. Such falsity, like sin, is measured by an authority that transcends human knowledge and interests, and which humans might have completely abandoned, forgotten or betrayed. Submission to this authority is, Rorty writes, “authoritarian,” because its edicts cannot be questioned, regardless of whether living by them increases or decreases happiness and human flourishing.

Rorty’s view is obviously influenced by Nietzsche’s (in)famous association of faith in truth with submission to God (Nietzsche [1882, 1887] 2001, 200 [§344]). But an equally important source for Rorty’s repudiation of sin is Judith Shklar’s *Ordinary Vices*, from which Rorty takes his own definition of liberalism in *CIS*: liberals see cruelty as the worst of the vices, they think that ‘cruelty is the worst thing we do’ (Shklar 1984, 44; *CIS* xv, 74, 146). The first chapter of Shklar’s book contrasts horror at cruelty with horror at sin. While, Shklar writes, ‘Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God’, cruelty ‘is a wrong done entirely to another creature’ (8). A morality of sin is one that sees vice as transgression against something superior to humanity, whereas a morality that puts cruelty first sees vice as transgression against our fellows or against those weaker than us. Rorty’s discussion of authoritarianism in his later work generalises this structure: a representationalist or essentialist epistemology treats untruth as failure to conform to a something nonhuman which has authority over us, whereas a pragmatist “epistemology” treats untruth as a failure by the standards of the evaluative practices we share with our fellows. Consequently, *only* the representationalist or essentialist can speculate about whether, even though we are acting effectively, we may still be lost in a realm of mere appearance. For the pragmatist, mistaking appearance for reality can only ever be local and correctible.

At this point, one may be wondering why metaphysical authoritarianism has remained so popular. In fact, however, the kind of authority it offers is attractive for a number of reasons. Most fundamentally, it is attractive because it allows us to justify our values when faced with criticism or otherness. If “truth” exists beyond the consensus of a given community, then there is a chance that we will be able to “answer the Nazi.” Only a metaphysician can say that if the Nazis had been intellectually rigorous enough, they would have realised their ideology was evil and wrong. But if we reject the idea of an authority that transcends culture, time and social practices, we lose this “metaphysical comfort.”⁶⁵ We may have to admit that Nazis, evil as they are, are irrefutable.

Rorty does not deny that the Nazis were wrong about human rights or dignity. However, the extra step that he cannot take is to argue that they were wrong *by their own lights*. The Nazis were wrong, but that is not because they were intellectually inconsistent, or because they betrayed a universal human faculty called Reason. They were wrong because cruelty is the worst thing that we can do. The fact that the Nazis would not agree to this, Rorty argues (as we shall see in the next section), shows nothing more than the fact that “cruelty is the worst thing that we do” is an element of our final vocabularies but not theirs.

The metaphysical attitude is “authoritarian” because it stems from the desire that something powerful and unquestionable is on one’s side. It stems from the desire that, when faced with a social and political force as evil and alien as Nazism, we have something *more* than

⁶⁵ Rorty [1980] 1982, 166. Rorty takes this phrase from Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* ([1872] 1967, 17).

the Nazis do. Although both sides have rhetoric, art, philosophy and guns, *we* have the truth and they do not. There is a ‘powerful nonhuman authority’ (Rorty [1998] 1999, 269) that will ensure that, even if the Nazis triumph so completely that all resistance is wiped out, they were wrong.⁶⁶ Even in our own society, metaphysics creates “conversation-stoppers’ (Rorty [1994] 1999d) which override democratic conversation and linguistic innovation—authorities which cannot be challenged, whether or not doing so would serve human happiness. As we shall see in chapter 4, Rorty claims that givenism is just such a search for a conversation-stopper.

The reason that Rorty puts so much stock in the similarities between Sin and Appearance on the one hand, and God and Truth on the other, is that he ‘see[s] the Western Rationalistic Tradition as a secularized version of the Western Monotheist Tradition—as the latest twist on what Heidegger calls “onto-theology”’ ([1994] 1998c, 76). Robert Brandom has summed up this view as the image of ‘metaphysics [...] as the pursuit of theology by other means’.⁶⁷ To push this comparison further, Rorty sometimes calls metaphysicians who claim to speak on the behalf of truth ‘priests’⁶⁸ or ‘priest-substitutes’ ([1998] 2007, 30). As Wojciech Maleski has argued, for Rorty this extreme version of the metaphysician does not *merely* submit or prostrate themselves before an authority. They also desire to take on some of that authority’s power for themselves. This attitude is, as Rorty puts it in an interview, a kind of ‘authoritarian *sado-masochism*’ (Rorty [2002] 2006, 143 [emphasis added]), rather than simple *masochism*, because through submitting to a superhuman authority, the metaphysician hopes to take on some of its authority. Through knowing Truth, Being, or something equally cold and distant, the priest-metaphysician hopes to ‘[opt] out of the struggles of his fellow human beings by making his mind its own place, his own story the only story that counts’ (Rorty [1989] 1991a, 70).

Most metaphysicians are not priests, just as most theists are not clergy. The authoritarian attitude usually manifests simply in the desire for superhuman or transcultural sanction for one’s own final vocabulary; the priest-metaphysician, by contrast, takes the extra step of creating *new* vocabularies that have this sanction. But just as the theist ultimately defers to some theologian or other, so the everyday metaphysician could not exist without the priests. There could not, for example, be a causal commonsensical scientism without someone having already declared what “science” actually says about other areas of culture. “Authoritarianism,” after all, is not always the desire to *be* an authority—it is usually, the desire to have an unquestionable authority *on your side*.

The problems with metaphysical authoritarianism are threefold. Firstly, it breeds intolerance; secondly, it breeds complacency; and thirdly, it discourages linguistic and cultural experimentation.

1. **Intolerance.** If our duties are to truth, Rorty argues, then we can bypass the need to understand and consider other people. In a 2001 essay, he puts the point as follows:

Egotists⁶⁹ who are inclined to philosophize hope to short-circuit the need to find out what is on the mind of other people. They would like to go straight

⁶⁶ In chapter five (§5.2.3) I explain that Rorty does not conclude that in such a scenario the Nazis *wouldn’t* be wrong; rather, he simply eliminates appeals to a non-human authority *in virtue of which* they would be wrong.

⁶⁷ Brandom 2000b, 180 (§11). This phrase was originally coined, as far as I can tell, by Marx Wartofsky (1977, 4) to describe a view of Feuerbach’s.

⁶⁸ (1989) 1991a, 70. Rorty explicitly takes his understanding of the metaphysician as “ascetic priest” from the third essay of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*. Cf. Rorty (2004) 2007a, 146.

⁶⁹ “Egotism” in this essay is a variety of authoritarianism: Rorty defines it as ‘a willingness to assume that one already has all the knowledge necessary for deliberation’ (2001b, 250).

to the way things are (to the will of God, or the moral law, or the nature of human beings) without passing through other people's self-descriptions. Religion and philosophy have often served as shields for fanaticism and intolerance because they suggest that this sort of short-circuiting has actually been accomplished. (2001b, 250)

In other words, Rorty sees metaphysical authoritarianism as the search for an excuse, or the pronouncement of a reason, to ignore perspectives different from one's own. If one knows what Reality says, one can dismiss disagreement as delusion, irrationality or ideology. It may present a *practical* problem (for example, if one's fellow citizens are blinded by ideology, one may need to develop practical means for converting or disenfranchising them), but it does not present a *theoretical* one. If someone is blinded by ideology, their claims are not *legitimate* challenges. Although some authoritarians do not claim the kind of certainty that would allow them to make this move, all of them are *seeking* it.

2. **Complacency.** If one believes that Truth, Reality or History is on one's side, Rorty argues, one is less likely to acknowledge the contingency of our historical situation. One will become, to use one of Rorty's favourite Deweyan terms, "spectatorial"—viewing one's role in relation to the politics of one's time as an observer rather than an agent (*AOC* 9). It is for this reason that much of Rorty's writing on politics takes Marx as its critical foil: he 'mistakenly thought that Hegel's dialectic could be used for predictive as well as inspirational purposes' (*AOC* 19). Such a view encourages a kind of "scholasticism" (*AOC* 49), more concerned with refining the critical methods required for understanding one's place in the movement of History than in participating in specific projects to make the future better. Intellectuals, Rorty writes, ought to 'rid themselves of the idea that they know, or ought to know, something about deep, underlying forces—forces that determine the fates of human communities' (Rorty [1995] 1998e, 228).

The intellectuals that Rorty admires are those who describe what shape the future *could* take, rather than the one that it *will* take. This is the purpose of chapter 8 of *CIS*, which treats George Orwell as such an intellectual. What Rorty takes from Orwell is that there is no guarantee that global totalitarianism will not triumph, and that the intellectuals of the future might not look like the character of O'Brien, who uses his intelligence and sensitivity to better understand how to torture and destroy other people. '[W]hether our future rulers are more like O'Brien or more like J.S. Mill does not depend—as [...] metaphysicians generally suggest it does—on deep facts about human nature' (*CIS* 187), but rather, 'by a lot of small contingent facts' (*CIS* 188) such as 'who manages to kill whom first' (*CIS* 185). The trap that many metaphysicians get into is that they develop eschatologies of triumph (as Marx did) or hopelessness (as Rorty sees in the worst moments of Foucault and Heidegger) (*AOC* 37-38), or theories of the essential goodness or badness of human nature. This prevents them from seeing either the dangers facing us or the hopes that we can work to realise. When someone is a metaphysician about History, they see guarantees where they should only see warnings or hopes.

3. **Hostility to experimentation.** The third problem with the metaphysical attitude—the attitude of seeking the sanction of "reality" in order to select between vocabularies—is that it closes one off from curiosity, experimentation and innovation. There are two

examples of this that Rorty discusses at length: the rise of analytic philosophy, and the rise of “cultural theory” in American literature departments. In both of these cases, firstly, a critical mass of practitioners in a previously diverse discipline developed a standard method—a method which enabled them to “unmask” or “debunk” their opponents, and to treat their allies as engaging in a shared research project. Secondly, in the process of professionalising their discipline, they established a “subject-matter” for it, a portion of Reality which it was meant to represent accurately. While such movements often produce genuinely useful and interesting work,⁷⁰ Rorty argues, this is not by virtue of their getting closer to this true subject-matter. Early analytic philosophy was useful not because philosophical problems are *really* problems of language (Rorty 2007b, 160), but rather because it helped them to escape dead-ends that had trapped their precursors (Rorty [1977] 1982, 76).

Once a particular research program, or worse still, “methodology,” takes over a discipline, its imaginative possibilities decline greatly. Before the analytic takeover of philosophy, Rorty laments, there was space both for clear-eyed debunkers and for visionaries like Hegel, Spinoza and Whitehead ([1996] 1998, 129-131). By making language into *the* methodology of philosophy, Rorty laments, the positivists and their successors cut philosophy off from the rest of culture—they detached the academic, professional enterprise called “philosophy” from the motives that led people to begin reading philosophers (PMN 384-385). Furthermore, those who tried to challenge this consensus on the appropriate subject-matter or methodology of philosophy were pushed out of the discipline. ‘[P]hilosophy departments [...] are now among the more insular, ingrown, uncommunicative departments in American universities’ (1994b, 576). This does not mean, Rorty thinks, that *philosophy* has become boring, scholastic or irrelevant, but that the most interesting philosophy going on in the world is dismissed without much thought by the authoritarian, scientific *institutions* of (Anglophone) philosophy (1994, 583). Such a situation is not ‘a tragedy [...] but it is a bit of a farce’ (Ibid.). In particular, Rorty is surprised and disappointed by ‘the amazingly strong animus of many distinguished analytic philosophers against Derrida—a philosopher whom few of them have tried to read’ (1994, 585n6). The public outcry from analytic philosophers over Derrida’s honorary degree from Cambridge University showed—to Rorty’s mind—the extent of this incuriosity ([1994] 1998c, 79n18; cf. (2003) 2007, 121); Derrida’s strangeness appeared not as an alternative way of doing philosophy, but as proof that he was not doing philosophy (Rorty 1994, 585n6).

The task of Part 2 of *CIS* is to describe a model of intellectual life that avoids metaphysical authoritarianism. In particular, Rorty wishes to avoid the intolerance, complacency and incuriosity of the metaphysician. The character he invents to accomplish this is called the “ironist,” and they will be the subject of my next section.

3.4 The Ironist

Against metaphysical authoritarianism, Rorty stakes his own metaphilosophical claim with the authors, philosophers and intellectuals he calls *ironists*. Ironists are opposed to metaphysicians at

⁷⁰ In particular, Rorty finds the “linguistic turn” pioneered by the logical positivists to have improved both the clarity of philosophers’ writing ([1996] 1998, 128-131) and the ability of pragmatists to defend their anti-representationalist doctrines (cf. my §4.2.3).

every turn, and they represent to him a “literary” culture opposed to a “philosophical” or “scientific” one (Rorty 2001b, 258; *CIS* 80-82).

What characterises ironists is that they do not wish (or think it possible) to ground their final vocabularies by appealing to an authority which transcends all human vocabularies. They do not rank vocabularies in terms of their closeness to truth, and they do not seek to commensurate all vocabularies in a single structure. The conviction behind *CIS* is that while ironism does not prove the truth of liberal beliefs (such as the opposition to discrimination and cruelty), it would serve liberalism much better than any metaphysical project to establish liberal values from first principles.

Rorty defines ironists in different ways, some of which explicitly commit ironists to particular philosophical doctrines, and some of which describe ironists more in terms of temperament and attitude. This ambiguity has led many commentators, as we shall see, to attempt to distinguish *two* ironists in *CIS*, and I will be taking this approach as well, following my distinction of the metaphysical tradition and the metaphysical attitude. One of the most succinct definitions Rorty gives of the ironist captures both of these aspects: an ironist is ‘the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires’ (*CIS* xv). Because of the ambiguity of ironism between a philosophy and a temperament, I will describe it from each of these sides in turn before discussing how they fit together. When it is important to distinguish between these two senses of “ironism,” I will use the shorthands “P-ironism” for ironists considered in terms of their philosophical views, and “T-ironism” for ironists who share the ironist temperament.

My approach is influenced in particular by Gutting (1999), who distinguishes between “epistemic ironism” and “moral ironism.” My “P-ironism” is best understood as an expansion upon his “epistemic ironism,” the refusal to ground one’s final vocabulary philosophically. Like him, I argue that P-ironism is shared by all ironists, whereas T-ironism is more limited in scope. However, unlike Gutting, I will argue that Rorty has good reason to commend T-ironism, despite his mistaken conflation of it with P-ironism.

3.4.1 Ironism as philosophy

Ironism begins from the acknowledgement of the contingency of our linguistic, epistemic and social practices. This emphasis on contingency commits the ironist, *insofar as she philosophises*, to four key positions: radical fallibilism, nominalism, anti-foundationalism and historicism.⁷¹ The italicized phrase in the previous sentence is important: not all ironists philosophise, but all of them, when pressed to justify aspects of their final vocabulary, will respond in ways that cohere with these four philosophical views rather than their “metaphysical” counterparts (for example, they will not appeal to foundations or ahistorical truths). In fact, these four positions, for Rorty, fit together so naturally that they might better be seen as different descriptions of a single position. I will now briefly describe each position, and then how the ironist’s philosophical approach contrasts to the metaphysical ones we examined in previous sections.

1. **Radical fallibilism.** Michael Williams defines radical fallibilism as ‘[the] conviction that even the most deeply entrenched commonsense convictions are open to revision’ (2009, 148-149). This is not the same as saying that we *should* revise them, or that we lack *good*

⁷¹ I preserve the genders of Rorty’s characters (“ironists” and “liberals” take female pronouns; “ironist theorists” and “metaphysicians” take masculine ones).

reasons to retain them. As Hilary Putnam puts it, ‘fallibilism does not require us to doubt *everything*, it only requires us to be prepared to doubt *anything*—if good reason arises!’ ([1992] 1995, 21). What fallibilism cautions against is the idea that we can rule out in advance the possibility of such a reason arising—we cannot limit the scope of human inquiry or cultural evolution in advance.

Although Rorty does not use the word “fallibilism” in *CIS*, the ironist is clearly committed to a fallibilist view. ‘Ironism,’ he writes, ‘results from awareness of the power of redescription’ (*CIS* 89). Specifically, she is aware that ‘anything can be made to look good or bad [or plausible or implausible] by being redescribed’ (*CIS* 73), and she does not believe that there is a set of meta-rules above our contemporary conventions of rational argument to secure their status as *really* rational should a challenge arise. This aspect of Rorty’s characterisation of the ironist is so strong that several commentators have treated it as her defining feature: for example, Colin Koopman (2009, 211), J.B. Schneewind (2010, 492), and Christopher Voparil (2016, 2) have all defined the ironist in terms of her fallibilism.

2. **Nominalism.** There are two kinds of situation in which Rorty uses the term “nominalism.” Firstly, Rorty often uses it as a shorthand for Sellars’ “psychological nominalism,” the view that ‘all awareness [...] is a linguistic affair’,⁷² i.e. that there is no *pre*-linguistic awareness, and in particular that sensory experience does not naturally fall into kinds. Secondly, Rorty uses the term “nominalism” to signal the view that conceptual meaning is entirely a matter of linguistic convention: as he puts it, ‘nominalists think that to have a concept is to be able to use a word’ ([1984] 1991b, 103). This is the Quinean side of Rorty’s nominalism, in which linguistic analysis means the analysis of social practices rather than intrinsic conceptual meanings.

This Sellarsian-Quinean nominalism is central to Rorty’s critique of metaphysics. By refusing to appeal to the intrinsic connections between *ideas*, *concepts* or *perceptions*, and turning instead to the conventional connections between utterances, the ironist cuts out a further form of non-human authority: she cuts out the idea that there exists an “order of reasons” that supersedes human practices and gives its sanction to a subset of absolutely valid ones.⁷³ In *CIS*, he argues that the idea of “absolute validity” is a hangover from the Platonic and Christian attempt to isolate a part of human beings that was not merely animal (47), and that only by becoming nominalists can we cut out the residual theology from our understanding of rationality.

3. **Historicism.** Rorty’s most frequent description of the ironist’s philosophical approach is that she is “historicist and nominalist”⁷⁴—these terms appear together in *CIS* even more frequently than they appear separately. Historicism is best understood as both a repudiation of *ahistoricism*, the view that there are unchanging aspects of human nature or unchanging objects of human contemplation, and a repudiation of the view that there are laws of history in the Marxist or Hegelian sense. It is the view that emphasises the radical contingency of history and the present.

In an illuminating classification, Rorty writes that ‘Historicism is a special case of naturalism’ (1991f, 55n8), and he ‘define[s] “naturalism” as the view that *anything* might

⁷² *EPM* 63 (§29). As I argue in chapter 6 (§6.1.2), I do not think that the omission represented by the ellipsis is as benign as Rorty does.

⁷³ Rorty (1993) 1998a, 50; Rorty (1994) 1999a, 36.

⁷⁴ *CIS* xv, 74, 94-95; Rorty (1995) 1998a, 307n2.

have been otherwise, that there can be no conditionless conditions.⁷⁵ Specifically, Rorty's historicism is a kind of naturalism because it is an extension of Darwin: it is the thesis that 'Cultural evolution takes over from biological evolution without a break.'⁷⁶ In other words, Rortyan historicism is the view that the evolution of our contemporary scientific theories, norms of rational argument, societal structures, and so on, are products of a process that is just as contingent as the process that led to the emergence of flowering plants, birds-of-paradise, tapeworms and intelligent apes. All of these creatures are extremely well-adapted to their environment, but this is neither because each is trying to approximate an ideal, nor because they were implied in what came before. Dinosaurs evolved into birds neither because they were striving towards greater birdhood, nor because birdhood was somehow immanent within dinosaurhood. Rather, at a certain point, the lighter, bipedal, feathered dinosaurs simply turned out to be better-adapted to their environment, and for entirely contingent reasons. It is only from that point, looking backwards, that we can tell an evolutionary story of ever-increasing birdhood.

Similarly, the ironist does not treat human history as the approximation to an ideal: 'In this historicist vision, the arts, the sciences, the sense of right and wrong, and the institutions of society are not attempts to embody or formulate goodness or beauty. They are attempts to solve problems' (Rorty [1972] 1982, 16). To treat, for example, the success of the sciences as a story of increasing fit to the structure of the world is simply a case of projecting the standards of the present onto the past (*CIS* 8). Rather, the sciences—and all of our cultural institutions—are responses to contingent historical and cultural events. This emphasis on the natality and mortality of institutions, vocabularies and concepts, for Rorty, is the key mark of ironist historicism (Rorty 1982b, xli).

Furthermore, just as ironists do not believe in history as convergence, neither do they believe in "laws of history" of the kind associated with Hegel or Marx:

The problem with wedding Hegel and Darwin has always been that Hegel seems to say that human civilization just *couldn't* casually be wiped out by a plague or a comet and that language-using beings just *had* to emerge from the evolutionary process so that the Idea could finish off Nature and get started on Spirit (Rorty [1994] 1998b, 300)

By contrast, this is a real possibility for the ironist, as is the possibility that the fascists will triumph or that Orwell will have proven to be a prophet. This emphasis on vulnerability, Rorty hopes, will ward off the "spectatorial" attitude he criticised in the metaphysicians, and persuade ironist intellectuals to engage, rather than simply analyse, their contemporary situation. They cannot rest assured, as metaphysicians can, that the

⁷⁵ Rorty 1991f, 55. It is important to distinguish Rorty's form of naturalism from another popular kind, exemplified by Brian Leiter, who describes naturalism as the view that 'philosophical inquiry [...] should be continuous with empirical inquiry in the sciences' (Leiter [2002] 2015, 2). Following Huw Price, Rorty distinguishes this "object naturalism," espoused by philosophers like Leiter, from his own "subject naturalism" which simply rejects the view that there are transcendent or transcendental forces or entities distinct from natural ones (Rorty [2006] 2007, cf. Price 2004).

⁷⁶ Rorty (1994) 1999c, 75. Rorty's idea of cultural evolution should be distinguished from the social Darwinism most famously associated with Herbert Spencer. Rorty complains that Spencer's understanding of evolution still involves 'the idea of an immanent teleology' ([1992] 1998, 191)—that is, the idea that evolution is hierarchical and moves towards an end. He rejoins that 'to speak of the "survival of the fittest" is merely to say, tautologously, that what survives survives' (Ibid.).

practices, values and standards of rationality that they cherish will survive unless they are actively defended.

4. **Anti-Foundationalism.** Finally, the ironist is an anti-foundationalist. This view, in essence, is simply an extension of the repudiation of authoritarianism, and it is the core of Gutting’s characterisation of the “epistemic ironist” (Gutting 1999, 64-67). There is *nothing* that grounds the ironist’s final vocabulary except some other component of it. It does not stand in relation to something beyond our social practices that justifies them, such as Truth, the Will of God, Being, Rationality or Experience. This is not because such things don’t exist,⁷⁷ but rather because they play no *justificatory* role in our practices. Claiming that a belief is true, or an action is the will of God, or that an argument is rational, is pointless unless one also provides *independent* criteria of justification (e.g. “what she says is true—I have video evidence”). What the ironist does is cut out these justificatory appeals to authorities that transcend our social practices, and save terms like “true” for other purposes (like signalling agreement or assent).⁷⁸

P-ironism, then, is opposed point-to-point to metaphysics. In §3.3.1, I defined metaphysics in terms of the search for necessity, representation, and grounding. Ironism, however, emphasises *contingency* (through its fallibilism and historicism), anti-representationalism (through its nominalism), and a hostility to grounding (through its anti-foundationalism). The ironist acknowledges that every vocabulary is a product of time and chance, and that it makes no sense to ask whether a vocabulary accurately represents reality, because normative relations (such as accurate representation) are entirely internal to vocabularies. Metaphysicians, the ironist thinks, ‘run together the fact that the world contains the causes of our being justified in holding a belief with the claim that some nonlinguistic state of the world [...] “makes a belief true” by “corresponding” to it’ (CIS 5). Ironists, by contrast, generalise the insight of Sellars that the space of causes should be distinguished from the space of reasons, and the related Davidsonian insight that ‘only a belief can justify a belief’ (Rorty 1998d, 141).

Consequently, ironism does not fall foul of Rorty’s three objections to metaphysics. I have already discussed (point 3 above) that ironism is a reaction against the *complacency* of metaphysicians: because there are no laws of history or immutable aspects of human nature or culture, the ironist is always aware that things could go very wrong—politics and culture could take a sharp turn in the wrong direction, or natural disasters could overwhelm us. There is no guarantee that truth and goodness will triumph, nor that falsity and evil will. The best that we can do is to put in the work of maintaining good practices and fighting bad ones. There is no guarantee that, if our epistemic practices are undermined by powerful people, our natural rationality will win through. Rationality concerns *norms* of human sociality, not *facts* of human nature.

I will discuss ironism’s contribution to tolerance and experimentalism at greater length in my discussion of T-ironism in sections 3.4.2 and 3.4.4. But even P-ironism has strengths in creating a more tolerant and experimental society and politics. For if we cut out the idea of divine or metaphysical sanction for final vocabularies, then the only place that we can look for

⁷⁷ Rorty begins *TP* by rejecting the idea that there is no truth. As for God, while Rorty’s pragmatism is explicitly atheistic, he admits that it is compatible with a “demythologised” God: one ‘without personal immortality, providential intervention, the efficacy of sacraments, the Virgin Birth, the Risen Christ, the Covenant with Abraham, [or] the authority of the Koran’, or at least without any of these things ‘providing premises for practical reasoning’ (Rorty [1996] 1999a, 156). This has led to some commentators, understandably, viewing this as a rejection of theism in all but name (e.g., Jackson 1992, 30n4).

⁷⁸ I discuss this point in more detail in chapters 5 (§5.4.3) and 6 (§6.1.1).

sanction is other humans. The ironist moves from thinking that they owe respect to ‘non-human persons’ (Rorty 2001b, 249) or ‘hypostatized sentences’ (Rorty 2000d, 126) to thinking in terms of ‘the respect that I owe to my fellows’ (Rorty 2000d, 126). This move is necessary by virtue of the ironist’s nominalism: if all meaning is conventional, then the ironist needs to *understand* the people around them. While this is not a guarantee of tolerance—Rorty argues that O’Brien, the torturer from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, shares the intellectual gifts of the ironist⁷⁹—it is conducive to it for two reasons. Firstly, the ironist’s nominalism and antifoundationalism allow them to reject the idea that different cultures or areas of culture should converge: if they encounter someone with a different vocabulary to theirs, they do not need to work out who is “closer to the truth.” So long as that other person is not doing anything that harms them, differences at the level of belief or language are entirely benign. Secondly, the ironist is less prone to the “incuriosity” that Rorty describes in chapter 7 of *CIS* (p. 163) that can blind us to the pain we are causing to others. The ironist may not be a liberal—she may not think that cruelty is the worst thing that we can do—but if she *is* a liberal, she will be a more effective one.

Finally, the ironist is less hostile to experimentation. She does not think that different vocabularies profess different, incompatible ontologies, so she will not be worried about self-contradiction at the level of theory. If, for example, she finds talk of values or intentional content useful, she will not worry about ‘questions like [...] “What is the place of value in a world of fact?” [or] “What is the place of intentionality in a world of causation?”’ (*CIS* 11). Similarly, if she wants to develop a new idiom, she need not worry about *theoretical* incompatibility with other idioms. She need only worry if speaking this way makes it harder for her to accomplish her practical ends (*CIS* 12).

None of the above means that the ironist will *be* more tolerant or experimental than the metaphysician. It simply means that they will erect fewer unnecessary barriers to tolerance and experimentalism than the metaphysician will, and if they are inclined towards experimentalist liberalism, their ironism will help them to realise it more effectively. However, such ground-clearing is not the only profession of the ironist. Rorty’s description of ironism, as I will now describe, is ambiguous and controversial, and sometimes he describes the ironist as doing more than holding the anti-metaphysical views I have outlined. I will now turn to this more radical vision of the ironist, which I call the ironist *temperament*.

3.4.2 Ironism as temperament

The philosophical views that I have just outlined, however, are only a part of the story. Recall the characterisation of ironism I quoted at the beginning of this section: the ironist is ‘the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires’ (*CIS* xv). This definition, I will argue, is ambiguous between treating ironism as a *philosophical position* and treating it as a *temperament* or *outlook*. All ironists certainly *acknowledge* the contingency of their central beliefs and desires. But Rorty wants more than this: he describes the ironist as *facing up* to this contingency. This “facing up” is a mark of T-ironism.

This ambiguity is especially visible in Rorty’s (in)famous three-point definition of ironism at the beginning of chapter four of *CIS*. He describes the ironist as follows:

⁷⁹ *CIS* 187. Rorty writes that O’Brien is an ironist in a “qualified sense”—I believe that the relevant “qualification” is a distinction between what I have been calling “ironism as philosophy” (P-ironism) and “ironism as temperament” (T-ironism), which I describe in the next section. O’Brien endorses the four philosophical theses I have described, but he does not have the “doubts” that T-ironists have about their own vocabulary.

I shall define an “ironist” as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one’s way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (*CIS* 73)

Even among those who are broadly sympathetic to Rorty’s antifoundationalism, nominalism, historicism and fallibilism, this definition has proven extremely controversial.⁸⁰ Rorty’s account of the ironist has been accused variously of superficiality,⁸¹ inconsistency,⁸² and radical scepticism,⁸³ and this has provoked several attempts to reconceive or revise the figure.⁸⁴ Such a reaction is lent support by Rorty’s own apparent abandonment of the ironist soon after the publication of *CIS*—after 1989, Rorty quickly stopped using the term, only mentioning it when prompted by others. In a reply to an article by J.B. Schneewind published posthumously in 2010, Rorty admitted explicitly that he had come to see his conception of the ironist as ‘deeply flawed,’ because it ‘confused two quite different sorts of people’ (2010a, 506). In the next few sections, I am going to pursue this idea that the ironist is a composite figure, and that the ‘two quite different sorts of people’ can be disentangled into the separate characters that Rorty describes in his reply to Schneewind.

All ironists are P-ironists: they all share the philosophy I described in the previous section—at least in a negative sense. By “in a negative sense,” I mean that they do *not* espouse the views that ironism opposes: they do not (1) claim certain knowledge or global scepticism, (2) treat concepts or classes as having a meaning distinct from use, (3) believe in laws of history or immutable aspects of culture or human nature, or (4) most importantly, appeal to any authority beyond human vocabularies to underwrite all or part of their own final vocabulary. This opposition to metaphysical doctrines may be principled and philosophical, as I outlined in the previous section, but it might simply be intuitive and commonsensical.⁸⁵

The three-point definition of the ironist, however, describes something more than the antimetaphysical view I discussed in the previous section. Rorty describes the ironist not just as recognising the contingency of her final vocabulary, but as having “radical and continuing doubts” about it. Furthermore, in subsequent pages Rorty expands these doubts into a fear that one ‘has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game [...] [or

⁸⁰ Ramberg 2014; Schneewind 2010, 491-494; Hall 1994.

⁸¹ Fraser (1988) 1989; Connolly, in Ball et al 1990.

⁸² Pettegrew 2000, 107-111; Gutting 1999, 63ff.; Curtis 2015, 93ff.

⁸³ Williams, M., 2003.

⁸⁴ Ramberg 2014; Bernstein 2016, 47-53; Dieleman 2010, 903; Curtis 2015, 93ff.

⁸⁵ This view is controversial—on page 74 of *CIS*, Rorty writes that ‘The opposite of irony is common sense’, so the idea of someone being commonsensically ironist may sound like a contradiction. In this section I am going to argue that one can be commonsensically ironist in the *philosophical* sense (one can have an intuitive understanding that one’s vocabulary is historically contingent), but not in the sense of T-irony. In this quote, as we shall see, Rorty is talking about T-irony. When it comes to P-irony, in Rorty’s vision of a ‘postmetaphysical culture’ (*CIS* xvi), ‘ironism, in the relevant [i.e. philosophical] sense, is universal’ (*CIS* xv).

been turned] into the wrong kind of human being' (*CIS* 75). Nothing in P-ironism requires that one be afflicted with such doubts or fears. In fact, in his later characterisation of pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism, Rorty treats the philosophical views which earlier I called "P-ironism" as a mechanism for *defanging* doubt, not intensifying it (1999c, 9). So why does Rorty here sound so much like a sceptic?

In the next two sections, I will argue that the "radical and continuing doubts" clause is not an expression of a lack of confidence or commitment, but rather of an intellectually curious, self-creative temperament. This temperament deserves the name "ironism" because of its paradoxical, self-revising character, which I discuss in section 3.4.4. Like Gutting, I treat this "doubt" condition as restricted *only* to T-ironists, although points two and three of the definition above apply to P-ironists as well. The importance of the T-ironist, I will argue, results from Rorty's desire to reject metaphysics without endorsing relativism.

3.4.3 Ethnocentrism and relativism

In order to address this question, it is necessary to situate the T-ironist in the context of Rorty's political philosophy and, in particular, his rejection of relativism. Because of his view that 'there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them' (*CIS* 80), Rorty is often accused of relativism.⁸⁶ For example, Joshua Forstenzer has recently argued that Rorty's affirmation of the contingency of our epistemic norms renders him complicit in the rise of post-truth politics (Forstenzer 2018, 4). Ironists, Forstenzer claims, are unable to respond to the claims of the contemporary far right, despite the far right's 'blatant breach or diminishment of traditional epistemic norms' (*Ibid.*, 7). This is because, he continues, ironists 'cannot establish the falsehood of such claims without first determining which community's epistemic standards to adopt in order to evaluate them' (*Ibid.*, 26). Ironists have, Forstenzer concludes, 'no stable ground from which to determine which [epistemic standards] are more justified' (*Ibid.*).

One finds a similar argument in Lawrence Torcello's paper 'Sophism and Moral Agnosticism, or, How to Tell a Relativist from a Pluralist' (2011). Torcello argues that Rorty's portrayal of the ironist slips from a sensible pluralism, the acknowledgement that we are unable to *defend* any position categorically against others, into relativism, the more extreme view that we are unable to *condemn* any position categorically (2011, 88). Such a slide is visible when Rorty writes, for example, that 'for liberal ironists, there is no answer to the question: "Why not be cruel?"—no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible' (*CIS* xv, quoted in Torcello 2011, 97). On Torcello's reading, this means that ironists cannot *categorically*, but only *conditionally*, condemn cruelty.⁸⁷ This "inability to (categorically) condemn" is not only untenable, but dangerous, since it deprives us of any means of resolving disputes other than 'rhetorical persuasion, or [...] Thrasymachian displays of intimidation and violence' (*Ibid.*, 97). The ironist is not only unable to categorically condemn cruelty, he argues, but she is also unable to distinguish between cases of rational argument and cynical rhetoric. Like Forstenzer, Torcello accuses ironists of complacency about recent and contemporary political dangers, such as climate change denial and the Bush administration's irresponsible promotion of the Iraq war based on flimsy evidence (*Ibid.*, 97-98).

⁸⁶ In this section I will discuss critics who accuse Rorty of both epistemic relativism and moral relativism. The difference between these kinds of relativism are unimportant for the matter at hand.

⁸⁷ Torcello defines the word "categorical" as 'absolute and unconditional', a usage which he associates with Kant (2011, 104n3).

In short, Forstenzer and Torcello argue that the ironist is an extreme relativist, who cannot determine which of two communities is in the right when epistemic standards diverge. Such an accusation, if true, would render the ironist politically complacent, or worse, equivocal, in times of epistemic crisis or revolution. Such complaints—that ironism gives us no way of deciding between internally coherent sets of epistemic practices, and commits us to an irrationalist philosophy of “might makes right” (Torcello 2011, 104n2)—resemble those that Rorty repeatedly faced during his lifetime, and which he spent much of his career responding to. We have already seen it appear in the demands that Rorty faced to “answer Hitler.” Rorty’s rejoinder in that case was simple:

It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out our differences. ([1992] 1999a, 15)

In other words, we will always, ultimately, beg some important question or other against Nazis: we will assume that all humans are created equal, that everyone’s claims should be respected, that people should be judged as individuals rather than on the basis of category-membership, or some other equally basic claim that stacks the deck in our favour. The “experienced Nazi philosopher” might point out our question-begging, but they will resort to the same circular reasoning if they attempt to make a positive defence of their side. All we can do is play the game of cultural politics, and rule Nazi racism out of bounds of rational acceptability. ‘I cannot take [the Nazi’s point] seriously,’ Rorty writes, ‘but I do not think that there is anything self-contradictory in the Nazi’s refusal to take me seriously’ ([1993] 2000, 14). In such situations, violence might indeed be the only answer. Rorty continues, ‘We may both have to reach for our guns.’

Critics like Forstenzer and Torcello see this admission of Rorty’s as an endorsement of relativism: if there are no neutral criteria to decide between us and the Nazis, they think, then we can have no principled reason for defending liberal values of tolerance, dignity and human rights against fascist ones of national greatness and racial purity. The correct view simply becomes whichever one wins has the most rhetorical or physical force on its side—and if fascists take over and eliminate their opponents, then fascism will become the correct moral view.⁸⁸ But unlike his critics, Rorty sees this as a dilemma with *three* horns, not two. Relativism—which he defines as ‘the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as any other’⁸⁹—is one of two possible alternatives to absolutism. The other alternative is what he calls “ethnocentrism,” the affirmation of the standards of our own final vocabulary despite their lack of metaphysical sanction. The dilemma is as follows: ‘Either we attach a special privilege to our own community [i.e., ethnocentrism], or we pretend an impossible tolerance for every other group [relativism]’ (Rorty [1985] 1991, 29). Rorty grasps the ethnocentric horn, not the relativist one: it is perfectly legitimate to condemn Nazism on the grounds that it is racist, cruel and antidemocratic, even though there is nothing in the Nazi’s vocabulary that would force them to recognise these condemnations as legitimate. But they *are* legitimate, because it is not the Nazis’ standards that matter: it is ours.

To apply this to Forstenzer’s concerns, the ironist is perfectly capable of condemning the inconsistency, conspiracy theorizing and rejection of expertise that he refers to as “post-truth politics.” This is true *even though* the ironist rejects the idea that there is something high above or

⁸⁸ I deal with this specific problem in chapter 5, §5.2.3.

⁸⁹ Rorty (1980) 1982, 166; cf. (1985) 1991, 23, (1992) 1999a, 15, and 1999d, 276

deep within her political opponents that equally condemns them. Rather, the ironist thinks that the epistemic standards of her community are, by and large, good—they have shown results, whereas the track record of “post-truth” epistemic practices such as trusting the word of charismatic politicians over scientists and investigative journalists from established newspapers have not. This confidence is enough, without quasi-divine sanction. As for Torcello’s critique, Rorty is perfectly able to do what Torcello complains that he cannot: he can *categorically condemn* people with deeply different final vocabularies, like (to use Rorty’s favourite example) Nazis, or (to use Torcello’s example) slave-owners who think that slavery has divine sanction. In ‘Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism,’ Rorty commends Dewey for doing just that:

Dewey was quite willing to say of a vicious act that it was sinful, and of “2+2=5” or “Elizabeth the First’s reign ended in 1623” that these sentences were absolutely, unconditionally, eternally, false. But he was unwilling to gloss “sinful” or “falsehood” in authoritarian terms. (1999c, 8-9)

Despite the fact that there are coherent final vocabularies in which one is completely justified in commending genocide, such things are categorically wrong and evil, because we speak *our* vocabulary, not theirs. It is folly to think that we can abandon our own epistemic standards and still reason or judge.⁹⁰ Even if we attempted to find a position of neutrality between ourselves and our opponents we would be applying our own standards, since neutrality is *itself* a historically contingent, localised epistemic standard that our opponents may not share.

There are, however, more sophisticated critiques of Rorty’s supposed relativism than Forstenzer’s and Torcello’s: for example, Christian Miller’s ‘Rorty and Moral Relativism’ (Miller 2002). Rather than accusing Rorty of the equivocal, absurd relativism one finds in Torcello and Forstenzer, Miller contends that while Rorty successfully defends himself against the charge of extreme *normative* moral relativism, he is nevertheless a *meta-ethical* moral relativist.⁹¹ Normative moral relativism, as Miller defines it, holds that we should tolerate people acting in ways that we would condemn among those who share our values, so long as what they are doing is acceptable on *their* ethical framework (Ibid., 355). Meta-ethical moral relativism, by contrast, is the endorsement of two theses:

[1] Framework Relativity Thesis: For any moral agent A and moral statement S, if A accepts S then the truth value of S is fixed only by A’s moral framework and the descriptive facts relevant to S.

[2] Objectivity Thesis: There are no objective facts or properties. (Ibid., 356)

One must endorse both of these theses in order to be a meta-ethical moral relativist: endorsing the first thesis alone is consistent with the view that there is only one objectively correct moral framework, and endorsing the second alone is consistent with several theories, including constructivism and nihilism (Ibid., 356). So if Rorty is a meta-ethical moral relativist, he must be found to endorse both of these theses.

⁹⁰ For this reason, Rorty would be unlikely even to endorse “pluralism” on Torcello’s definition, despite Torcello’s promotion of it as a sensible alternative to relativism. Torcello defines pluralism as ‘an inability to unequivocally endorse any one worldview, or any one moral doctrine, over another’ (2011, 104n2, emphasis mine).

⁹¹ Miller 2002, 364. Although Miller intriguingly argues in part III of his paper that Rorty could ward off this accusation by endorsing a “quasi-realist” position like Simon Blackburn’s, I will limit my discussion to the critical part of Miller’s paper.

I agree with Miller regarding the Objectivity Thesis: Rorty indeed endorses the following, “pragmatised” version of it by deflating the objective/subjective distinction (cf. my §3.3.2):

(R3) It is of no practical benefit to continue to talk in realist terms about objective facts of any kind. (Ibid., 358)

So, Rorty would not describe moral truths as objective, not because he thinks that they are *subjective*, but because he sees the entire distinction as unhelpful. However, when it comes to the Framework Relativity Thesis (FRT), Miller makes a similar mistake to the one we saw in Torcello and Forstenzer.

Miller claims that Rorty endorses the FRT because of his rejection of foundationalism. He writes that, because ‘there are numerous passages in which Rorty writes as if the truth of statements in general, and that of moral claims in particular, is fixed solely by human frameworks and practices’ (Ibid., 359), it is clear that he endorses the FRT. For example, he writes that social consensus, rather than nonhuman reality, is central to the pragmatist’s understanding of truth ([1985] 1991, 23n1)—moral or otherwise. Hence, Miller argues, for Rorty the truth value of a moral claim is relative to the moral framework (that is, the final vocabulary) of the person making or evaluating that claim.

Let us fill in the “A” and “S” in the FRT with someone whose moral framework is alien to our own: Rorty’s “rational Nazi.” The FRT would have us admit that for the Nazi, the truth value of a moral statement (such as “sometimes genocide is morally commendable”) is fixed only by the Nazi’s moral framework and various descriptive facts. So if the Nazi’s moral framework is coherent, such a statement could be true for them. But this is not what Rorty argues at all: genocide is always, absolutely wrong. Importantly, it is wrong *whether or not the claim “sometimes genocide is morally commendable” is justifiable to a particular audience*. The Nazis’ moral framework may provide justification for such claims—but so much the worse for the Nazis, and for their appalling standards of justification. In short, Rorty would endorse the view:

For any moral agent A and moral statement S, if A accepts S then *whether or not S is justified* is fixed only by A’s moral framework (insofar as it is shared by A’s audience or community) and the descriptive facts relevant to S.

This, however, is *not* the FRT, because justification by someone else’s standards is a far cry from truth.

For Rorty, the truth value of the statement “sometimes genocide is morally commendable” is fixed by *our* moral framework, not the Nazi’s, even if the Nazi is the one making the claim to an audience of other Nazis. This is because ‘justification is relative to time and place, and truth is not’ (Rorty 1976, 322-323). This is an extremely basic, but incredibly important claim: we only claim that something is true if we think it is true.⁹² The function of the word “true” to *endorse* claims. We make moral judgments about the actions of people with different moral frameworks, and especially people such as Nazis, because we believe that our epistemic and moral standards are right (or, insofar as they are wrong, they are wrong by the lights of better possible communities). ‘No one [...] Except for the occasional cooperative freshman [...] says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good’ (Rorty [1980] 1982, 166), even if they are equally justified to different epistemic communities.

⁹² Barring cases like lying, acting, etc.

All three of the critics we have examined share a misunderstanding: they preserve a version of the appearance-reality distinction that Rorty wants to reject, and they read Rorty as if he is also preserving it. They accuse Rorty of holding the relativist view that “It *appears* that Nazi crimes are absolutely wrong, because you they are wrong *for us*, but *for the Nazi* they are right.” In other words, they treat relativism as a theory of the way things *really are*: morality *really is* relative to a framework, and only *appears to be* absolute. But, Rorty writes, “To accuse postmodernism [or ironism] of relativism is to try to put a metanarrative in the postmodernist’s mouth” ([1983] 1991, 202). The ironist does not hold that morality *really is* relative, but rather that questions about what *really is* moral and what merely *appears to us* to be moral make no sense. We should either work from where we are—from our own epistemic practices—or we should come up with better epistemic practices.

3.4.4 T-ironism and the expanding *ethnos*

We are now in a position to discuss why T-ironism, and not just P-ironism, is so important to Rorty. This issue is the key point of disagreement between me and Gutting, who writes that Rorty’s “moral ironism”—Gutting’s term for the kind of ironism that goes beyond simple antifoundationalism, which I have been calling T-ironism—is clearly just his own preference’ (1999, 65). In this section and the next, I will respond to such challenges⁹³ by arguing that T-ironism serves an important and useful function in Rorty’s political vision and, in particular, that it shows him the way out of what I will call the “paradox of ethnocentrism.”

It is, to put it mildly, surprising to hear a *defence* of ethnocentrism, especially from a cosmopolitan liberal such as Rorty. After all, isn’t ethnocentrism one of the key vices of the “rational Nazi” who we have taken as our foil?

Some uneasiness may remain even if one reads Rorty’s clarification that he thinks ethnocentrism is not *commendable*, but *inescapable*, and that all he is trying to say is that we should be ‘more *frankly* ethnocentric, and less *professedly* universalist’ ([1997] 2007, 55, emphasis mine, cf. 1991a, 15). Unless Rorty can find a way to save what is good in universalism—such as respect for those different from oneself, a commitment to overcoming prejudice, and so on—such clarifications may read like admissions of defeat for the cosmopolitan project Rorty takes himself to defend.

Rorty invents the T-ironist to resolve this tension between ethnocentrism and liberalism. Specifically, the components of ironism that I have been calling “T-ironism” are a direct response to this problem. As a philosopher, Rorty is frankly ethnocentric, but as a liberal, he abhors ethnocentrism. He is *frankly*, but not *proudly*, ethnocentric. ‘We [liberals] would rather die than be ethnocentric,’ Rorty writes, ‘but ethnocentrism is precisely the conviction that one would rather die than share certain beliefs’ ([1986] 1991b, 203). I call this the *paradox of ethnocentrism*, after Karl Popper’s “paradox of tolerance”: the paradoxical position that defending tolerance requires being intolerant of intolerance (Popper 1945, 226n4). Similarly, the paradox of ethnocentrism results from the fact that one can only oppose ethnocentrism by ethnocentrically defending one’s own opposition to ethnocentrism.

Let us return to Rorty’s three-point definition of ironism. I have been arguing that the first point—that the ironist has radical and continuing doubts about her final vocabulary—

⁹³ For a similar challenge, cf. Pettegrew 2000, 107-108.

extends only to some ironists, who go beyond *philosophical* ironism to an ironist *temperament*. These doubts do not typically arise from argument. They arise from encounters with other final vocabularies, or “re-descriptions” of aspects of their own.⁹⁴ For this reason, the ironist is typically less interested in philosophy than in ‘the disciplines which specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic [...] In particular, novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language’ (*CIS* 94). Ironist “doubts” come from these sources rather than classical sceptical arguments. T-ironists seek to expand their knowledge of human possibility by getting to know other people with different vocabularies and values and, in doing so, discover the contingency of their own on more than an abstract, philosophical level. For this reason, ‘Ironists read literary critics, and take them as moral advisers, simply because such critics have an exceptionally large range of acquaintance’ (*CIS* 80).

The T-ironist’s “radical and continuing doubts about her own final vocabulary” are not doubts about whether her vocabulary is justified. As we saw in our discussion of Rorty’s “vocabulary” concept, justification can only happen according to the norms *within* a final vocabulary, so it makes no sense to talk about a vocabulary *itself* being justified. Rather, ironist doubts are doubts about whether she is missing something: whether there are things that she would see better if she adopted a different vocabulary. The theme of the cruelty we cause unintentionally recurs throughout *CIS*, and especially in chapter 7, in which Rorty offers a reading of Nabokov’s *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* as exploring exactly this fear—to Rorty, Nabokov’s genius is his ability to write about the ‘particular form of cruelty’ that comes from ‘incuriosity’ into how things seem to other people (*CIS* 157-158).

Similarly, the T-ironist is concerned that she may be missing something beautiful or rewarding: sources of meaning and joy that she isn’t currently able to appreciate. In a later article, Rorty writes that the inspirational value of great works of art (and, one can reasonably assume, with new and surprising vocabularies) consists precisely in their ability ‘to recontextualize much of what you previously thought you knew’ ([1996] 1998, 133). Although Gutting writes that the ironist’s fascination with other final vocabularies is ‘better construed as a matter of aesthetic fascination than of ethical worry’ (1999, 64), I would rather put the point that it is *both at once*. By being fascinated about the ways that other people describe their own lives—the surprising, yet coherent sets of beliefs and desires different kinds of people live by—she will also be better equipped to avoid being cruel to them.

This, however, is not my main disagreement with Gutting. Rather, I disagree substantially with his claim in the following passage:

[Rorty claims that] there is special ethical value in challenging and enriching one’s perspective with those of others. Rorty is, of course, entitled to this view as a basis for his own private project of self-creation. He presents it, however, as part of the commitment of his liberalism. [...] Rorty confuses ironism as a specific private attitude of those especially interested in exploring alternative ways of thinking and living with ironism as an essential component of liberalism. Nothing Rorty says supports anything more than the latter merely epistemic ironism; the former, moral ironism is clearly just his own preference. (1999, 64-65)

⁹⁴ For Rorty, there is no principled way to divide an encounter with another vocabulary from a re-description of one’s own (cf. [1988] 1991d, 107-108).

While I agree that Rorty thinks that there is special ethical value in acquainting oneself with different vocabularies, and that he should have distinguished between two separate characters in his description of the “ironist,” I resist the notion that “moral,” or T-ironism, is merely a preference. I will argue that while it is not essential that every liberal (or even every liberal intellectual) be a T-ironist, it is essential to antifoundationalist liberalism that there *be* a significant number of T-ironists.⁹⁵ This is because of the essential role of “thick description” in resolving the paradox of ethnocentrism.

Gutting writes, correctly, that ‘Pragmatic liberalism requires a balanced appreciation of both the mundane and the *outré*, and neither component can claim special privilege over the other’ (1999, 66). However, he contends, Rorty’s characterisation of the ironist identifies her entirely with the *outré* end of this spectrum. Rorty, he argues, takes his own interest in diverse final vocabularies and in poetic self-creation as essential to the project of liberalism. To deal with this criticism, and to get straight what the role of ironism is in Rorty’s liberalism, I will briefly turn to Rorty’s paper ‘On Ethnocentrism’ ([1986] 1991b), which deals with the importance of appreciating diversity to liberalism.

In ‘On Ethnocentrism,’ Rorty argues that adopting universalist liberal moral principles is only half of the picture when it comes to creating his liberal utopia. Such principles are limited and abstract unless we are also attentive to how they interface with people’s lives. He describes those who expand our sense of human possibility—in a manner strongly reminiscent of the T-ironist of *CIS*—as ‘specialists in particularity’, and claims they include ‘historians, novelists, ethnographers, and muckraking journalists’ ([1986] 1991b, 207). Such people ‘insist that there are people out there whom society has failed to notice’ (Ibid., 206), who either are not being protected by our supposedly universally applied principles of morality and justice, or who are harmed by our institutions. The T-ironist’s fear, but also her fascination, concerns the idea that she has missed or misunderstood those neglected people, who she (or her community’s practices) might be harming, but who she also might be able to learn something from.

‘[T]he moral tasks of liberal democracy’, Rorty writes, ‘are divided between the agents of love and the agents of justice. In other words, such a democracy employs and empowers both connoisseurs of diversity and guardians of universality’ (Ibid.). We need both those who are deeply fascinated with the manifold ways in which humans make sense of their lives, and those who are committed to principles of impartiality, fairness and procedural justice. On my reading, the T-ironist is just such an “agent of love”—someone who enlarges our sympathies, our moral imaginations, and our awareness of how we are affecting other people.

The agents of love, however, have a privileged position in Rorty’s liberalism for two reasons. The first, simpler reason is just that our metaphysical prejudices have led us to overlook them in the past. Our desire to ground our actions in knowledge of general moral principles has overshadowed our need to understand other people. This desire, Rorty writes, reached its apotheosis in Kant’s emphasis on the categorical nature of moral imperatives (*CIS* 192), since the principle behind Kantian moral philosophy (and, Rorty claims, most other contemporary moral philosophies) is that moral principles transcend empirical circumstances. Moral philosophy, on

⁹⁵ It is not Rorty’s view, however, that *ironism* is essential to liberalism. It is perfectly coherent to be a liberal metaphysician—Rorty describes Habermas in exactly these terms. What *is* essential, however, is that in an ironist liberal culture, there should be *some* T-ironists.

this view, consists in discovering these principles and, when difficult cases arise, determining which principles to apply.⁹⁶

Rorty's view—and this is the second reason for privileging the agents of love—is that this Kantian account gets the ordering all wrong. Moral progress does not consist in greater approximation to a moral truth, a set of principles and rules which logically and psychologically precede thick empirical knowledge of other people. Rather, moral imagination comes first: 'Reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken' (2006b, 378). One of the central claims of *CIS* is that the engine of cultural change is "redescription" rather than reason: 'the ironist thinks of logic as ancillary to dialectic, whereas the metaphysician thinks of dialectic as a species of rhetoric, which in turn is a shoddy substitute for logic.'⁹⁷ It was, for example, a gradual increase in powerful people's ability to imaginatively identify with enslaved people that led to the abolition of slavery—not the abstract but sincere belief that "all men are created equal" which, after all, was held by slave-owners such as Jefferson.

It is for this reason that Rorty's praise of liberal (T-) ironism is more than a mere preference for the *outré*. T-ironism is essential to the moral progress of post-metaphysical liberalism, because it is only by enlarging our sympathies and hopes through imaginative identification and redescription that we can meaningfully improve our principles. The universalism espoused by the agents of justice can only be realised by the work of the agents of love.

It is this aspect of T-ironism that makes it essential to Rorty's response to the paradox of ethnocentrism. In the introduction to *ORT*, Rorty praises liberalism in the following terms:

the liberal culture of recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantage of ethnocentrism. This is to be open to encounters with other actual or possible cultures, and to make this openness central to its self-image. This culture is an *ethnos* which prides itself on its suspicion of ethnocentrism—on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters, rather than on its possession of truth. (1991a, 2)

The outcome of this project is the ironist temperament: the constant suspicion of any sense that we have "got things right" once and for all. It is likely this more limited version of ironism that led Rorty to call it *ironism*: the ironist would rather die than give up her most fundamental beliefs, but she is also committed to understanding those who reject them so as to enlarge her community's moral imagination. The T-ironist is *both* committed to her principles *and* able to imaginatively suspend of them in the name of curiosity. It is not the case that she is ironically detached, but rather than she is constantly seeking ways to revise and improve on her supposedly "final" vocabulary. 'Expanding the range of our present "we," [...] is one of the two projects which an ironist liberal takes to be ends in themselves, the other being self-invention'.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ On this topic, cf. Rorty (1994) 1999c and (2004) 2007b.

⁹⁷ *CIS* 78. Rorty defines "dialectic" as 'the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another [...] and thus the partial substitution of redescription for inference' (Ibid.).

⁹⁸ *CIS* 64. This quote is alluding to Rorty's distinction between the "public" and the "private" spheres, which is central to much of the argument of *CIS*. The conclusion of Part 2 is that ironist philosophers should "privatise" the aspects of their work that seek sublimity and self-creation—in other words, they should not turn them into *political* proposals for revolution (cf. Rorty 1996c). Whether this account is plausible is beyond the scope of this thesis—persuasive critiques can be found in Koopman 2007b, Lynch 2007 and Fraser (1988) 1989. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the public-private divide can be safely ignored. I will not be discussing self-creation or the yearning

In summary, then, developing the ironist temperament—even more than endorsing the ironist *philosophy*—helps us to avoid the three vices that the metaphysician risked falling into: intolerance, complacency, and hostility to linguistic and cultural innovation. *Tolerance*, claims Rorty, is ‘the most important virtue of the ironist’ ([1998] 2006, 80). The T-ironist’s curiosity, sensitivity and imaginative ability allows her to reject the idea that her culture is more “rational” than others (Rorty [1997] 2007), and to better recognise when her own practices are cruel and harmful. ‘For the liberal ironist, skill at imaginative imagination does the work which the liberal metaphysician would like to have done by a specifically moral motivation’ (*CIS* 93). Nevertheless, her acknowledgement of the ethnocentrism of all vocabularies allows her to stick to *her* guns, and to refuse to tolerate intolerance.

Secondly, by familiarising herself even with vocabularies that seem morally abhorrent, she can get a sense of how they might make appalling things seem attractive. ‘Ironism,’ Rorty writes, ‘results from awareness of the power of redescription’ (*CIS* 89), and this awareness can only be developed through experience and acquaintance. Such awareness makes the possibility of our politics turning sharply in the wrong direction far more palpable to the T-ironist, and she—unlike the metaphysician—has no reassurance that such turns will be temporary aberrations that will fail to accord with common sense.

Thirdly, the T-ironist, through her encounters such a wide variety of final vocabularies, will sometimes take new descriptions on board. She specializes not only in understanding the vocabulary of others, but also in incorporating them into her own. Rather than wanting to escape her final vocabulary to see what grounds it, the image she favours is ‘that of our minds gradually growing larger and stronger and more interesting by the addition of new options—new candidates for belief and desire, phrased in new vocabularies’ (Rorty 1991a, 14). While she is not a relativist, she is aware (and happy) that encounters with strange individuals and vocabularies will cause her to reweave her own web of beliefs and desires (cf. Rorty [1988] 1991d, 110). Since the T-ironist knows that her vocabulary lacks superhuman sanction, she is always curious about what other humans have to offer—whether they have dreams that she did not previously understand, or better means for achieving her own dreams. Unlike the metaphysician, she never wants to arrive at a framework that can categorise anything or anyone she encounters.⁹⁹ Rather, she wishes to use such encounters to recontextualize her own beliefs and desires (Rorty [1996] 1998, 133). Her dream is to synthesise her encounters with individuals and vocabularies into something beautiful, to embark upon the ‘creation of ever more various and multicolored [cultural] artifacts’ (*CIS* 54). The T-ironist goes further than the P-ironist: while the latter is not hostile to experimentation, the former embraces it. Her heroes are ‘the strong poet and the revolutionary’ (*CIS* 61), and her imaginative gifts empower her to develop new vocabularies for making sense of her own life.

3.5 Conclusion to Chapter 3

In this chapter, we have seen that Rorty responds to Sellars’ critique of givenism, Quine’s critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction, and Davidson’s critique of the concept of a conceptual scheme, by replacing these vocabularies with what Brandom has called a ‘vocabulary

for “sublimity” that he wishes to privatise. Rather, I will be discussing the public side of the ironist imagination: the side which identifies with others, weaves together different interests, and thinks up concrete new proposals for new words and practices that will make our society less cruel.

⁹⁹ Cf. Rorty’s discussion of “knowingness” in (1996) 1998.

vocabulary' (2000b, 168 [§7]): a way of talking that treats social webs of belief and desire as interdependent wholes, rather than static frameworks. In *CIS*, Rorty uses the vocabulary to recommend a new self-image to the philosopher: that of a restless, intellectually curious individual who seeks to synthesise and enrich her vocabulary with other people's rather than grounding it in something universal or superhuman. She is temperamentally and intellectually opposed to those "metaphysicians" who seek to bypass the task of understanding other humans by discovering an authority beyond them.

In the next chapter, we will examine the relationship between Rorty's critique of authoritarianism and his Sellarsian critique of givenism. Givenism, Rorty will argue, is an authoritarian concept, because it posits a kind of epistemic authority that exceeds our social and epistemic practices: the given. Furthermore, he will claim that by translating our philosophical questions about experience into questions about language and shared social practices, we can avoid this kind of authoritarianism without significant loss. This is the claim that I will argue against in chapters 5 and 6.

The ironist vision of moral progress as imaginative redescription will also be central to those two chapters. As part of project of translation from experience-talk to language-talk, he will argue that the social role of "understanding someone's experience" can be replicated without loss of anything worth saving by understanding their final vocabulary—the specialism of the ironist. In chapters 5 and 6, I will interrogate this view, and argue against Rorty that we can—and must—learn to talk about experience without being authoritarians.

4. RORTY'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST EXPERIENCE

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will begin to deal with the most important consequence of Rorty's reading of Sellars and his critique of authoritarianism: his rejection of philosophical discussions of "experience." Many authors have noted the radicalism of Rorty's reading of Sellars.¹ Rorty's response is far more extreme than Sellars'—in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars does not argue that philosophers should *reject* experience-talk, but only that the epistemological role given to immediate experience by empiricists is untenable. In his later work, he even goes so far as to endorse the existence of "sensa," which have the ontological status of sense data minus their epistemological role (SSIS). Rorty, on the other hand, takes this further step, having been inspired by Sellars to 'deny the existence of qualia' entirely (Rorty 1997a, 8n8), rather than simply detaching them from epistemology. It is on this radical Sellarsianism that Rorty built the bedrock of his influence, and in particular, his controversial and influential objections to classical, "radically empiricist" pragmatists such as James and Dewey. In this chapter, I will give a full account of Rorty's arguments against empiricism; in the next two, I will respond to them.

This chapter will fall into three parts. Part one will delineate the different senses of the term "experience" discussed by Rorty, and which of these senses he considers "philosophical" and hence dispensable. Part two, the bulk of the chapter, covers the tripartite argument Rorty gives for renouncing our use of these philosophical senses of the term. Part three provides an example of these arguments in practice, in his interventions into feminist theory. This also serves the purpose of setting up my argument in the next chapter, in which I will argue against Rorty in favour of reincorporating some kinds of experience-talk in philosophy, drawing on feminist critics of Rorty such as Sonia Kruks and Linda Alcoff, as well as social epistemologist Miranda Fricker's account of radical hermeneutical injustice, and—in the final chapter—Gilles Deleuze's distinction between expression and representation.

4.1 Three senses of "Experience"²

Before I can talk about Rorty's rejection of philosophical discussions "experience," I must clarify what he takes the word to mean. The term "experience" has three relevant meanings for Rorty's critique and my own response, which roughly correspond to three Ancient Greek terms—a connection Rorty frequently makes regarding two of them, but not the third. These terms are *empeiria* (ἐμπειρία), *phainomena* (φαινόμενα) and *aisthesis* (αἴσθησις), which may be preliminarily translated as "life-experience," "appearance" and "feeling" respectively.

¹ E.g. by Brandom 2013a, 91 and 2000b, 180; Koopman 2007a; Sachs 2013, 691-692.

² I would like to thank Bethany Parsons for her helpful guidance regarding the meanings of ancient Greek terms I have discussed in this section.

Typically, Rorty identifies what he considers to be the unproblematic, everyday sense of experience with *empeiria*, found in phrases like “experience on the job” (*PMN* 150). Rorty has no issue in principle with talking about experience *qua empeiria*, since its place within the various language-games we play is established, useful and specific. To put the point another way, Rorty sees no significant drawbacks of us continuing to use “experience” in this way, although (as we will see in §4.2.3.4 and §5.1) he objects to using it as a basis for philosophical theories, or thematising it in philosophical analyses. Rorty is fine with questions such as “has he experienced oppression?”, but he is hostile to questions like “what is the role of experiences of oppression in the creation of knowledge?” or “is our language adequate to describe these experiences?”, even though these are philosophical questions *about* the unproblematic, everyday sense of “experience.”³

The distinctively philosophical (and therefore problematic) sense of “experience,” for Rorty, is aligned with the Greek “*phainomena*.” What makes *phainomena* problematic is that, unlike *empeiria*, its continued importance lies less in its role in specific language-games than in distinctively philosophical metavocabularies of cultural arbitration. *Phainomena*, according to Rorty, is a ‘term of philosophical art’ which has ‘come to be the epistemologists’ name for their subject matter’ (*PMN* 150). To Rorty, *phainomenon* is an essentially *contrastive* term—appearance *rather than* reality, or subjectivity *rather than* objectivity.⁴ This, he contends, is ‘The philosophically interesting sense—the only sense relevant to epistemology—of “experience”’ ([1994] 1998b, 296). In other words, Rorty believes that when philosophers have thematised “experience” it has almost always been a means of thematising the appearance-reality distinction which, as we saw in the previous chapter, he believes has proven untenable and authoritarian. Furthermore, the appearance-reality distinction made by *phainomena*-talk is more cumbersome than the everyday distinction between getting things right and getting things wrong; it goes further than the everyday distinction by encouraging a representationalist interpretation of this activity, in which “getting things right” means getting our appearances into a relationship of conformity or isomorphism with reality (*PMN* 84).

In the rare cases when philosophers haven’t used “experience” to mean something like *phainomena*—for example, when Dewey attempted to develop a philosophically rich understanding of experience which had more in common with *empeiria*—Rorty sees them as having engaged in a hopeless task. This is because Rorty believes that the *phainomena* sense in philosophy is so dominant that any attempt to redefine experience will be read by others as simply a variant on the appearance-reality distinction ([1994] 1998b, 296). I analyse this argument in more detail later this chapter (§4.2.3.4), and I will examine whether this task *is* hopeless in chapter 5.

Finally, there is *aisthēsis*, which I am loosely translating as “feeling” or “sensibility.” To my knowledge Rorty never discusses this Greek term, but I will appeal to it in my argument in the next chapter (§5.4). This sense of “experience” is captured in contemporary discussions of qualia, raw feels, or “what it’s like.”⁵ This is the experience of which “Mary,” the neuroscientist from Frank Jackson’s famous thought experiment (1982, 130), supposedly has a new type when

³ Rorty’s stance here is similar to his deflationary view of truth. Despite Rorty’s opposition to philosophical analyses of the nature of “truth,” he happily acknowledges that ‘Everybody knows that the difference between true and false beliefs is as important as that between nourishing and poisonous foods’ ([2004] 2007c, 89).

⁴ In Greek, Rorty contrasts *phainomena* to *ontōs ontā* (beings *qua* being; cf. Aristotle 1984b, 1025^b1).

⁵ Rorty treats these concepts as fundamentally similar in ‘Cultural Politics and the Existence of God’ ([2002] 2007a, 12).

she steps out of her colourless room. Rorty usually treats *aisthēsis*-talk as a form of *phainomena*-talk, because he cannot see why any philosopher would choose to talk about *aisthēsis* except insofar as they are beholden to an appearance-reality distinction—in these cases, aesthetic concepts like qualia and “what-it’s-like” are just a way of talking about appearances as they are in themselves.⁶ But when he is at his most analytic, it is clear that this is not a conceptual identification for Rorty so much as a practical one: it is not that Rorty thinks that “what-it’s-like” means the same thing as “appearance,” but rather that it only has a use within the language-game built around the appearance-reality distinction.

The story behind this association can be found in Rorty’s paper ‘Contemporary Philosophy of Mind’ (1982d). In this paper, Rorty outlines the following intellectual history of the discipline of the philosophy of mind. The mind-body distinction can be traced back, he claims, to Descartes’ *epistemological* distinction between the immediately known and the inferentially known (329), which gives rise to an *ontological* distinction between mind (which is immediately known) and extension. This distinction is mapped onto the Platonic appearance-reality distinction, with the immediately known mind standing as appearance to the mediately known external world (339 and *PMN*, Ch.1, esp. 57ff.). This gives rise to veil-of-ideas scepticism, and post-Cartesian metaphysics is obsessed with the project of overcoming that scepticism (329). The project of the philosophy of mind was, until Ryle, concerned with the question of whether this distinction between the immediately known and the inferentially known *had to* give rise to an ontological distinction—in other words, whether the immediately known things like sensations were of the same ontological kind as the mediately known things like tables. It was only with the Rylean revolution, and especially with its hero Sellars, that the underlying *epistemological* distinction was challenged (329-330). The philosophers of mind who take questions about qualia, raw feels and philosophical zombies seriously (such as Nagel and Searle) are those who wish to retain the epistemological distinction between the immediately known and the inferentially known—that is, between the given and the postulated (339-340)—even though these concepts only directly concern it *feeling* like something to be in a certain state rather than such states having any kind of representative content. In other words, although *aisthēsis* may be conceptually distinguished from *phainomena*, Rorty sees no use for philosophical discussions of *aisthēsis* except in the fleshing out of a language game built on *phainomena*-talk.⁷

Nevertheless, this sense of “experience”—*aisthēsis*—can be found in any theory of mind or thought insofar as it is conceptually irreducible to the epistemological appearance-reality distinction. It is not even confined to modern debates about the existence of qualia or the possibility of zombies in analytic philosophy of mind. For example, I will argue in chapter 6 that aesthetic experience is essential to Gilles Deleuze’s anti-representationalist empiricism, despite his lack of interest in epistemological questions about the nature and sources of knowledge and his rejection of the representationalist understanding of thought and sensation. Although Rorty does not thematise the distinction between *aisthēsis* and *phainomena*—and frequently treats *aisthēsis*-talk as simply an extension of *phainomena*-talk (e.g. *PMN* 84ff. and [2002] 2007a)—we shall see that he

⁶ Cf. *PMN* 30 and Rorty (1993) 1998b (in which Rorty moves freely between talking about “the intrinsic nature of consciousness,” “qualia,” and “appearances”).

⁷ In a 1994 paper, Rorty is explicit about this conflation: he writes that he is unable ‘to take the notion of “conscious experience distinct from the having of a belief” seriously’ (1994c, 124). But the reason he gives for this view is that he sees the alternative as ‘the Lockean notion of words as names of ideas—of words as able to have meaning by naming experiences’ (Ibid.). While he cannot take this latter view seriously, he does not even countenance that there may be some (perhaps useless, absurd or confused) sense to the word “experience” that is distinct from questions of meaning and justification altogether—something like Sellars’ “*sensa*.”

has *distinct* arguments against the advisability of appealing to *aisthēsis*-experience and *phainomena*-experience in philosophy. One may, of course, talk about one's *aisthēsis*-experience outside of philosophy (by, for example, talking about how awful one's toothache feels), but Rorty sees no non-representationalist use in analysing or thematising it within philosophical discussions.

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to *empeiria* as “lived experience” or “life experience,” *phainomena* as “phenomenal experience,” and *aisthēsis* as “aesthetic experience.”⁸ In the following section, when I discuss Rorty's arguments for rejecting “experience,” I will be discussing a composite of aesthetic experience and phenomenal experience but not lived experience (except where otherwise noted). Then, in chapter 5, I will argue in favour of retaining *aisthēsis*-talk and *empeiria*-talk in philosophy, but not *phainomena*-talk. This will be a rejection of Rorty's view, which opposes asking philosophical questions about any of these forms of experience.

4.2 Rorty's three arguments for rejecting philosophical experience-talk

Rorty's arguments for rejecting experience fall into three kinds, although Rorty never breaks them down in the way that I will. I shall call Rorty's three arguments the *anti-givenist* argument, the *authoritarianism* argument, and the *replaceability* argument. I will discuss each independently here, and respond to them in the next two chapters. In brief, they are:

1. **The Anti-Givenist Argument.** The philosophical discussion of aesthetic or phenomenal experience encourages the givenist confusion between causation and justification (cf. Ch. 2, §2.1.3), and often entails it.
2. **The Authoritarianism Argument.** Any philosophy which appeals to any form of experience to motivate changes in linguistic usage or to justify contentious claims is philosophically “authoritarian” (cf. Ch. 3, §3.3.3), unless there is an established role in our shared epistemic practices for such appeals. This is because it involves the appeal to a non-human authority that has the power to override the authority of one's peers, whether or not they recognise it.
3. **The Replaceability Argument.** Any useful function played by the philosophical concept of experience—in any of its three forms—can be played at least as well by discussions of our shared social and linguistic practices. This move has the advantage of shifting debate to a terrain which does not encourage givenism and which makes it easier to avoid authoritarianism. Any *unique* function of philosophical experience-talk turns out, on analysis, either to be of no conceivable use or to presuppose a form of givenism or authoritarianism.

Broadly, these arguments are *pragmatic*—they concern the question of whether experience-talk is useful for our metaphilosophical or non-philosophical ends rather than whether “experience” exists in itself, or what its intrinsic character is. As I discussed in my introduction, in his later writings Rorty claims that pragmatic arguments are the only ones that he really cares about, and that his rejection of experience is more for the sake of freeing us from authoritarianism than givenism and more motivated by the ends of human freedom than conceptual coherence.⁹ But even in his writings of the 1980's, Rorty sometimes justifies his allegiance to the anti-empiricist

⁸ I have spelled “aesthetic” with an “i” rather than an “e” to signal that aesthetic experience is a different concept to what is commonly called *aesthetic* experience, the experience of art and beauty.

⁹ Rorty specifically characterises his arguments about experience and the broader philosophy of mind and cognition in this light in 2010b, 585.

“Ryle-[Sellars-]Dennett tradition” on metaphilosophical grounds, citing its service to culture as a whole (1982c, 187 and 1982d, 326 and 346).

That said, it is also important to note that arguments 1 and 3 rely on Sellarsian *non-pragmatic* arguments that many appeals to experience (especially the most common variety, empiricist-givenist appeals to experience) involve a conceptual confusion between causation and justification. The replaceability argument is bolstered by Rorty’s philosophy of language, whose roots we have seen in Davidson, Quine and Sellars, and which we will examine in chapter 6. It would be a mistake, then, to see Rorty’s critiques of philosophical experience-talk as entirely *external*, despite his cultural-political motivations for hoping for its demise. Rather, he sees empiricism in philosophy as *both* harmful to culture at large *and* as self-undermining on its own terms ([1977] 1982, 76). His critiques, consequently, aim to be persuasive *both* to those philosophers who thematise experience (or qualia, the given, or the phenomenal), regardless of their politics, *and* to philosophers who share his cultural political motivations, regardless of their philosophical methodology.

4.2.1 The Anti-Givenist Argument

Rorty’s reasons for rejecting philosophical discussions of experience are put forward most comprehensively in *PMN*. Here, following Sellars, Rorty accuses Kant and the British empiricists of confusing a causal account of the emergence of beliefs with a justification of those beliefs.¹⁰ This confusion is what Sellars calls “the Myth of the Given,” which I discussed in chapter 2. To recap, this “myth” results from a failure to distinguish between the space of causes and ‘the logical space of reasons’ (*EPM* 76 [§36]). Only entities in the logical space of reasons can enter into normative relations with each other, such as justification or contradiction. Consequently, only entities within the logical space of reasons can be called “beliefs” or “knowledge.” An account of justification, according to both Sellars and Rorty, is irreducible to a causal analysis of the mind or brain; such a reduction would be a version of the naturalistic fallacy¹¹—to use a phrase Rorty borrows from Davidson, ‘only a belief can justify a belief’ (Rorty 1998d, 141). A sensory episode, an event or a physical object cannot. The ‘crucial premise’ of Sellars’ argument, Rorty writes in *PMN*, is that ‘there is no such thing as a justified belief which is nonpropositional, and no such thing as justification which is not a relation between propositions’ (*PMN* 183). The mistake of Locke, Kant and 20th century empiricists was to think that beliefs are justified by something non-propositional, such as the presence of an impression in the mind or a synthesis of presentations to sense.

To Rorty, these confusions were aided and accelerated by the ambiguity of our term “experience.” This term, in its philosophical usage, is often used to refer *both* to a kind of pre-conceptual “feeling” *and* to immediate knowledge of the kind of feeling one is having (in my terms, both to the *aisthēsis* and to the *phainomenon*). For example, the ambiguous phrase “an

¹⁰ Rorty sees no important distinction between Kant’s talk of “grounding” and the empiricists’ language of causation (*PMN* 151n31). For his part, Sellars viewed Kant as a givenist (*EPM* 14 [§1]), and saw him as laying the groundwork for the overcoming of empiricist givenism, but also of succumbing to the broader givenism of innatism through his failure to analyse the process of concept acquisition (SRK 647). Cf. Redding 2019 and my section §2.2.1.

¹¹ The “naturalistic fallacy” is originally a term from ethics, which is used to characterise arguments of the form “*x* is natural/unnatural, therefore *x* is good/bad.” Such arguments make no attempt to explain *why* something’s being natural should have any bearing on whether it is good. Sellars argues in *EPM* that the Myth of the Given is based on a similar kind of fallacy in epistemology, which has the form “belief *x* is the product of a natural process of cognition, therefore belief *x* is justified” (19 [§5]).

experience of pain” could refer to the simple fact of being *in pain* (presumably something babies and animals can have) or to the awareness *that one is in pain* (which is limited to language-users).¹² Another way of putting this is that philosophers have used “experience” ambiguously between something which is known (*aisthēsis* or phenomenal character) and the event of coming to know it (its appearance to consciousness as representative *phainomenon*).¹³ This ambiguity is what allows empiricists to use “experience” as a bridge-concept between the nonpropositional and the propositional—that is, a concept that provides the link between things or events on the one hand, and beliefs on the other. Playing on this ambiguity in the concept of “experience,” empiricists make the transition by examining ‘the way in which experience (supposedly) sorts itself out, gradually changing from a [nonpropositional, aesthetic] buzzing confusion to a coherent [propositional, phenomenal] inner discourse’ (Rorty [1994] 1998b, 292n8). If one removes this ambiguity between feeling and knowledge, the ability of experience to act as a bridge-concept disappears. Experience ceases to be itself justificatory, and must be relegated to the status of a mere ‘cause of the occurrence of a justification’ (1998d, 141).

Importantly, nothing Rorty has said so far gives us reason to reject experience-talk; only to clarify it. In *PMN*, Rorty acknowledges that:

We can take the Sellars-Quine attitude toward knowledge while cheerfully “countenancing” raw feels, a priori concepts, innate ideas, sense-data, propositions, and anything else which a causal explanation of human behavior might find it helpful to postulate. What we *cannot* do is take knowledge of these “inner” or “abstract” entities as *premises* from which our knowledge of other entities is normally inferred, and without which such knowledge would be “ungrounded.” (*PMN* 177)

Here Rorty is clear that the concept of experience is not necessarily *logically* incoherent. One can retain a whole menagerie of empiricist concepts (e.g., raw feels and sense data) without falling into the Myth of the Given, so long as one’s experiential concepts are not given *justificatory* roles. It is a ‘sound intuition’, he writes elsewhere in *PMN*, ‘that raw feels are as good particulars as tables or archangels or electrons—as good inhabitants of the world, as good candidates for ontological status’ (*PMN* 107). Abandoning givenism does not require that one abandon raw feels or become an eliminative materialist (or even a materialist).¹⁴ One can have all the mental concepts one likes, so long as one’s account of mental causation is rigorously distinguished from one’s account of the justification of beliefs or claims. What Rorty is keen to rule out is a view which he calls “principle P,” the view that reports of our mental states are justified by a particular kind of *thing* being presented to us; or, as he puts it, ‘Whenever we make an incorrigible report on a state of ourselves, there must be a property we are presented with which induces us to make the report’ (*PMN* 84). But it is enough for him for the *justificatory* relationship between things and

¹² Or perhaps limited to beings which are capable of conceptual thought, if one thinks (unlike Rorty) that this is broader than the sphere of language-users.

¹³ Rorty treats this ambiguity as essential to any discussion of “experience” that treats it as something mental, arguing in Rorty (1970) 2014a that the only grounds for treating experience in this way is that it is incorrigibly known (or, as he puts it in *PMN*, its ‘appearance *is* its reality’ [30]).

¹⁴ Rorty endorses materialism for other reasons in *PMN*. Here he abandons his earlier position of eliminative materialism (*PMN* 119-120n23), which he had put forward a decade earlier (Rorty [1965] 2014). From *PMN* onward, his philosophy of mind remains relatively stable: he endorses ‘a materialism which is not an identity theory in *any* sense’, and is hence neither eliminativist nor reductionist (*PMN* 119; cf. Rorty [1987] 1991b and Rorty 2004 for expressions of this position). However, as Neil Gascoigne has pointed out, Rorty’s position is better understood as a refusal to attempt to find mind-body problem problematic than an endorsement of a particular solution (Gascoigne 2016, 57-59).

reports to be severed—one does not need to reject the existence of the things (*PMN* 101n11-12), or even the view that they have a causal relation with the reports.

Despite this, Rorty argues in *PMN* and elsewhere that upon closer analysis a whole host of apparently non-givenist forms of philosophical experience-talk which accept the existence of such mental “things” either slide into givenism or into incoherence and irrelevance. Let us turn to what might appear to be the least givenist concept in this area, qualia. Qualia might seem an odd target for Rorty’s Sellarsian critique of givenism—after all, they are rarely treated as carrying *information* (unlike, for example, sense data). Rather, qualia are supposedly what’s left when all the relational, describable and epistemological properties of a mental episode are subtracted. They are explicitly nonrepresentational; they are pure *aisthēsis* and pure subjectivity.¹⁵ This is why, supposedly, Mary doesn’t know anything about the qualia that go with red sense contents—all that she can learn from her “external” position are their relational properties, and not their phenomenal ones. Yet, all three of Rorty’s arguments against philosophical experience-talk are applied to the case of qualia.

The anti-givenist argument against qualia appears in the article ‘Daniel Dennett on Intrinsicity’ (Rorty [1993] 1998b). Here Rorty discusses a classical qualophilic argument made by John Searle in his *Intentionality* (1983) against various qualophobic views (including Dennett’s)—views which would deny that ‘there really are such things as intrinsic mental phenomena which cannot be reduced to something else or eliminated by some kind of re-definition.’¹⁶ As we saw in the previous chapter (§3.3.3), this idea that there is something ‘which cannot be [...] eliminated by some kind of re-definition’ is the paradigmatic view of the Metaphysician, who insists that our ability to redescribe is ‘based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility [...] which is itself beyond the reach of play.’¹⁷ By rejecting the possibility that qualia may be reduced or eliminated by redefinition, Searle is essentially making just this move. He is placing qualia beyond the reach of play.

Searle introduces his complaint against views that reject his stable conception of qualia with the claim that ‘no one ever came to these [qualophobic] views by a close scrutiny of the phenomena in question’ (Searle 1983, 263). Rorty’s response here is that Searle’s point is question-begging in favour of givenism, since it assumes that when we introspect we in fact encounter something that is immune to redescription: Searle ‘presupposes just the idea of intrinsic, nonrelational features [...] that were clearly and directly scrutable, right up there on the screen of the Cartesian Theater, before you ever learned to talk’ ([1993] 1998b, 100). Furthermore, even though they are supposedly pure intrinsicity, Searle is assuming that when we introspect we can acquire *knowledge* about what kinds of things qualia are.¹⁸

There are two ways in which Searle’s claim could be cashed out. The first way would be the interpretation that “close scrutiny” of qualia would give us thick knowledge about their nature (e.g., we could recognise what is intrinsic to our experience of redness that separates it from our experience of blueness, or we could learn the ways in which visual qualia are naturally

¹⁵ I am using *qualia* in the third and fourth senses ascribed to the term by Tye (2018, §1), which I take to be most representative of the technical use of the term that Rorty is targeting. These are ‘Qualia as intrinsic non-representational properties’ and/or ‘Qualia as intrinsic, nonphysical, ineffable properties’.

¹⁶ Searle 1983, 262. Here Searle is talking not only about qualia, but also intentional states; nevertheless, I will restrict my discussion of this example here to the case of qualia. Regarding the association of the intentional with the phenomenal, cf. *PMN* 22-32 (Ch. 1, §2).

¹⁷ Derrida (1967) 2001, 352; this passage is quoted by Rorty in *CIS* 25n2.

¹⁸ Rorty reads and responds to Thomas Nagel in a similar way in 1982d, 339-340.

distinct from aural qualia). This would be a classic case of the givenism attacked by Sellars, which holds that immediate experience is populated with discernible properties which are epistemologically (and presumably developmentally) prior to the language we use to describe them and which we learn about through introspection. This would be a case of philosophical experience-talk directly descending into givenism, and an obvious target for Rorty's anti-givenist argument against experience. The fact that any qualophiles make this kind of move when pressed supports Rorty's suspicion that they are secret givenists.¹⁹

The other alternative would be to treat our knowledge of qualia as thin—to hold that we know *that* there is a phenomenal character to all of our mental life, but to reject the givenist claims that (a) this phenomenal character is naturally divided up into different *kinds* of qualia such as aural and visual, sensory and affective, or red and blue, and (b) that qualia are a source of *knowledge*. Such a view would be compatible with Sellars, but Rorty would ask what the point of such a view was other than to save the idea that there is *something* ineffable about the mind, beyond the reach of science.²⁰

The qualophile faces a dilemma, then: either they endorse the givenist distinction between immediate and inferential knowledge (with the quale being the paradigm of immediacy); or they relegate the quale to the status of an empty placeholder for the ineffability of consciousness. This latter horn of the dilemma, Rorty writes in a late article on the mind-body problem, is likely to result in 'the subjective realm float[ing] out of ken altogether'²¹—a possibility that Rorty will embrace in his third argument against philosophical experience-talk: the replaceability argument (§4.2.3.5). But before discussing that argument, I will turn to Rorty's complaint against philosophical experience-talk: that it is not only incoherent, but authoritarian.

4.2.2 The Authoritarianism Argument

Rorty's second criticism of the concept of experience is that it supports what he calls philosophical "authoritarianism," which we examined in chapter 3. Philosophical authoritarianism, to recap, is the view that there are sources of epistemic authority that lie outside of our social and linguistic practices, and which can be appealed to in order to modify or override those practices. Fundamentally, the authoritarian thinks that these sources of authority are authoritative regardless of whether their peers recognise them or not. Such sources of authority include truth, the Will of God, the structure of reason or the empirically given.

Rorty sees his rejection of philosophical experience-talk as an element of his anti-authoritarianism. At first this might seem odd. If authoritarianism consists in the submission of human goals and purposes to a nonhuman standard, it may seem obvious that appealing to *human* experience is not an example of authoritarianism. However, this confusion vanishes if we attend to Rorty's unusual use of the terms "human" and "nonhuman." In 'Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism' and elsewhere, Rorty often contrasts "nonhuman authority" with 'consensus of our fellow humans.'²² We should not, then, take "nonhuman authority" to mean "authority deriving from nonhuman sources" but rather "authority capable of overriding unforced consensus between humans." It is in *this* sense that Rorty sees appeals to any kind of experience

¹⁹ For an expansion of this argument, cf. Dennett (1991) 1993, 402.

²⁰ Rorty suggests that philosophers of mind like Searle and Nagel are motivated by exactly this idea in 1982d, 344.

²¹ This quote is taken from Dennett 1978, 143, quoted and endorsed in Rorty 1994c, 125.

²² 1999c, 7. Cf. (1996) 1999b, 237-238 and (1996) 1999a, 155. Rorty often adds that this consensus should be "free" or "unforced" ([1996] 1999b, 237 and 1996b, 60).

as an example of authoritarianism if one's intention is to override shared epistemic standards and the consensus of one's peers, for such appeal allow one to say to one's community "you may all agree that x , but my experience tells me y , and my experience is more authoritative than your consensus, so you should all agree with me that y ."

One might respond that the above example is unproblematic, or even commonplace. What could be less authoritarian than respecting other people's testimony? But to Rorty, the claim that *my experience is more authoritative than your consensus* is far more problematic than it might seem. This is because it gets the priorities all wrong: it is not experience that is more authoritative than consensus, but consensus which decides which kinds of experience-claims are authoritative. To put this another way, whether we respect appeals to experience is up to *us*, or more specifically, it is up to the practices that we have developed in evaluating and accepting claims. It is not up to the *experience* whether it is authoritative—this would be an example of the core givenist belief that experiences carry with them the norms by which we should talk about them.

In his paper 'Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God' ([2002] 2007a), which I will talk about at greater length in chapter 6, Rorty argues that appeals to experience are analogous to appeals to religious revelation. He sees the above example as working the same way as the example "you may all agree that x , but my God tells me y , and my God is more authoritative than your consensus, so you should all agree with me that y ." Rorty's point is not that such appeals are empty, but rather that whether they are authoritative *depends* on the norms of one's community—it does not override them. To use Rorty's (perhaps somewhat dated) example:

when somebody reports experiencing an object about which the community has no reason to think her a reliable reporter, her appeal to experience will fall flat. If I say that round squares are, contrary to popular opinion, possible, because I have in fact recently encountered several such squares, nobody takes me seriously. [...] If I say that I experienced God, this may or may not be taken seriously, depending on what uses of the term "God" are current in my community. If I explain to a Christian audience that personal observation has shown me that God is, contrary to popular opinion, female, that audience will probably just laugh. But if I say that I have seen the Risen Christ in the disk of the sun on Easter morning, it is possible that I shall be viewed with respect and envy.

In short, God-reports have to live up to previous expectations, just as do reports of physical objects. They cannot, all by themselves, be used to repudiate those expectations. (Rorty [2002] 2007a, 10)

This is, for Rorty, how experience-reports work: a claim only has authority if it is *given* authority by the shared practices of a linguistic community.²³ If one makes a claim that is unlikely to be given authority (whether due to its surprising content, or due to one's social position) the only ways to make it efficacious are to appeal to other established norms of the linguistic community, to appeal to the norms of another linguistic community, or to engage in the long-term project of imagining and establishing new norms within one's community. An example of the first of these would be the Copernican scientists, who used the norm of favouring theories with greater

²³ This is a view that Rorty, following Brandom, calls the "ontological primacy of the social," and I will discuss it at length in chapter 6.

coherence and predictive accuracy to get their surprising experiential claims accepted (Rorty [2002] 2007a, 10); we will see the second and third in Rorty's account of feminism later in this chapter.

If one attempts to intellectually bypass these means of getting one's claims accepted, one is likely to be an authoritarian in Rorty's sense of the term. Just such a move was made by Searle, as we saw earlier in the chapter, when he claimed that qualia could never be reduced or eliminated by redescription, because introspection would always tell us what they were like. This move treats our experience of the intrinsic nature of qualia as something beyond consensus, and which has the authority to override it. It exemplifies the broader authoritarian conviction that some vocabularies are *right* in a more fundamental sense than their usefulness or beauty—the conviction that they 'actually get in touch with *intuition*—with a non-linguistic mode of relating to the essences of objects as opposed to simply relating these objects to other objects' (1982c, 187).

All of this can be seen as a restatement of Rorty's argument against givenism, and indeed, Rorty sees the rejection of empiricist givenism and the rejection of authoritarianism as deeply intertwined.²⁴ This is because empiricist givenism is the preeminent form of foundationalism, a doctrine that treats epistemological authority as a matter of direct apprehension. 'The problem with foundationalism' on Rorty's account, as described by Koopman, 'is that it purchases normative authority (correctness) only at the cost of buying into dogmatic authoritarianism (infallibility)' (Koopman 2011, 69). The idea that experience is *intrinsically* authoritative (i.e., the Myth of the Given), then, is clearly an authoritarian argument in Rorty's sense, since it rules out the possibility that we might choose to place normative authority elsewhere. The reason, however, that I have treated the anti-givenist argument and the authoritarianism argument separately is that the former is an *internal* critique of a specific (if dominant) form of empiricism, whereas the latter is a *metaphilosophical* critique of a more general form (cf. Rorty 1982c, 186 and 1982d, 339).

I must now turn, however, to Rorty's argument against those discussions of experience that are neither authoritarian nor givenist. These discussions will resist the idea that there is anything intrinsic about experience, and especially the idea that it is intrinsically authoritative. Rorty's paradigm case of such a view is found in James and Dewey, although I will later argue that Deleuze is also a member of this camp. Rejecting this approach to experience is the upshot of Rorty's final argument against experience, the replaceability argument.

4.2.3 The Replaceability Argument

The replaceability argument contends that nothing valuable would be lost, and much clarity would be gained, if philosophers replaced experience-talk with talk of shared social and linguistic practices. This is the most important of Rorty's three arguments, because its scope is the greatest. While the former two arguments target particularly problematic kinds of philosophical experience-talk—the cases where it becomes givenist or authoritarian—this one deals with *all* philosophical discussions of experience.

²⁴ 'If our awareness of things is always a linguistic affair, if Sellars is right that we cannot check our language against our nonlinguistic awareness, then [...] There is no authority outside of convenience for human purposes that can be appealed to in order to legitimize the use of a vocabulary. We have no duties to anything nonhuman' (Rorty 1998c, 127). However, as we saw in chapter 2, Rorty complains of Sellars' authoritarian 'residual scientism' ([1998] 1991b, 160) so it is clear that not all antigivenists are anti-authoritarians.

The authoritarianism and anti-givenist arguments brought us to the weak but plausible conclusion that philosophical experience-talk bears a significant *risk* of lapsing into givenism or authoritarianism. This is not yet sufficient to compel us to abandon philosophical experience-talk—only to compel us to be careful with it. We may yet discover that the best option is for us to continue using this vocabulary, but more mindfully. This would be to ‘hop sure-footedly along the very edge of the precipice’ of givenism, as Robert Brandom describes John McDowell as doing, ‘with the confidence and insouciance of a mountain goat’ (Brandom 2013a, 91). (In chapter 6 I will argue that Deleuze another such mountain goat, who retains empiricism and experience-talk while repudiating givenism.) But, Brandom warns, doing this is extraordinarily treacherous. ‘I still want to say,’ he continues, “‘Kids, don’t try this at home. This man is a professional. If you try it, it will end in tears.’” (Ibid.). Rorty’s stance on such daredevil antics is similar: McDowell, for example, ‘has rehabilitated empiricism’ without committing the sin of givenism. But, he writes, ‘I do not *want* such a reconciliation or such a rehabilitation [...] I see nothing worth saving in empiricism’ (1998d, 150). Even when it does not wholeheartedly endorse givenist or authoritarian positions, empiricism ‘saves an intuition’ that clashes with Rorty’s own anti-authoritarian romanticism.²⁵ It is the challenge posed by the replaceability argument that I will respond to in the next chapter, in which I argue that Fricker and Alcoff have indeed discovered something worth saving in philosophical experience-talk.

Rorty’s favoured mode of argument is comparative: he offers (real, historical or imagined) alternatives to the approach he is attacking, in order to show the historical contingency and relative strengths and weaknesses of his target. The idea that these strengths and weaknesses are relative is key to Rorty—they only motivate intellectual change if they are contrasted to an alternative. It is in this context that he makes the anti-givenist and anti-authoritarian arguments above. They would be pointless, he claims, unless there were vocabularies available that accomplished what empiricism set out to do without risking authoritarianism or givenism (cf. Rorty 1991a, 16). What we have seen so far amounts to making empiricism *unattractive*. But to see why Rorty sees empiricism as an approach well-lost, it is essential that we look at some of the alternative vocabularies that he has suggested and endorsed in its place. These would be vocabularies that similarly allow us to talk about our internal or perceptual states, to explain how such talk emerged if we never had direct knowledge of such states, and to explain problematic phenomena like optical, hallucinations or dreams. There are several such Rortyan alternatives, all of which are broadly Sellarsian or broadly Brandomian.²⁶ All of them revolve around the same three moves: firstly, replacing something irreducibly private with something potentially public; secondly, naturalising that public thing by telling a story about how it developed; and thirdly, making his paradigmatically vocabulary-pragmatist move of replacing ontological distinctions with conventional ones.

4.2.3.1 *Sellars and the Myth of Jones*

The three moves I mentioned above appear in Wilfrid Sellars’ “Myth of Jones” (*EPM* §§48-63), a narrative on which Rorty based almost all of his own narratives (with additional material from Dewey, Brandom, Nietzsche and Hegel). As we saw in chapter 2, Sellars places empiricist givenists on the horns of a dilemma: either their view is incoherent or radically innatist. It is incoherent if they attempt to endorse givenism—the view that having sensations entails knowing

²⁵ Ibid. In McDowell’s case, this intuition is that we are “answerable to the world.” Rorty, for his part, sees the idea of the world—much like empiricism—as “well-lost” (Rorty [1972] 1982).

²⁶ Rorty sees much of Brandom as an update and purification of Sellars (cf. Rorty 1997a, 8n10 and 1998c, 127).

their nature—while also endorsing traditional empiricism—the view that our empirical concepts are acquired through sense-experience itself as the products of a process of learning. (This view is incoherent because givenism requires that experience always be accompanied by knowledge, whereas traditional empiricism requires that some experiences occur at a developmental stage before we are able to know their nature.) The alternative is radical innatism, which secures the connection of experience with knowledge by assuming that all of our basic empirical concepts are available to us from birth, and that we are born able to subsume particulars under universals.²⁷ While innatism is not incoherent, it is inelegant given the vast amount of unexplained assumptions its proponents have to make.²⁸ Sellars' Myth of Jones, the model for Rorty's narratives, is an account which explains how talk of sensations, thoughts and perceptual categories could have entered our language while avoiding the assumptions of innatism. Sellars' account depicts our ability to describe our internal states as a product of our cultural and conceptual evolution rather than a product of some unique faculty possessed by all humans. Furthermore, it gives us a picture of the vocabulary we use for reporting experiences for which we can give a developmental account much more easily than we could the vocabularies of traditional empiricism or innatism. Most importantly, it reveals the *contingency* of experience-talk, and opens the possibility that we could have learned to speak differently. Such an account, to Rorty's mind, is far superior to earlier accounts such as Ryle's, because rather than *rejecting* introspection or internal states as category-mistakes—a move that is radically at odds with our everyday talk about thoughts and sensations—Sellars' account renders such talk philosophically unproblematic instead (Rorty 1982d, 330-331).

Sellars' story explains how experience-talk could have emerged in a linguistic community that originally only spoke about public objects and their properties. He calls this initial language "Rylean" in that its vocabulary goes no further than that of logical behaviourists: it is 'a language of which the fundamental descriptive vocabulary speaks of public properties of public objects located in Space and enduring through Time' (*EPM* 91 [§48]). It also has a semantic vocabulary (i.e., its speakers can analyse the meanings and truth conditions of sentences, as in the phrases "'Rot' means red," and "'Der Mond ist rund' is true if and only if the moon is round" [EPM 92 {§49}]). From this starting point, Sellars details the additions we would need to make to the Rylean language in order to arrive at a language of thoughts, sensations and introspection, and describes why each addition would help to accomplish a specific intelligible purpose in the Rylean language. This approach allows Sellars to preserve the force of the Rylean critique of Cartesianism while moving beyond Ryle's radically counterintuitive conclusions.

Sellars puts forward his account by describing the innovations of a "genius" called Jones, hence the title "The Myth of Jones." Jones' first major addition to the Rylean language is a theoretical vocabulary, which allows the Ryleans to postulate unseen entities 'to explain why things which are similar in their observable properties differ in their causal properties, and things which are similar in their causal properties differ in their observable properties' (*EPM* 98 [§52]). Such a discourse is of obvious use—it may, for example, allow one to explain why some objects are flammable or poisonous and other, apparently similar ones are not. But it is also of use in

²⁷ These concepts are the concepts that we can use to describe anything that we are "given" in experience, as opposed to things that we infer from the contents of experience. A series of examples of these basic empirical concepts should suffice to show how many there are: red, triangular, loud, bright, foul-smelling, smooth, sweet, and painful. These are much more controversial as candidates for innate ideas than the categories of Aristotle or Kant.

²⁸ It is also very difficult to account for the variation of empirical concepts across languages on such a view, as I argued in ch.2, note 16, or to distinguish real immediate knowledge from merely apparently immediate knowledge, as we saw in §2.1.2.

explaining behaviour. People, Jones notices, act intelligently ‘not only when their conduct is threaded on a string of overt verbal episodes [...] but also when no detectable verbal output is present’ (*EPM* 102 [§56]). So, reasonably enough, Jones assumes that there is something “in” intelligent creatures that has the same semantic properties as sentences, an “inner speech” as he calls it, which can explain ‘intelligent nonhabitual behavior’ (*EPM* 103 [§56]). He decides to call these silent analogues to sentences “thoughts.”

Pleased with the success of this theoretical vocabulary, Jones and his fellows begin to use it to describe their *own* behaviour:

Thus, when Tom, watching Dick, has behavioral evidence which warrants the use of the sentence (in the language of the theory) “Dick is thinking ‘p’” (or “Dick is thinking that p”), Dick, using the same behavioral evidence, can say, in the language of the theory, “I am thinking ‘p’” (or “I am thinking that p”). (*EPM* 106 [§59])

In making this step, the theoretical vocabulary of Jones takes on a reporting role—given sufficient training in accordance with public criteria, a person can describe their thoughts in order to explain their behaviour. There is nothing intrinsically private about these thoughts beyond the fact that it turns out that, once trained in Jones’ new language, a person’s reports of their own thoughts are a more reliable predictor of behaviour than others’ hypotheses about what thoughts they are having (much like how a person’s reports are a good predictor of their stomach acidity, despite us not having direct access to our stomach’s chemical profile). A person has privileged access to their own thoughts, but this privileged access is the product of the proven usefulness of asking people what they’re thinking in predicting their behaviour rather than anything to do with the ontological or logical status of thoughts. It is a social convention which has proven its worth.

A similar process allows talk of impressions to enter into the new Jonesian language. Now that Ryleans have been trained to self-ascribe their sentence-like “thoughts,” it makes sense to posit that there is an analogy between reporting *sentences* such as “This table is green” and reporting *thoughts*, which allow one to report to *oneself* that the table is green (*EPM* 108 [§60]). However, the explanatory picture here is incomplete, since although there is an obvious connection between having the thought that “this table is green” and uttering the corresponding sentence, Jones has not yet explained why we have the *thought* that the table is green. It will not do to say that it is caused by a green table, because one also has this thought in some cases in which there is no green table (e.g., in odd light conditions, or when one is under the effects of hallucinogenic mushrooms). So, finally, he introduces his final theoretical concept: the internal replica. This, in the Jonesian language, is the cause of internal reports. For example, an internal replica of a green table is the kind of thing that usually occurs when one is presented with a green table, but which is also present when one makes an *erroneous* internal report that there is a green table (like when a hallucinogenic mushroom causes an internal replica of a green table to come into existence). These inner replicas he calls “sensations.” Here, at the end of Jones’s story, we arrive at the concept of a sense-impression or experience. The genealogy of this concept is entirely composed of publicly comprehensible theoretical entities which explain publicly observable behaviour. The language-game that the Ryleans have come to play has no place for irreducibly private properties such as qualia, although it has a place for entities that people are more reliably reportable when talking about oneself than when talking about others.

Nevertheless, everything, even the most abstract of their theoretical concepts—the inner replicas, or what we call impressions—plays a useful explanatory role.

4.2.3.2 Rorty's revisions to the Myth of Jones

Sellars' myth was of immense importance for Rorty's own picture of the status of mentalistic concepts. Despite this, however, Rorty does not encourage his readers to speak Jonesian. Jones, he writes, was 'the man who invented the [representationalist] Mirror of Nature and thereby made modern philosophy possible' (*PMN* 390)—a huge mistake to Rorty's mind. Moreover, Rorty's goals were different to Sellars'. While Sellars wished to reconcile the "scientific image of man" as an entirely physical complex organism with the "manifest image" of us as persons, perceivers, agents and beings-in-the-world, Rorty does not see any such clash except where philosophers create it. Where Sellars claims that 'To the extent that the manifest image does not survive [...] to that extent man himself would not survive' ([1962] 1963, 18), Rorty rejoins that:

Despite my veneration for Wilfrid Sellars, who originated this talk of manifest and scientific images, I would like to jettison these visual metaphors. [...] We do not need a synoptic view of something called "the world." At most, we need a synoptic narrative of how we came to talk as we do. [...] We should confine ourselves to making sure that we are not burdened with obsolete ways of speaking, and then ensuring that those vocabularies that are still useful stay out of each other's way. (Rorty [2006] 2007, 150)

The value of Sellars' myth, to Rorty, is primarily that it shows a continuous story of how our folk-psychological vocabulary developed from a much more basic language of public objects and, consequently, how it is a mistake to think that privileged access must entail direct access. The Myth also shows the *contingency* of our language—we did not begin talking of thoughts and sensations because we were presented with them directly—which is why Rorty frequently turns to it to show how our language we use to talk about perception and mentality could have turned out differently. While the most famous and developed example of this is the "Antipodean" thought experiment from *PMN*, to my mind the clearest example is a brief one from his early paper 'Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental.'²⁹ The Antipodean example is an extension of this earlier one, but it is primarily directed at philosophers of mind rather than epistemologists, so I will stick mainly with the example from the 'Incorrigibility' paper. Here, Rorty suggests an alternative path Jones could have taken that would have warded off representationalism. Let us assume that even before Jones entered the scene, the Ryleans knew the fairly basic fact that behaviour is caused by something happening to the brain. In his article, Rorty offers Jones the possibility of, rather than introducing confusing neologisms such as "thought" (a kind of inner speech) and "sensation" (a kind of inner replica), simply granting that semantic and intentional properties can attach to brain processes. This may sound strange to us (how could something physical have semantic properties?) but, as Rorty frequently points out (e.g. in *PMN* 24-28) it need not, since we happily grant that these properties can attach to sounds and marks.

Making this move from "sensations/thoughts of *x*" to "brain-states of *x*" would clarify that Jones's use of the term "inner," in the phrases "inner speech" or "inner replicas," is quite literal—thinking and sensing are something that happens inside our bodies:

²⁹ Rorty (1970) 2014a. The "Antipodean" case can be found in chapter 2 of *PMN*.

all the term [inner] can mean (before the day when Jones trains his fellows to make not merely noninferential, but incorrigible reports, of their thoughts and sensations) is “beneath the skin.” [...]

To see this point, it helps to notice that Jones might just as well have introduced the notion of “brain-process-about-*p*” or “brain-process-of-a-red-triangle” as have invented the neologisms “thought about *p*” and “sensation of a red triangle.” [...] It would have been just as good an explanation of intelligent behavior to say that some brain processes had, like sentences, the special feature of being “about” things, as to say that an invented state called a “thought” did. (Rorty [1970] 2014a, 160)

Let us call this approach “neo-Jonesian” (my term, not Rorty’s). The advantage of neo-Jonesism over Jonesism is its clarity regarding the epistemic status of our first-person reports. On the Jonesian model it is very easy to slip from the non-representationalist view that inner replicas (sensations) *cause* our trustworthy but fallible beliefs about physical objects to the representationalist view that we *infer* such beliefs from knowledge of our inner replicas. This would be the move from

- (a) I am inclined to say that there is a red triangle in front of me. Hence, there is probably a red triangular replica inside me.

To

- (b) I know there is a red triangular replica inside me. Hence, there is probably a red triangle in front of me.

The former case (a) is a non-givenist example of experience-talk since it begins with a claim that one is inclined to make (“there is a red triangle”), evaluates one’s confidence regarding this claim, and speculates as to its cause (“there is probably a red triangular replica”). The latter, however, is a case of full-blown givenism, since it treats the experience (the red triangular replica) as a case of knowing (“I know there is a red triangular replica”). Now consider the same move in neo-Jonesian language:

- (a') I am inclined to say that there is a red triangle in front of me. Hence, there is probably a brain-process of a red triangle inside me.

And

- (b') I can perceive a brain process of a red triangle inside myself. Hence, there is probably a red triangle in front of me.

The slippage from (a') to (b') is much harder to make than the move from (a) to (b), because brain-processes do not resemble their intentional objects in the way that “sensations” can seem to. When I am looking at a red triangle, it is clearly not the case that what I am actually looking at is a brain process. I am looking at a red triangle. But in the language of sensations, it is much easier to conclude that I am actually looking at a sensation—because sensations, unlike brain-processes, *look like* their objects. While it is reasonable to conclude from the belief that there is a red triangle that I am *having* a brain process of a certain kind, it is absurd to conclude that what I am really perceiving is my brain, and the red triangle in front of me is just an inference from my perception of my brain-states. Hence, neo-Jonesism is far harder to twist into givenism than Jonesism.

There is a second advantage to neo-Jonesism: it replaces the *absolute* incorrigibility of givenist experience-talk with the *practical* incorrigibility of brain-state reports. Let us take a traditionally empiricist account of the red triangle example:

(b") I know that I have a sense-impression of a red triangle. Hence, there is probably a red triangle in front of me.

The empiricist givenist would hold that the sense-impression of a red triangle is known with certainty by virtue of its very existence.³⁰ Consequently, no one can ever be wrong about their immediate sense-impressions, only the inferences they make from them. Fallibility only enters the picture for the empiricist givenist if one has reason to doubt someone's honesty in their perceptual reports, or reason to suspect that they have misrepresented what they know noninferentially to be true. This is a case where we are *given* knowledge by our experiences. To Rorty, it is a case of authoritarianism—we have no say in the matter.

Now consider the a-cases above. Two things are notable here. Firstly, the inference runs in the opposite direction in the a-cases than in the b-cases: in the a-cases one begins with the occurrent disposition to make the claim "there is a red triangle in front of me"; in the b-cases one *infers* that there is a red triangle from logically prior, private knowledge. For example, in the empiricist-givenist version (b"), the b-case begins with the claim that one has a sense-impression of a red triangle. In (b") one infers from the infallible to the fallible; in (a') one infers from fallible to fallible. The picture in (a') is rigorously antifoundationalist—one begins from inclinations, but not from knowledge.

Secondly, and consequently, while the impression-report of (b") and the replica-report of (b) are logically privileged (they not the kinds of thing one can be wrong about), the brain report of (a') and the replica-report of (a) are only socially privileged. Rorty spells this out in 'Incorrigibility' by distinguishing two senses of incorrigibility. The first is the "logical" variant shared by the b-cases. This version of incorrigibility obtains when a belief 'implies its own truth' (Rorty [1970] 2014a, 165). However, on social incorrigibility—Rorty's favoured variant, made plausible by neo-Jonesism—

S believes incorrigibly that *p* at *t* if and only if

- (i) *S* believes that *p* at *t*.
- (ii) There are no accepted procedures by applying which it would be rational to come to believe that not-*p*, given *S*'s belief that *p* at *t*. (Rorty [1970] 2014a, 165)

What is advantageous on this account is that it preserves the idea that noninferential reports are privileged while rejecting the idea that there is anything special (something like immediate experience) that *makes* them true. Rather, they are privileged simply because we don't have any better ways of finding out how someone is feeling or what things seem like from their point of view than asking them. Socially privileged access 'merely says that there is no better way of finding out whether someone is [e.g.] in pain than by asking him, and that nobody can overrule his own sincere report' (PMN 109-110).

³⁰ Even in the hypothetical case in which upon having a red, triangular sense-impression one mistakenly thinks to oneself "ah, that's a red square," the empiricist account would take this as a case of mismatch between immediate perceptual knowledge and its expression in (inner) language, not as a case of a lack of immediate knowledge.

One upshot of this is that it is only contingently that our noninferential first-person reports are incorrigible. Let us imagine, for example, that advanced neuroscience allows us to map exactly which parts of the brain are stimulated when one is presented with a red triangle, or hallucinates that one is seeing a red triangle, or is presented with an optical illusion which appears like a red triangle.³¹ Were someone to be placed within an MRI scanner, their neo-Jonesian report “I am having a brain-process of a red triangle” *could* be rationally rejected. In such a situation, noninferential first-person reports would no longer be incorrigible, since we would have developed a procedure for evaluating them.³²

All that this serves to illustrate is that by making a couple of tweaks to Jones’s neologisms, we arrive at a language which, while accomplishing all of Jones’s predictive goals, lacks some of the ambiguity that allowed Jonesism to evolve into full-blown givenism. But what would be the use of such a language? In short, not much. But this is to its credit: much of our commonsense folk psychology, an evolution of Jonesism, trades on the ambiguity that neo-Jonesism lacks. Rorty is not suggesting that ‘empiricist talk of perceptual experience can or should be replaced by neuro-physiological talk’ (Rorty 2010d, 346). Rather, he is suggesting that philosophical thematization of perceptual experience should be abandoned, that its ambiguous causal-justificatory role was misconceived, and that *as philosophers* we can do all the epistemological work we need with a Jonesian or neo-Jonesian gloss on the role of introspective or perceptual reports. As I will argue in the next section, neo-Jonesism is only one half—and the less important one—of this story.

4.2.3.3 *Neo-Jonesism and Justification*

Let us return now to experience. Rorty takes from the Myth of Jones the view that it is possible to tell a non-givenist story about how our ways of talking about sensation and thought developed, a story whose characters are publicly observable entities, human behaviour and the purposes which are describable in terms of them. Rorty’s own innovation is to argue that Jones could have accomplished all that he did without introducing the ambiguous terms “sensation” and “thought.” This alternative path of development, into what I have called “neo-Jonesism,” would have prevented us from developing a representationalist theory of knowledge according to which we have sensations and thoughts first and infer from them to the objects that caused

³¹ This neural mapping, applied to every utterable sentence and perception-report, brings us to the bizarre example of an “Antipodean” language in chapter 2 of *PMN*. This language, an evolution of neo-Jonesism, has replaced the functional talk of brain-states-of-x with the neurobiological talk of activities of specific regions of the brain. For example, where neo-Jonesians would say “brain-state of pain,” Antipodeans would say “firing C-fibres”; where the former would say “brain-state of indigo,” the latter would say “neural state C-692.”

There are several reasons that I am sticking to neo-Jonesism rather than the much more thoroughly-examined Antipodean language of *PMN*. Firstly, Antipodean is far less plausible as a possible language for human beings—the near-infinity of possible beliefs that would need to be “coded” in neurological language, coupled with the plasticity and adaptability of human brains, makes such a language practically impossible. This implausibility often obscures rather than clarifies the points that Rorty is trying to make in *PMN*. Furthermore, the Antipodean example is only somewhat relevant to the topic of the present chapter. While the question of experience is raised in his example, Rorty’s main purpose is to demonstrate various metaphilosophical impasses in the ontology of mind. Furthermore, there are many problems with the Antipodean case that I do not have time to address—cf. Tartaglia 2007, 80-85 and 233n5.

³² In such a situation, seems-statements (e.g., “it seems like I am having a brain-state of a red triangle”) would still be infallible. But this is unproblematic, since seems-statements are marked only by a refusal to endorse a claim. The above claim, for example, could be translated into “I am inclined to say to say that I am having a brain-state of a red triangle.” If they are turned into affirmative claims (e.g., “I *am* having a brain-state of seeming to have a brain-state of a red triangle”), a similar neuroscientific revolution could render such statements fallible (*PMN* 76-77).

them. It would be a language that treated what we call “sensations” and “thought” as physical processes, which are semantic and intentional in ways which are no more philosophically problematic than the semantic properties of sentences or the representational character of photographs.

Rorty’s contention in *PMN* is that we would lose nothing worth saving if we spoke neo-Jonesian rather than our current empiricist vocabulary. Specifically, he writes that ‘No predictive or explanatory or descriptive power would be lost if we had spoken Antipodean [a dialect of neo-Jonesian]³³ all our lives’ (*PMN* 120). Understanding that nothing important would be lost is, to Rorty, the important point—if it were fully appreciated, the work of actually changing our common-sense reporting language would be unnecessary.³⁴ However, what *would* be lost would be the ambiguity of the term “experience” which tempts us into givenism, the authoritarianism of logical incorrigibility, and a whole host of problems in the philosophy of mind.

It is not Rorty’s goal here to prove the metaphysical thesis that mental processes are in fact brain processes. Rather, he simply wishes to argue that they might as well be for our purposes—we might have learned to speak in such a way that the mind-body problem had never appeared:

It is pointless to ask whether the fact that cerebroscopes correct Antipodean [or neo-Jonesian] reports of inner states shows that they are not *mental* states, or shows rather that mental states are merely neural states. It is pointless not just because nobody has any idea how to resolve the issue, but because nothing turns on it. (*PMN* 120)

Faced with this impasse—the confrontation between our vocabulary and the neo-Jonesian one—our only recourse is to ask which it is better, for *our* purposes, to speak. Any inquiry that begins by asking the question “are there such things as sensations or are they just theoretical posits?” will find itself at a deadlock that can only be resolved by question-begging (Rorty [1993] 1998b, 105ff). For what is at stake is what could count as evidence in answering such a question (cf. 1982d, 339; 1982c, 186). Do we allow irreducibly private first-person reports to be taken as evidence for ontological claims? Should it matter whether our conclusions are intuitive? Intuitive to *who*, anyway? The advantage of putting his argument in terms of a comparison between vocabularies rather than from first principles within a vocabulary is that by doing so Rorty can ward off accusations that his conclusions are counterintuitive from the outset. Empiricism would appear just as counterintuitive to a neo-Jonesian as eliminativism does to us.

So, what is the advantage of neo-Jonesism over empiricism? Primarily, it is that the former keeps the vocabularies of causation and justification separate. Consider the answers that an empiricist and a neo-Jonesian would give to the two questions: “What made you say that there is a red triangle in front of you?” and “How do you know that there is a red triangle in front of you?” To an empiricist, both would be (rigorously) met with something like “I had red and triangular sense data, from which I inferred that there was probably a red triangle in front of me.” This account is ambiguous between a causal one and a justificatory one. But to a neo-Jonesian, the two answers would be distinct: “I probably said there was a red triangle because a brain-state of a red triangle disposed me to—but I know that my report was probably *true*

³³ See note 31.

³⁴ This point was the innovation of Rorty’s early work on eliminative materialism in the philosophy of mind: that the important claim of the materialist was not that we *should* replace mentalistic talk with neurological talk, but rather that we *could* do so at no greater cost than inconvenience (Rorty [1965] 2014, 117).

because when I have noninferential dispositions to make such reports in standard conditions, it usually turns out that I am right.” Brain-states, but not sense-data, drop out of the picture on a justificatory account. For the purposes of justifying their claims, all a neo-Jonesian needs to talk about is what dispositions they have to make certain kinds of reports, the conditions they occurred under, and under which conditions such reports tend to be reliable.

What this means in practice is that for a neo-Jonesian the two halves of traditional epistemology—the causal and the justificatory—never need to come together. The language of brain-states is a purely causal one, and as neo-Jonesian science progresses will become a part of neuroscience, psychology, or perhaps psychoanalysis (a discipline which, whatever its faults, has never confused its causal accounts with justificatory ones). When it comes to theories of justification, there will be *no* replacement concept for the aesthetic or phenomenal experience—not even brain states. Insofar as they show up in epistemology, *aisthēsis* and *phainomenon* are both types of theoretical *things* that one is presented with, something that is unnecessary in a neo-Jonesian account of justification (and explicitly attacked by Rorty throughout *PMN*).³⁵ Rorty ‘cannot see what is supposed to be gained by inserting “perceivings” as intermediaries (what Davidson calls “*tertia*”) between S being P and someone’s reliable noninferential report that S is P’ (Rorty 2010d, 346). *Tertia*, whether they are perceivings or brain-states, are of no consequence in working out whether someone’s noninferential report is reliable, because they accompany *every* honest report that S is P. We can, then, leave them out of our accounts of justification entirely.

By completely isolating our accounts of causation from justification, this move saves us from any risk of givenism. It also, to Rorty’s mind, cuts off much modern philosophical authoritarianism at its source. Neo-Jonesian accounts of justification can no longer appeal to what is given in experience, and this “empirical given” is the dominant (but not exclusive)³⁶ modern philosophical example of an unquestionable source of truths beyond human control. Neo-Jonesism is, then, superior to our commonsense empiricism because it clearly distinguishes between vocabularies of causation and justification, and because it makes the foremost modern form of philosophical authoritarianism unintelligible.

4.2.3.4 *The advantages of language-talk over experience-talk for pragmatism*

In the previous section, we saw Rorty’s recommendation that the *causal* aspects of experience-talk be taken over by disciplines that have nothing to do with theories of justification—for example, neuroscience, psychology and psychoanalysis.³⁷ As for the epistemological, metaphysical and metaphilosophical functions of experience-talk, he favours abandoning or replacing them with talk of language and shared social practices. His argument is that philosophical experience-talk stacks the deck against the very pragmatist views which are of most value in resisting authoritarianism and givenism: holism, anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, and historicism. *Language-talk*, however, makes such views seem more plausible. By shifting

³⁵ This view is exactly what Rorty attacks under the name “principle P,” which he describes as follows:

(P) Whenever we make an incorrigible report on a state of ourselves, there must be a property we are presented with which induces us to make that report. (*PMN* 98)

³⁶ Some people, for example, treat their holy text as an unquestionable source of truths.

³⁷ Rorty admires psychoanalysis because of its emphasis on individual idiosyncrasy and contingency rather than general features of human nature, without insisting on a division between “normal” and “pathological” cases (*CIS* 31-39). This, he argues in *CIS*, is another anti-authoritarian move, since it opens up space for self-creation.

philosophy towards holism and historicism, Rorty hopes to escape epistemology as traditionally conceived altogether.³⁸

I will briefly recap these views, which I have dealt with in more detail in previous chapters.³⁹ Holism is the rejection of “atomism,” the view that the goal of philosophy is to break its subject-matter into smaller elements which can be analysed independently of each other—for example, by analysing the mind in terms of beliefs, experiences and concepts, or by analysing language into meanings.⁴⁰ Holism is antigivenist for two reasons. Firstly, givenism is always atomistic, since it requires that particular experiences be individuated according to particular natures which may be made the subjects of judgments (e.g., *This* sense-datum is red) (Rorty [1963] 2014, 102). Secondly, givenism is foundationalist while holism is anti-foundationalist, since while givenism and foundationalism treat meaning and justification as unidirectional (words acquire meanings, and beliefs their grounds, from more basic linguistic or mental entities such as sense data), holism sees them as multidirectional (words acquire meanings by dynamic and co-constitutive relations with the rest of language and practice, and beliefs are justified by an indefinitely large set of commitments and norms, of which they are a part).⁴¹ Fallibilism is the view that none of our beliefs are immune from revision in principle (as Sellars puts it, we may ‘put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not all at once’ [EPM 79 §§38]). ‘Holism and fallibilism go hand in hand’, writes Rorty ([1993] 1998b, 106n14), because if language and belief are treated as a Quinean “web” rather than a Cartesian order of reasons, then there can be no “basic” beliefs or meanings which are immune from revision in principle—only beliefs and meanings whose revision would be more consequential for the structure of the rest of the web. Fallibilism is opposed to the givenist idea of direct apprehension, and to the authoritarian thesis that our noninferential beliefs are authoritative because of their intrinsic (rather than culturally assigned) authority. Historicism is the view that every aspect of culture, language and our systems of knowledge is a contingent historical product, that there is nothing outside history that sets the goal or pattern of cultural evolution, and that even the things we take to be most necessary about the ways we think and talk could have been otherwise and might change or cease to be. The core of this doctrine is that every claim and practice, no matter how central to our self-image, was once a novel innovation and may one day be rejected or replaced with a new claim or practice; as with fallibilism above, this is a clearly antiauthoritarian view since it rejects the idea of unrevisable, nonhuman sources of truth. All of these views—holism, anti-foundationalism, fallibilism and historicism—are compatible both with (non-traditional) empiricisms such as Dewey’s and with a total rejection of philosophical experience-talk. However, in much of his writing on Dewey and the other early pragmatists, Rorty argues that while these views are *compatible* with philosophical experience-talk, they are made clearer and more plausible by taking the linguistic turn—that is, by moving from philosophical analysis of experience to philosophical analysis of the ways in which we make and evaluate claims.⁴²

This move marks the most consequential difference between Rorty (and other linguistically-minded neopragmatists) on the one hand, and experientially-minded classical pragmatists like James and Dewey on the other. In *Pragmatism*, William James characterised pragmatism as ‘a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude’ ([1907] 1975, 31). This empirical orientation, he continues, is necessary to ‘[turn] away from abstraction and

³⁸ PMN 380; Rorty (1977) 1982, 182.

³⁹ Cf. §§2.2.2 and 3.4.1.

⁴⁰ Rorty (2005) 2007, 176ff.

⁴¹ On the relation between givenism, atomism, and foundationalism, cf. Brandom (1994) 1998, 90-91.

⁴² Cf. Koopman 2011, 62.

insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins' (Ibid.). In other words, James's appeal to experience served his goals of historicism, anti-foundationalism and fallibilism. Dewey similarly saw his philosophy as one of experience: 'Experience', he wrote in *Experience and Nature*, 'is a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature' ([1925] 1981, 5). Like James, he too saw a philosophy of experience as the only alternative to either stultifying and solipsistic rationalism or the passivity and atomism of early modern empiricism (Dewey [1920] 1982, 97). It is this view that motivates Dewey and James to split the difference and develop sophisticated, non-traditional empiricisms, which explicitly reject the givenist view that experience is best understood as passive receptivity. They satisfy the criteria of holism, anti-foundationalism, fallibilism and historicism, Rorty admits, at least in their better moments.⁴³ This is because they use "experience" not to mean representationalist *phainomena*, but rather something more akin to *empeiria*—the everyday sense of "experience" that we use when talking about a person's life-experience, experience on the job, or experience of oppression. They treat experience as something public, reorganisable and redescribable, and their goal is to organise it in more interesting, beautiful and productive ways. On this account, experience and its place in our lives evolves just as we do—we can reshape it through science, art, politics, philosophy, and many other things besides. Most importantly, the authority we give to it (and to appeals to experience) is up to us—there is nothing intrinsic about experience in pragmatist theories of it, and consequently, they are not guilty of philosophical givenism or authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, Rorty forcefully rejects the classical pragmatists' appropriation of the language of the empiricists to state their views. He describes Dewey's theory of experience as 'the worst part of Dewey' ([1982] 2006, 20) and frequently imagines a "purified" Dewey who rejected philosophical experience-talk (cf. [1994] 1998b and [1977] 1982, 82-88). This is sometimes because of genuine mistakes on Dewey's part (for example, Rorty accuses him of a late backslide into givenism, which he had earlier repudiated [{1977} 1982 81 and {1994} 1998b 291]), but more often it is because of the rhetorical problems with using "experience" to make the arguments he did. Put simply, Rorty's contention is that "Language" is a more suitable notion than "experience" for saying the holistic and anti-foundational things which James and Dewey wanted to say' (1985b, 40). It is more suitable, Rorty argues, for several reasons. Firstly, despite their intentions when using the term "experience" in the sense of *empeiria*, the dominance of *phainomena*-talk in philosophy made misunderstandings inevitable:

Much of Dewey's work was a desperate, futile attempt to get rid of the *phainomena* versus *ontōs onta*, appearance versus true reality, distinction and to replace it with a distinction of degree between less organized and directed and more organized and directed *empeiria*. This attempt was futile because his fellow philosophers insisted on language in which they could discuss the possibility of our being "out of touch with reality" or "lost in a realm of mere appearance." ([1994] 1998b, 296)

In other words, Rorty's contention is that the appearance-reality distinction is so central to philosophers' ways of conceiving experience that any attempt to alter the sense while retaining the term is doomed to failure. Furthermore, even the new sense of experience retains an ambiguity between referring to our physical interactions with the world and to our noninferential

⁴³ On Dewey as a holist, cf. *PMN* 174 and 1992c, 393; as an anti-foundationalist, cf. *CIS* 57 and *PMN* 5; as a fallibilist, cf. Rorty (1990) 1998, 211; as a historicist, cf. Rorty (1990) 1998, 203; 2007d, ix; *CIS* 45; 1999c, 12 and 1998c, 125.

beliefs about our experiences—between organising and directing one’s subjective sensory engagement with a situation and organising and directing one’s empirical beliefs about it. This makes accidental givenist moments much more common for Dewey and James than they would have been if they had just dropped philosophical experience-talk entirely.

The point that Rorty stresses the most, however, is that holism, historicism, fallibilism and anti-foundationalism are simply more *plausible* when presented in terms of language rather than experience. The idea that our language and practices evolve over time is uncontroversial—the idea that experience does so is far less so. Similarly, the idea that sensations are the unquestionable foundations of cognition makes much more intuitive sense than the idea that noninferential reports are, and the idea that if we change our social practices then the meanings of our sentences will be transformed is far easier to swallow than the idea that our experiences will change in meaning. The reason that givenism became so prevalent is that when we are talking about experience, even if we consciously intend to use it in the sense of *empeiria*, it is very easy to confuse the causal priority of sensation in the formation of empirical beliefs with an epistemological foundation for their justification. By leaving vocabularies of mental causation to the neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists and psychoanalysts, and by developing vocabularies of justification that make no reference to these vocabularies of causation, we can prevent the slide into givenism from the outset.

This argument, it should be noted, is one of *relative* expediency. If one can find a useful enough function of experience-talk in philosophy, one will be entitled to retain it despite the dangers that Rorty has identified (so long as it isn’t givenist). It is precisely this which my arguments in the next two chapters will rely on—I will identify a danger with *abandoning* the philosophical thematization of experience, and I will argue that this danger is sufficiently serious that it outweighs the risks of further philosophical analysis of experience. Rorty will have performed an invaluable service by identifying and warning us about these dangers, but they will *remain* threats rather than being surpassed by a superior vocabulary.

4.3 Rorty, experience and feminist theory

To recap, the core claims of the replaceability argument are the following: (1) everything useful that philosophers could do with “experience” can be performed equally well by talking about language and shared social practices; (2) taking this linguistic turn would clarify and prevent the misunderstandings which we fall into when we confuse the vocabularies of causation and justification; and (3) everything unique that experience-talk can do turns out, on analysis, to be guilty of authoritarianism, givenism, or sheer uselessness. In the next two chapters I will put forward my own critique of Rorty, which builds on the critiques of Rorty made by several feminist theorists. The replaceability argument shall be my fundamental point of disagreement. However, before making this argument, I should briefly cover Rorty’s engagement with feminist theory. Rorty’s intervention here is important for understanding his motivation for making many of the arguments we have discussed in this chapter, since, as we saw in the introduction, what matters most about a philosophical view for Rorty is the cultural-political consequences. Rorty’s feminism papers, then, should be seen as the ultimate payoff of his engagements with analytic philosophers of mind, language, and epistemology.

As we shall see in chapter 5, many of the most interesting critiques of Rorty’s arguments against philosophical experience-talk, and in particular against the replaceability argument, have come from feminist theorists and pragmatist feminists. These arguments were generally made in

response to his interventions into feminist theory in the early 1990s, in which he encouraged feminists make two rhetorical moves: from universalism to historicism about rights and personhood ([1990] 1998, 203ff.), and from experience-talk to language-talk (Ibid., 212 and 217-218n32). This second move, while far from central to the argument of Rorty's articles on feminism, has become a key point of contention in their reception.

Rorty's intervention was noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, as Nancy Fraser observed in her oral reply to his 1990 paper, it was 'the first time, to my knowledge, in this era of postwar professionalized American philosophy, that a renowned male philosopher ha[d] elected to address the subject of feminism and indeed to make it the subject of a major philosophical address' (Fraser [1991] 2010, 47). Secondly, it was first published in the same year as Joan Scott's hugely influential 'The Evidence of Experience' (Scott 1991), in which she encouraged historians to stop treating "Experience" as an 'unquestionable ground of explanation' (787) and instead interrogate the constitution of experience in and by the field of discourse. This fortunate timing led to Rorty's paper often being considered alongside Scott's (as well as the work of other thinkers, such as Donna Haraway and Judith Butler) within a greater debate about whether feminist theory should take a "linguistic turn." This milieu gave rise to several important critiques, some of which I will consider in the next chapter. What is particularly interesting about these debates is that, unlike Rorty's debates about experience with neopragmatists such as Hilary Putnam, John McDowell and Robert Brandom, Rorty's highest priority in the feminism debates is to advance a specific *political* project: to make pragmatism useful for feminists.⁴⁴ '[F]eminism', he wrote in 1992, 'is perhaps the only movement in which the academy and the extra-academic world are in continual and fruitful contact' (1992b; cf. 1991g, 77). The feminist movement, to Rorty, was not only a fruitful political struggle, but one of the few to which philosophers could contribute directly (albeit only in the modest capacity of supplying 'a few pieces of special-purpose ammunition' [Rorty {1990} 1998, 212]).

Let us turn to Rorty's two arguments in 'Feminism and Pragmatism' ([1990] 1998). The first argument, which makes up the bulk of the paper, defends historicism in opposition to universalism.⁴⁵ The second advocates formulating historicist theses in linguistic terms rather than experiential ones. Within the context of feminist theory, historicism amounts to rejecting the claim that the rights of women were always recognisable and describable using the tools available, and our moral progress on the issue is best understood as increasing awareness of pre-existent moral truth. Historicists argue that neither women, nor humans, nor experience, nor *anything* has always had a nature that it was always within our power to recognise.⁴⁶ Instead, they contend, our recognition of women as possessing full personhood was a historical achievement not just of reason, but first and foremost of imagination and vision. Rorty presents the distinction between historicism and universalism with reference to what he calls the "logical space of moral deliberation" (which I will call the LSMD for short).⁴⁷ This is Rorty's term for our moral vocabulary—that is, the set of intuitions, practices, concepts, procedures for apportioning semantic authority and shared common sense we use in making and evaluating moral claims.

⁴⁴ Importantly, Rorty was *not* trying to make feminism useful for pragmatists—relative to the 'vast social hope' represented by the feminist movement, he saw pragmatism as 'relatively small and unimportant', suitable only for providing support in a few specific rhetorical struggles ([1990] 1998, 212).

⁴⁵ This opposition is not uncontroversial. Youjin Kong (2017), for example, has argued that Rorty's dichotomy of historicism and universalism is both false and unsubstantiated.

⁴⁶ This, at least, is the global historicism that Rorty advocates. Many thinkers are historicists about some topics (e.g. morality) and non-historicists about others (e.g. physics).

⁴⁷ The term is likely a riff on Sellars's "logical space of reasons."

‘Universalist philosophers assume,’ Rorty writes ‘that all the logical space necessary for moral deliberation is now available—that all important truths about right and wrong can not only be stated but be made plausible, in language already to hand’ ([1990] 1998, 203). In other words, a universalist philosopher would claim that what feminists need to do in order to make their claims plausible is to explain how sexist actions, policies and views are failures of recognition, intellectual consistency or awareness, and how unless we are to be wrongdoers or hypocrites we need to change the way we act. This is no easy task—bias, vested interests and plain ignorance are notoriously hard to overcome, not to mention the possible need for a wholesale critique of ideology and overcoming of superstition—but it at least carries the reassurance that given enough information, open-mindedness, thought and good-faith discussion any reasonable person will be able to recognise what sexism entails and why it is wrong. It carries, in short, the reassurance that truth and reason are on one’s side (cf. *CIS* 51-52). For many universalists, the only important *conceptual* revolution feminism ever needed was for us ‘to grant that Cartesian subjects and Kantian wills have turned out to be encased in female as well as male bodies’ (Rorty 1994a). Universalist feminists’ real problems are theoretical (how do patriarchal ideologies function?) and practical (how do we raise awareness despite these ideologies?) rather than imaginative (can we envision a world without sexism? How do we conceive a full moral identity for women which is independent from their relationships with men?).

Historicist feminists are acutely aware that the LSMD that feminists need might not yet be fully formed. The language we speak, and the norms of justification that come with it, might be woefully insufficient for the purposes of making the world better for women, or for making honest claims of oppression seem plausible or sane. For example, rather than simply granting that women have autonomous wills, historicists take seriously that our universal moral categories might be discriminatory even if they are applied consistently. They might point out that ‘it is hard to imagine a Cartesian subject or a Kantian autonomous will raising a child’ (Rorty 1994a), and hence that activities commonly coded as feminine might be devalued by taking such supposedly neutral notions as autonomy as the marks of moral personhood.⁴⁸ Historicists are aware that they are condemned to speak the language of the oppressor, at least until a better one is formulated, ‘and most oppressors have had the wit to teach the oppressed a language in which the oppressed will sound crazy—even to themselves—if they describe themselves *as* oppressed’ (Rorty [1990] 1998, 203). This is why many historicist feminists attack “reason”—not because they prefer irrationality, but because they reject the supposed neutrality of the tools by which we arbitrate what is and isn’t rational. Historicist feminists attack what is called “impartiality” not because they worship power, but because ‘the recourse to a position—hypothetical, counterfactual, or imaginary—that places itself beyond the play of power [...] is perhaps the most insidious ruse of power’ (Butler 1992, 6). Unable to appeal to rational standards or common sense, historicist feminists conclude ‘oppressed groups require another strategy to realize their goals of emancipation’ (Dieleman 2010, 896). What is called for is not only consciousness-raising, but the transformation and expansion of the LSMD itself. What is needed is not just better arguments but new concepts, new descriptions of people and behaviour, new stories, new ways of evaluating credibility and new ways of resolving disputes. This, historicists believe, is what happened with the cultural campaigns that paved the way for women’s suffrage, for civil rights, for sexual harassment laws, and for same-sex marriage—they were not a gradual move towards greater consistency and rationality by appealing to the LSMD we already had, but rather imaginative and poetic achievements that expanded and restructured logical space itself. To

⁴⁸ This example is taken from Rorty 1994a.

historicists, moral progress involves not just changing the practical norms by which we judge behaviour, but also the theoretical, logical or argumentative norms by which we evaluate claims. This, Rorty argues, is done by imagining a better community, with better norms and practices and, ultimately, a better LSMD. This activity of imagination is what he calls “prophecy.”

The second debate in Rorty’s paper, and the one I shall be focusing on, is one within the camp of historicists: between those historicists who aim to better describe and transform the (historically contingent) nature of our experience and those who favour translating such discussions into terms which make no reference to experience, or which treat experience as something completely reducible to discursive and social norms. So far I have largely stacked the deck in Rorty’s favour by treating the project of expanding the LSMD as one of changing our language, but there is a school of thought—comprising classical pragmatists like Dewey, feminists like Sonia Kruks, and authors who combine both schools of thought like Charlene Haddock Seigfried—that prefers to talk about changing our experience or taking an analysis of experience as a starting-point for solving the kinds of problems faced by oppressed groups.⁴⁹ I will be defending a moderate reincorporation of experience-talk into a broadly Rortyan pragmatism in the next chapter, in which I will discuss such views in more detail.

Rorty’s criticism of the usefulness of experientialist historicism for feminism, although brief, contains two distinct arguments. The first of these we saw above, in §4.2.3.4: Rorty contends that experience-talk is an ineffective way of presenting feminist (and especially historicist-feminist) arguments and projects because it is unclear how one could evaluate claims made in such this diction:

The only real advantage of psychological nominalism⁵⁰ for feminists, perhaps, is that it replaces hard-to-discuss (I am tempted to say “metaphysical”) questions about whether women have a different *experience* than men, or Africans a different experience than Europeans, or about whether the experience of upper-class African women more closely resembles that of lower-class European men than that of upper-class European women, with easier-to-discuss (more evidently empirical) questions about what *language* these various groups of people use to justify their actions, exhibit their deepest hopes and fears, etc. answers to the latter questions are jumping-off places for practical suggestions about different languages they might use, or might have used. (Rorty [1990] 1998, 218n32)

A clear, conceivable goal for feminists, Rorty argues, is not one that is phrased in terms of changing women’s experience, even though that is a worthwhile thing to achieve.⁵¹ Rather, he describes the project of feminism as one of making it possible for women to get *semantic authority* over themselves. A group has semantic authority over themselves, a term Rorty takes from Marilyn Frye,⁵² if they are able to define for themselves what it means to be a member of that group. Historically, men have had semantic authority over both men and women, since what it

⁴⁹ Rorty argues in ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ that Dewey’s philosophy, although almost entirely silent on the status of women, is deeply engaged with the problem of expanding and improving our LSMD. Dewey, Rorty claims, is also an experientialist rather than a linguistic historicist. This is a typical reading of Dewey and is shared by Seigfried, whose project in *Pragmatism and Feminism* (Seigfried 1996) is to extend a largely Deweyan pragmatism to feminist concerns. For a specifically feminist example of experiential historicism, cf. Kruks 2001, Ch. 2.

⁵⁰ I discussed psychological nominalism in §§2.1.3 and 3.4.1, and I will return to it in §6.1.2.

⁵¹ Recall that Rorty does not think *everyday* experience-talk, which revolves around *empeiria*, should be abandoned (§4.1). Rather, he simply cautions that it should not be made into a philosophical subject-matter (§4.2.3.4).

⁵² Frye 1983, 106n, quoted in Rorty (1990) 1998, 222.

entails to be a man or a woman has been defined by men alone. In a point Rorty emphasises, when a group, defined by their *x*-ness (e.g. by their femaleness or their blackness), has semantic authority over itself its members can make their *x*-ness a salient part of their moral identity, and they can have these claims *recognised* by their community. '[T]o be a full-fledged person in a given society'—in other words, to have semantic authority over oneself to tell one's own story—is a matter of double negation: it is *not* to think of oneself as belonging to a group which powerful people in that society thank God they do *not* belong to' (Rorty [1990] 1998, 224). This is a status, Rorty claims, that most women—unlike men—are not yet granted. In telling the story of one's life, one's womanhood is more likely to feature as an obstacle ("I succeeded *despite* the obstacles I faced on account of being a woman") rather than a virtue ("I succeeded *as* a woman") or a neutral feature ("I succeeded"), simply because of the differential ways invocations of one's status as a woman and a man are apportioned semantic authority.⁵³

Whatever one makes of Rorty's claims about semantic authority—and they have been subjected to several persuasive critiques⁵⁴—they serve as an example of what the project of a discursively-formulated historicist feminism might look like. Instead of describing or changing experience directly, Rorty emphasises the importance of changing the norms by which we ascribe and respect people's authority to describe their own lives in their own terms. This is not an exercise in getting anything *right*, at least if "getting things right" is construed as representing them accurately. Rather it is an exercise in "cultural politics," the exercise of deciding how best to talk and evaluate the authority of certain kinds of claims (Rorty [2002] 2007a).

Rorty's second complaint, although less explicit, is that "experience" is a universalizing rather than a historicizing concept. This complaint is visible in Rorty's distinction between a "linguisticised Deweyan" approach to feminist theory on the one hand, and a universalizing one on the other. Rorty describes the latter, non-Deweyan approach as suffering from theoretical universalism, essentialism about the terms "human being" and "woman," and a tendency to raise 'unanswerable questions about the accuracy of their representations of "woman's experience."' (Rorty [1990] 1998, 212). By switching to a Deweyan approach, he concludes, feminist theorists would 'see themselves as *creating* such an experience by creating a language, a tradition, and an identity' (Rorty [1990] 1998, 212).

It is possible to read this passage disjunctively, with Rorty opposing the linguisticised Dewey to *both* experientialists *and* universalists. But I see Rorty's quick grouping of universalism, essentialism, and philosophical experience-talk in this paragraph to imply that he sees them to be of a piece, or at least as natural allies. Such a view would not be unprecedented—three years before Rorty, Judith Grant had famously criticised feminist invocations of experience in a similar way (Grant 1987). I suspect that Rorty would endorse Grant's contention that feminist appeals to experience risk either becoming so granular as to be useless or, alternatively, essentialising and universalising "woman" as a category. We are left, Grant argues, with either an authoritarian, exclusive concept of "woman" which treats the experience of some women as more authentically female than others', or alternatively a 'radically relativistic' (Grant 1987, 110) approach which, by

⁵³ There are, of course, some areas in which women have semantic authority. "I succeeded *as* a woman" will be accepted even in deeply sexist societies if the story one tells about oneself concerns one's virtues in childcare. But semantic authority, Rorty contends, is deeply conditional for women in a way that it is not for men. His leading example here is taken from the essays of Adrienne Rich: 'She could not be, so to speak, a full-time poet, because a language she could not forget did not let one be both a full-time poet and a full-time female. By contrast, since Byron, the language has let one be a full-time poet and a full-time hero' ([1990] 1998, 221). Rich did not, in other words, have the semantic authority to make her gender and her creative calling part of the same story.

⁵⁴ Cf. Fraser (1991) 2010 and Kruks 2001, Ch. 5.

respecting the experiential knowledge of every woman, proves completely unable to resolve disputes between different groups of feminists. In other words, Grant's fears are much like Rorty's: experiential feminism is either so wedded to privacy and individual perspectives as to be useless, or so essentialist as to be authoritarian.

In summary, in 'Feminism and Pragmatism' Rorty recommends linguistic historicism, on the model of an imagined John Dewey who took the linguistic turn, to feminist theory. The advantages of this are twofold: it avoids authoritarian conceptions of an unchanging female essence, and it prevents feminist theorists from getting bogged down in interminable disputes concerning what "women's experience" is really like—disputes which are likely to conclude either in authoritarianism or empty relativism. Furthermore, as we saw in Part 2 of this chapter, Rorty accuses philosophical experience-talk in general of risking authoritarianism, givenism or political and practical uselessness. In the next chapter I will respond to Rorty's rejection of the political usefulness of theoretical analyses of "experience" by drawing on two key sources: Linda Alcoff's critique of Rorty's approach on the grounds that it makes it harder to defend feminist linguistic innovation, and Miranda Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice—a kind of injustice that, I contend, we are unable to respond to unless we allow some forms of experience-talk back into philosophy.

5. HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE AND FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF RORTY

5.0 Introduction

In chapter 4 I examined Rorty’s arguments for rejecting experience-talk from philosophy. This chapter contends that these arguments are insufficient to warrant rejecting *all* philosophical experience-talk. While the anti-givenist argument and the authoritarianism arguments are sufficiently strong to justify rejecting philosophical experience-talk that falls into givenism or authoritarianism, I will contend that Rorty’s weighing of relative utilities in the replaceability argument is disproportionate—there are important uses of philosophical experience-talk that he has failed to consider. Rejecting *all* philosophical questions about experience (a category of questions I delimit in §5.1) hampers our ability to locate new sites for political redescriptions of the kinds we examined in chapter 3. Rorty’s anti-empiricism throws out the baby with the bathwater, excluding even some important forms of experience-talk. In this chapter, I put forward this argument using a set of concepts taken from Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice* (2007)—concepts that I argue are essential for some important forms of political linguistic innovation, and whose use requires some of the philosophical questions about experience that Rorty rejects. The idea of reading Rorty alongside *Epistemic Injustice* is not original to this thesis. I am indebted to Susan Dieleman (2010 and 2012) for this connection, although what I take away from this encounter is at odds with her approach, for reasons that I discuss in §5.4.1. This chapter contributes to a growing body of feminist assessment of Rorty—what I hope to add to the established literature is an account of the difficulty Rorty has dealing with questions of hermeneutical justice, as well as a critique of Rorty’s exclusion of philosophical experience-talk that takes seriously the arguments that led him to his extreme position in the first place.

As we saw in the last chapter, Rorty distinguishes two senses of the word “experience” (to which I added a third kind). Firstly, he advocates rejecting talk of, and especially questions about, those appearances, impressions, and sense-data commonly associated with empiricist epistemology.¹ I called this kind of experience *phenomenal* experience. His reason for rejecting phenomenal experience-talk is that such language is always metaphysical, since it presupposes an appearance-reality distinction, and consequently it leads us into inescapable sceptical problems or the authoritarianism of specifying a set of privileged representations. Furthermore, it is often givenist, and it always carries the *risk* of encouraging givenism. Because of the extent to which givenism and authoritarianism have become philosophical common sense, it is extraordinarily

¹ Rorty associates these uses of the term “experience” with the Greek *phainomena* (“appearance”), but which I argued also includes anything resembling the Greek *aisthesis* (“feeling” or “sensibility”) (§4.1).

difficult to write about phenomenal experience without being *read* as a givenist, even if one is personally aware of its dangers and careful to avoid it.

I argued that Rorty's critiques of phenomenal experience also often implicitly address another form of experience, which I will call *aesthetic* experience, after the Greek *aisthēsis*. Aesthetic experience is what we often call *feeling* or *sensibility*—it is first-personal, like phenomenal experience, but it is not representational, and it does not carry information or “data.” It is not the appearance or representation *of* something else (as in the appearance/reality distinction of phenomenal experience), even if on reflection we often identify and associate it with some object which caused it. Rorty's critique of aesthetic experience (most visible in his critique of qualia) resolves aesthetic experience either into a givenist form of phenomenal experience (by treating it as conceptually articulated), into concept of no use and no consequence, or—in cases in which philosophers stop trying to thematise it—into an unproblematic, non-philosophical dimension of lived experience.

The second form of experience-talk that Rorty advises philosophers to reject from their analyses (but not necessarily their vocabularies) is *lived experience*, which he traces from the Greek *empeiria*. He is suspicious of *philosophical* analyses of lived experience for two reasons: firstly, because this kind of experience-talk may *also* be misread through a givenist lens (a trap he sees Dewey as having fallen into), and secondly, because he contends that any useful work that it *does* perform can be done just as well by the analysis of language and shared social practices, which is far less treacherous. Rorty's rejection of talk of lived experience differs from his rejection of phenomenal (and, on my taxonomy, aesthetic) experience, since in the case of lived experience he admits that there are “everyday,” unproblematic ways of using the term “experience” along these lines, and that it only gets into trouble when it is thematised by philosophers. For example, Rorty does not think that we should stop asking questions like “does he have enough relevant experience to do this job?” He does, however, object to questions which treat experience—even lived experience—as something big and abstract which can be connected to other big, abstract things like “thought” or “language.”

In this chapter I will argue, against Rorty, that some “philosophical” questions regarding lived experience and aesthetic experience are of great importance if we are to achieve some of his political ends, and that these cannot be replaced without loss by questions about language or shared social practices. For a breakdown of my points of difference from Rorty, cf. table 5.1, at the end of this section. Some kinds of philosophical experience-talk are, in fact, necessary to achieve Rorty's pragmatist task of reducing suffering by modifying our linguistic and social practices. This task is of supreme importance for Rorty since, as I argued in the introduction and in chapter 3, it is his anti-authoritarian political motives that drive even the most technical of his philosophical work. Since it is in his engagement with feminist theory that his political justification for his anti-empiricism is most clearly put to the test, I will also turn to feminist theorists in my defence of experience—in fact, much of the groundwork for my argument has already been laid by normative feminist theorists. In particular, this chapter will focus on two key arguments: firstly, Linda Alcoff's argument that Rorty's linguistic turn would harm feminists' ability to persuade others to take up their recommendations for linguistic change; and secondly, Miranda Fricker's argument that there are distinctive types of injustice (called “hermeneutical injustice”) that directly harm our capacity to describe our own experience—a type of injustice that, if we accept Alcoff's argument, Rorty's linguistic pragmatism would make it more difficult for feminists to address.

In the next chapter, I will explore what kind of philosophical experience-talk is best suited for dealing with situations of hermeneutical injustice while also avoiding the traps that Rorty is wary of. I will argue that French poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s “expressionist” empiricism is ideal for this role. Deleuze’s empiricism successfully avoids givenism despite its embrace of *aisthesis*-talk. In the next chapter, I will contend that Deleuze’s distinction between expressing the sensible and representing it—two approaches which, I will argue in this chapter, Rorty treats interchangeably—successfully admits the reality of pre- and non-linguistic experience, and allows us to talk meaningfully about it without treating it as inherently normative, conceptually structured, or historically unchanging.

Kind of Experience-Talk		Rorty	Me
Phenomenal experience	Philosophical	X	X
	Everyday	N/A	N/A ²
Aesthetic experience	Philosophical	X ³	✓
	Everyday	✓ ⁴	✓
Lived experience	Philosophical	X	✓
	Everyday	✓	✓

Table 5.1: Kinds of Experience-Talk

5.1 What is a *philosophical* question about experience?

Central to the argument of this chapter is my claim that Rorty was wrong to reject some forms of philosophical experience-talk. But what makes a particular use of the term “experience” philosophical? It is clear from Rorty’s writing that it is at least possible for a philosopher to use the term “experience” unproblematically.⁵ Philosophical experience-talk, then, means more than just a philosopher’s use of the word “experience.” So what, precisely, is Rorty objecting to? To answer this question, it is helpful to look at two papers in particular: ‘Dewey between Hegel and Darwin’ ([1994] 1998b), and ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ ([1990] 1998).

The former of these papers, you may recall, was one of Rorty’s most explicit presentations of the replaceability argument. The core argument of this paper is that ‘Dewey should have dropped the term “experience,” not redefined it’ ([1994] 1998b, 297). This argument is particularly relevant for our present purposes because Rorty explicitly states that he sees the problematic, philosophical uses of the term “experience” in Dewey as closer to *empeiria* rather than *phainomena* (296). So, despite using the sense of experience closest to our unproblematic,

² I agree with Rorty that phenomenal experience is ‘a term of philosophical art’ (*PMN* 150), rather than the philosophical thematisation of a concept that is also used in non-philosophical language-games.

³ Rorty treats this as a form of phenomenal experience—for him, philosophical discussions of aesthetic experience (that is, “feeling” or “what it’s like”) still rely on the appearance-reality dualism, but constitute a special case in which appearances *are* reality (*PMN* 30).

⁴ For Rorty, everyday discussions of this kind of experience can be reduced to lived experience (for example, “the awful feeling of vertigo” falls into the same conceptual category as “the experience of oppression” or “experience on the job”).

⁵ Cf. his approving citation of Dewey’s recommendation that we ‘act as to increase the meaning of present experience’ (Dewey [1922] 1983, 196, cited in Rorty [1994] 1998b, 304).

everyday experience-talk, Dewey's use of "experience" was both problematic and philosophical. There are three reasons that Rorty gives for this claim: that Dewey treated "experience" *epistemologically*, that he treated it *metaphysically*, and that he treated it too *abstractly* to do anything useful with it. We examined Rorty's criticisms of epistemological and metaphysical argument in chapters four and three respectively, so I will only discuss them briefly here before examining Rorty's third, and most revealing, criticism of Dewey's use of the term experience.

First, then, let us look at Rorty's criticism of the *epistemological* role that Dewey gives to "experience." Rorty complains that Dewey's use of "experience," despite his conscious anti-representationalism, is not enough to avoid the givenist conflation of causation and justification. ([1994] 1998b, 294-298). By treating lived experience as something "proto-linguistic" (298) rather than non-linguistic—that is, by treating it as something that can be true or false, and that is more intimately related to thought and belief than mere sensory stimuli are—Dewey replicates the givenist attitude despite avoiding the excesses of sense-datum empiricism. The problem here is that the questions that Dewey asked were *epistemological*. They concerned the mechanics of mind ("what is the role of experience in the constitution of consciousness?" [cf. 295]) or the nature of our engagement with the world ("what is the relation between experience and nature?" [cf. 296, 298]). The first kind of question typically devolves into givenism; the second into representationalism or scepticism. Clearly, then, any talk of experience, even lived experience, which places it within a theory of knowledge or perception is philosophical for Rorty.

But Rorty's conception of philosophical experience-talk is broader than epistemological uses of the term "experience." Rorty's second complaint is that Dewey asks *metaphysical* questions about experience—for example, which kinds of organisms have experience (cf. 295-296), if it extends to all of the natural world (Ibid.), or what experience itself is like, prior to any particular analysis of it (cf. 301 and Rorty [1977] 1982, 79-80). These questions are problematic for Rorty because they attempt to adjudicate what and how things really *are*, regardless of our purposes or projects. Rorty sees the rejection of this kind of question as a purification of pragmatism, a move towards 'seeing descriptions of experience, nature, and their relation to one another [...] *simply* in terms of expediency' ([1994] 1998b, 301). If any description of experience goes beyond this pragmatist attitude, it is "philosophical."

Thirdly, philosophical questions about "experience" are ones which treat it as something abstract, "big," or technical: a philosophical subject-matter. This kind of talk is marked by its goal of talking about experience while bracketing its *content* and *context*. Questions about "experience" in this abstract sense are often, but not always, epistemological (e.g. "does experience give us knowledge?") or metaphysical ("what is the place of experience in nature?"). But it is possible to formulate questions that are less clearly epistemological or metaphysical here, such as "what relates experiences to each other?" ([1994] 1998, 299) or "are there non-linguistic or non-cognitive experiences?" (296). These questions do not require us to talk about the intrinsic nature of experience—it is possible to answer them with a view towards nothing more than expediency for our current purposes⁶—but they are distinctly *theoretical* nonetheless. There is no non-philosophical language game in which they have an established role. Rorty is dismissive about such questions: he 'would like our activist colleagues to stop talking about great big things like Experience or Language, the shadow entities that Locke, Kant, and Frege invented to replace Reality as the subject-matter of philosophy' ([2006] 2007, 159). Such talk, especially when

⁶ I will employ such a strategy in this and the next chapter.

it concerns experience, always risks being re-captured by the representationalists and the metaphysicians ([1994] 1998, 296).

In short, a philosophical question about experience is one that treats experience in abstraction from any particular, specifiable purpose or language-game or, alternatively, which treats it in connection with a specifically philosophical language-game. Unlike everyday questions about experience, philosophical questions about experience are not something that can be cashed out in terms of specific experiences—for example, while “does he have enough experience for this job?” could be answered with a list of relevant experiences, it would be a mistake to answer “what relates experiences to each other?” by recounting stories of times one’s experiences had been linked together. While “what did you learn about children from your experience as a teacher?” can be answered with specific, perhaps personal, observations, “what does experience contribute to knowledge?” invites only general answers which transcend one’s individual viewpoint.

Philosophical questions about experience are also questions that address the concept “experience” itself (like “what is experience?”). Here one could contrast the question “do men experience sexism?” with the question “do barnacles have experience?” While both of these may be philosophical questions, they are not both philosophical questions *about* experience. In the latter the problematic term is “experience” (it is assumed that one knows what a barnacle is); but in the former the problematic term is “sexism.” One’s answer to the first question will depend on one’s definition of “sexism,” while one’s answer to the latter will depend on one’s definition of “experience.”⁷

To recap, the kind of experience-talk Rorty wants to reject is philosophical because it is epistemological, metaphysical or simply abstract and general. In ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ he urges that feminists cut out appeals to experience entirely and treat ‘all awareness [as] a linguistic affair’ ([1990] 1998, 218n32), at least when urging linguistic or social change. He argues that the feminist movement would be well served if feminists stopped asking whether they are representing “women’s experience” accurately—questions which he sees as “metaphysical” (Ibid.) and “unanswerable” (211). The arguments of historicist feminists, he contends, tend to stray into this area even if their concept of experience has more to do with *empeiria* than *phainomena*, and that any philosophical experience-talk will lead them into unhelpful theoretical wrangling rather than useful political work.

5.2 Feminist Critiques of Rorty

5.2.1 The Reception of Rorty’s Feminism Papers

At the end of my last chapter, I described two recommendations Rorty makes to feminist philosophers. The first of these is that feminist philosophers should abandon universalism about moral principles in favour of historicism; the second is they abandon philosophical experience-talk in favour of talk about language and shared social practices. Of course, Rorty does not think that feminists should stop talking about experiences that they have had (e.g. experiences of sexism), but rather that they should stop talking about “experience” or “women’s experience” abstracted from such particulars. They should, for example, stop talking about whether women

⁷ This analogy is an imperfect one, because the former question could be made into a question about the nature of experience (e.g., “Taking for granted that men observe sexism, does that mean that they *experience* it?”)—but hopefully it is clear enough for my present purposes.

experience the world in a more interconnected, or less detached, or more affectively laden manner than men, and instead talk about different existent or possible social practices and epistemic norms. Although there are critics of both of Rorty's recommendations, it is the second that has drawn the most hostility.⁸ Tellingly, the most prominent feminist defender of Rorty—Susan Dieleman—does so not by defending a rejection of experience, but by arguing that 'Rorty's position in the experience-language debate has been misconstrued' (2014, 114).

Contrarily to what I argued in the previous section, Dieleman claims that Rorty holds a positive view on the nature of experience. Rorty's view, she argues, 'amounts to the claim that it is not inconsistent to recognize the role of social meanings in constituting lived experience on the one hand, and to admit the existence of an experience that exceeds, locates, and prompts social meanings on the other' (115). This is what Dieleman calls a "combinatory" view, which takes the best of both the "experience" and "language" sides of the experience-language debate. My disagreement with Dieleman lies in the nature of Rorty's "admission" of the existence of experience. Dieleman is right to say that Rorty does not deny the existence of a pre-linguistic experience that "exceeds, locates, and prompts" (but does not justify) social meanings. Nevertheless, it is wrong to call Rorty's stance on this issue "combinatory," because he sees no role for talk of pre-linguistic experience in *philosophy*. While it may sometimes be appropriate for philosophers to talk about experience when they are "speaking with the vulgar," they must renounce it when they are engaging in philosophy proper.⁹ All interesting philosophical work that can be done with experience-talk can be done better with language-talk or social-practice-talk, because—as he argues in 'Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God' ([2002] 2007a, 11)—appeals to any kind of experience only have authority by virtue of them fitting our cultural-political expectations, and appeals that go against these practices will lack any force. So, what Rorty is combining is not an acknowledgement of both experience and language in the constitution of social meaning, but rather the demand of philosophical carefulness with the demand not to insist on changing the categories of well-functioning non-philosophical language-games to make them accord with the categories of philosophical discourse. Rather than endorsing a combinatory attitude towards experience and language, for all *philosophical* purposes Rorty's approach is reductionist. Feminist philosophers, he argues, should forego the task of better describing women's experience and focus directly on changing the language-games by which we make and evaluate experience-reports. This should not be done in the name of recognising what experiences are there already, but rather *simply* for the sake of improving the lot of women. Rather than trying to describe their experience more accurately, feminists should 'see themselves as *creating* such an experience by creating a language, a tradition, an identity' ([1990] 1998, 212).

Let us turn directly to Rorty's rejection of philosophical experience-talk. In the section of 'Feminism and Pragmatism' which I quoted at the end of the last paragraph, Rorty argues that the question of what women's experience is *like* will become unimportant for feminists if they take a prophetic, poetic or reconstructive approach to describing the lived experience of women. If feminists focus on changing the situation of women or the ways in which we talk about issues which affect women, Rorty suggests, the project of describing women's experience will become unnecessary. If we wish to examine experience at all, we must understand it through an analysis

⁸ For feminist critiques of Rorty's rejection of universalism, cf. Lovibond (1992) 2010 and Kong 2017.

⁹ George Berkeley's dictum that 'we ought to *think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar*' (Berkeley [1710] 1949, 51) is a favourite *bon mot* of Rorty's. He uses it to emphasise that we shouldn't extend our counterintuitive philosophical conclusions beyond philosophical conversations and into the rest of culture. Cf. Rorty (1993) 1998a, 44-45 and (1994) 1998c, 78-79.

of the descriptions and epistemic norms by which we discuss it. On his analysis, “experience” should be treated as an epiphenomenon of language, discourse, or other historical forces. It is not excessive to describe this view, as Kruks does, as ‘discourse reductionism’ (2001, 132): the pre-linguistic nature of experience is a difference that makes no difference to practice and so, to Rorty’s mind, it *is* no difference.¹⁰ ‘We have to take seriously’, he writes, ‘the idea that what you experience yourself to be is largely a function of what it makes sense to describe yourself as in the languages you are able to use’ ([1990] 1998, 220).

My critique of Rorty, which draws on critiques made by several feminist defenders of experience-talk, contends that there is an important sense in which philosophical discussion of the nature of pre-linguistic aesthetic and lived (but not phenomenal) experience could support the political hopes which motivate his pragmatism. The problematic cases for Rorty, I argue, are ones in which it is harmful for marginalised groups to see themselves solely as “creating experience” by creating languages and identities, and there are cases in which the idea of an experience which is not yet describable is of great importance for political agitation. This view can be illustrated by examining historical cases of linguistic innovation by feminists.

Let us turn to Rorty’s vision of linguistic and social progress. Rorty, Linda Alcoff observes, describes his political goals at the most elementary level as increasing freedom and reducing pain (understood in a broad sense, including humiliation, suffering and cruelty).¹¹ These two goals, Rorty believes, are both important—an exclusive focus on either results in an impoverished politics and an impoverished picture of humanity. Some kinds of oppression, like those described in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (which Rorty praises in 2000a [189]), are thoroughly compatible with pure utilitarian pain-reduction, and must be limited by introducing a “Romantic” ethic of self-creation. But attempting to build a political theory on Romantic conceptions of freedom alone, he argues in *CIS*, leads to absurd or cruel outlooks like those of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault (cf. *CIS* Ch. 4). Rorty’s solution is to relegate freedom, self-creation and the pursuit of sublimity to the private sphere, while promoting a public ethic of reducing cruelty.

Rorty’s engagement with feminism speaks to both of these goals. In Rorty’s view, the feminist project of increasing women’s semantic authority over themselves serves the goal of freedom by making it possible for women to coherently affirm more kinds of identity, and more aspects of their identities (Rorty [1990] 1998, 221). But no less importantly, the intellectual work being done by feminists allows us to imagine alternatives to our cruel present practices—an essential step towards overcoming the cruelty of the present (Ibid., 204-208; Rorty 1993c, 96). It is this latter aspect of feminist theory that I will discuss in the present chapter—specifically, I will challenge Rorty’s view that rejecting philosophical experience-talk will help with the feminist project of building a less cruel society.

In *CIS*, there are three ways in which Rorty characterises the linguistic and attitudinal changes that could help to create a less painful, less cruel society: (i) expanding the scope of our human solidarity (whose pain matters?),¹² (ii) recognising which pains are unnecessary (could we build a less painful, freer society without torture, extreme inequality and prohibitions against

¹⁰ Rorty (1989) 1991d, 17; 2007d, ix.

¹¹ Alcoff 2010a, 141. Cf. Rorty (1990) 1998, 214 and *CIS* Ch. 3 and 9. For a more detailed overview of the contours Rorty’s theoretically minimal liberalism, cf. Curtis 2015, Ch. 2.

¹² *CIS* Ch. 9; Rorty (1997) 2007

homosexuality? Or are these necessary evils?),¹³ or (iii) simply recognising when we are causing others pain or better describing the ways in which we do so (for example, by reading or writing socially conscious fiction like that of Dickens or Nabokov).¹⁴ However, until he addressed the topic of feminism Rorty never considered a further kind of situation: that in which one's language is so ill-suited to describing one's own pain that one must adapt or amend it. In *CIS*, Rorty even claims that doing so is impossible for victims of pervasive oppression: "The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together."¹⁵ In cases like (i) and (ii) pain is freely recognised, and in case (iii) its recognition and articulation is down to the imaginative gifts of a benevolent other. In keeping with what Kruks calls Rorty's linguistic 'vanguard theory' (Kruks 2001, 134) it is not, for example, the urban poor of England who describe their plight, but rather literary intellectuals like Charles Dickens.

In 1988, the view that Rorty espoused in *CIS* was forcefully criticised by Marxist feminist theorist Nancy Fraser in her *Unruly Practices*. Fraser's paper attacks Rorty's split of the social world into two spheres—the private, which is the domain of romantic freedom, and the public, the domain of utilitarian solidarity. In *CIS*, she argues, Rorty confines all genuine linguistic innovation to the private sphere: 'Rorty makes nonliberal, oppositional discourses non-political by definition' (Fraser [1988] 1989, 104). Such an approach would be inherently conservative, quarantining the most productive redescriptions for fear of revolution, and failing to address the importance of collective political *movements* rather than just individual intellectuals in bringing about cultural change (105). Although feminism is not the explicit topic of Fraser's article, it is easy to see on her analysis why Rorty's approach would be deeply unattractive to feminists: it appears, to its critics, like a conservative celebration of individual genius with little space for oppressed groups to collectively articulate their own experiences.

It is noteworthy, then, that 'Feminism and Pragmatism,' written the year after *CIS* was published, appears to respond to at least one of Fraser's concerns. Although, Rorty never abandoned the reformist aspect of his approach, he acknowledges in this paper that his differences with Fraser on this point 'are concrete and political rather than abstract and philosophical' ([1990] 1998, 209n15), and that his low estimation of the value of radical critique of liberal democratic society or discourse is based on his lack of hope that there is a better alternative rather than a principled rejection of the idea that there could be.¹⁶ As Curtis writes, 'the main difference between them would seem to be Rorty's relative optimism about the American project versus Fraser's rhetorically radical critique of it' (2015, 150). His position on the public/private divide also softened though the 1990s and 2000s in line with the changed emphasis of 'Feminism and Pragmatism.'¹⁷ In its articulation in *CIS*, recommending that we

¹³ Questioning such assumptions is the key service that Rorty believes pragmatism may bring to the benefit of feminism (1993c).

¹⁴ This is the subject of chapter 7 of *CIS*. I discussed the ironist's relation to cruelty in chapter 3 (§3.4.2).

¹⁵ *CIS* 94. Rorty defends this view by citing Elaine Scarry's argument that what is unique about pain is its linguistic inarticulability (Scarry 1985, 5, cited in *CIS* 36n12).

¹⁶ Although Rorty's 'hunch is that Western social thought may have seen the last *conceptual* revolution it needs' (*CIS* 63), he rules out neither the need for further *political* revolutions (*CIS* 63n21; Rorty 1991a, 15n29) nor the possibility that some vast redescription of contemporary American society might come along that *does* turn out to be preferable to his own reformist liberalism (cf. my section, later in this chapter, on the "cautionary use of 'true'").

¹⁷ Cf. Rorty 2002, 61ff., in which Rorty downplays his writings on the private split as merely "urging that there was *nothing wrong* with letting people divide their lives along the public/private line" (emphasis mine), and (1995) 2006, in which he acknowledges the "leakage" between the public and private spheres as something unproblematic. Cf. 2001d, 92.

make such a divide amounts to the claim that we should not attempt to turn the languages we each invent for the purposes of describing our own individual lives into collective political projects; we should not, in other words, desire that ‘our autonomy be embodied in institutions’ (Yack 1986, 385, quoted in *CIS* 65). The divide does not have much more to say about the public sphere than the claim that we should not seek the political sublime (as those who ignore the divide sometimes do), but only the politically better.¹⁸ Rorty is sceptical of conceptual revolutions because they often pursue the former, but there is nothing intrinsic to radical critique or revolutionary action that prevents it from being motivated by a concrete proposal for reducing cruelty.

So, what is new in ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’? Here, Rorty’s attention is no longer on the fear that privileged liberals have that they might be unknowingly hurting others, a fear exemplified by Dickens, Nabokov or Orwell. His attention is shifted in this paper to the role of oppressed groups in making the world better for *themselves*. Rather than looking to isolated geniuses to describe a better world, Rorty now places his hopes in feminist separatism, the creation of new *communities*, isolated from hegemonic discourses, which might act as laboratories for new descriptions ([1990] 1998, 223). By creating relatively insulated social groups, feminist separatist groups (or “exclusive clubs,” as Rorty calls them) would, by virtue of their relative independence from patriarchy, develop linguistic and social practices that preserved and enhanced their own autonomy. When such groups later re-integrate into mainstream society, they will do so with concrete alternatives to social orthodoxy rather than abstract critiques ([1990] 1998, 224-225).

Rorty’s shift of focus onto what oppressed groups can do for themselves was not lost on Fraser, who signalled her welcome surprise at Rorty’s transformation in her oral response ([1991] 2010). In his writings on feminism, ‘those earlier dichotomies [from *CIS*] have been scrambled. [...] the oppositions between the public and the private, the community and the individual, the political and the aesthetic are exploded’ ([1991] 2010, 50). Rorty’s attention has shifted from private, seemingly apolitical poetry to collective, motivated, and most importantly *political* redescriptions. He has also seemingly abandoned the view that oppressed groups cannot describe their own pain, looking to autobiographical writing such as Adrienne Rich’s ‘When We Dead Awaken’ to articulate the pain of being denied the right to define one’s own life.

Nevertheless, according to Fraser, Rorty’s problematic “vanguard theory” (to use Kruks’ term) remains in his focus on separatist groups, prophetic voices and the ‘flirtations with meaninglessness’ (Rorty [1990] 1998, 225) that are the condition of linguistic innovation. Fraser writes:

we can read a kind of failure of nerve in Rorty’s excessive preoccupation in this lecture with the figure of the feminist as prophet and the outcast, the solitary eccentric or member of a small embattled separatist club, huddled together spinning a web of words as a charm to keep from going crazy. [...]

[...] in 1990 feminists are not a ragtag band or exclusive club of witches and crazies. Rather we constitute a large, heterogeneous social movement with a presence in virtually every corner of American life. (Fraser [1991] 2010, 51).

¹⁸ Rorty put this point this way in the first of his unpublished 1996 Girona lectures (Rorty 1996c). For more on the different formulations of the divide, cf. Curtis 2015, 100-112.

Fraser's concern, as well as that of many other feminists, is that Rorty's approach fails to address how women can redescribe, inform and grow *within* a larger social world, one which contains people and norms which might not be sympathetic to their cause. There are two distinct aspects to this concern.

Firstly, Rorty's account of feminist linguistic innovation seems haphazard, unmotivated and mysterious—the story he tells focuses largely on the mechanism rather than the motivation for redescription, and sharply separates the creative from the rationally justifiable.¹⁹ If women, and especially feminists, form exclusive clubs then better descriptions will, on Rorty's account, naturally emerge. Rorty does not seem capable of addressing the question of what actually *motivates* such descriptions head on: the process of identifying an area of one's experience that is poorly described and experimenting with new language in order to develop a way of speaking that produces better results (cf. Lovibond [1992] 2010, 64–65). His analogy of cultural evolution with biological evolution lacks a crucial component: while biological evolution is Darwinian, linguistic evolution is Lamarckian. In Darwinian theory, island species do not *set out* to create better-adapted offspring, but in redescriptive linguistic projects like feminist agitation, those involved *are* setting out to fulfil a purpose.

Secondly, Fraser criticises Rorty for ignoring the feminist tradition of “consciousness-raising.” She ends her article by urging Rorty to consider the ‘feminist counterpublic sphere,’ a network of feminist institutions with an ‘outward-looking agitational thrust’ ([1991] 2010, 54) rather than the insularity of separatist groups. The counterpublic sphere has been the origin of some of the most consequential redescrptions of the past century, including “sexism,” “sexual harassment,” “marital rape,” “date rape,” [and] “the double shift” (Ibid.). Rorty's understanding of feminism, she argues, has not moved past the early 20th century.²⁰ Insofar as Rorty discusses this outward-facing task of feminist persuasion, he does so in the broadest generalities. He talks of the language formed in separatist groups being re-assimilated into the language of society as a whole, along with the groups themselves ([1990] 1998, 224–225), but his description of the rhetorical strategies that might be employed by these groups is brief. ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ focuses on a strategy of *contrast*: of the prophetic voice of feminists providing a vision of a better future than the present we share. In ‘Feminism, Ideology, and Deconstruction’ he supplements this with the strategy of deconstruction, which illustrates the contingency of our present languages and practices. But, as we shall see in the next section, Rorty's account leaves out or advocates against many of the most promising and proven rhetorical strategies available to feminists—strategies that require convincing unsympathetic listeners that one's redescrptions of the present are *better*.

5.2.2 Rorty's problem making sense of feminist linguistic innovation

In this section, I will discuss Linda Martín Alcoff's argument against taking a Rortyan approach to feminist linguistic innovation. Alcoff's contention draws on both of the problems I identified in the previous section: firstly, that Rorty's account fails to explain the motivations behind specific feminist redescrptions, and secondly that the feminist rhetorical strategies he discusses would have been unhelpful in several of the most important historical examples of feminist linguistic innovation. In particular, one would be hard-pressed to find a feminist theorist who treated the invention of these terms as a matter of sheer imaginative genius or well-intentioned

¹⁹ Cf. Alexander 1993, 381–382 and Koopman 2007b.

²⁰ Cf. Lara 2010, 211.

good fortune, as Rorty seems to. As Sabrina Lovibond puts this point, ‘conceptual innovations like “sexual harassment” are not just poetic *jeux d’esprit*. They are offered in solidarity to other people (mainly other women) who, it is believed, will find them a recognizably apt way of characterizing something that is *already* part of their social experience’ ([1992] 2010, 65). But if experience only becomes intelligible if it is already describable in a vocabulary one knows, as Rorty contends, how could one set out to (re)describe an aspect of one’s lived experience that does not yet have a place in one’s vocabulary? Can the kind of thing Lovibond is describing be translated into Rortyan language, which does not allow for prelinguistic experience to act as a check or standard for evaluating our descriptions?

This problem is the focus of Alcoff’s paper ‘Rorty’s Antirepresentationalism in the Context of Sexual Violence’ (2010a). In this paper, Alcoff clarifies the dilemma on Rorty’s hands by means of an example which I will return to throughout this chapter.²¹ Alcoff’s example is of a character named “Rosie,” who has been the victim of a sexual assault. Alcoff asks how Rosie’s situation would be affected by its linguistic context:

Imagine a scenario in which there is one discourse in which Rosie’s pain from a sexual assault is invisible or unintelligible, or a second one in which it is considered justifiable or inevitable, and a third discourse in which it is visible as well as considered wrong and cruel (Alcoff 2010a, 142).

This example obviously presupposes something contentious: that one could be suffering and also not be able to recognise, understand or articulate that suffering. I will discuss my theoretical reasons for thinking such cases are possible (and, indeed, widespread) in §5.3, when I discuss Miranda Fricker’s concept of maximal hermeneutical injustice.²² If we grant this for now, we can see that Rorty’s philosophy is extremely well-suited to making the move from the second vocabulary of Alcoff’s example to the third. In fact, this is precisely the kind of scenario in which he argues pragmatism can provide feminism with the ammunition it needs (Rorty [1990] 1998, 212). Once pain is *visible* (or at least, once the problems with its visibility become problems of attention and education rather than vocabulary), his linguistic pragmatism is extremely well-suited to undermining the view that it is natural and necessary. Furthermore, Rorty’s pragmatism rightly acknowledges the value of work that makes suffering *more* visible (such as journalism or literature). Linguistic historicism is an excellent dialectical rejoinder to such verdicts on Rosie’s situation as “boys will be boys,” or “that’s just the way the world works, she should toughen up.” For Rortyan pragmatism is first and foremost a vast repudiation of the naturalistic fallacy. He characterises pragmatism as ‘the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers’ (Rorty [1980] 1982, 165). Rorty argues, as we saw in chapter 3, that invoking *any* extra-human authority is a move in the game of cultural politics—that is, a suggestion about how we

²¹ While Alcoff uses this example to critique Rorty’s antirepresentationalism, I will be using it to critique his exclusion of philosophical questions about experience in particular. I will explain why I think that this re-articulation more effectively hits its mark in §6.1.2—in short, I will argue that the problem is not Rorty’s antirepresentationalism as such, but rather the place of experience within it (specifically, the ideas that it is (a) best understood propositionally, and (b) incorrigibly reported).

²² I would like to briefly acknowledge, however, that this possibility is backed up by contemporary clinical psychology. Alexithymia, a widespread condition, but one that particularly affects many survivors of trauma, describes exactly this phenomenon: Alexithymics ‘simply cannot identify what their physical sensations mean’ (van der Kolk 2014, 98). Nevertheless, people with alexithymia still bear all the physiological signs of negative affect and emotion (for example, raised levels of cortisol, shaking, crying) (Donges and Suslow 2017, 5-6).

should speak disguised as a fact about how we *must* speak—and so responses like “boys will be boys” (which implies that boys have an unchangeable nature) really amount to attempts to ward off inquiry into whether “boys” can or should change.

On the other hand, when it comes to making specific moves from the first vocabulary in Alcoff’s example to the second or third, Rorty’s approach is far less helpful. This is because the motive for making such a move—making Rosie’s distinctive experience of suffering known—is impossible to articulate in Rortyan terms. The only language which Rosie has recourse to is one in which her suffering is inexpressible, so a neopragmatist is hard-pressed to say how one could come to understand the need to find a way of expressing it. Such an understanding would, it seems, require that we are able to talk about prelinguistic experience and the adequacy of our language for describing it. Furthermore, the project of constructing a vocabulary in which Rosie’s suffering is expressible is senseless unless one has reason to believe that she is *already* suffering. This is true not only for Rosie herself on Rorty’s account, but to anyone—herself, a peer, or even a benevolent Dickensian observer. The formulation of a vocabulary which makes Rosie’s suffering visible is nevertheless something which, retrospectively, we generally look back on as a good thing. A universalist would be able to explain this easily: situations like Rosie’s were always painful, and our ability to recognise it was an important first step toward reducing such suffering. But Rorty has a harder time, because for him this judgment can *only* be made retrospectively, and would not be justified if it was made contemporaneously: over the next couple of pages, I will argue that although Rorty’s mature position makes it possible for us to retrospectively recognise Rosie’s suffering and defend the innovations that made it visible, he is unable to recognise present suffering of this kind or motivate our responses to it.

5.2.3 Rorty on historical injustice

The ability of linguistic historicism to acknowledge historical oppression is a vexed question for Rorty, which prompted him to repeatedly revise his position through his career before settling on his mature view in ‘Feminism and Pragmatism.’ The problem has also at times made pragmatism unattractive to many of those interested in social justice, who fear, like Fraser, that pragmatism possesses an intrinsic conservatism that makes it unable to acknowledge oppression or suffering unless they are already recognised as such. For example, Sonia Kruks goes as far as claiming that for Rorty, ‘Where oppression is not voiced [...] it does not exist.’²³ Some of Rorty’s earlier approaches to this question of moral progress—approaches which he rejects in ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ (225n42), but which are useful to examine in order to understand the motivations for his mature position—do encourage such a view. For example, at the time of the publication of *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty took his belief that

All truths (moral, scientific, or otherwise) have sense only relatively to a vocabulary

To imply that

*Before vocabularies were formulated in which they were expressible, these truths did not obtain;
and if such vocabularies die out they will cease to obtain.*

Citing Heidegger, he argued in 1987b that Newton’s laws were not true before Newton; citing Sartre, he wrote in 1982b that if fascism were to triumph on a global scale, then fascism would “become the truth of man” and it would no longer be true that there is some truth or fact that

²³ Kruks 2001, 134. Cf. Alcoff 2010a, 151, Wilson 1992, 22 and Seigfried 1996, 5.

stands against fascism (xlii). Were he to follow such a line of reasoning with regard to the case of Rosie, he would be forced to conclude that before the term “sexual assault” was invented, it was not true that sexual assault existed or caused suffering.

As if this were not bad enough, Alcoff emphasises another dangerous consequence that such a view would have for feminist analyses with a further example: the invention of the term “date rape.” One especially pernicious feature of this case of linguistic innovation is that ‘In some cases of date rape, it may well be that there is a feedback loop between the language used to describe the event and the experiential quality of the event itself’ (Alcoff 2010a, 150-151). In other words, describing one’s experiences differently changes their aesthetic character and, if a new description characterises an experience as one of injustice or violation, adopting that description can make the experience *more* painful.²⁴ In coming to understand one’s past experience as one of rape, one may at first experience new forms of grief, pain or violation, alongside or before any feelings of relief or validation. Alcoff argues that this is a situation that Rorty’s approach is particularly ill-suited to describe. On a historicist view according to which experience is entirely determined by discourse, feminist re-descriptions might be attacked as creating pain where there was none before:

what is the source, or cause, of the woman’s subjective experience of being raped? Is the source of that experience a feminist suggestion of new language? On Rorty’s view, it would be acceptable to say this and acceptable for feminists to put forward new language that will alter our practices—including experiences—on the grounds of evolutionary progress. Feminists might then say to their critics who accuse them of a kind of suggestive therapy that since there is no neutral fact of the matter about the nature of the event, or certainly of the normative or moral nature of the event, their innovative suggestions are as justifiable as any others and more justifiable if they are likely to lead to social progress. Against this, critics of feminist work on sexual violence would be likely to argue once again that women are being victimized by feminism, made into pawns in a social contest for cultural power, and made to feel the worst sort of psychic pain because of irresponsible feminist characterizations of certain sexual interactions as rape. (2010a, 151)

This is a dire situation for Rorty—if such accusations hold water then linguistic historicism could pose genuine threats to feminist re-description. Critics could accuse feminists of propagating pain and suffering rather than describing it; they could argue in clear Rortyan fashion that feminists were *creating* experiences of suffering rather than *expressing* them.²⁵ To return to Alcoff’s “Rosie” example, the movement from vocabulary 1 to vocabulary 3 would not simply be a case of *revealing* the contingency of pain, but of *creating* a contingent pain. And this accusation is not an insignificant concern for feminists. Sara Ahmed has persuasively described how one of the most common rhetorical tools of antifeminist reaction is precisely this ability to make the person who exposes a problem into the source of the problem (2017, 36-39). Similarly, one popular strategy that antifeminists use to make their case is to argue that feminism *harms* women by making them believe that they are victims of violence and oppression—a strategy that is much harder to resist

²⁴ Cf. Ahmed 2017, 34.

²⁵ Cf. Rorty’s claim that feminists should ‘see themselves as *creating* [women’s] experience by creating a language, a tradition, and an identity’ (Rorty [1990] 1998, 212).

if one is unable to make the case that the violence and oppression already existed.²⁶ Rorty, on his early view of normative change, could be accused of bolstering both of these rhetorical moves by suggesting that problems and experiences do not exist until they have been named.

It is this kind of difficulty that led Rorty, around the turn of the 1990s, to change his tune regarding the question of historical truth in response to criticism from Jeffrey Stout among others.²⁷ Stout's criticism was that Rorty's early view attempted exactly the kind of escape from perspective that he was trying to reject:

consider Rorty's suggestion concerning something else not to be said to the torturer: "Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond you which condemns you."²⁸ That suggestion seems false, on the first reading that occurs to me, even according to Rorty's own view. There is something beyond totalitarian practices that condemns the torturer. There's me. There's my (better) set of practices. There's the example of every remaining virtuous person, as well as whatever exemplary lives we can keep alive in memory. (Stout 1988, 259)

Stout's point is that claims like "fascism may become the truth of man" or "Newton's laws were not true before Newton" involve the idea of a view from nowhere, a perspective outside time and context that allows us to take a position of neutrality between the justificatory practices of the present and those of the past or future. This view is anathema to Rorty.²⁹ It is only possible if we renounce our own standards of justification—a move that leaves us with *no* standards. To suggest that Newton's laws could have ever not been true, or that fascism may become the truth of man, requires us to reject the view that *we* would be right to describe the physical phenomena that occurred before Newton in accordance with his laws, or the view that fascism is an inhuman and evil worldview whenever and wherever it appears. It is a relativist move that not only admits that if our justificatory practices change then what we *count* as truth will change, but takes the extra step of suggesting that we would be right to do so, and that truth *itself* would change.

To suggest a way out, Stout reminds Rorty of a different line he had taken on this issue in the 1970s: that as long as we exist, we can and should apply our own standards:

justification is relative to time and place, and truth is not [...]. We can say that the Homeric heroes were justified in acting as they did, but that what they did was (like their whole culture) morally repugnant [...]. The derogatory judgment is in both cases a justifiably invidious distinction between them and ourselves (Rorty 1976, 322-323)

In other words, if fascism should triumph, it will be morally repugnant because we are still the ones doing the evaluating. Thought experiments are not time-travel: although they may take place in an imagined future or past, we can only evaluate them from our real present.

²⁶ Cf. Anderson 2015, Ch. 6 for a survey of such anti-feminist stereotypes. Jordan Peterson's recent bestseller is a case in point: he argues that the feminist demand for equitable representation of women and men in traditionally "masculine" careers is a form of social pressure, which harms women by forcing them into careers better-suited for men (Peterson 2018, ch. 11).

²⁷ Rorty acknowledges the importance of Stout's criticism on historical moral truth in Rorty (1990) 1998, 225n42. Elsewhere, he credits Brandom's derision of his claims about Newton's laws with making him reconsider his views about historical scientific truth (2000a, 185).

²⁸ Rorty 1982b, xlii.

²⁹ Cf. *CIS* 48; (1980) 1982, 173; (1988) 1991a, 50; 1991a, 15.

Acknowledging the strength of these criticisms, in ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ Rorty altered his own approach in accordance with the one Stout recommends: ‘pragmatists should agree with everybody else that “Slavery is absolutely wrong” has always been true—even in periods when this sentence would have sounded crazy to everybody involved’ ([1990] 1998, 225n42). In other words, slavery was wrong even when nobody would have been justified (their standards of justification being vastly inferior to ours) in believing that slavery was wrong. Likewise, situations we now rightly describe as “date rape” were always rape, even before we used the term to describe it, and the suffering of its victims was always real.

Unfortunately, this only gets us some of the way. Although Rorty’s considered view allows him to say that past oppression was always wrong, it makes it *more* difficult for him to say that things we will come to recognise as oppression in the future are real cases of oppression now, despite our own failure to recognise them as such. Although taking our own standards of justification as right and inescapable gives us the confidence to say that the past should be judged by the standards of the present, it also makes it harder to judge the present by the standards of a better future. Why should we take on redescriptions that seem to expand the amount of suffering in the world? Such redescriptions are not yet codified into our moral and social practices, since they are suggestions that we modify our practices. By necessity, they make these suggestions in a language that we do not yet speak.

To take an example of a contentious contemporary redescription, what could convince us to start using the term “microaggression”? It is tempting for proponents of this term to argue that it allows us to describe an aspect of some people’s lived experience that we previously couldn’t. But whether or not this *is* an aspect of people’s lived experience is precisely the point of contention. Faced with this impasse, the proponent of the term has two possibilities open to them. Firstly, they could describe how the world will be *better* if we use the term (suffering and cruelty will be reduced, for example, and we might move closer to racial and gender equality). But this Rortyan approach will be either unconvincing or question-begging: unconvincing because, to the sceptic who doubts that microaggressions exist (or perhaps that they are common, or that they affect their targets in any significant way), the introduction of this term appears to *increase* tension by describing widespread cruelties that weren’t there before; or question-begging because it relies on the idea that there was *already* something lying in wait of description. Alternatively, the proponent could take a non-Rortyan approach, and describe the nature of their lived and aesthetic experiences (what they have witnessed and how it felt), the insufficiency of the available linguistic resources to make sense of them, and the reasons there are for believing that there is something left undescribed. This is the approach which we will examine further in the next section.

In short, Alcoff’s paper shows that Rorty’s approach leaves open the question of why we should ever be motivated to create ways of speaking about *specific* new, yet-to-be-described, forms of suffering and oppression, regardless of how much we value such a project in general. How would we ever realise that they existed? We can say now, retrospectively, that it was right to move from the first to the third vocabulary of the Rosie example, but only because we already have and use the term “sexual assault.” But we are not at the end of history—it is almost certain that, looking back in a decade or two, we will come to recognise the moral vocabulary of 2019 as one which resembles Alcoff’s first vocabulary (in which a kind of cruelty or suffering is invisible or inexpressible) regarding some other important moral phenomenon. But what could justify the move from our vocabulary to one that looks like the third? The challenge is that a Rortyan psychological nominalist, who holds that *all* awareness is a linguistic affair, would never be able

to say, “I feel like my language is insufficient for describing my suffering, so I need to find a new way of speaking,” except in the most general, platitudinous ways. There is no mechanism to locate sites for new descriptions, or to explore the gaps where it is felt language should be. Because of this inability, a Rortyan feminist would be faced with the difficult question: “If you regard yourself as creating (e.g.) women’s experience through linguistic innovation, then why are you creating new experiences of suffering and cruelty?”

Before dealing with how Rorty might respond to such a dilemma, I will introduce a concept that might help us to make sense of these situations: Miranda Fricker’s concept of hermeneutical injustice. Fricker’s concept is devised precisely to identify, understand and respond to situation in which our linguistic resources are inadequate. The current debate, I will argue, can be posed in the following way: do situations of maximal hermeneutical injustice exist, and if so, is it possible to recognise them? Then, after I have introduced Fricker’s concepts, I will argue that Alcoff’s and Fricker’s accounts require that we ask philosophical questions about the nature of both lived and aesthetic experience—questions that Rorty has advocated that we reject.

5.3 Hermeneutical Injustice

5.3.1 What is Hermeneutical Injustice?

In this section, I will introduce critical social epistemologist Miranda Fricker’s concept of maximal hermeneutical injustice, and explain why it is relevant to the present debate.³⁰ From the outset it should be noted that Rorty would reject Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice, at least in the terms in which she articulates it, for reasons that I will discuss shortly. Nevertheless, it is a concept that he should find intelligible, and more importantly, it helps us to get the point at issue between Alcoff and Rorty into clearer focus.

The term “hermeneutical injustice” refers to a kind of injustice which occurs when a person or group of people are harmed by the insufficiency of their vocabulary for describing a particular kind of experience, event or phenomenon. Furthermore, in order to be a case of injustice rather than sheer bad luck, the relevant ‘hermeneutical lacuna’ (Fricker 2007, 151) must be a result of prejudice. In other words, hermeneutical injustice has three characteristics: (1) harm; (2) the cause of that harm being an insufficiency in one’s conceptual resources; and (3) that insufficiency being the product of prejudice, or what Fricker calls “hermeneutical marginalisation” (Fricker 2007, 158). Depriving a group of what Rorty and Frye called ‘semantic authority’ over themselves is central to hermeneutical marginalisation.³¹ Marginalisation takes away a group’s ability to shape the language used to describe their lives, experiences, fears and possibilities. ‘People are hermeneutically marginalized’, explains Laura Beeby, ‘when they are excluded from the generation of shared social meanings’ (Beeby 2011, 481)—for example, when they are systematically excluded from influential professions such as journalism or politics, or simply when they are not taken seriously by their peers as a result of prejudice.³²

³⁰ Although examples of “maximal,” “midway” and “minimal” hermeneutical injustice (the taxonomy I will use in this chapter) are all present in *Epistemic Injustice*, the text I will focus on in this section, Fricker only began to explicitly distinguish between them by name in Fricker 2016.

³¹ Rorty (1990) 1998, 223; Frye 1983, 106n; cf. my previous chapter, §4.3.

³² The phenomenon of not giving people due credibility due to prejudice is what Fricker calls “testimonial injustice” (Fricker 2007, 1 and 4). For her discussion of the mutually-reinforcing relationship between testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, see Fricker 2007, 159.

There are degrees of hermeneutical injustice. At the most extreme end, which is the most relevant to the present discussion, are cases in which a group's experiences are not articulable *even to themselves* (Fricker 2013, 1319). Fricker's influential example of maximal hermeneutical injustice is the historical case of Carmita Wood. Wood's experience is described in Susan Brownmiller's memoir of the American women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Brownmiller 1990), and it is clearly a case of what we would now call sexual harassment.³³ While working at Cornell University's physics department, Wood was repeatedly approached, groped and kissed against her will by a "distinguished professor." Her increasing discomfort and anxiety with the professor's ongoing behaviour, and the physical symptoms she developed as a consequence, eventually led to her quitting her job. Later, when she applied for unemployment benefits, her claim was denied because she was unable to articulate the reasons why she had left her job at the university. Later, when she spoke up about her experience at a women's liberation meeting at MIT, the women present found themselves recalling many similar experiences: 'We realized that [...] every one of us—the women on staff, Carmita, the students—had had an experience like this at some point, you know? And no one of us had ever told anyone before. It was one of those *click, aba!* moments, a profound revelation' (Brownmiller 1990, 280-281, quoted in Fricker 2007, 150). This revelation spurred the women present to engage in the difficult work of conceptualising and naming the experience that they had shared. Not long after this meeting, the group coined the term "sexual harassment," and spearheaded a campaign to introduce legislation against it.

Carmita Wood was a victim of hermeneutical injustice because her case satisfies the three conditions I outlined above. Firstly, it is clear that she was *harmed* by her inability to invoke the term or concept "sexual harassment," either in understanding her own experiences or in making them intelligible to others. She needed the concept, and suffered from its absence. The criterion of harm separates her from her harasser, who also lacked the concept of sexual harassment, but did not need it to make sense of his experience. Epistemic harm, it should be noted, is distinct from the harm of *being* sexually harassed, and it is the additional harm of not being able to describe the experience that characterises *hermeneutical* injustice. (Being sexually harassed is obviously an injustice, but it is not intrinsically an epistemic injustice.)

Secondly, the reason that Wood was unable to invoke the concept of sexual harassment was that it was lacking from the vocabulary of her, her peers, and American society in general. There was, in other words, a hermeneutical *lacuna*, not simply a lapse in memory or an inability to recognise the nature of her own case.

Thirdly, for the Wood case to be a case of hermeneutical injustice rather than mere hermeneutical bad luck, an additional feature is essential: hermeneutical *marginalisation*. It was not by mere chance that Wood lacked the concept of sexual harassment. Rather, this lack, and other conceptual privations like it, can be attributed to a more widespread marginalisation of women from positions of hermeneutical influence. It was no coincidence, in other words, that in a patriarchal society experiences like Wood's would be widely thought of as unwanted but innocuous "flirting" rather than harmful and violent "harassment" (Fricker 2007, 152).

Maximal cases of hermeneutical injustice, then, occur not simply when a person or group of people are disadvantaged by a term's absence from their vocabulary, but also when its continued absence is attributable to the marginalisation of that group from the platforms and

³³ Wood's story also involves incidents of sexual assault, but what is at issue in the present discussion is the creation of the term (or concept) of "sexual harassment."

practices which sustain, develop and propagate new linguistic innovations. These platforms and practices might include political leadership, employment by leading newspapers, jobs in academia or the creative industries or simply being taken seriously by other hermeneutical influential people (a judgement that is frequently subject to implicit or explicit bias on racial, gender, dis/ability or class lines). '[R]elations of unequal power', Dieleman writes, 'can "skew" the collection of hermeneutical resources' towards being more able to describe the experiences of the powerful (Dieleman 2015, 801). Moreover, hermeneutical lacunas often perpetuate hermeneutical marginalisation; for example, the exclusion of women from positions of linguistic influence is perpetuated by leaving the problem of sexual harassment unaddressed.

For another illustrative, extreme example of maximal hermeneutical injustice we can look to fiction. The appendix to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, entitled 'The Principles of Newspeak,' is an especially clear picture of what happens when the logic of hermeneutical injustice is taken to the extreme. Orwell describes here how, in his dystopia, the shared hermeneutical resource³⁴ is *entirely* centralised, with concepts that could improve the lot of anyone outside the ruling class being deliberately rendered entirely unintelligible by compulsion to speak an artificial, limited language. Such concepts are utterly excluded from people's vocabularies, by violent repression if necessary. The result is a situation in which it is impossible to even formulate the idea of political freedom. Anyone who might benefit from being able to use such a concept is *hermeneutically marginalised* in Fricker's sense, as they are put at an 'asymmetrical cognitive disadvantage' (Fricker 2007, 161) relative to the Inner Party as a consequence of being prevented from shaping the vocabulary they share.

Fricker has also discussed "midway" cases of hermeneutical injustice, in which an "in-group" has the relevant terms in their vocabulary and has no problem understanding them, but other important or powerful groups do not (Fricker 2016, 167). As Trystan Goetze describes it, while in maximal cases of hermeneutical injustice the subject lacks *cognitive* intelligibility, in midway cases they lack *communicative* intelligibility (Goetze 2018, 74). The concept of midway hermeneutical injustice would be well-used to characterise a situation in which the term "sexual harassment" had already been coined and propagated through feminist circles, and its use had become more developed and precise, but in which it had not spread beyond such circles. In this situation, women might be put at a disadvantage because of a gap in *men's* vocabularies. For example, even if Wood had incorporated the term "sexual harassment" into her own vocabulary, it might still have proven impossible for her to claim unemployment benefits if the term was not also understood by the person evaluating her application. In such a case, Wood would still have been a victim of a kind of hermeneutical injustice despite being entirely able to articulate her own experience to herself and her peers.

5.3.2 Rorty and the question of hermeneutical injustice: are maximal cases possible?

With these concepts: *hermeneutical injustice*, *hermeneutical marginalisation* and *hermeneutical lacuna* (or "hermeneutical gap"), we can now better formulate the experientialist feminist challenge to Rorty. The challenge is that *because Rorty refuses to ask philosophical questions about experience, he cannot*

³⁴ This is Fricker's term for the common vocabulary. I share Goetze's understanding of this as the overlap between, rather than the sum of, all the disparate vocabularies present in any given society (Goetze 2018, 77).

*adequately discuss, identify or respond to present cases of maximal hermeneutical injustice.*³⁵ More precisely, I will conclude in this section that Rorty is unable to formulate a workable concept of *hermeneutical lacuna*, and consequently that a Rortyan political theory would be unable either to locate where political redescriptions are needed, or to motivate defend them from an unsympathetic audience when they do occur. Developing a workable concept of hermeneutical gaps, I will argue, requires asking “philosophical questions” about both aesthetic and lived experience.

The strength of the feminist challenge to Rorty depends on whether the concept of “maximal hermeneutical injustice” is coherent in a Rortyan vocabulary. In other words, can we make sense of (a) the idea that there are distinctive harms caused by the *absence* of terms from one’s vocabulary, and (b) the idea that these harms are *unjust*, without becoming “metaphysicians” and appealing to something beyond our social practices in order to decide the right way for us to speak? In the next two sections I will argue that, although he would take issue with Fricker’s *formulation* of the concept of maximal hermeneutical injustice, Rorty would be able to recognise some past situations as examples of it; in the next section, I will argue that Rorty’s view of history and cultural change gives us reason to suppose that in the future, we may rightly come to view the present in the same way. Once I have established these points, the question remains whether Rorty can provide us with the resources to move us to a better future, or to motivate such a move, in situations of *present* maximal hermeneutical injustice. I will argue that, for reasons described above by Alcoff, he cannot.

Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice has two components: hermeneutical lacunas and hermeneutical marginalisation. For Rorty, the most problematic aspect of Fricker’s account would be the way that she characterises hermeneutical lacunas. The way in which she describes hermeneutical lacunas in *Epistemic Injustice* seems to presuppose an idea of pre-linguistic experience. This experience is both *lived* experience—the things that a person does or which happen to them—and *aesthetic* experience—the way that it feels to them. Fricker wants to say that Carmita Wood and the other women in her meeting had gone through lived experiences of sexual harassment, even though at the time no one would have been able to identify them as such or group them together under a single concept. These were things that they had experienced, that had happened to them, even though the appropriate descriptions for their lived experiences did not yet exist. But these unexpressed experiences also have a *quality*, which is central to the harm caused by hermeneutical injustice. There is a feeling, on Fricker’s account, of a mismatch between the experience and the hermeneutical resources available. This is most visible in her discussion of Edmund White’s autobiography (Fricker 2007, 163ff.), in which he discusses the experience of growing up in 1950’s America, feeling a love and sexual attraction for men that could not be expressed using any of the descriptions available to him. This is not just about his lived experience—the things that he did and which happened to him—but a mismatch between his aesthetic experience, the quality or feeling of his experiences of desire and love, and the culturally available descriptions of “the homosexual” as sick, evil or disgusting. Similarly, in Carmita Wood’s case, an important dimension of her experience of sexual harassment was her *aesthetic* feeling of powerlessness, fear and violation—a feeling that did not fit with the available descriptions of her experience as one of “flirtation,” or of her reaction as prudishness. This dimension is especially visible of Alcoff’s paper, which thematises the felt quality of Rosie’s

³⁵ The decision to formulate this challenge in terms of Fricker’s concepts is my own. I see it as an adaptation of Alcoff’s argument, which I introduced in §5.2.2, but I would be amiss not to also recognise the work of Sonia Kruks (2001, Ch. 5), Timothy Kaufman-Osborn (1993) and Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1996, Ch. 7), which was instrumental in my coming to formulate the argument in the way that I will here.

experience and its relation to her language. When I discuss Fricker and Alcoff, then, I will use “experience” to mean both *lived* and *aesthetic* experience. (I will discuss whether such experience-talk is *philosophical*, in Rorty’s sense of the term, in §5.4.6.) The third form of experience, phenomenal experience, is not relevant here—there is nothing in Wood’s, White’s or Rosie’s experience that is the *appearance* or *representation* of an external, objective *reality*.³⁶

There is a second reason that Rorty would find Fricker’s concept of hermeneutical lacunas hard to swallow: Fricker often sounds like she holds a *realist* view about these undescribed experiences. For example, she describes hermeneutical lacunas as ‘absences of proper interpretations, blanks where there should be a name for an experience which it is in the interests of the subject to be able to render communicatively intelligible’ (Fricker 2007, 160); or, elsewhere, she writes that ‘hermeneutical lacunas are like holes in the ozone—it’s the people who live under them that get burned’ (161). Sympathetic critics of Fricker have raised concerns about sentences like these—for example, Alcoff writes of her fear that the latter sentence ‘implies a realist account of meaning as reference to already existing, fully formed objects, objects existing, like global warming, whether they are acknowledged by this season’s political administration or not’ (Alcoff 2010b, 136). Rorty would raise similar concerns, given his insistence that we should reject the view that ‘the world [or experience]³⁷ splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called “facts” (CIS 5). Regarding hermeneutical lacunas, then, Rorty can only claim that Carmita Wood had a “blank” where “sexual harassment” should have been by comparing her vocabulary to someone else’s, not by comparing it to her experience. Consequently, we cannot make sense of the idea that our *own* vocabulary contains such blanks, unless we have already filled them up by making concrete proposals for new terms and concepts. The presence of hermeneutical lacunas cannot justify the introduction of new words for Rorty—the concept of “hermeneutical” lacuna is only useful in explaining what one vocabulary lacks relative to another. There is always *space* for linguistic innovation on a Rortyan account, but there are not *spaces* where words are lacking. For Fricker, good linguistic innovation fills in hermeneutical gaps like one fills potholes in a road; for Rorty, it works like a freeze-thaw cycle, in which the gaps are filled at the same time as they are created, and by the same means. If understanding present maximal hermeneutical injustice requires that we treat Frickerian hermeneutical lacunas in a realist manner, then on a Rortyan picture such understanding is empty, undesirable or impossible. In the next section, however, I will argue that it is possible to apply Fricker’s argument in a non-realist manner, which should make the problem intelligible to Rorty.

As well as hermeneutical gaps, Fricker’s concept of hermeneutical injustice has another key component: hermeneutical marginalisation. This concept would be much more amenable to Rorty, and its mechanisms receive sustained attention in ‘Feminism and Pragmatism.’ Indeed, Rorty describes the feminist movement itself as an attempt to help women get semantic authority over themselves, which in Frickerian terms means simply enabling women to shape the hermeneutical resources available to describe their own lives rather than having them shaped by men. Rorty’s analysis of contemporary feminism is keenly attentive to feminists’ strategies for

³⁶ Although Alcoff uses the “Rosie” example to argue against Rorty’s antirepresentationalism, she does not treat the experience itself as representational (that is, as an appearance of something). Rather, she argues that we need the concept of *better representation of experience* to motivate the linguistic change she is promoting. I will discuss why I think Alcoff’s conclusion is too extreme in §6.1.2.

³⁷ Cf. my §4.2.2, where I argued that Rorty treats claims about “experience” as claims about a nonhuman authority (like “the world”) which makes our claims true, at least if “experience” is taken to have a nature that is not entirely reducible to the norms of justification of some linguistic community.

overcoming hermeneutical marginalisation, and the obstacles they may face. For example, he argues that making people's claims of oppression sound "crazy" is itself a mechanism of oppression ([1990] 1998, 203, 207-208); and he takes seriously feminist separatism as a strategy for creating a space in which women are not marginalised relative to hegemonic groups. He often presents his recommendation of historicism to feminists as a better way of conceiving semantic authority, rather than a better way of reducing suffering.³⁸ He even concedes that universalism might provide a more palatable interpretation of past oppression for feminist purposes (219) but concludes that losing this virtue is a price worth paying for the advantages of historicism in overcoming hermeneutical marginalisation.

Let us return to the problem of hermeneutical gaps. Although Rorty occasionally mentions *past* cases of hermeneutical gaps (Rorty [1990] 1998, 203 and 221), it is hard on a Rortyan account to explain what it would mean for such a case—in which the problem is not simply making oneself intelligible to an out-group but rather making sense of one's own experiences—to exist in the *present*. Consequently, his account of linguistic innovation, because of its apparent absence of a present or prospective (rather than merely retrospective) concept of hermeneutical lacuna, can only treat linguistic innovation as something inexplicable, mysterious and haphazard (Rorty [1990] 1998, 217). Tellingly, Rorty often turns to Darwinian metaphors here, treating linguistic innovation as a constant froth of mutations competing to fill cultural niches. In 'Feminism and Pragmatism' he describes cultural history in terms of Richard Dawkins' theory of memes, which treats beliefs, concepts and words as self-replicating units that propagate or die according to a kind of natural selection.³⁹ Rorty's presentation of this view in *CIS* is even more striking:

Think of [linguistic, conceptual or cultural] novelty as the sort of thing which happens when, for example, a cosmic ray scrambles the atoms in a DNA molecule, thus sending things off in the direction of the orchids or the anthropoids. The orchids, when their time came, were no less novel or marvelous for the sheer contingency of this necessary condition of their existence. Analogously, for all we know, or should care, Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agapē*, and Newton's metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the result of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy – some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata. It hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. (17)

What Rorty resists here is elevating his account from an account of *causes* to one of *reasons*. Yes, these innovations may have been the results of cosmic rays or idiosyncratic childhood traumata—but were they not also responses to the conviction that *something was missing* from our language or conceptual apparatus? Similarly, as much as the invention of the term "sexual

³⁸ Although he defends it on those grounds too, e.g. on p. 203.

³⁹ Dawkins (1976) 1989, Ch. 11. Cf. p. 192: 'Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots and building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.'

harassment” was an imaginative achievement, was it not also a conscious attempt to fill a descriptive gap?⁴⁰

As we have seen, Rorty’s reason for taking this approach is his fear that any other approach would be metaphysical or givenist. His concern is that other approaches would amount to seeking a justification for new ways of speaking in something non-human—in the nature of the world or pre-linguistic experience—or at the very least in noninferential, private beliefs. Rorty, I argued in chapters 3 and 4, rightly saw such a move as authoritarian. His response is to treat all appeals to experience as moves in the game of cultural politics, and to refuse to admit experience-talk unless there are already established norms for talking about the experience in question. (In the next chapter, I will argue that the first of these responses does not, and should not, entail the second). But in maximal cases of hermeneutical injustice one’s experiences are articulable in *no* vocabulary—neither that of one’s community, nor anyone else’s.

For Rorty, what is essential is that vocabularies dictate the nature of experience, rather than experience serving as a tribunal for selecting between or amending vocabularies. It is acceptable to say, “This way of talking about experience would have the following benefits . . .”, but it is unacceptable to say “this way of talking would more faithfully capture the nature of our experience” or “this way of talking would address this aspect of our experience that we have not been able to talk about before.” As Rorty puts it,

We are *not* saying that the voice in which women will some day speak will be better at representing reality [including “experience”] than present-day masculinist discourse. [...] We are just trying to help women out of the traps that men have constructed for them, help them get the power they do not presently have, and help them create a moral identity as women ([1990] 1998, 210)

In a case like Carmita Wood’s, we would not be entitled to say at the time—Rorty argues—that “sexual harassment” was a better description of her experience because her experience was truly a case of sexual harassment. Although looking back from our linguistic position, we can say that it *was* a better (and true) description of her experience, we would not have been justified in saying that *at the time*. In Frickerian terminology, we would not be entitled to say *at the time* that there was a gap, but no concept to fill it. We can say this now, but only with hindsight, because we have come to speak a language which includes the term “sexual harassment.” When they proposed the term, however, Wood and her allies would only be entitled to say that calling such an experience “sexual harassment” is better because it discourages bad behaviour, because it helps to establish a culture of respect in the workplace, because it allows women in her position to explain why they quit their job, or other explanations of this kind. They would not be justified in saying that the term was a better description of their prior *experiences*.

What this amounts to saying is that, on a Rortyan analysis, contemporary hermeneutical injustice is entirely reducible to hermeneutical marginalisation. To Rorty, there is no *extra* injustice to be found in the absence of concepts or terms for specific parts of our experience, except in hindsight or in comparison to other vocabularies. Hermeneutical lacunas, when used to describe our contemporary situation, appear to be a useless notion for Rorty. In the next few sections, I will examine two possible paths open to Rorty: whether, on the one hand, he would

⁴⁰ Later in *CIS*, Rorty endorses a Hegelian reasons-oriented account of intellectual history, which allowed for explanations of the latter sort. But when examining the present, he refuses to make this move, staying at the level of initially meaningless, accidental mutations seeking a cultural niche.

be entitled to discard the notion of present hermeneutical gaps altogether; and, on the other, whether there are resources in his linguistic historicist approach that would allow him to recognise them and defend redescrptions put forward to close them. The answer to both of these questions, I will argue, will be “no.”

5.4 Rorty’s Inability to deal with Hermeneutical Gaps

5.4.1 Perspectives from the literature

At this point, it should be noted that the two other authors who have analysed the potential of Rorty’s linguistic pragmatism to meliorate hermeneutical injustice—Susan Dieleman (2010, 2012 and 2017) and Federico Penelas (2019)—have come to a different conclusion from my own. Dieleman and Penelas argue that Rorty provides us with important tools for dealing with hermeneutical injustice. Dieleman argues that liberal ironism empowers us to close hermeneutical gaps by getting us to appreciate the contingency and mutability of our own final vocabularies (2017, 141; 2012, 101; 2015, 804). She praises Rorty for acknowledging the contingency even of our epistemic norms themselves, which—if taken at face value—could exclude marginalised groups with particular expressive styles (2012, 101). This, Dieleman argues, prepares the ironist to develop the skills that Fricker calls “virtuous hearing” (Dieleman 2015, 804 and Fricker 2007, 169ff.), a kind of sensitivity to the effects of hermeneutical marginalisation in others. Penelas, similarly, argues that ironism is helpful remedying hermeneutical injustice through its concern with “liberal redescription,” which problematizes and revises our understanding of which of our practices are cruel (2019, 320-321; cf. my §3.4.4).

I have no disagreement with this. I believe that a historicist orientation of the kind that I outlined in chapter 3 is the most promising orientation when it comes to ameliorating situations of hermeneutical injustice, as it avoids the complacency and inflexibility that one risks with more universalist approaches. Such a view has also been defended by Shannon Sullivan (2017), although her favoured form of historicism is closer to that of Dewey than Rorty and freely uses the language of “experience.” My disagreement with Dieleman and Penelas lies not in their conclusions but in their omissions. Although both authors mention hermeneutical gaps, neither considers the question of how to *identify* or *remedy* them, except indirectly by overcoming hermeneutical marginalisation. Their analyses, in fact, are concerned entirely with Rorty’s usefulness for dealing with prejudice and marginalisation (cf. Dieleman 2015, 801-803), with the implicit assumption that once marginalisation is overcome hermeneutical gaps will cease to pose a problem.

I reject this assumption for two reasons. Firstly, it is clear that even if marginalisation were to cease overnight, our hermeneutical resources would still be marked by the gaps it left until we developed new descriptions and practices. The material harms of prejudice (i.e., the hermeneutical gaps) remain even when that prejudice is overcome, and further work is needed to deal with these material harms. Secondly, remedying material harms caused by hermeneutical marginalisation is an important task even while that marginalisation endures, and indeed, is often an important way of undoing that marginalisation. The invention of the term “sexual harassment” materially improved people’s lives even though the marginalisation that reduced women’s hermeneutical power persists to this day; furthermore, the ability to identify situations of sexual harassment has itself helped to make the spheres of culture that shape our hermeneutical resources (academia, journalism, politics, and so on) less unrepresentative.

In short, then, while I agree with Dieleman and Penelas that a broadly Rortyan framework—one that is fallibilist, historicist, and nominalist—is valuable for overcoming hermeneutical injustice, my contention in this thesis is that there is one aspect of Rorty’s approach that obstructs this ability: the rejection of philosophical questions about aesthetic experience. Just as the thesis as a whole can be read as a critical *amendment* to Rorty’s philosophy, so it can be read as a critical extension of Dieleman’s and Penelas’s arguments: *yes*, Rortyan ironism is a promising orientation for resisting hermeneutical injustice, *but* revising his linguistic reduction of experience is in order to make good on this promise.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I shall consider, first, whether the concept of a present hermeneutical gap would be intelligible and problematic for Rorty in the way that I have assumed so far. Would such a concept make sense at all on a Rortyan account? And if so, does Rorty possess the resources to resolve them?

5.4.2 Is talk of hermeneutical gaps compatible with linguistic historicism?

The challenge for Rorty, and for feminist theorists more generally, is to produce an account of linguistic innovation that combines the advantages of both universalism and historicism.⁴¹ These advantages are, respectively, the ability to defend the view that linguistic innovations satisfy needs that pre-existed them—they fill in hermeneutical gaps—while also retaining the historicist understanding of our practices and institutions as contingent and revisable rather than natural or necessary. Rorty’s politics of language deals handily with the second of these desiderata, but poorly with the first. Although he allows the novel norms produced by linguistic innovation to apply retroactively, he has no way of locating gaps in our current linguistic resources except by comparing them to other existent (or historical or fictional) vocabularies. In short, the political potential of Rortyan pragmatism is hampered, rather than helped, by its refusal to ask such questions as “is our language adequate for describing our experience?” or “do women have different experiences to men’s?” These are, I argued in §5.2, *philosophical* questions about (lived and aesthetic) experience—questions which he advocates against asking in ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’ and elsewhere.⁴² They are the kinds of questions that he sought to remove from pragmatism with the replaceability argument.

Rorty’s refusal to ask these questions hampers the political potential of pragmatism for two reasons. Firstly, as we have seen, it prevents us from isolating situations of hermeneutical inadequacy which call for linguistic innovation. Secondly, and consequently, it prevents us from developing practices of remedial hermeneutical *justice* in such situations—something that Fricker, by asking the above question, is equipped to do. Bringing about hermeneutical justice, after all, relies on the ability to detect if one’s interlocutor is living under a hermeneutical gap.

If one examines the history of feminist linguistic innovation, one finds that an essential part of the struggle towards a better future has been the improved description of *present* suffering and injustice—for example, in coining terms such as “sexual harassment” and “date rape.” It is only *after* such descriptions have been taken up that we can argue that these behaviours are unnecessary or prophesy a future in which they don’t exist. We cannot, to recall Alcoff’s “Rosie” example, get to vocabulary three unless we have already moved away from vocabulary one. By

⁴¹ For more on this problem and one feminist approach to resolving it, cf. Kong 2017.

⁴² He advocates against asking the first question on p. 212, and the second on p. 218n32 (Rorty [1990] 1998). In both cases, he makes a version of the replaceability argument.

throwing his lot entirely in with the prophets of a better future, however, Rorty seems to make it impossible to explain why we would ever wish to describe a *worse* present. If feminists are really engaged in the project of *creating* women's experience, as Rorty suggests ([1990] 1998, 212), why would they want to create an experience of widespread sexual violence, objectification, microaggressions and routine belittlement? Why not skip this step—as Rorty does in 'Feminism and Pragmatism'⁴³—and move straight to describing a better future?

The easiest way to avoid this problem for linguistic historicists like Rorty would be to find a way to *historicize* the work that the concept of a hermeneutical gap does, and in the next two sections I will examine ways in which Rorty might try to do just that. This would require endorsing *both* the view that present hermeneutical gaps are real *and* the view that they are contingent historical products. Such an approach has been recommended by Alcoff, who argues that Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice 'needs to address the messy, circular ways in which language and human experience is linked [sic]' (Alcoff 2010b, 136)—for example, we need an account that captures the way in which the invention of the term "date rape" changed the aesthetic experience of date rape. She objects, as Rorty would, to what she considers Fricker's overly simplistic 'realist account of meaning as reference to already existing, fully formed objects' (Ibid.). In her response to Alcoff's paper, Fricker acknowledges that 'our interpretive needs [which, when unaddressed, give rise to hermeneutical lacunas] evolve with other kinds of social change' (Fricker 2010, 169)—for example, the concept of workplace sexual harassment would not have helped improve the status of peasant women in feudal Europe, and so it was not a hermeneutical lacuna for them.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, she insists that although the quality of an experience will be changed by a hermeneutical innovation, and although some experiences only come into existence in particular historical or cultural circumstances, she is 'committed to the reality of [that experience] even prior to the advent of that concept as a ready collective hermeneutic resource.'⁴⁵

So, is Rorty able to say "this is real, but we don't yet have the language to talk about it"? On the account that I have set out, he cannot. This is because of his difference from the historicised Frickerian and Alcoffian views I set out in the previous paragraph: they have something to *contrast* to language, but he does not. Rorty cannot talk about a mismatch between (historically contingent) language and (historically contingent) experience, because the only kind of experience-talk that he is willing to countenance is one in which "experience" is discursively constructed. So while Alcoff and Fricker can use experience as a check on language, Rorty cannot.

Nevertheless, there are two potential Rortyan attitudes might appear to show promise in making "hermeneutical gaps" intelligible. Sadly, I shall argue, neither does the necessary work required by a feminist political philosophy of language. The first of these attitudes is Rorty's claim that there is a "cautionary" use of the word "true" (an attitude which it is plausible to extend, *mutatis mutandis*, to the word "reality"). The second is his Hegelian attitude to cultural evolution that takes tensions in language and culture as the proving ground for progress.

⁴³ For example, Rorty advises that feminists 'abandon the contrast between superficial appearance and deep reality in favour of the contrast between a painful present and a possibly less painful, dimly seen, future' ([1990] 1998, 214). At no point does Rorty consider that the painfulness of the *present* could be dimly seen.

⁴⁴ This example is my own.

⁴⁵ Fricker 2010, 168. Here Fricker is talking about the experience (and concept) of "workplace bullying."

5.4.3 The cautionary use of “true”

First, then, let us look at what Rorty calls ‘the cautionary use of “true.”’ Despite being commonly stereotyped as a postmodern enemy of “truth” and “reality,” Rorty allows three uses of the word “true” into philosophy. All three of these are best understood as adjectival rather than nominal uses. Rorty’s three favoured uses of “true” are (a) to endorse a claim (for example, “what she said is true”), (b) to ‘say metalinguistic things’, for example, in talk of truth conditions (e.g. “‘Snow is white’ is true iff snow is white”) and finally, (c) a “cautionary use” ([1986] 1991a, 127-128). The cautionary use of “true” is found in phrases like ‘Your belief that S is perfectly justified but perhaps not true’ (Rorty [1986] 1991a, 128) or ‘unjustifiable to all of you but maybe true anyway’ (Rorty 1996d, 50). This use of “true” is important because it allows us to say that even though we have no way of getting outside our current norms of justification, we may come to see them as having been flawed or unsatisfactory. In other words, it allows us to remind ourselves that the true and the presently justified are not the same, despite the fact that we have no way of telling them apart. By using “true” in a cautionary sense, we emphasise that ‘we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justifiable [or vice versa]’ ([1995] 1998d, 22).

Could something like the cautionary use of “true” allow a Rortyan to say “this is real, but we don’t yet have the language to talk about it”? Unfortunately, I do not think this concept is up to the task. This is because the cautionary use of “true” is limited to discussing *claims*, and hence we can only say that *claims* might be true. To do this, however, presupposes that a vocabulary in which such claims can be made already exists. Caution can be used either to encourage humility toward claims that we cannot see any reason to doubt, or to encourage curiosity toward claims that we cannot see any reason to accept. For this reason, it is well-suited for the de-naturalising shift from Alcoff’s second vocabulary to her third. For example, even if the idea that men are incorrigibly sexually aggressive was generally accepted and considered to be justified by all reasonable standards, one could helpfully say “it still may not be true.” Such reminders are often politically useful—for example, we could follow up with “. . . so let us imagine what a society in which men acted differently might look like.” Similarly, to use Rorty’s examples from ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’:

Once, for example, it would have sounded crazy to describe homosexual sodomy as a touching expression of devotion or to describe a woman manipulating the elements of the Eucharist as a figuration of the relation of the Virgin to her Son. But such descriptions are now acquiring popularity. (Rorty [1990] 1998, 204)

At one time, the tool of last resort for defending such claims was the cautionary use of “true,” advising the proponents of majority opinion to exercise a little humility or curiosity. But the work of devising such descriptions in the first place happens at a prior stage. Hence, it is difficult to see how “this is real, but we do not yet have the language to talk about it” could be translated into a claim of the form “claim ‘x’ is true, but we don’t yet have the language to talk about it.” For how could we ever specify what *x* was unless one had the language to talk about it?⁴⁶

My reading of the cautionary use of true is supported by Rorty’s discussion of caution in a 1996 paper, in which he explicitly connects the cautionary use of “true” both to the truth of particular propositions and to the prophetic language of ‘Feminism and Pragmatism’:

⁴⁶ This question becomes even more unanswerable once one takes Wittgenstein’s critique of ostensive definition into account, which Rorty praises in *PMN* (109n16) and Rorty 2007b, 174.

I think of the cautionary use of ‘true,’ the use in which it swings free of present practices of justification, as the voice of prophecy. This use says, Some day the world will be changed, and then this proposition may turn out to be true. (1996d, 50)

The cautionary use of true is, in other words, a tool for stating counterintuitive hopes for a better future in which some proposition is accepted, not for locating where new descriptions are needed. We could, for example, use it in the claim “Your belief that the gender pay gap is ineradicable is justifiable, but may not be true,” but we cannot use it to say “there is some real experience that we do not yet have adequate language to discuss,” because the latter sentence cannot easily be translated into the hope that a specific claim may become easier or harder to justify in future. Cautionary uses of “true” encourage the valuable intellectual virtues of curiosity and humility, but they give us no direction regarding where to look for linguistic change.

5.4.4 Hegel, metaphor and linguistic evolution

Despite Rorty’s insistence that there is nothing beyond language which could inform our attempts to change it (other than sheer causal pressure), it is not the case on his view that we are powerless in the face of language. Language is not an omnipotent force that wholly defines human possibility. Rorty does not, as Alcoff suggests, ‘think that cultures are like linguistic prisons with no escape’ (Alcoff 2006, 10)—indeed, much of his philosophy is a celebration of linguistic creativity, diversity and freedom. There are two reasons that Rorty is not a cultural determinist. Firstly, there are a vast array of languages and vocabularies available to us, especially in our age of global communication and mass literacy, from which we can take inspiration when working on our own. Even if our abilities to influence our language were strictly confined to pitting existing vocabularies against existing vocabularies, the possible interventions we could make are virtually infinite. But secondly, and even more consequentially, on Rorty’s picture of linguistic growth there is a constant effervescence of play and experimentation which pushes languages forward. The first chapter of *CIS* puts forward this vision at length, extending Donald Davidson’s work on metaphor (Davidson 1978). Metaphors are, Davidson and Rorty agree, strictly meaningless (or rather, the only meaning they have is their literal sense, which is unimportant in understanding them). This is an *advantage* of metaphor as far as Rorty is concerned. Because of their meaninglessness, or the inexhaustibility of their possible meanings, metaphors can lead us to see things differently in a way that literal use never could. ‘[M]etaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact—but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact’ (Davidson 1978, 46). They are, in Sellarsian terms, *causes* but not *reasons* for belief-change. Over time, of course, some metaphors get stabilized into regular patterns of use and acquire literalness. This, in Rorty’s picture, is the key to linguistic change: language is like a coral reef, with “dead,” literalised metaphors providing the structure on which living ones can grow (*CIS* 16).

Rorty’s picture of feminist linguistic work also takes this model. His interest in feminist separatism, which he sees as an attempt for women to get semantic authority over themselves (or, in Frickerian terminology, to overcome hermeneutical marginalisation), comes in part from his view that in separatist communities new descriptions and linguistic conventions which do not privilege the situation of men will develop and flourish. These innovations, which are of key political importance for Rorty, nevertheless start out their development as meaningless, haphazard, purely causal interventions. The language that develops in feminist separatist groups

will, he claims, be the outcome of ‘a long series of flirtations with meaninglessness’ (Rorty [1990] 1998, 225). It will, of course, cease to be meaningless once enough time has passed for it to enter into regular patterns of use, but meaninglessness is for Rorty an *essential* first stage of growth.

Rorty does not, however, believe that linguistic evolution happens in a vacuum. Rather, it can only happen where there is a “tension” in the vocabulary (much like the way in which corals can only grow where a foothold has been provided by the existing structure of the reef):

We can only hope to transcend our acculturation if our culture contains (or, thanks to disruptions from outside or internal revolt, comes to contain) splits which supply footholds for new initiatives. Without such splits—without tensions which make people listen to unfamiliar ideas in the hope of finding new means of overcoming those tensions—there is no hope. (Rorty 1991a, 13-14)

Is there space for hermeneutical lacunas on this picture? Could exploring the relation between linguistic innovation and cultural tensions help us to distinguish genuine lacunas from less politically relevant areas of growth? Rorty’s approach might seem promising. But again, the answer depends on what these “tensions” that Rorty discusses are between. In Fricker’s usage, the tension which defines a hermeneutical gap is between hermeneutical resources and experience. There is a hermeneutical gap whenever there is an experience it would be in one’s interests to understand, but one’s hermeneutical resources are insufficient for understanding it (and, of course, this insufficiency must be attributable to a process of hermeneutical marginalisation rather than sheer bad luck). At a bare minimum, for the concept of hermeneutical gap to do any work one must be able to speak of tensions between the shared hermeneutical resource and *something else*. Furthermore, if the concept of *maximal* (rather than just midway) hermeneutical injustice is to be intelligible, then this “something else” cannot be another community’s vocabulary. So, does Rorty use “tension” to refer to a tension between a culture or vocabulary and something else?

Rorty’s language is ambiguous in the article I quoted above. It is unclear what he means by the word “contains,” and his next sentence does nothing to clear it up. ‘The systematic elimination of such tensions,’ he continues, ‘*or of awareness of them*, is what is so frightening about *Brave New World* and *1984*’ (1991a, 14, emphasis mine). Is there a difference between eliminating awareness of the tensions in a culture and eliminating the tensions themselves? If so, tensions might be a kind of hermeneutical lacuna. Furthermore, a couple of pages later, Rorty writes that ‘*every* social practice of any complexity, and every element of such a practice, contains internal tensions. Ever since Hegel we intellectuals have been winking them out’ (1991a, 16). In this passage Rorty portrays the work of the Hegelian intellectual as a kind of *discovery*, rather than a kind of creation.

Nevertheless, it would be extremely out of character for Rorty to treat this intellectual work as a kind of finding that was different to making, or to treat the elimination of tension as the elimination of anything but the awareness of tension.⁴⁷ In an article on the usefulness of deconstruction to feminists, Rorty scorns just these kinds of questions:

⁴⁷ If one wishes to keep tension and the awareness of tension distinct, a possible Rortyan approach would be to treat the latter as the awareness of other vocabularies, and nothing more. But as I wrote in the previous paragraph, this leaves him unable to describe present situations of maximal hermeneutical injustice, in which the relevant description cannot be found in *any* vocabulary.

The question of whether these differences [discovered by deconstructionists]⁴⁸ were there (huddled together deep down within the entity, waiting to be brought to light by deconstructing excavators), or are only there in the entity after the feminist has finished reshaping the entity into a social construct nearer her heart's desire, seems to me of no interest whatsoever. Indeed, it seems to me an important part of the anti-metaphysical polemic common to post-Nietzscheans (pragmatists and deconstructionists alike) is to argue that the finding-vs.-making distinction is of little interest. (Rorty 1993c, 99-100)

Such a response—the view that it is pointless, for practical purposes, to distinguish between finding and making when it comes to this kind of tension—is characteristic of Rorty's view of social and linguistic progress. Elsewhere he describes Hegel's "winkling out" of tensions in his culture as 'simply a literary skill—skill at producing surprising gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology to another' (*CIS* 78). By 'turning philosophy in a literary genre' (*CIS* 79) in this way, Hegel, on Rorty's view, was revolutionary precisely because of his refusal to distinguish between finding tensions and creating tensions. Just as it is pointless to ask whether *War and Peace* was latent in the Russian language before Tolstoy, so it is pointless to ask whether "sexual harassment" was missing from ours before that women's liberation meeting at MIT. The "tensions" that Rorty talks about serve only to remind us of our freedom, or to retroject whatever problems we are currently discussing into our evaluation of past ways of speaking. They are entirely useless for the project of figuring out new targets for redescription, and even less useful for motivating or justifying those redescriptions. If feminists are simply "reshaping entities into social constructs nearer to their hearts' desires," then why would they ever wish to reshape the entity "women's experience" into one of new, previously unseen kinds of suffering—the upshot of many contemporary feminist redescriptions?

5.4.5 Why the problem of conceptualising present maximal hermeneutical injustice should matter to Rorty

In a recent paper on Fricker's work, Katharine Jenkins observed that 'An important aspect of the particular harm of hermeneutical injustice is the way that it pre-emptively silences protests against other injustices' (Jenkins 2017, 201). If one cannot understand what is wrong, one cannot articulate that wrongness to others or set about fixing it. This aspect of hermeneutical injustice is at the core of my critique of Rorty in this chapter. If his philosophy prevents us from identifying or understanding contemporary cases of maximal hermeneutical injustice, the project of coming up with redescriptions to deal with them will fail to even get off the ground.

In this section, I will establish that past cases of maximal hermeneutical injustice can be described unproblematically on a Rortyan approach, and that we do not have any good reason to doubt that such situations exist in the present. In the next section, I will argue that Rorty's rejection of philosophical experience-talk makes him unable to deal with such situations.

I have argued in the past few sections that on a Rortyan picture of language, the only use for the concept of maximal hermeneutical injustice, and in particular the sub-concept of "hermeneutical lacunas," is that it can help us characterise what other times, communities or cultures lack(ed) relative to ours. There is no use, in other words, for the idea that our *contemporary* vocabulary has "gaps" that are a product of oppression, except as the cautionary,

⁴⁸ Specifically, Rorty is responding to Johnson (1980) 1985, x-xi.

fallibilist idea that *any* of our beliefs or practices might turn out to be false, unjust or incomplete (Rorty 1990, 634-635), especially as more people gain semantic authority over their lives. For Rorty, to say that there are tensions “in” our vocabularies is to say that there are tensions between one of the vocabularies we are acquainted with and another, or between different aspects of a single vocabulary (Kaufman-Osborn 1993, 134). The idea that hermeneutical gaps are semantically *located*, however, has no use unless they have already been filled.

We may get this idea into more detail if we look at three theses Rorty would likely endorse, and what they leave out. In §5.2.3 I outlined Rorty’s mature view on past injustice. In ‘Feminism and Pragmatism,’ Rorty acknowledges that what is unjust now was *always* unjust, even though one might not have always been justified in *saying* that it was unjust ([1990] 1998, 225-226n42). So, regarding the example of sexual harassment, Rorty would endorse the following claim:

- i. The statement “sexual harassment is wrong and harmful” was *always* true, even if it was not always justified (justification being a sociological, vocabulary-relative process).

Furthermore, let us ascribe to Rorty the relatively uncontroversial view that

- ii. In addition to the harm of being sexually harassed, victims of sexual harassment suffer an additional psychological harm if they are unable to describe what they are going through.

This second thesis covers two of Fricker’s three essential characteristics of situations of hermeneutical injustice: the thesis that one was (1) harmed by (2) a hermeneutical gap.⁴⁹ Although Rorty does not make this point directly, it is easy to infer from his discussion of semantic authority.

Rorty illustrates Frye’s concept of semantic authority with a discussion of Adrienne Rich’s autobiographical essay ‘When We Dead Awaken’ (Rich 1972), in which she describes herself as “split” between her identities as a woman and as a poet. Rorty reads this essay as an account of the psychological impact of being deprived of semantic authority over oneself—an impact that involves both a rift between different aspects of one’s identity and one’s constant repudiation of some parts of oneself in favour of others. In ‘When We Dead Awaken,’ Rich documents the laborious process by which she came to write *as* a woman. Specifically, she describes how she was led to feel that she had failed both as a woman and as a poet by a culture that opposed love to creativity (and associated the latter with a romantic, solipsistic, masculine egotism). This false choice of whether to love or to create, she writes, led her into self-hatred and the ‘fatigue of suppressed anger and the loss of contact with her own being’ (Rich 1972, 23)—a condition that could only be alleviated by developing a new concept of love (25). This is a case of a Frickerian hermeneutical gap: Rich suffered psychological harm because of the inadequacy of her culture’s hermeneutical resources for talking about love, an inadequacy that resulted directly from the hermeneutical marginalisation of women from positions in which they could define what it was to be a poet in a way that didn’t preclude also being a wife or mother. The fact that Rorty spends several pages of his paper discussing the harm Rich suffered as a result of her hermeneutical marginalisation makes it highly plausible that he would endorse Fricker’s view that hermeneutical gaps lead to psychological harm for the individuals that “live underneath them.”

⁴⁹ The third requirement, which I discuss below, is that this gap is a result of hermeneutical marginalisation.

Hence, the criterion of harm—Fricker’s first condition for a situation to count as one of hermeneutical injustice—can be described in a way that Rorty would endorse.

Fricker’s third condition for a situation to count as one of hermeneutical injustice is that a hermeneutical gap must be the result of hermeneutical marginalisation. In the case of sexual harassment, this amounts to:

- iii. the fact that situations we now call sexual harassment were described at Wood’s time using innocuous terms such as “flirtation” or “banter”—rather than terms which captured its violence and the suffering of its victims—was the result of the marginalisation of women from positions of hermeneutical influence.

This is also a view that Rorty would almost certainly endorse, given his emphasis on the need for women to gain semantic authority over themselves and his attention to the mechanisms of semantic exclusion.

The question of whether any cases of hermeneutical injustice are truly *maximal*, however, might give us pause here. What does it mean for a whole culture to “lack a concept”? To begin with, let us accept Rorty’s nominalist deflation: ‘to have a concept is to be able to use a word’ ([1984] 1991b, 103). So, to have the concept of “sexual harassment” means to be able to use the term “sexual harassment”—something that Wood was obviously unable to do, given that the word didn’t exist yet. If we are to accept Rorty’s characterisation of concepts, then during the 1960’s it was clearly the case that people lacked the concept of sexual harassment.

However, it should be noted here that a hermeneutical gap is not the *mere* lack of a concept. It is, more fundamentally, the lack of the hermeneutical resources one needs in order to properly make sense of or describe one’s own experience. So in order to say that Wood had a hermeneutical gap where “sexual harassment” should be, one cannot just point to the lack of the term “sexual harassment” in her vocabulary. To be able to say this, one must also make the case that the needs that would have been met by this concept could not have been met by resources that *were* available to her. This is a difficult task—even Fricker, despite her realist language about conceptual change, rejects the claim that in maximal cases the victims of hermeneutical injustice were ‘having an experience [...] before there were *any* conceptual resources to frame its meaning’ (2010, 168). So how can one defend the view that Wood was harmed by a genuine hermeneutical lacuna?

On the face of it, it seems clear that it was not *impossible* for Wood to describe her situation accurately⁵⁰ without using the term “sexual harassment.” In fact, this is exactly what she (and many other women) did in the meeting at MIT described in Brownmiller’s book. So did they really lack a concept (or term) that they couldn’t do without? My answer to this question is affirmative, for two reasons. Firstly, the women present at the meeting at MIT were all able to tell *stories*, but lacked an abbreviation for what their stories had in common. As Brownmiller describes it, the meeting began with female students discussing ‘unwanted sexual advances they’d encountered on their summer jobs’ (Brownmiller 1990, 281). At some point, Wood joined the discussion, telling a similar story about her time at Cornell. It was only, Brownmiller claims, at this point—when Wood had connected her story to the students’ stories—that those present ‘realized that [...] every one of us—the women on staff, Carmita [Wood], the students—had had an experience like this’ (Ibid.). Those present realised what their lived experiences, and their

⁵⁰ Accurately, that is, according to our standards.

aesthetic dimensions, had in common *through the process of sharing them*. The commonalities became apparent *through* the discussion rather than framing it from the outset. The idea that these experiences were all examples of the same phenomenon and belonged in the same category was not easily captured, and it was partially as a stroke of luck and partially as a product of hard intellectual labour that the women present were able to clarify and isolate this idea. The abbreviation of the idea was the term “sexual harassment,” and its existence as term, concept, or available hermeneutical resource was only made possible as the result of conversations such as the one Wood participated in.

The other reason that the coining of this term mattered was that the descriptive frames that were available to Wood overwhelmingly stacked the deck against her. Available summaries of her experience, such as being made uncomfortable by “flirting,” or of experiencing what the professor saw as casual comments as sexual advances, would have made her appear oversensitive and unstable to many of her contemporaries. It is possible that she would be recognised as suffering, but the nature of her suffering would be misunderstood—her experience would be looked at through the lens of neurosis, prudishness or hysteria rather than violence and hurt. While with careful argument such deck-stacking could have been overcome, such argument is frequently not an option for people in positions such as hers—for example, when applying for unemployment benefits or complaining to an unsympathetic colleague. Such people are doubly marginalised: not only do they lack the ideal concepts, but they are also taken less seriously as members of the epistemic community (a phenomenon Fricker calls “testimonial injustice”). The availability of a term, like “sexual harassment,” that summed up the ideas that her aggressor’s behaviour was sexual, aggressive, intimidating, persistent, unwanted, and widespread would have saved her from a great deal of harm, both in describing her experience and in understanding it (and, in particular, in understanding it as non-isolated). The ability to *summarise* is the key advantage of concepts such as sexual harassment.

It is in these two senses—in making it possible to sum up, and hence to recognise, the connections between different women’s lived and aesthetic experiences, and in offering an alternative to descriptions that painted women as oversensitive or unstable—that the invention and propagation of the term “sexual harassment” responded to a genuine hermeneutical gap. Such innovations, although not entirely *sui generis*, represent a genuine and major advancement in comparison to the linguistic circumlocutions it would have taken beforehand to achieve the same effect. The interpretative needs of women like Wood were met in a wholly new, and vastly superior, manner.

If Rorty would accept the three theses above, then he should accept the existence of past maximal hermeneutical injustice. These are cases in which a certain hermeneutically marginalised group was harmed by gaps in their hermeneutical resources—gaps where interpretative needs are not being met, and consequently, gaps which render them unable to satisfactorily describe or understand what they are going through. Such cases, as we saw in his attitude to historical truth, can be judged to be hermeneutical gaps by *our* lights, by comparing them to our vocabulary.

Given Rorty’s emphasis that we are not at the end of history (a view that Colin Koopman has characterised as the picture of pragmatism as *transition* [Koopman 2009]), and his ironist politics, he would agree that it is likely that we will come to recognise similar hermeneutical gaps in the vocabulary of 2019, much as we currently recognise hermeneutical gaps in the vocabulary of the late 1960s. There will be concepts which, when we formulate them, will aid people who are currently marginalised in understanding their own lives. This is, I think,

all we need to establish the *possibility* of present maximal hermeneutical injustices on a Rortyan framework: that the present may come to seem to future critics like the past seems to present ones. Such a possibility is of the deepest importance to Rorty's meliorist politics: creating such concepts is a central part of cruelty-reducing linguistic reform. In the next section, however, I will argue that this is not enough: Rorty makes it impossible to actually *identify* these gaps and, even worse, to motivate overcoming them. Then, in my final chapter, I will argue that there is a concept of experience that can accomplish this without falling into the traps that Rorty fears.

5.4.6 Rorty's inability to identify or overcome present maximal hermeneutical injustice

As we saw in the last chapter, Rorty would be unwilling to describe hermeneutical gaps as mismatches between language and *experience*. This is not because such approaches would be givenist—if the nature of our experience was noninferentially known, there would be no problem with maximal hermeneutical injustice.⁵¹ Rather, Rorty would be opposed to this kind of experience-talk because it *encourages* both givenism and metaphysical thinking. It encourages givenism because it requires that the nature of experience has some independence from our linguistic and social norms, a view which is easily assimilable to the givenist view that it acts as a *check* on those norms; and it encourages metaphysical thinking because it could easily be interpreted in a representationalist way as the view that “experience” is a standard which we could approximate with our language and practices. Even though these views are not *entailed* by Fricker's position, Rorty would fear that they are encouraged.

If Rorty is to avoid this understanding of hermeneutical gaps, however, he can only resort to strategies that deal with the midway cases—but not the maximal ones. That is to say, he can deal with cases in which an important term is missing from *someone's* vocabulary, but he cannot deal with cases in which it is missing from *everyone's* vocabulary. The two strategies that are open to Rorty are, firstly, comparing our culture to others (e.g. “*they* didn't have the term ‘sexual harassment’ so *their* culture was hermeneutically unjust”) or by reducing hermeneutical injustice to hermeneutical marginalisation (e.g. “women don't have the same kind of power to shape our hermeneutical resources as men do, so our culture is hermeneutically unjust”). The first of these strategies is Rorty's approach in *CIS*; the latter is Susan Dieleman's approach in her promotion of Rorty as a theorist of hermeneutical injustice (Dieleman 2012). What Rorty cannot do is discuss cases that are simultaneously *specific* rather than general, *contemporary* rather than historic, and *maximal* rather than midway. That is to say, Rorty cannot identify present cases in which a group are unable to make a specific aspect of their experience intelligible, even to themselves.

Such cases are important because of cases like Alcoff's “Rosie” example, which we examined in §5.2.2. Alcoff's challenge concerns the *motivation* a Rortyan might have to make a certain kind of change to their vocabulary. Specifically, Alcoff questions what might motivate a Rortyan to move from a vocabulary in which a particular kind of suffering (for example, being a victim of date rape) is not intelligible or expressible to one in which it is. Such a move would have two obstacles for a Rortyan linguistic historicist. Firstly, if language *creates* experience rather than expressing or representing it, then we have no motivation or justification for claiming that someone is suffering if we don't have a language for describing that kind of suffering. Such cases

⁵¹ There would, however, still be midway cases, in which the problem is *communicating* our experience to others.

are quite possible—there are forms of suffering which, before they were described, would not have easily been assimilated into our previous understandings of suffering. Examples of this might be the concepts of post-traumatic stress⁵² or W.E.B. Du Bois’s account of “double consciousness” (Du Bois [1903] 2007, Ch. 1). Although such descriptions make sense to us now, at the time they would have simply seemed like the creation of new forms of suffering. Secondly, in some cases the redescription of an event—for example, the redescription of an encounter with a date who did not respect our withdrawal of consent as rape—can introduce *new* suffering (for example, feelings of violation, anger or shame, as well as the pain of adjustment to a new understanding). The aesthetic qualities of an experience or memory are changed when one can name it. Experientialist feminists like Alcoff and Ahmed can defend these moves on the ground that the experience already existed before one’s descriptions of it, and that there is value in better knowing or better expressing the experiences that one has. There is value, in other words, in filling in hermeneutical gaps. Recounting her own experience encountering feminist writings for the first time, Ahmed writes that ‘[e]ven if you still feel pain, frustration, and rage, even if you feel these feelings more as you have given them more attention, they are directed in a different way. Knowledge is this achievement of direction’ (2017, 31).

Without the concept of a hermeneutical gap between language and experience, however, linguistic historicists cannot make this move. The best they can do is to say that the world will be better if such new descriptions are adopted. But feminists face a rhetorical obstacle: often, the world such descriptions would bring about does not yet exist—so it is the word of the feminist against the antifeminist, who thinks that such descriptions would make the world worse. Where Alcoff and Fricker would cite the gap between language and experience, linguistic historicist feminists can only appeal to prophecy, a mode of communication which—powerful and inspiring though it may be—is less likely to win over the unsympathetic than the citation of something awry in the here and now.⁵³

My contention is that in order to make the moves required to create and motivate new descriptions, one needs to take what Rorty would consider a *philosophical* stance on experience—one needs to ask, and answer, philosophical questions about experience. Such questions would include: “is there an aesthetic dimension to people’s experiences that exists (at least somewhat) independently from our descriptions of them?”, “what *is* the aesthetic nature of people’s pre-linguistic experiences (i.e. how do they *feel*)?” and “how do we identify when someone’s experiences are not adequately expressed in our language?” These questions are philosophical because they treat experience as something that varies independently from the available descriptions, and because they treat it at the most abstract level (because we don’t yet know where hermeneutical lacunas might be found, we cannot ask questions about specifiable *areas* of experience). These are moves that Rorty refuses to make, for fear of lapsing into metaphysics or givenism.

Is there any way that we can describe and instrumentalise hermeneutical gaps without returning to representationalist metaphysics, or worse, givenism and authoritarianism? In the next chapter I will argue that there is. What is needed is a way of talking about “experience” in a

⁵² For a striking account of the harm that war veterans suffered before the creation of the concept of post-traumatic stress, cf. van der Kolk 2014, Chs. 1 and 12.

⁵³ It is telling that when Rorty acknowledges and defends the pain caused by new descriptions, he uses the example of ‘feminists trying to convert complacent matrons in Sicily or Utah’ (1992d, 42). The implication here seems to be that feminists could cite the increased happiness and equality, and the decrease in sexism and violence, in places that are less conservative (or religious, or traditional, or *something*) than Sicily or Utah. But Carmita Wood and her fellows could cite no such place—they were proposing an entirely new description.

way that allows for us to say that, in some cases, it is inexpressible or poorly expressed in the language available, but without treating it as *giving* norms to language. What is needed, in other words, is a cultural politics which treats experience as something that can be empirically investigated and, in particular, one that can locate experiences that are not yet adequately described. In short, what is needed is a *cultural politics of atypical experience*. In the next chapter, I will argue that Gilles Deleuze's empiricism provides us with an account of experience that threads this needle. I will conclude that Rorty's antirepresentationalism and historicism can be preserved, and givenism avoided, while re-admitting experience to philosophy—so long as we have an understanding of the nature of aesthetic experience that detaches it entirely from epistemology.

6. WHY RORTY SHOULD EMBRACE A DELEUZEAN EXPRESSIONIST EMPIRICISM

6.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued, generalising Linda Alcoff's argument in 2010a, that Rorty's linguistic historicism is ill-equipped to motivate or defend certain desirable forms of linguistic innovation. Since such innovations are essential for ameliorating some pressing forms of suffering, Rorty's inability to motivate or defend them poses a problem for his political goal of reducing suffering. This criticism is fundamental to Rorty's project, given his motivating principle of cultural politics, which I discussed in §1.2.

The situations which create problems for Rorty, I argued, are best described in Miranda Fricker's terms as *present* situations of *maximal hermeneutical injustice*. Specifically, these are contemporary situations which fulfil three conditions: (i) someone's conceptual or linguistic resources are insufficient for understanding or describing an important aspect of their own lived or aesthetic experience, (ii) this insufficiency is a consequence of their unjust marginalisation from positions of cultural influence, and (iii) their inability to understand their experience causes them harm. I argued that making sense of this "harm" requires that we assess someone's aesthetic experience—it requires, in other words, that we are able to recognise when something feels bad or wrong to them, even though they do not have the words to describe how or why. Because Rorty is unwilling to discuss whether our vocabularies are adequate for describing our pre-linguistic aesthetic experience (seeing such a project as encouraging givenism and authoritarianism), Rortyan politics of language is ill-equipped for identifying situations in which linguistic innovation is needed. Even when such situations *are* identified, a Rortyan cannot employ the rhetorical tool of defending ameliorative innovations by saying that they make people better equipped to describe their own suffering, as they are unable to distinguish this question from the question of whether the person *is* suffering. This has two negative cultural political consequences: firstly, it makes it more difficult to identify situations in which linguistic innovation would be politically useful; secondly, it makes it harder to defend these innovations when they occur.

As I discussed in chapter 4, Rorty's reluctance to ask "philosophical questions" about experience—such as questions about whether there is some aspect of our experience which is currently indescribable in our language—is motivated by three arguments. The first of these argues that asking such questions would encourage givenism, the idea that the conceptual classifications that we use to describe our experience are directly apprehended in experience. The second argues that they would encourage philosophical authoritarianism, the idea that something external to our shared linguistic and social practices possesses an intrinsic authority that can

override those practices. And third, he argues that anything worthwhile that experience-talk can do can be done just as well by language-talk or social-practice-talk. This third argument (the “replaceability argument”) concerns the *relative* value of philosophical experience talk and, as I established in the previous chapter, it is threatened when we examine situations of present, maximal hermeneutical injustice, since these are situations in which language-talk is wholly unable to do the analytic, rhetorical and justificatory work that experience-talk is capable of. But I have yet to address the other two arguments, the “anti-givenist argument” and the “authoritarianism argument.” Is there a way of talking about experience that (a) does useful political work that Rorty’s approach cannot, and (b) does not encourage givenism or authoritarianism? In this chapter, I will contend that there is.

This chapter has three parts. In part one (§6.1), I describe what a concept of experience would need to be able to do in order to deal with present situations of maximal hermeneutical injustice without lapsing into authoritarianism. In part two (§6.2), I argue that post-structuralist Gilles Deleuze’s non-traditional empiricism, and in particular his account of expression and symptomatology, does exactly this kind of work. Then, in part three (§6.3), I argue that Deleuze’s empiricism, despite its use of the term “the given,” is not givenist in the problematic sense that Sellars discusses. If my argument in this chapter holds up, Rortyans should moderate their radical anti-empiricism by incorporating philosophical experience-talk, on the model offered by Deleuze, into their cultural politics.

6.1 What does a cultural politics of atypical experience look like?

6.1.1 Pragmatism about authority

I ended my previous chapter by writing that we need a “cultural politics of *atypical experience*.” What should be clear immediately from such a description is that I will, like Rorty, be looking at experience through the lens of language and shared social practices (cultural politics). I will not be arguing for directly apprehended “experiential knowledge”—in fact, the fact that we are often *ignorant* of the nature of our experience is central to my argument. Although in this chapter I will argue that philosophers should commit themselves to the reality of pre-linguistic experience, I will do so by discussing how such a commitment would affect the language-games that we play.

The easiest way to distinguish my position from Rorty’s will be to focus on a late paper by Rorty: ‘Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God’ ([2002] 2007a). In the first half of this paper, Rorty spells out the core of his pragmatist conception of authority and the place of experience within it. He does this by introducing a distinction made by Brandom (1983) in an early paper of his about Heidegger.

Brandom’s paper begins with an analysis of three different ontological kinds: subjective entities, objective entities and social entities. The relevant part of his theory comes when he examines the relationship between these kinds—but before discussing that, I will introduce the kinds themselves. Brandom distinguishes these three ontological kinds epistemically; that is, by examining the ways in which claims about them are justified. Claims, beliefs or propositions about *subjective* entities, such as sensations and desires, are justified simply by virtue of being sincerely made or endorsed by the right person. For example, if I claim that I am thinking of a golden mountain, that claim is justified so long as no one has reason to think that I am being dishonest. My sincere report is all that is required. The second, *objective* kind of claim is justified by the world—for example, if I claim that I have a driving license in my wallet, we will evaluate it

by examining the contents of my wallet. Whether I think that I do, sincerely or not, is beside the point. Finally, the third kind of claim is *social*, which is justified if a specific group of people are predisposed to accept it. Claims about etiquette, such as “one should hold one’s knife in the right hand and one’s fork in the left hand,” are paradigmatic of this category. Even the staunchest anti-pragmatist would admit that such claims are true only because they are *taken as true* by a sufficient number of people. As Rorty puts it,

In the first of these [spheres] the individual’s authority is supreme (as when she makes sincere first-person reports of feelings or thoughts). In the second, the non-human world is supreme (as when the litmus paper, or the DNA-analysis apparatus, is allowed to determine whether the accused will be freed or punished, or whether a given scientific theory will be accepted or rejected). But there is a third area in which society [...] retains the right to decide for itself. ([2002] 2007a, 7)

The core question in Brandom’s paper is this: is the division of entities into social, subjective and objective kinds an objective feature of the world, a purely subjective distinction made by some individual, or a matter of social consensus? Brandom likens this question to that of which of the three branches of United States government has the authority to draw boundaries between its purview and that of the other two branches: ‘In matters of constitutional import, we might say, the judiciary is given the authority to draw the boundaries between its own authority and that of the executive and legislative branches’ (1983, 389).

For metaphysicians, the boundary between the objective, the subjective and the social is an objective feature of reality. However, Brandom’s argument, which is endorsed by Rorty, is that in fact the *social* is the authority of last resort. He calls this thesis the ‘ontological primacy of the social’, and grounds it on the thesis of ‘pragmatism concerning *authority* [...] the claim that all matters of authority or privilege, in particular *epistemic* authority, are matters of social practice, not objective matters of fact’ (1983, 389-390). When a claim about a new, puzzling or unfamiliar entity is made (or alternatively, when a surprising redescription of a familiar entity starts to spread), the question we should ask is *not* what ontological kind the entity falls into, but rather whether we should evaluate claims about it by appealing to individual judgment, a (new or already existing) social practice, or persistent features of some object that endure whether we acknowledge them or not.

The distinction between kinds of epistemic authority, and between visions of ontological primacy, can be summed up in the following chart (Table 6.1):

Kind of Entity	Source of Epistemic Authority	Paradigmatic Examples	Held to be ontologically primary by
Subjective	A particular individual’s sincere report	Sensations, beliefs, occurrent thoughts	Berkeley
Objective	The non-human world	Rocks, climate change, Newton’s laws	Descartes, most metaphysicians
Social	Social practices of some community	Table manners, charisma	Early Heidegger, ¹ Rorty, Brandom

Table 6.1: Approaches to ontological primacy

¹ According to Brandom’s article.

Because the ontological primacy of the social is a *meta*-epistemological position, any defence of it (or its rivals) will be question-begging. Acknowledging this circularity is the point of Rorty’s famous contention that ‘cultural politics should replace ontology, [but] also whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics’ ([2002] 2007a, 5). The position of his rivals, by contrast, can be summed up as “cultural politics should not replace ontology, and whether it should or not is a matter of ontology.”² Rorty is untroubled by such circularity—as I argued in chapter 3, it is unavoidable for any final vocabulary. He is not trying to offer a demonstration but a vision: ‘pragmatists should be viewed as attempting neither to offer noncircular arguments, nor to satisfy criteria, nor to analyze meanings, but rather to transform human beings’ sense of their situation’ (Rorty 1996b, 62-63).

Up to this point, my view is the same as Rorty’s. I agree that all epistemic authority is parasitic on the epistemic authority of the social—that is why I favour developing a *cultural politics* of atypical experience. Take, for example, those areas of culture where we treat epistemic authority as objective, like the natural sciences (where we treat some claims as being true even when we don’t notice them, or desire them to be true, or find them useful). The *reason* their authority is objective is because we have developed the *social practice* of treating authority in this way with regard to these topics. If we stop treating epistemic authority in these areas as a matter to be decided by specified parts of the non-human world (such as litmus paper, scales or the physiology of laboratory mice), the non-human world will cease to be such an authority.

However, I disagree with Rorty on the place of experience within this picture. Rorty’s article opposes empiricism to pragmatism about authority ([2002] 2007a, 9). “Experience,” in his article, refers indiscriminately to what I have been calling phenomenal experience and aesthetic experience: it refers on the one hand to the perception of objects (9-11), and on the other, to “what it’s like” to be in a particular state (11-14). Rorty sees both of these kinds of experience-talk as falling into the same trap: treating experience-talk as having a subjective authority that overrides social practices (an authority granted to it, on this view, by the ontological primacy of the objective).

Firstly, Rorty writes that the problem with empiricism is that it treats phenomenal experience as a source of authority above and beyond our social practices. This is because it treats phenomenal experience as something objectively existent, regardless of whether we acknowledge its existence or not (Fig. 6.2).

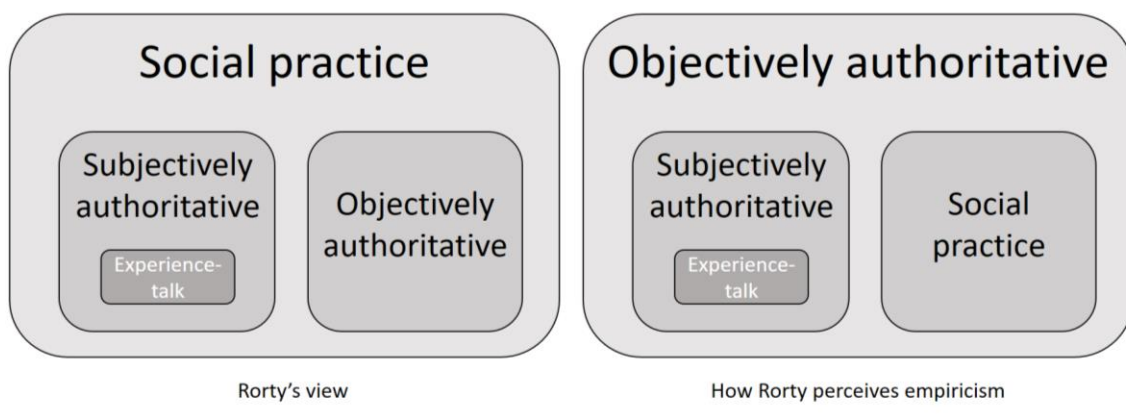


Fig. 6.2: Rorty’s view of the epistemic status of experience-talk, and his perception of empiricism

² I cannot think of any contemporary advocates for the ontological primacy of the subjective, given that unless one posits a specific authoritative subject (as Berkeley did), it tends to devolve into an absurd form of relativism.

Later (Fig. 6.3), I will use a similar diagram to introduce my own approach to ontological primacy. Rorty also has a second objection to empiricism in his discussion of ontological primacy. This objection is that empiricism, and in particular philosophical conceptions of aesthetic experience, are *incompatible* with the ontological primacy of the social. This is because he sees aesthetic talk of “what it’s like” as ‘reject[ing] Sellars’ and Brandom’s doctrine that all awareness is a linguistic [hence social] affair. There is [...] [such views contend] more awareness than can be put into words’ (12). As we saw in chapter 4, Rorty sees the first move as authoritarian, treating phenomenal experience as something that allows us to say “you may all agree that x , but my experience tells me y , and my experience is more authoritative than your consensus, so you should all agree with me that y ” (cf. my §4.2.2). As for talk of “what it’s like,” he sees such a philosophical move as either givenist or useless (cf. my §4.2.1). Either what-it’s-like-talk is authoritatively reporting some kind of experiential object, in which case it is authoritarian (and phenomenal), or it is making the seemingly pointless claim that something exists despite having no effect on the world and no role in the justification of knowledge-claims.

The disagreement I have with Rorty has two aspects. Firstly, I do not place aesthetic experience-talk exclusively in the “subjective authority” sphere, as Rorty does.³ Secondly, I disagree that what-it’s-like-talk (which is characteristic of aesthetic experience) is *necessarily* in conflict with Sellars’ psychological nominalism, and furthermore, I argue that such a view is based on a misreading of Sellars. I will provide my reasons for holding the first of these views in sections 6.1.3 and 6.2.4; but first, I will defend the latter, simpler contention.

6.1.2 Strong and weak psychological nominalism

Throughout his career, Rorty described himself as a psychological nominalist. This, as we saw in chapter 2, Sellars’ name for his position in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, which he describes as follows:

If [...] the association [of words with classes of resembling particulars] is not mediated by the awareness of facts either of the form x resembles y , or the form x is φ , then we have a view of the general type which I will call *psychological nominalism*, according to which *all* awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair. (*EPM* 63 [§29])

There are two ambiguities regarding Rorty’s reading of this section, both of which will be important for my argument in this chapter. Firstly, Rorty typically abbreviates Sellars’ definition to the phrase “all awareness is a linguistic affair,”⁴ especially from the 1990s onwards. Frequently, he does this while keeping the phrase in quotation marks, and without using ellipses. I take this to show that Rorty thought the abbreviated phrase was a fair representation of Sellars’ view. If I am correct here, then Rorty thought that if you add all awareness of abstract entities to all awareness of particulars, you end up with all awareness *simpliciter*. This is the first ambiguity—is Rorty’s abbreviation of Sellars’ point benign?

³ Although Rorty wrote that we should not always privilege people’s descriptions of themselves (e.g., [1981] 1982b, 200-202), the claim that I am ascribing to him is much narrower: that we should privilege people’s descriptions of their own experiential states.

⁴ Rorty (1978) 1982, 99; (1990) 1998, 217-218n32; (1993) 1998a, 101; (1994) 1998a, 89n10; 1998c, 136; 1998d, 142; 1998e, 282; (2002) 2007a, 12.

This leads into the second, related ambiguity: what does Sellars mean by “awareness?” One interpretation, endorsed by Brandom, is that Sellars ‘is after awareness in the sense of *sapience*, not of *sentience*. It is classificatory awareness, awareness of something as something’ (Brandom 1997, 150 [§29]). On this interpretation, Sellars is claiming that all awareness of kinds and category-memberships is a linguistic affair—that is, all classificatory consciousness is a linguistic affair.

Rorty’s response to this question changes throughout his career, from a position of broad agreement with Brandom’s interpretation to a much more radical position. I will call his earlier position *weak* psychological nominalism, and his later one *strong* psychological nominalism. The clearest statement of weak psychological nominalism comes in *PMN*. Here, Rorty treats Sellars as making the distinction ‘between “knowing what X is like” and “knowing what sort of thing an X is.”’ (183). In Sellars’ quote, “awareness” refers to the second of these, not the first. It is *classificatory awareness*, not *aesthetic experience*. It is possible on this account, however, to be aware of what something is like without knowing what sort of thing it is. This happens when someone is simply feeling something, or when they have a particular kind of mental state, but they do not have the language to talk about it. For example, when we talk about a child being in pain, ‘it feels just the same to him before and after language-learning. Before language, he is said to *know* the thing he feels just in case it is the sort of thing which in later life he will be able to make noninferential reports about’ (184). The Rorty of *PMN* is content to talk about “what it’s like” to be in a state, and to distinguish this from talk about what kind of state it is. He writes that

we can take the Sellars-Quine attitude toward knowledge while cheerfully “countenancing” raw feels, a priori concepts, innate ideas, sense-data, propositions, and anything else which causal explanation of human behavior might find it helpful to postulate. What we *cannot* do is to take knowledge of these “inner” or “abstract” entities as *premises* from which our knowledge of other entities is normally inferred, and without which the latter knowledge would be “ungrounded.” (*PMN* 177)

So, in *PMN* Rorty sees the claims “all awareness is a linguistic affair” and “there are nonlinguistic raw feels that cause us to make some claims” as compatible. It is *this* view, that these two theses are compatible, that I call weak psychological nominalism.

By the end of his career, Rorty has moved to a much more radical position. In his ‘Cultural Politics’ paper, he treats talk of raw feels, qualia and “what it’s like” as givenist, pitting the proponents of such talk (Nagel, Chalmers, Searle) against its detractors (himself, Sellars, Brandom, Wittgenstein and Dennett) on the very question of whether all awareness is a linguistic affair ([2002] 2007a, 12). In 1994, he writes that he ‘distrust[s] appeals to immediate experience, and especially the idea that certain experiences cannot be put into words and made the subject of an argument’ (1994c, 124). He insists on treating conscious experience as ‘a matter of *having beliefs*’ (1994c, 124), and consequently on treating “what-it’s-like” talk and qualia-talk as disguised givenist epistemologies. The implication of these passages is that, by the final decade of his career, Rorty thinks that the two claims in the above paragraph are *incompatible*—if you accept that all awareness is a linguistic affair, you must reject the existence of raw feels, talk of “what it’s like,” sense-data and qualia. I will call the view that these theses are incompatible *strong* psychological nominalism.

Although Rorty never explicitly acknowledges a difference between weak and strong psychological nominalist views, the justification he gives for his strong psychological nominalism

is as follows. The reason that qualophilic philosophers of mind talk about qualia, raw feels and “what it’s like” is that they wish to defend the view that there is something about our mental lives that is entirely irreducible to physical states, behaviour, functional roles, linguistic expressions, scientific analyses, and so on (cf. 1982d, 382-387. This is one of Rorty’s earliest articulations of a strong psychological nominalist position). But such talk is either pointless—a useless language game which serves only to preserve a sense of the ineffable—or, more commonly, givenist. It the givenist impulse that motivates the majority of philosophical arguments in defence of qualia, most famously and clearly Jackson’s “knowledge argument” (Jackson 1982). Furthermore, such talk leads us into interminable philosophical morasses like the mind-body problem—in a 1997 introduction to *EPM*, for example, Rorty writes that ‘To agree that Sellars dissolved the mind-body problem, one has to deny the existence of qualia’ (1997a, 8n8).

While in *PMN* Rorty took psychological nominalism to mean that all classificatory consciousness is a linguistic affair (but to allow that there may be other kinds of awareness that aren’t), by the end of his career thought that (1) all awareness is a linguistic affair, (2) talk of ‘what it’s like to be in a particular state’ refers to a kind of awareness that is not a linguistic affair, and consequently (3) that talk of “what it’s like” is incompatible with psychological nominalism. As I argued in chapter 2, however, Sellars’ argument is specifically that classificatory and sensory consciousness are distinct—in other words, awareness *of* something is never sufficient for awareness *that* something is of a particular kind. Sellars himself, on my analysis, is a weak psychological nominalist. This position is entirely compatible with acknowledging the existence of facts about “what it’s like,” so long as we don’t treat our immediate experience of what it’s like to be in a certain state to be the source of our knowledge about it.

My argument will reject Rorty’s late position on the grounds that talk of aesthetic experience can be useful in forming our views of *other people* rather than in knowing about ourselves. In other words, I offer *social* reasons to treat aesthetic experience as a matter of *objective* rather than *subjective* authority—as something which we can investigate collaboratively, and to which we lack privileged access. Such an approach is nongivenist, since it does not treat aesthetic experience as a *source* of knowledge—it is merely something that we can have knowledge *about*. However, by placing aesthetic experience in the epistemic circle of objective entities rather than subjective ones, we can allow for it to have properties which we do not yet understand. Someone’s aesthetic experience is less like their occurrent thoughts and perceptions, which they can report easily and with complete authority, than it is like their unconscious desires, about which we can form better or worse hypotheses and develop methods of evaluation. A person’s own reports are, of course, important in figuring out what it’s like to have their experiences, but the gap between aesthetic experience and their classificatory consciousness is great enough that they might be wrong, they might be unable to describe it, or we might discover new things with better methods of investigation. This gap allows me to claim, with Rorty, that all phenomenology is heterophenomenology ([1993] 1998b, 103), without rejecting the view, as he does, that we have ‘more awareness than we can put into words—language can point to things that it cannot describe’ (Rorty [2002] 2007a, 12). To summarise (fig 6.3) I acknowledge the ontological primacy of the social, but I urge that we split experience-talk into two areas of authority. Classificatory consciousness can be placed in the subjective sphere, where sincere first-person reports are all that matters. On the other hand, aesthetic experience or “sentience” should be treated as objectively authoritative, where sincere first-person reports are useful, but not decisive.

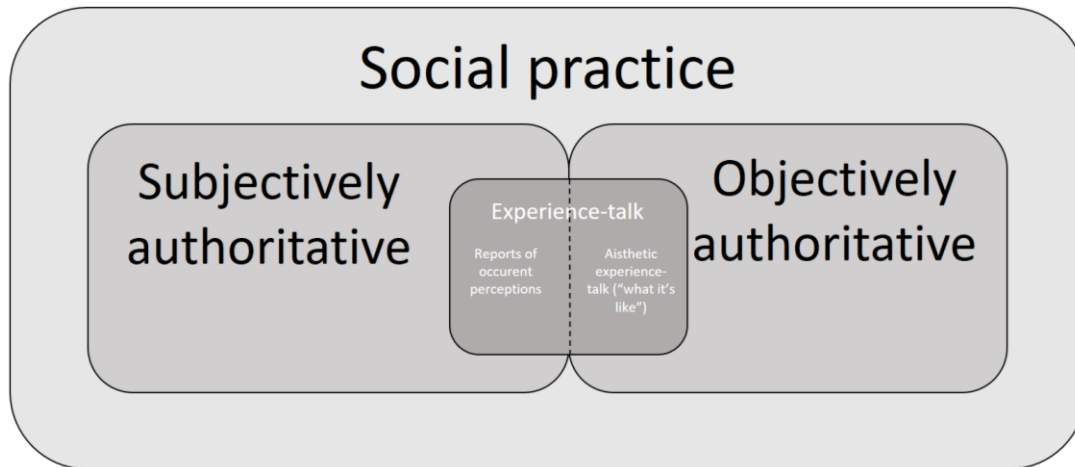


Fig. 6.3: My view of the epistemic status of experience-talk

This approach, I will argue, can do the job required of experience-talk by Fricker and Alcott. However, this view is at odds with Fricker's and Alcott's own understandings of their projects as well as Rorty's understanding of his. Fricker, and especially Alcott, take the idea of accurate representation to be essential for dealing with epistemic injustices (for an overview of Fricker's implicitly representationalist epistemology, cf. Sullivan 2017, 205-207; as for Alcott, her argument in 2010a is an explicit defence of the concept of accurate representation [cf. p. 150]). On their view, the problem with Rorty's approach is that it deprives us of the ability to distinguish accurate from inaccurate representations of experience, and that in order to deal with hermeneutical injustice we need the 'contrast between the way power [or discourse] deems things to be and how they are' (Fricker 2017, 56).

Although the ability of non-representationalist pragmatist approaches to truth and knowledge to deal with hermeneutical injustice has been defended in far greater detail by Dieleman (2012 and 2017) and Sullivan (2017), I will briefly explain my own reasons for thinking that the approach I have recommended can help us to deal with this problem. In cases where we treat something as having objective authority (as I am recommending we treat aesthetic experience), we can meaningfully isolate situations in which our descriptions are not aligning with the (socially recognised) objects that our descriptions are *about*. We can, for example, construct models to explain observable phenomena, reevaluate them when something inexplicable happens—just as we constructed the periodic table from regularities in observed chemical reactions, found explanatory gaps, and filled them over time by constructing experiments that would allow us to observe the behaviour of new elements. Where there are objectively authoritative entities, the world can *surprise* us (e.g., by making the litmus paper turn blue instead of pink). These surprises disrupt our models and force us to revise or replace them. On my approach to aesthetic experience, its manifestations—in surprising reports, behaviours or symptoms—can surprise us in similar ways, and force us to alter our models for talking about it. Consequently, the Frickerian and Alcottian fear that antirepresentationalism will prevent us from noticing or describing situations of hermeneutical injustice is true *only* if experience is taken as a realm of subjective or social, rather than *objective* authority.⁵

⁵ I suspect that much of the hostility to Rorty comes from people's confusion between the ontological *primacy* of the social and the far more extreme idea that *all* authority is social.

In the next section, I will examine in more detail what a modified Rortyanism might look like by looking at Daniel Dennett’s “heterophenomenology”—a view which takes an objective approach to understanding the mental lives of others. I will begin here because Rorty was openly sympathetic to such an approach, despite its differences with his own. In the following sections, I will argue (a) that an objective understanding of aesthetic experience can provide the extra tools we need without falling into givenism or authoritarianism, and (b) that Dennett’s understanding of experience is not yet sufficient for recognising situations of hermeneutical injustice.

6.1.3 Why heterophenomenology?

Heterophenomenology, a methodological term coined by Daniel Dennett (1982), refers to an approach in the philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences that seeks to preserve the idea that we can talk meaningfully about people’s first-person experiences of the world while sidestepping questions about whether qualia really exist, what causes mental phenomena, and whether our fellow humans (or ourselves) might be philosophical zombies. In this section, I will introduce Dennett’s theory and explain why it falls into none of the traps Rorty sees lying for philosophical experience-talk. What makes heterophenomenology promising is that it appears to provide a model for how we could build an objective account of experience into a cultural-political theory in which the social is ontologically prior.

In attempting to understand the mind of another, Dennett argues, we can treat their verbal utterances and actions as a *text*. Creating this text necessarily involves a degree of interpretation: for example, we will (typically) assume that the person’s verbal utterances are all made in a particular language, and we will “purify” the transcript by making educated guesses where the words are mispronounced or slurred (1982, 161). Furthermore, as has been clear since Anscombe’s *Intention* (1957, §6), deciding which of a person’s bodily movements count as actions (which belong in the text) and which do not is a non-trivial judgment. But once we have this rudimentary text, actually *understanding* it needs an even more sophisticated hermeneutics. ‘We are generally prepared to assume,’ writes Dennett, ‘that the text is a product of a process that has an *intentional interpretation*: it consists of things the subjects *wanted to say*, of *propositions* they meant to *assert*, for various *reasons*’ (1982, 161). We would adopt the *intentional stance* (cf. Dennett 1971), attributing beliefs and desires to our subjects. Beliefs and desires are basic elements of the ontology of the intentional stance, in the same way as the unconscious is a basic element of the ontology of the psychoanalytic stance. Whether one thinks that these things *really* exist is beside the point—what matters is that, by taking them to exist, we can better understand the text.

But there are utterances that even the intentional stance has trouble dealing with: those involving mental objects, images and operations. It is here that heterophenomenology becomes necessary. If our subject utters a statement like “there is a yellowish-orange after-image in the centre of my field of vision” or “I am imagining how it would feel to break my leg,” the intentional stance alone is not enough to provide a clear interpretation. We need something more: the idea of mental images, feelings, a “mind’s eye,” and so on. Fundamentally, what is involved here is the idea of a subject’s mental *world*, populated by objects that can interact—or be interacted with—in certain ways. Whatever we make of the ontological status of this world, we can make true or false claims about it. Dennett defends this point by comparing heterophenomenology to the hermeneutics of fiction:

the interpretation of fiction, the fleshing out of the story, the exploration, if you will, of “the world of Sherlock Holmes”, is undeniably do-able, with certain

uncontroversial results. First, the exercise is not pointless or idle; one can learn a great deal *indirectly* about a novel, about its text, about its world, about the author, about the real world, by learning about *the world portrayed* by the novel. Second, [...] we can amass a great volume of unchallengeably objective fact about the world portrayed. All interpreters agree that Holmes was smarter than Watson; in crashing obviousness lies objectivity.

Third—and this fact is a great relief to students—knowledge of the world portrayed by a novel can be independent of knowledge of the text of the novel. I could probably write a passing term paper on *Madame Bovary*, but I've never read the novel—even in English translation. I've seen the BBC television series, so I *know the story*, I know what happens in that world. (1982, 164-165)

What Dennett is trying to establish in this quote is not that heterophenomenology is the study of something fictional (it is, but only in a heavily qualified way, as I will discuss in the next paragraph). Rather, he is using the analogy to point out three things that heterophenomenologists can do. Firstly, our ability to talk meaningfully about fictional worlds can teach us about things beyond them—for example, about their authors, their historical context or their intended audience. Similarly, what we learn about people's heterophenomenological worlds can teach us other things about them, about the world that we share, about the culture they were raised in, and so on. Consider, for example, what we can learn about a society from the ways in which people within it experience beauty, or disgust, or sexual attraction. Secondly, we can arrive at a level of *objectivity* about these worlds—on reading a transcript of a conversation, people will agree on the nature of many features of the subjects' heterophenomenological worlds (what they can perceive and how they interact with these mental objects). And third—most importantly for the argument of this chapter—we can learn about a subject's heterophenomenological world from sources beyond their words and actions. We might, for example, make judgments about these worlds based on their *reactions*, or their past behaviour, or what we would expect of another person's heterophenomenological world in their situation. We might even have good reason to suspect that they are hiding an aspect of their heterophenomenological world—for example, if we suspect that they harbour a socially unacceptable prejudice against a group of people, we might be suspicious of how they claim to feel around them.

Dennett treats the objects of heterophenomenology (for example, appearances, mental acts, feelings) as theoretical fictions, as well as the heterophenomenological world itself (Dennett 2007b, 259). But this is not to say that he thinks that they are not real—Dennett uses the term “theoretical fictions” to highlight that these objects (and worlds) are of the same status as ‘those of, say, physics—centers of mass, equators, parallelograms of forces’ (Ibid., 256n5). He is neutral about whether these fictions are *mere* fictions: such an issue can be settled by further work down the line (260). What we can be sure of is that ‘the experiential content [of heterophenomenology] at the personal level concerns real events’ (Ibid.), whether these events are the contents of these worlds themselves, or whether we report them by talking about such worlds.

In short, heterophenomenology treats facts about consciousness as *objective*—we can develop practices for discovering the nature of someone's mental states, and although the subject's sincere reports are our primary form of evidence for beliefs about consciousness, the subject is not *authoritative*. Although Dennett never uses the word “experience” in his

heterophenomenology paper, given Rorty's equivocation between the terms "experience" and "consciousness," applying Dennett's approach to experience is not a major leap.

While Rorty never adopts Dennett's approach, he is sympathetic to it—he sees Dennett as an ally in a cultural-political struggle (1982c, 1982d, 1994c), and even writes in his late career that he sees Dennett's *The Intentional Stance* as having eclipsed *PMN* in the philosophy of mind (1994c, 126; [2007] 2010, 13). This is because (he writes in 1994c and 1982d) Dennett repudiates the idea of immediate awareness in the same way that he does—he is a fellow in the fight against authoritarianism. So, if we are to construct a cultural-political approach in which claims about experience have objective, rather than subjective, authority, which Rorty would find convincing, then Dennett is the best place to start.

Heterophenomenology is useful for the project of creating a cultural politics of atypical experience because it allows us to talk objectively about experience, without either reducing it to what can be captured in a sincere first-person report or treating it as something intrinsically authoritative. This allows us to treat even atypical experience-claims, which don't fit neatly into our current practices of evaluation, as claims about something real which can be investigated collaboratively. As Dennett describes it, 'Heterophenomenology [...] is a cautious, controlled way of *taking subjects seriously*, as seriously as they could possibly be taken without granting them something akin to papal infallibility' (2007b, 252). Furthermore, heterophenomenology is compatible with a *weak* Sellarsian approach, which admits of (non-classificatory) awareness that is not a linguistic affair. It gives us the image of a mental *world*, which is much richer than the strong Sellarsian collection of *dispositions to report*. A heterophenomenological world could conceivably contain things that are not yet describable, or which are not being described well, without overriding the ontological primacy of the social. Rather, such things would be like those posited in *auxiliary* or *ad hoc* hypotheses in science, such as dark matter: marks of something surprising, a problem in need of a solution, rather than explanations of that surprising observation.⁶

6.2 Deleuze's Theory of Experience

6.2.1 Beyond heterophenomenology

In order to *both* resist the critiques made by Rorty *and* to deal with hermeneutical injustice, any theory of experience needs to satisfy four criteria. On the neopragmatist side, it must (1) avoid givenism, and (2) avoid authoritarianism (it must accept the ontological primacy of the social). On the feminist side, (1) it must allow us to say that there are aspects of our aesthetic or lived experience that are presently (but not necessarily) indescribable; and (2) when such experiences are described, it must allow us to say that they were "there already"—even if the description is contested.

Heterophenomenology clearly allows us to avoid authoritarianism, since its motivation for talking about experience at all is to allow for the *social interpretation* of *public texts*, and it acknowledges no authority beyond these texts. It is antigivenist by nature, since it is a *heterophenomenology* first and an *autophenomenology* only derivatively, in those special cases in which we apply heterophenomenological interpretation to ourselves (Dennett 1982, 179). Furthermore, our reports about our heterophenomenological worlds need not be caused or

⁶ Cf. Merritt 2017

justified by the heterophenomenological worlds themselves in order to be true (Dennett 2007b, 258-260).

However, whether heterophenomenology fits the criteria required to deal with hermeneutical injustice is less clear. The difficulty lies both in the way we construct the “text” and in how we interpret it. Firstly, the heterophenomenological text is restricted to verbal utterances (made in a particular language) and deliberate actions. Consequently, the evidence for the state of our heterophenomenological worlds is no broader than what we can conceptualise, posing a problem for our project of locating and filling hermeneutical gaps. On Dennett’s approach, there can be no facts about my experience that are not at the very least derived from what I say and do deliberately and consciously. This obstructs what might be a rich source of information about our heterophenomenological worlds in our *non-deliberate* words, actions and behaviours.

Secondly, Dennett describes the interpretation of our text as an *intentional* interpretation, on which ‘the text [...] consists of things the subjects *wanted to say*, of *propositions* they meant to *assert*, for various *reasons*’ (1982, 161). This includes statements about their heterophenomenological world—everything that we think about it must be derived not simply from *words* that they uttered but from propositions that they *meant* to assert, even if we come to believe that these propositions are false. This, again, drastically limits the resources at our disposal in constructing models of people’s heterophenomenological worlds. It would limit us to constructing the text only out of material that the subject would understand and intend to communicate—an approach which is likely to hinder us if we are looking for those aspects of experience that are least communicable.

So, what would the alternatives be here? Firstly, to construct the text in a way that incorporates the *involuntary*—slips of the tongue, behavioural tics, unreconstructed nonsense, bodily movements and so on. And secondly, to go beyond the intentional stance in the interpretation of this text, to adopt what I will call an *expressionist*⁷ or *symptomatological* approach to understanding it—one that takes grammatical mistakes, tics, strange word-choices or non-sequiturs not as impurities to be corrected, but as a source of information about what might be going on in someone’s heterophenomenological world. Adopting both of these approaches would help us to unmask undescribed aspects of experience while preserving the features of heterophenomenology which rendered it nongivenist and nonauthoritarian.

In the next three sections (§6.2.1-3) I will argue that Gilles Deleuze provides a theory of aesthetic experience that preserves the virtues of heterophenomenology, but with an added sensitivity to the accidental and the unintentional that makes it more capable of identifying *gaps* in the tools available to us for the interpretation of heterophenomenological worlds. Then, in the next two sections (§§6.2.4 and 6.5) I will argue that Deleuze’s theory of experience is nongivenist and nonauthoritarian.

6.2.2 Deleuzean possible worlds as heterophenomenological worlds

The focus of the remainder of this chapter will be Deleuze’s theory of expression. This theory, which is at the heart of Deleuze’s metaphysical project, has three components that are especially relevant to my project. The first is his theory of the other, which preserves the characteristics of

⁷ This is not to be confused with *expressivism*, the anti-representationalist understanding of language endorsed by Huw Price (2013) and Robert Brandom (2015).

Dennettian heterophenomenology which allowed us to treat claims about experience as objectively authoritative but nonauthoritarian. The second is the “symptomatological” dimension of his project, which allows us to isolate atypical experiences and, by extension, hermeneutical gaps. The third underlies the other two: his *transcendental empiricism*, which is explicitly and utterly opposed to givenism, or as Deleuze describes it, to “the postulate of recognition.” I will defend transcendental empiricism in §6.3; I will explain the nature and usefulness of his symptomatological approach in §§6.2.3.1-5; but I will start with Deleuze’s theory of the other, which is the topic of this and the next section.

Deleuze describes the “other person” as ‘the expression of a possible world.’⁸ This is an application of his more general “expressionist” metaphysics to the problem of understanding other people, so in order to make sense of it I will first explain Deleuze’s understanding of expressive causality in general. In *Difference and Givenness* (2008, 127ff.), Levi Bryant argues that at the core of Deleuze’s project lies a distinction between two kinds of causality. The first of these is the familiar mechanical, horizontal causality that one finds, paradigmatically, in bodies colliding with other bodies and producing predictable effects. But Deleuze is interested in a second, “vertical” kind of causality—the kind of relation that holds between abstract structures and their actualisations in discrete things (bodies, societies, statements, etc.). A vertical causal account can *explain*, but cannot *predict* events—it is not deterministic. Vertically causal relationships hold between, for example, genetic code and an organism (Ibid.) or between the equation for a circle and an actual, empirical circle (Ibid., 62). Deleuze prefers not to call this second kind of causality “causality,” but rather “expression.”⁹

Deleuze’s own examples of expression are typically more abstract than the ones I just mentioned. The conceptual lineage of Deleuze’s expressionism can be traced back to Leibniz and Spinoza: Deleuze frequently illustrates his expressionism with the examples of Leibnizian monads (which are expressions of the world [DR 60]) and Spinoza’s substance (which expresses itself in the attributes).¹⁰ Sense is expressed in propositions (DR 202) and problems are expressed in solutions (DR 205-206). This latter case is especially informative—for Deleuze, problems are neither propositional (they are not *questions*), nor do they represent a subjective lack of knowledge (they are irreducible to their solutions). Instead, they are concrete structures of reality, and their relation to solutions is paradigmatically expressive.

In his paper ‘Who Thinks Abstractly?’ (2016), Brent Adkins gives a useful example of one such problem: the ‘problem of solar energy’ (358). This is the problem faced by almost all organisms on Earth: how to derive bio-useable energy from the energy that comes from the sun. Adkins describes the two dominant solutions in mammals: the ‘big brain solution’ and the ‘big gut solution.’ Ruminants, for example, specialise in digesting the difficult-to-break-down but abundant chemical energy that plants have derived from solar energy, using their large guts. Carnivores, by contrast, have developed large brains to better obtain the scarcer and harder-to-catch, but easier to digest, energy in the bodies of other animals. The tendencies that we see in the diverse physiologies of mammals, then, should be understood as the empirical expression of the solar-energy problem. Deleuze himself uses similar language when talking about bodily

⁸ Deleuze uses this exact phrase in DR 339 and (1967) 2004b, 347; cf. PS 6 and WP 17. He claims to have taken this phrase from Michel Tournier (Deleuze [1945] 2002, 24n3).

⁹ The distinction between (mechanical) causation and expression can be seen in many of the central distinctions of Deleuze’s work, including the chronos/aion distinction of *The Logic of Sense*, the coexistence/duration distinction of Bergsonism, and the actual/virtual distinction in *Difference and Repetition*.

¹⁰ EPS 14. However, Deleuze’s own expression importantly differs from the one he finds in Spinoza (cf. Bowden 2017, 219-220 and Piercey 1996, 276).

organs—for example, the eye is a solution to ‘the light “problem”’ (*DR* 275) or ‘the expression of a possible light’ (*DR* 339).

The expressive relationship has two important aspects (*DR* 60 and 338-340; *PS* 28-29). Firstly, the expressed does not exist outside or apart from its expressions. But second, the expressed is irreducible to and different in kind from its expressions. The solar energy problem does not *resemble* the bodily morphology of a cow; the genetic code does not resemble a human. But the genetic code exists only insofar as it codes *for* something (a DNA strand is only a *code* by virtue of the complex cellular machinery of *decoding*); nor would the solar energy problem be a problem if organisms did not need to evolve solutions to it (if deep-sea vent extremophiles were the only terrestrial organisms, then talk of a “solar energy problem” would be empty). It is for this reason that Deleuze often characterises expression as a kind of “unfolding,”¹¹ “development,”¹² or “explication.”¹³

So, what does it mean to say that other people “expresses possible worlds?” To start, it is to say that we cannot understand a person unless we understand the world they express. It is not enough to treat the other person as a complex physical object obeying mechanical laws—that is, to reduce the expressed possible world to the empirical facts about the other person. Such an approach might be sufficient, if one were to pursue it in enough detail, to *predict* how they would act, but it would not *explain* who or what they are, and it would deprive us of useful knowledge of the patterns in their thought, experience and behaviour. Neither can we treat them as pure Cartesian subjects—there is something *objective* about the possible world they express, even if it only exists through its expression.¹⁴ Neither approach would capture the nature of the other person as bound up with a rich world of meaning and value, and as expressing that world to us. ‘Consider a terrified face’, writes Deleuze: ‘this face expresses a possible world: a terrifying world’ (*DR* 338). To treat their terror as a purely subjective experience would be to miss the reasons for the person’s terror, what it is like for them to be terrified, and how terror structures their *world* rather than just their mind.

If Rorty would accept Dennett’s characterisation of facts about the mental lives of others as facts about heterophenomenological worlds, there is good reason for him to accept a Deleuzian account of possible worlds as well. This is because the possible world account retains three advantages of Dennett’s account (which I will lay out here) as well as possessing advantages beyond Dennett (which I will discuss in the next section). Deleuzian possible worlds resemble heterophenomenological worlds in three ways: they are hermeneutical necessities; they are real; and they are not known through givenist “direct access”:

1. **Hermeneutical Necessity.** To understand another person, it is essential to understand their possible world. One cannot understand the terrified face without understanding the terrifying world behind it (*WP* 17; cf. also [1945] 2002, 17). What is important at such moments is not what is going on in their *mind*. A terrified person is not interested in their mind, but their world.

The importance of understanding possible worlds is most obvious to us when we are invested in understanding a specific other person. To illustrate this, Deleuze employs the figure of the “jealous lover”:

¹¹ (1967) 2004b, 347; *EPS* 16

¹² *DR* 202, 213 and 257; (1967) 2004b, 347

¹³ *DR* 300-301 and 338-340; *PS* 6 and 12

¹⁴ Cf. Lambert 2002, 33.

love is born from and nourished on silent interpretation. The beloved appears as a sign, a ‘soul’; the beloved expresses a possible world unknown to us, implying, enveloping, imprisoning a world that must be deciphered, that is, interpreted. [...] To love is to try to *explicate*, to *develop* these unknown worlds that remain enveloped within the beloved. (*PS* 6)

Since much of Deleuze’s work is devoted to avoiding the philosophical impulse to treat Others as fundamentally similar “subjects,” he is extremely interested in situations that pull us in the other direction—towards appreciating the *singularity* of the other person and the world they express. Most frequently, this manifests in his examples of obsessive love, which he takes from Proust, but Deleuze is also fascinated by psychoanalysis due to its ability to make sense of diverse individuals without needing to posit a standard subject.¹⁵ In short, Deleuze’s theory of the other is heterophenomenological because it holds that we cannot understand the other unless we understand their world. It is a *hermeneutical necessity*.

2. **Reality.** Second, possible worlds are *real*, but in only insofar as they are expressed. Deleuze cautions the reader: ‘Let it be understood that the possible here is not an abstract category designating something which does not exist: the expressed possible world certainly exists, but it does not exist (actually) outside of that which expresses it’¹⁶. *Every aspect* of the possible world expressed by the other person is expressed, whether through explicit words and actions or involuntary signs (cf. Williams, J. 2003, 209); there is no aspect that remains unexpressed. On a Deleuzian account are no “Super Spartans” (to borrow an example from Putnam, who describes a fictional culture whose members suppress their physical reactions to pain so effectively that it is completely unexpressed¹⁷). The motivation behind the construction of heterophenomenological worlds is specifically to make sense of what has been expressed in language or behaviour, and the same goes for Deleuze’s possible worlds. Dennett would have no interest in understanding “unexpressed” or “inexpressible” aspects of someone’s mental life, and neither does Deleuze.

If “possible worlds” are real, however, why does Deleuze call them *possible* worlds? As he explains in his work on Bergson (*B* 98), he rejects any understanding of the possible/actual distinction which distinguishes the two by assuming that the actual exists but the possible does not. Possible worlds exist just as fully as actual worlds do.¹⁸ So, to say that the other person expresses a possible world is *not* to say that they express a world that is not real. Deleuze rejects the view that “The possible is opposed to the real [and] the process undergone by the possible is therefore a “realisation”” (*DR* 275), a mere addition of existence to something that remains conceptually unchanged. However, on Deleuze’s understanding of possible worlds, the possible becomes actual not by increasing its level of existence, but by enacting a *transformation* of our world—for example, in reacting to the terrified face, ‘I either develop it into a frightening world the

¹⁵ Cf. *AO* and *ATP* Ch. 2, both of which critique Freud’s tendency to retreat back into standardising forms through the imposition of the Oedipus complex.

¹⁶ (1967) 2004b, 346. Cf. *WP* 17.

¹⁷ Putnam (1961) 1975, 332. I am amending Putnam’s example slightly, because in the original the Super Spartans still express their pain through affectless verbal reports.

¹⁸ This is a consequence of Deleuze’s metaphysical doctrine of the *univocity of being* (*DR* 45), according to which there are no gradations in being—every kind of being (actual, possible, virtual, mental, physical, etc.) possesses “being” in the same sense.

reality of which seizes me, [thus actualising it,] or I denounce its unreality [thus suppressing the disruption to my secure world]’ (DR 339). As with heterophenomenological worlds, the fact that Deleuzian possible worlds are hermeneutical necessities does not mean that they are unreal.

3. **No direct access.** Thirdly, both Dennett and Deleuze reject the idea that people have privileged, “direct” knowledge of their worlds. For Dennett this is because (for Sellarsian reasons) all phenomenology is heterophenomenology; for Deleuze, it is because of the dynamic model of subjectivity that animates his account of possible worlds.

We should not imagine the Deleuzian Other on the model of the Cartesian “I,” which is closest to itself and immediately, transparently self-perceived. Rather, we are equally distant from knowing ourselves as we are from others. ‘For it is not the other which is another I, but the I which is an other’.¹⁹ This means that we learn about our own mental states through interpretation, just as we learn about the possible worlds of others. For Deleuze, our mental lives are fundamentally dynamic and pre-objectival in a way that can never be wholly captured by representation (cf. my §6.3.3): like the unconscious of Freud or the drives of Nietzsche, Deleuzian subjectivity is composed of processes rather than objects. Deleuze’s “subject,” writes Stark, ‘cannot be constrained by identitarian frameworks because it is always caught in the process of becoming different’ (2012, 101). To explicate a possible world is to “cancel” the differential perspective that constitutes it: ‘For difference, to be explicated is to be cancelled or to dispel the inequality which constitutes it. [...] “to explicate is to identify”’ (DR 300). This need not mean *falsifying* difference or falling into illusion, so long as one does not mistake the representation for the possible world itself.²⁰

This is clearest when one encounters oneself in (one’s explication of) the possible world of another, since—in a point Deleuze takes from Sartre²¹—here one can no longer hold both worlds in view. Deleuze writes in an early article of the (aesthetic) experience of being fatigued, and encountering another person who is not.²² Before this encounter, it is *the world* which seems fatigued: ‘There is this large round sun, this uphill street, the tiredness in the small of the back’ ([1945] 2002, 17; cf. Sartre [1943] 2003, 147ff.). But when one encounters another person, this apprehension of the world is threatened: ‘The Other is in this tired world, and yet, through its attitude and gestures, its soft step, its calm breath and its ease, it can express a world in which there is no tiredness’ (18). A world in which there is tiredness comes up against a world in which there is no tiredness—either this results in my world losing its reality (‘A magical transformation of tiredness into being tired’ [18]) or in a repudiation of theirs (the other becomes ‘the enemy, the hateable’ [18] and ‘I denounce [the] unreality’ of their world [DR 339]).

In short, we discover our possible world through its clash with the possible world of another, which we either reject, or we accept by transforming our own. ‘If the Other is a possible world, I am a past world. The mistake of theories of knowledge is that they postulate the contemporaneity of subject and object, whereas one is constituted only

¹⁹ DR 339. Deleuze takes this phrase (“I is another” [*je est un autre*]) from Rimbaud—cf. (1984) 2008 viii and *CTI* 139, 158, who Sartre famously quoted in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (Sartre [1937] 2004, 26).

²⁰ Cf. Bryant 2008, 5.

²¹ (1943) 2003, part III, ch. 3. I discuss Deleuze’s objections to Sartre in §6.3.3).

²² Deleuze disowned this early article, so one must exercise extreme caution when citing it. In this case this is especially true, since it is deeply sexist and the core thesis (that ‘Woman does not express a possible world’ [18]) is entirely repudiated in *PS*. Nevertheless, the section that I am discussing here presents fundamentally the same argument as the much briefer discussion of the terrified face in *DR*, *LS* and *WP*.

through the annihilation of the other' ([1967] 2004b, 349). In knowing my world, I lose it—there is no immediate knowledge of my world, but only knowledge arrived at through encounters with others, which can only tell us our past.

To summarise, Deleuze's theory of the other preserves three important features of heterophenomenology: firstly, understanding possible worlds and heterophenomenological worlds is essential for understanding other people, even if one is a committed materialist and limits one's ontology to bodies producing sounds and movements in space and time. There is nothing *purely* internal to a heterophenomenological or a Deleuzian possible world—either because their *purpose* is to aid the interpretation of what is publicly expressed (Dennett) or because they exist in such a way that they are *necessarily* expressed (Deleuze). Secondly, these worlds are *real*—either because they are “theoretical fictions” in the same way as atoms and unconscious desires (Dennett) or because they are in bound up with an implication-explication relationship with the actual, other person (Deleuze). And thirdly, we do not have direct epistemic access to our own heterophenomenological or possible worlds. As I will argue later in this chapter, this allows us to avoid the problems with givenism and authoritarianism using Deleuzian tools just as well as Dennettian ones, while preserving the idea that some kind of objectively existent *world* explains our linguistic utterances and behaviours. With some changes, I will argue, such a world could help us to locate hermeneutical lacunas.

6.2.3 How Deleuzian possible worlds differ from heterophenomenological worlds, and why it matters for dealing with hermeneutical injustice

6.2.3.1 *Intensity, explication and interpretation*

There are two important ways in which Deleuze's theory of the other person deviates from Dennett's heterophenomenology. Firstly, Deleuze's theory treats understanding the world of the other as a *necessarily* creative process; and secondly, Deleuze's focus on “signs” presents a superior tool for this project than Dennett's privileging of explicit verbal expressions and deliberate actions.

First, then, let's examine the way in which our interpretation of possible worlds is *creative*. When I learn about the possible world of another my role is not that of a passive spectator—I am not trying to discover a pre-existent truth. To return to Deleuze's example of the lover, ‘To love is to try to *explicate*, to *develop* the unknown worlds enveloped within the beloved’ (*PS* 6). This is not a metaphor for developing one's *knowledge* of a possible world—Deleuze literally means that we develop or explicate possible worlds themselves. This surprising view arises from his conception of the world of the other as “intensive.”

It would be a mistake to think that the world of the other is primarily made up of discrete perceptions, objects and operations, as one finds in Dennett's examples such as ‘I am rotating a mental image or imagining a purple cow’ (1982, 178). Rather, it is composed of “intensities” or “intensive difference.” In order to explain this point, I will use the next three paragraphs for a brief digression into Deleuze's use of the concept of “intensity.” Intensity, Marc Rölli writes, is Deleuze's ‘fundamental empiricist concept’ ([2003/2012] 2016, 11), which replaces the “sense-data” or “impressions” of traditional empiricism. Unlike sense-data, however, intensity should not be understood as bearing information; and unlike impressions, intensities are not passively received by consciousness and do not naturally fall into kinds. As we

shall see, Deleuze describes the intensive ground of sensation precisely as that which cannot be grasped by classificatory consciousness (DR 184).

The concept of intensive difference has a philosophical lineage from Aristotle (Mader 2017), but Deleuze's understanding of it is largely taken from Bergson (Adkins 2018) and Kant (Ables 2017). For the sake of brevity, I will limit my discussion to Kant. In a section of Kant's first *Critique* entitled 'Anticipations of Perception' (Kant [1781/1787] 1998, A165ff./B207ff.), Kant distinguishes between two kinds of "magnitude": intensive and extensive. Extensive magnitudes are composed of homogeneous, indivisible units which may be added or removed without changing the nature of the rest of the magnitude. Kant uses the example of 'thirteen round dollars' (Ibid. A170/B212) to illustrate this point: a further dollar may be added or removed to this magnitude without changing its nature. All that changes is the magnitude's quantity or extension.

For Kant, the contents of sensibility are fundamentally extensive. However, these extensive contents of sensibility also *have* intensive magnitude. This is to say, they also have a kind of magnitude that 'can only be apprehended as a unity, and in [them] multiplicity can only be represented through approximation to negation = 0' (Ibid. A168/B210). What this means is that while intensive magnitudes can be understood in terms of more and less, they cannot be broken into parts without changing in nature. One Kantian example of intensive magnitude is colour: the notion of differing intensities of red makes sense, but not the notion of this intensity of redness having parts. The apprehension of a given intensity of redness (unlike the apprehension of thirteen coins, a cluster of sense-data or an extended field of colour) is 'not successive but instantaneous (Ibid., A169/B210). As Ables puts this point, 'although each [intensive] quality is a unity at any given instant, it has a distance from its vanishing point [i.e., Kant's "negation = 0] that gives it its unique position as a degree: 140 decibels, 32 degrees, and so on' (2017, 361). Consequently, intensive magnitudes are differentiated *internally* while extensive magnitudes are differentiated *externally*.

Deleuze makes two modifications to Kant's picture of intensity. First, he rejects Kant's view that intensities are the intensities *of* intuitions of extensive qualities—for example, the brightness of a colour patch *of* such a shape and size (DR 304-305); secondly, he 'separates the concept of intensity from the concept of magnitude' (Ables 2017, 364). For Deleuze, our (intensive) aesthetic experience is not populated by *qualities*; nor is it atomised into distinct units (as classical empiricists would have it) (DR 310). Furthermore, he writes that 'intensity is neither divisible, like extensive quantity, nor indivisible, like quality' (DR 311); rather, since it is internally differentiated, it 'may be divided, but not without changing its nature' (Ibid.). As neither quantitative nor qualitative, intensities are neither conceptually structured (which would require quality) nor passively received units of sensation waiting for synthesis by the understanding (which would require extensive magnitude).

Deleuze's shift from intensive magnitude to intensity and his separation of it from extensive quality exemplifies his core complaint about his predecessors: when they were trying to describe the nature of thought and experience, they took identifiable aspects of our conscious, communicable experiences and retrojected them as *causes* of those very experiences. For example, in observing that we talk of extended objects which have qualities of various magnitudes, Kant posits these very characteristics as transcendental conditions of possible experience. By contrast, as we shall see in §6.3, Deleuze's empiricism follows two fundamental principles: firstly, what gives rise to thought and experience must be *different in kind* from it; and secondly, that we cannot

posit a transcendental subjectivity that is the same across all subjects (as he puts it in the famous slogan of transcendental empiricism, the transcendental conditions must be no larger than what they condition [NP 46 §§2.6; DR 373; cf. Voss 2013]). Intensity is, for Deleuze, this generative principle: it does not follow the same categories as our empirical experience (for example, of presenting discrete objects with qualities), and it is creative and self-differentiating.

So, what is the upshot of this when it comes to understanding the possible world expressed by the other? Firstly, these worlds are intensive, and the other expresses them *in* extensity (e.g. through facial expressions or words). Deleuze also explicitly places aesthetic experience on the side of the intensive: ‘Lived experience²³ is “intensive”: *I feel...* ‘I feel’ means that something is happening in me, I am experiencing an intensity, and intensity is not the same thing as sensible qualities’ ([1972] 2004b, 238). Deleuze describes the other person as a “centre of envelopment” (DR 338) or “centre of possible implication” (DR 60). What is implicated is intensity (DR 300, 314) or aesthetic experience; consequently, the possible world that the other expresses is intensive in itself, and explicated by their expression and our interpretation of it. It is not populated by discrete objects or thoughts, although it may be *explicated* by separating out its concatenated intensive differences (for example, by being described or interpreted) (DR 340).

To summarise this point, in understanding the possible world of the other we are explicating it rather than representing it as it is. This is because *what it is* cannot be described without changing in nature.²⁴ The explication and individuation of the world of the other is necessarily contextual (DR 339): there is no objective “way things are” in the world of another; the way things are is pre-objective, and in understanding or describing them, we objectify them.

Although Rorty repudiates the notion of there being a principled difference between discovering and creating (1999b), he would be sympathetic to the *negative* idea that we cannot separate the way the world of the other is in itself from the way our interpretations shape it (in fact, he makes a suggestion along these lines to Dennett in his reply to Dennett’s heterophenomenology paper, in which he urges that he drop the idea of there being a “right interpretation” of the “text” of verbal utterances, and replace it with the idea of more and less useful connections we could draw the text into [1982c, 184-185]). So we can safely modify Dennett’s approach in this way, as far as Rorty would be concerned.

6.2.3.2. *Signs*

That said, there are better and worse ways to interpret a possible world. We could, of course, take the Dennettian approach and limit our interpretative source material to asserted propositions and deliberate actions. But as we saw, this risks perpetuating hermeneutical lacunas, because it amplifies our ability to understand the areas of experience in which our hermeneutical resources are best-developed, and diminishes those in which our hermeneutical resources are lacking. Deleuze, on the other hand, prioritises what he calls “signs.”

When someone expresses a possible world, for Deleuze, they do it through a sign. Deleuze defines signs as follows:

²³ While Deleuze uses the term “lived experience,” his use of the phrase “I feel” places it in the category of what I have called aesthetic experience.

²⁴ Cf. Zourabichvili (1994) 2012, 67-68.

by “sign” we mean [...] what flashes across the intervals when a communication takes place between disparates. The sign is indeed an effect, but an effect with two aspects: in one of those it expresses, *qua* sign, the productive dissymmetry; in the other it tends to cancel it. (DR 24)

This description captures both of the contexts in which we will examine the “sign:” firstly, the sign is the expression of the intensive in the extensive (e.g. the expression of a possible world in a facial expression or in language); secondly, in the final two sections of this chapter we will examine the sign in context of the relation between sensory and classificatory consciousness. In this first case, ‘a sign [...] refers to an implicated order of constitutive differences, and tends to cancel out those differences in the extended order in which they are explicated’ (DR 300). Let us take an example from a recent paper by Sean Bowden: the smile, as the sign (the expression) of friendliness (2017, 219-223). Friendliness is not something extended (one cannot specify purely extensive criteria for when a person is “friendly” or not), but it is revealed in extensively identifiable behaviours such as smiles. Nevertheless, whether one of these behaviours is an expression of friendship or something else (obsequiousness, for example) requires looking behind it into the possible world that it expresses. A smile, then, is a *sign* of friendship—but in different contexts, it may be a sign of something else, or friendship may be expressed through different signs.

Bowden’s example helps to clarify several points. Firstly, it makes little sense to talk about friendliness that is not expressed in some way, through some signs (2017, 220). Nevertheless, friendliness is *irreducible* to the particular signs by which it is expressed (221). Furthermore, my friendliness is constituted and transformed *through* its expressions. ‘[M]y smile does not express something internal and already fully formed. The expression is rather an accomplishing of what is expressed, that is, of my friendliness towards the person at whom the smile is directed’ (221). This is another way of saying that *expression is explication*, not the communication of a content that was there already formed. The nature of a friendship is constituted and transformed by its expressions—a friendship that is expressed through smiles is very different to a friendship that is expressed through acts of service. This is not because the friendship was different from the outset, but rather because it was constituted differently through being expressed differently.

To review, we have discovered several features of signs and their role in expression. Firstly, signs face in two directions—towards the possible world that they express, and towards the extended, individuated world that they express it in. The smile is a sign that occupies an intermediate position between an extensive configuration of facial muscles, and an intensive possible world characterised by friendliness. Secondly, signs are ‘ontologically inseparable’ (Bowden 2017, 220) from the possible world they express. Expressions of friendship (like smiles) *make* someone friendly—someone is not friendly unless they express it in some way. Thirdly, the sign shapes what it expresses (the way I express a friendship shapes the friendship itself). Fourthly, the sign is *underdetermined* by what it expresses.²⁵ And fifth, the expressed possible world plays an ‘explanatory role [...] with regards to its expression. [...] we explain my smile with reference to my friendliness: I smile *because* I am friendly’ (Bowden 2017, 222).

There is, however, a kind of sign that Deleuze will privilege in his analysis, which I will call the “symptom.” For Deleuze, the interesting kind of sign is not the conventional, familiar sign that we see in the above example. Rather, he chooses to focus on the kind of sign that

²⁵ Cf. Bell 2009, 63.

disrupts the categories of representation—the sign that forces a creative response, and which sets our mental faculties off in different directions towards different objects. This is the object of what Deleuze calls an “encounter,” the subject of his book on the sign in Proust’s *Recherche*.

6.2.3.3 *The Dogmatic Image of Thought*

There is a feature of the sign which allows us to distinguish Deleuze’s possible worlds approach from Dennettian heterophenomenology. This concerns the raw materials we use to construct our interpretations. While Dennett constructed a “text” out of propositions and (deliberate) actions, Deleuze gives pride of place to the *involuntary*. The reason that Deleuze holds this view is that he is deeply suspicious of what he calls the “Dogmatic Image of Thought.”²⁶ The Dogmatic Image develops when we mistake our conventions for communicating our thought, or the kinds of thought that are most easily communicable, for the nature of thought itself.²⁷

Deleuze describes the Dogmatic Image as developing out of the assumption that thought is a natural and universal human faculty (*DR* 174). This assumption leads us into the mistaken view that, so long as thinkers are operating in good faith, they will eventually arrive at agreement and truth. The Dogmatic Image relies on what Deleuze calls “the postulate of recognition” which, much like Sellars’ ‘Myth of the Given,’ assumes that ‘the same object may be seen, touched, remembered, imagined or conceived’ (*DR* 176)—in other words, there is *harmonious communication* of an object between the faculties of sensibility, imagination, memory, understanding, language and so on. So long as people do not *misrecognise* or *misreport* what is going on in their minds, they will converge on truth about both the world and their experience.

The problem with the Dogmatic Image, however, is twofold—and these two aspects correspond to the concerns of Fricker and of Sellars. In this section I will only discuss the first problem: that the Dogmatic Image excludes both atypical thinkers (for example, people with mental illnesses or people who with idiosyncratic styles of expression) and harder-to-communicate forms of thought. But, as we shall see in §6.3, the Dogmatic Image propagates misunderstandings even of those thinkers and styles of thought which it privileges by covering their conditions of genesis with the categories of representation.

One might liken Deleuze’s critique of the *exclusiveness* of the Dogmatic Image to Fricker’s critique of hermeneutical injustice. Fricker argues that hermeneutical gaps can ‘concern not (or not only) the content but rather the form of what can be said’ (2007, 160)—i.e., one can be a victim of hermeneutical injustice either because one lacks the concepts to understand and communicate one’s experience, or because of prejudice against individuals and social groups with atypical expressive styles engaging in the collective exercise of meaning-making. Deleuze complains that philosophers treat the intelligent layperson as the measure of philosophical good sense, on the grounds that they know what “everybody knows” and that they presuppose nothing that might lead them astray. He urges, in contrast, that philosophers pay attention rather to those who do not see themselves reflected in this common sense:

But here and there isolated and passionate cries are raised. How could they not be isolated when they deny what “everybody knows . . .”? [...] Such protest does not take place in the name of aristocratic prejudices: it is not a question of saying

²⁶ Deleuze is using “thought” here in a broad sense which includes aesthetic experience, what he calls “sensibility”—one might liken Deleuzian “thought” to analytic philosophers’ use of the term “the mental.”

²⁷ Cf. Somers-Hall 2015.

what few think and knowing what it means to think. On the contrary, it is a question of someone—if only one—with the necessary modesty not managing to know what everybody knows, and modestly denying what everybody is supposed to recognise. (*DR* 172-173)

Deleuze's fear here is that the Dogmatic Image will exclude those who do not fit its model of thinking, because it presupposes that thought is a universal faculty. On this view, if someone fails to fit or recognise our model of what thought is they must either have 'a bad nature' or 'an ill will' (*DR* 187). They are, philosophers might think, either not capable of thinking or they are stubbornly refusing to think. Deleuze has in mind here not only hermeneutically marginalised groups, but in particular artists, fictional characters and people with schizophrenia—for example, Dostoevsky's "underground man"²⁸ and experimental playwright Antonin Artaud (*DR* 192-194). Because such people think in surprising, alien ways, in the face of immense pressure to describe their thought in a way that is communicable and comprehensible to common sense, it is *only* in their cases that we can be sure we are actually discovering real thought—as Deleuze puts it, 'everything begins with misosophy', the hatred of (received) wisdom (*DR* 183).²⁹

Where Dennett would prioritise the explicitly communicable in constructing a heterophenomenological world, then, Deleuze sees a trap. 'Only the conventional is explicit', he writes in *PS*, 'because philosophy [...] is ignorant of the dark regions in which are elaborated the effective forces that act on thought, the determinations that *force* us to think' (*PS* 60-61). If we follow Dennett's approach, we will end up unintentionally constructing a Dogmatic Image of Thought and interpreting our "texts" according to that Image. To take several of Deleuze's "postulates" of the Dogmatic Image, which he details in chapter 3 of *DR*, we will tend to take other people's heterophenomenological worlds to consist of individuated *objects* rather than affects or intensive differences; and we will assume that these objects are harmoniously *communicated* between their mental faculties (for example, if I am experiencing something, I will know that I am experiencing it); and that worlds converge with each other rather than diverge.³⁰

So, how does Deleuze avoid this trap? How do we explicate the possible worlds of other people without perpetuating a Dogmatic Image? Deleuze's response to this problem is to focus on two things: firstly, he foregrounds what is *involuntary* in thought; and secondly, he focuses on the ways in which thought is expressed through means other than explicit or deliberate communication. When it comes to understanding another person's possible world, 'the truth is not revealed, it is betrayed; it is not communicated, it is interpreted; it is not willed, it is involuntary' (*PS* 61). Again, we ought to scrutinise the possible world of the other person as a jealous lover treats the object of their desires—take nothing at face value, search for signs of something buried or hidden, prioritise what the other person *did not mean to say* over what they meant to. This is not because Deleuze thinks other people are lying or untrustworthy—Deleuze does not treat the jealous lover as a *moral* exemplar. Whether or not *people* are trustworthy, *thought itself* is untrustworthy. What is most fundamental to thought is also that which is least communicable and least recognisable, because it is the least explicated and the least visible from the perspective of the Dogmatic Image. The mistake of the philosophers was to follow

²⁸ *DR* 173, cf. *WP* 62. Deleuze is drawing directly on Lev Shestov's reading of *Notes from Underground* (Chestov [1923-1929] 1932 §§4-7; cf. Dostoevsky [1864] 2009, 31 [§1.9]).

²⁹ One might liken this privileging of the misosopher to feminist standpoint theory, which holds that the marginalised are epistemically privileged when it comes to understanding their own oppression (Harding 1991, Chs. 5 and 7; cf. Fricker 2017, 56).

³⁰ These are, respectively, the fourth, second and eighth postulates—the postulates of representation, common sense and knowledge (*DR* 216-217).

Descartes in giving highest epistemic status to the clear and distinct: ‘it is no exaggeration to say that the notion of ease poisons the whole of Cartesianism’ (*DR* 176).

Deleuzian suspicion operates at two levels. Firstly, in understanding ourselves we should pay closest attention to that which perplexes or shocks us; and secondly, in understanding others we should prioritise that which seems most incongruent or accidental. In the next section I will examine the role of these surprising signs in understanding the aesthetic experience of others; in the section 6.3.4 I will turn to its role in Deleuze’s anti-givenism when it comes to our own aesthetic experiences.

6.2.3.4 *The Symptom*

For Deleuze, when it comes to understanding the aesthetic experiences of others the most promising approach is what he calls “symptomatology.” Symptomatology is the creation of novel groupings of “symptoms”—signs which demand a particular kind of interpretation. Deleuze describes symptomatology as ‘a kind of neutral point’ between philosophy, art and science ([1967] 2004a, 132; cf. *NP* 3 [§1.2]), because the question of what counts as a symptom can be approached from any of these three angles. First, Deleuze argues, authors and clinicians are both engaged in symptomatological projects:

authors, if they are great, [...] are themselves astonishing diagnosticians or symptomatologists. There is a great deal of art involved in the grouping of symptoms, in the organization of a *table* where a particular symptom is dissociated from another, juxtaposed to a third, and forms the new figure of a disorder or illness. Clinicians who are able to renew a symptomatological table produce a work of art; conversely, artists are clinicians, not with respect to their own case, nor even with respect to a case in general; rather, they are the clinicians of civilization. (*LS* 273)

Furthermore, philosophy is a symptomatology because

it interprets phenomena, treating them as symptoms whose sense must be sought in the forces that produce them. [...] The philosopher as such is a symptomatologist (*NP* 70 [§3.1])

So, symptomatology is the discipline that organises signs into tables of symptoms. When a philosopher is a symptomatologist, they group these symptoms according to what they express (cf. Deleuze [1988] 1995, 143). In the case of the symptomatology of other people, the symptomatologist groups symptoms according to the possible world they express or, more broadly, the intensive field that gives rise to them. Deleuze even goes as far as drawing out Nietzsche’s symptomatological table, and describes a similar Proustian table at length.³¹ To return to Bryant’s treatment of expression as a kind of vertical causality, symptomatological analyses should be understood as the attempt to explain the manifestations of surprising phenomena in terms of what they express: ‘It is always a matter of returning to the system underlying surface manifestations which function as genetic principles’ (2008, 128). Although Deleuze himself performs symptomatology, especially in *CC*, *ECC* and ‘Capitalism and

³¹ *NP* 136-137 (§4.16) and *PS*, Ch. 7. On Proust as symptomatologist, cf. Deleuze (1988) 1995, 142 and 149, and *PS* 64.

Schizophrenia,' his two-volume collaboration with Félix Guattari,³² what I am interested in is less the symptomatological tables that he produces than the idea of symptomatology itself in *DR*, *LS*, *PS* and *NP*.

So, what is a “symptom” for Deleuze? There are two possible readings of Deleuze here. The first is that “symptom” is just another word for “sign.”³³ This approach, while simple, reduces symptomatology to a stylistic flourish resembling Nietzsche’s depiction of the philosopher as the “physician of culture”³⁴—in other words, symptomatology would just be another term for semeiology. Far more interesting, however, is the model of symptoms found in *PS*, in which they are a particular kind of sign: a sign of that which is unspoken, or spoken deceptively:

Every symptom is a word, but first of all every word is a symptom. ‘Words themselves instructed me only if they were interpreted in the fashion of a rush of blood to the face of a person who is disturbed, or again in the fashion of a sudden silence’ (III, 88).³⁵ It will come as no surprise that the hysteric makes his body speak. He rediscovers a primary language, the true language of symbols and hieroglyphs. His body is an Egypt. (*PS* 59)

What is important here—especially if one examines the context of Deleuze’s quotation from Proust—is that signs are only symptoms if they express something *unsaid*. These signs disrupt the categories of representation. Unlike Bowden’s friendly smile, they demand the creation of new groupings and interpretations, and the interrogation of the other’s world.³⁶ As Bryant writes, “The transcendental sign marks the place in which there is something else to be found. The mark of the sign that can only be sensed is precisely that it is the unexpected” (2008, 132). Symptomatology is inextricably tied up with the need for interpretation—for this reason, Deleuze refers to it as “Egyptology,” and the symptoms as “hieroglyphs” ([1968] 2004, 140). Constructing a symptomatological table is like interpreting an alien language, except in the case of symptomatology there is no original or primary meaning to approximate. All there is to go on is the idea of a world behind the symptoms.

If we adopt this interpretation of Deleuze—that symptoms are signs of the unsaid or the unsayable—one arrives at a reading similar to that offered by Paolo Vignola, who describes the symptom ‘as a type of blockage of individuation’ (2017, 187). In other words, where we are unable to explicate our possible worlds as explicit, conventional signs, then they will be expressed as symptoms. These might be anything from tics, to strange turns of phrase, slips of the tongue, behavioural anomalies, facial expressions or psychotic episodes. A symptom is, Vignola argues, ‘an extra-ordinary expression in relation to the normality of the organism’ (2017, 186). Symptoms break with what we expect and understand, with our normal habits, and with our conceptual resources and expectations. Symptoms need not, however, be symptoms of a *disease*. Deleuze’s most sustained symptomatological project, for example, is an analysis of masochism which, while unconventional, is not pathological. They are simply symptoms of *something* that isn’t getting communicated.

³² Cf. Koopman 2018, 195-198 and Smith (1998) 2012, 195-196.

³³ Cf. Deleuze (1983) 2006, ix and *NP* 3 (§1.2).

³⁴ Deleuze (1983) 2006, ix and *NP* 70 (§3.1). Cf. Nietzsche (c1873) 1979.

³⁵ In the Enright translation (Proust [1923-1925] 2000), this quotation comes from p. 93.

³⁶ Cf. Voss 2013, 143.

Vignola's use of the term "blockage" is a useful one, because it connects symptoms with one of Deleuze's most revealing examples of the blockage of individuation: repression and trauma (cf. Bryant 2008, 132). Repressed memories are incommunicable through the means of explicit linguistic utterances, but they shape our experiences and behaviours nonetheless. In fact, repression is *essentially* experienced: 'I repress, because I can live certain things or certain experiences only in the mode of repetition' (DR 21). I cannot make these experiences an object of thought or communicate them to others, but they are still expressed in my behaviours, reactions and associations. 'When the consciousness of knowledge or the working through of memory is missing [...] it is *played*, that is to say repeated, enacted instead of being known' (DR 17). Repressed traumas can undoubtedly shape our experiential worlds, but we cannot describe them as we could our immediate perceptual objects or occurrent thoughts.

To sum up, to understand a Deleuzian possible world one must move beyond what is explicitly communicated to that which is hidden or betrayed. 'The mistake of philosophy is to presuppose within us a benevolence of thought, a natural love of truth. Thus philosophy arrives at only abstract truths that compromise no one and do not disturb' (PS 11). If, in attempting to understand a possible world, we rely exclusively (or even primarily) on what is expressed explicitly and deliberately, we will inevitably exclude those who have the most difficult time being understood by others. If, on the other hand, we search for symptoms, we will not only do justice to those who are excluded by the Dogmatic Image, but also to those aspects of our own mental lives that are least communicable.

6.2.3.5 *Why Deleuzian expressionist empiricism helps us to deal with hermeneutical gaps*

Let's recall the four criteria any theory of experience required if it was to overcome the challenges presented by Rorty and Fricker. On the one hand we need a theory of experience that is neither authoritarian nor givenist; on the other we need one that allows us to *identify* hermeneutical gaps and to *defend* redescriptions which close them, even if such redescriptions cause new suffering or make it more visible.

While I will deal with Rorty's two challenges at greater length in §6.3 and §6.2.4, I will summarise the key points of my Deleuzian response here. Firstly, we have no direct access to our mental states—as Deleuze often writes about great authors or artists, we must become the symptomatologists of ourselves.³⁷ As for authoritarianism, it would be beyond the scope of this thesis to describe and evaluate Deleuze's views on the nature of truth and the place of his account of thought within them; what matters, I argue in the next section, is whether *we* can incorporate Deleuzian empiricism into a cultural-political approach that preserves the ontological primacy of the social. In this section, however, I will be focusing on the questions raised by Fricker and Alcoff rather than those raised by Rorty. I argue here that Deleuze's transcendental empiricism provides tools to help us isolate and respond to situations of hermeneutical injustice without presupposing that experience is either given or ahistorical.

Deleuze's critique of the Dogmatic Image is applicable to situations of hermeneutical injustice. The Dogmatic Image presupposes that the hermeneutical resources that are good for the majority³⁸ are good for everyone, and furthermore that if someone is failing to think

³⁷ Cf. CC 133; Deleuze (1967) 2004a, 132; and Deleuze (1988) 1995, 142. Arguably, his work on Spinoza could also be included in this list (cf. SPP 84).

³⁸ By "majority" I do not mean the most numerous groups, but those with the social power to establish themselves as "default." For example, men would count as a majority on this approach. Cf. ATP 22.

according to the Dogmatic Image's strictures it is either because they are not trying to (they have an "ill will") or because they are an aberration (they have a "bad nature") (*DR* 179, 187). Either they are a philosophically unimportant pathological case, or they just need to try harder and in good faith. This is especially visible in an example Deleuze discusses at length, from an exchange of letters between schizophrenic playwright and poet Antonin Artaud and Jacques Rivière, the editor of a literary journal to which Artaud had sent a series of poems.³⁹

The Artaud-Rivière correspondence arises from the following conflict: Artaud had submitted a series of poems to the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which Rivière had rejected because they had poor literary form and contained many 'awkward things and disconcerting oddities' (Rivière, 9). However, he had been curious enough about the author of the poems that he had set up a meeting with Artaud, following which the two corresponded for almost a year. Artaud insisted that his poems' fragmented and awkward nature was the expression of his suffering and the fragmented nature of his own consciousness:

The dispersiveness of my poems, their formal defects, the constant sagging of my thinking, are to be attributed not to lack of patience, of mastery of the instrument I wield, of *intellectual development*, but to a central collapse of the mind, a kind of erosion, both essential and fleeting, of my thinking, to the passing non-possession of the material gains of my development, to the abnormal separation of the elements of thought (Artaud, 10-11).

Rivière's response alternates between two approaches. The first is to coach Artaud towards achieving better 'unity of impression' (Rivière, 9); the other is to explain how while Artaud's mental suffering is clearly profound, he may mitigate it by focusing his mind on clear and present objects: 'It seems to me that the "mental erosion," the inner larcenies, the "destruction" of thought "in its substance" which afflicts yours, have no other cause than the too great freedom you allow it' (Rivière, 16). Rivière treats Artaud's poetic *goals* as if they were the same as his own, and he repeatedly applies his own hermeneutical resources in an attempt to understand, and "cure," Artaud's case.⁴⁰

Rivière's response to Artaud misunderstood him on several counts: Deleuze writes that 'the more Rivière believes himself to be close to an understanding of Artaud, the further away he is, and the more he speaks of something altogether different' (*DR* 184). Rivière had been trying to understand Artaud on the model of thought that he was familiar with, and so the more he managed to fit Artaud into this model, the less he understood how different they were. Firstly, in trying to unify and clarify Artaud's expression, he missed the entire purpose of Artaud's poetry—as Atteberry writes of the exchange, Rivière faults him 'for not being explicit enough in his attempt to discuss the very problem of being explicit enough' (2000, 719). Artaud is trying to express a fragmented possible world in language, and Rivière faults him for his fragmented expression. Secondly, Rivière conducted the whole exercise under the assumption that Artaud's faculty of thought was fundamentally similar to his own, even if it was utilised differently or encountered empirical obstacles. In Frickerian language, Rivière perpetuated hermeneutical

³⁹ Artaud and Rivière (1923-1924) 1965. I will abbreviate citations to this text to (Artaud, *n*) for Artaud's letters and (Rivière, *n*) for Rivière's.

⁴⁰ Cf. Atteberry 2000, 725-726.

injustice by refusing to entertain the possibility that his inability to understand Artaud was the effect of a hermeneutical gap.⁴¹

Deleuze finds, in Rivière's assumption that Artaud was simply trying to express something he thought or perceived clearly and choosing poor means in his quest to do so, the failure to grasp that experience is intensive and directly shaped by its expression.⁴² Artaud describes his predicament as follows:

there, sir, lies the entire problem: to have within oneself the inseparable reality and material clarity of a feeling, to have them to such a degree that the feeling cannot but express itself, to have a wealth of words and formal constructions which might join in the dance, might serve one's purpose—and at the very moment when the soul is about to organize its wealth, its discoveries, its revelation, at that unconscious moment when the thing is about to emanate, a higher and evil will attacks the soul like vitriol, attacks the word-and-image mass, attacks the mass of the feeling and leaves me panting at the very doors of life.
(21-22)

Artaud finds that the modes of linguistic expression available to him fail to do justice to his experience of mental collapse. Rivière tries to interpret these signs of Artaud's possible world in terms of a fundamental similarity with his own—or, at the very least, in terms of a definable difference. The idea that Artaud's thought itself might be fractured, unformed, that its expressions in Artaud's poetry might be symptoms, did not occur to him: 'Artaud pursues in all this the terrible revelation of a thought without image, and the conquest of a new principle which does not allow itself to be represented' (DR 193).

How might Deleuzian symptomatology, and his expressionist concept of experience, help us to discover and overcome hermeneutical gaps? Two features of Deleuze's theory make it especially well-suited for this purpose. Firstly, on Deleuze's theory, as with heterophenomenology, it makes sense to talk about what another person's mental life is like. The aesthetic experience of another person is *real*. Secondly, the other person's mental life is not reducible to, or even entirely derived from, what they say. Aesthetic experience may be expressed *in* language, but it is not an epiphenomenon *of* language. This overcomes the Dennettian, and especially Rortyan, problem of treating explicit reports as the source for our inferences about people's mental lives. Since hermeneutical injustice is a product of those gaps where we are least able to explain our aesthetic experience, a symptomatology—which treats the *accidental*, the *unusual* and the *involuntary* as the best guides to people's mental lives—is far better suited for dealing with it. And third, because Deleuzian intensive experience necessarily exceeds any description of it, it allows for a pragmatic focus on *better descriptions* of aesthetic experience rather than a metaphysical focus on *correct descriptions*.

⁴¹ Although Fricker does not place the responsibility for committing hermeneutical injustices on individuals, she believes that individuals developing the virtues of hermeneutical *justice* is part of the solution (2007, 169). Rivière was clearly not exercising such virtues.

⁴² Massumi's distinction between a "communicative" and a Deleuzian model of expression is helpful for understanding Rivière's mistake here. Massumi writes of the image of expression according to the Dogmatic Image that 'Traditionally, for communicational purposes, expression is anchored to a 'content'. The content is viewed as having an objective existence prior and exterior to the form of its expression. [...] One of the reasons Deleuze and Guattari find the basic communicational model questionable is that it assumes a world of already-defined things' (2002, xiv-xv). Cf. Uhlmann 2009, 57-59.

Let's examine how a Deleuzian empiricism could help us to deal with the cases described by Alcoff and Fricker. Alcoff's fear was that if we adopted Rorty's picture of linguistic innovation, we would be put at a rhetorical disadvantage if we tried to describe new kinds of harm—as, for example, when feminists first attempted to propagate the terms “sexual harassment” and “date rape.” Such terms often lead to what appears to be the creation of new forms of pain and hurt, both because new forms of pain are being described and because reconceiving one's past experience as one of violation can bring *additional* pains. If we were limited to a Rortyan picture of experience, we would be unable to justify a redescription on the grounds that it *revealed* something already there until after such a description had become conventional—when one is proposing a new way of speaking, the distinction between revealing and creating is purely rhetorical. Consequently, Rorty's approach puts feminists at a rhetorical disadvantage (Alcoff 2010a, 151).

A Deleuzian account of aesthetic experience can help us respond to this: something was there already, which wasn't getting expressed explicitly in language. The reason to redescribe some sexual interactions in this way is that the hermeneutical resources we had previously were preventing this expression. There was a hermeneutical *gap*, since there was no clear way for people to explicate their aesthetic experiences, their “possible worlds,” in these situations. These experiences would have been expressed instead in symptoms. By searching for discontinuities—that is, symptoms—we can discover experiences that are not being expressed and work to create conditions for their expression.

The differences between this approach and Rorty's becomes especially stark if we consider the Carmita Wood case. Wood's aesthetic experience clearly manifested in symptoms that exceeded and undermined the hermeneutical tools that were available for her to explicate it. They were so disabling that she was forced to leave her job, and yet when she tried to describe why she left she was only able to say that it was for “personal reasons.”⁴³ When she described her lived experience to the women's liberation group at MIT, however, she found an audience who were sympathetic to her inability to describe her aesthetic experience, who were attentive to her symptoms and her pain. They understood that there was something real that she was having trouble describing. In other words, she found a community of Frickerian “virtuous hearers,” people who are sensitive ‘to the possibility that the difficulty that [she] is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is not due to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in the collective hermeneutical resources’ (Fricker 2007, 169). Adopting a Deleuzian empiricism in which the nature of aesthetic experience is *not* transparent to the experiencer, in which it is often expressed through symptoms rather than reports, and in which our descriptions modify the experience itself—a phenomenon acknowledged by Fricker in her response to Alcoff⁴⁴—allows us to locate, motivate and justify our attempts to close hermeneutical gaps without resorting to givenism.

6.2.4 How to use Deleuze without being authoritarian

I will begin this section with a clarification. The purpose of this chapter is to explain why a Rortyan who is concerned with dealing with hermeneutical injustice should be attracted to Deleuzian empiricism. This means that, while I have been careful to represent Deleuze's thought fairly, the ends to which I am putting his theory are decisively Rortyan. Deleuze would be

⁴³ Brownmiller 1990, quoted in Fricker 2007, 150.

⁴⁴ Fricker 2010, 168, in response to Alcoff 2010b.

unlikely to endorse a politics of decreasing suffering and increasing freedom.⁴⁵ He staunchly resisted the linguistic turn (*D* 14; *AZ* 3 W), and spoke derisively of Rorty in his later work (cf. my §1.4).

While there may be a tension in my use of Deleuze's philosophy to pursue Rortyan ends, it is a surmountable one. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the politics of *DR* and *PS*—my key reference points in this chapter—are minimal and implicit, taking a back seat to ontology and Deleuze's exegesis of other figures. The tension between Deleuze's politics and Rorty's can, therefore, be much more easily avoided in this discussion than in one that focused on Deleuze and Guattari's collaborative works. Secondly, Deleuze enthusiastically endorses taking the work of other philosophers and using it for one's own ends (cf. Deleuze [1994] 2014, xii and *ATP* 4–5). This is also something that Rorty has no qualms doing—for example, when he enthusiastically endorses Nietzsche's perspectivism in the same breath as he rejects the metaphysics of the will to power.

My thesis in this chapter is that if we accept a Deleuzian expressionist theory of experience, we can talk about experience in a way which allows us to both discover hermeneutical gaps and motivate and justify our attempts to overcome them. Unlike classical empiricism, sense-datum theory or our common-sense view of experience as something clear and individuated, Deleuzian empiricism is not vulnerable to Sellarsian critiques. Establishing this point will be the purpose of section 6.3.

But what about Rorty's authoritarianism argument? Doesn't Deleuze posit something outside of our social and linguistic practices that exerts authority over them? Perhaps (and perhaps not⁴⁶). But what is important is whether *we* can adopt his account of experience without making authoritarian appeals. One of the advantages of Rorty's account of the ontological primacy of the social is that it allows us to preserve social practices and areas of culture with strong conceptions of objectivity, while giving them an anti-authoritarian philosophical gloss. Objectivity, for Rorty, is not dead, but it is delegated—the decision of where and how to make claims about objectivity is a social one rather than a brute fact that we are presented with by reality itself. My proposal is that we treat experience as an area where objectivity is possible, and that we develop practices that are modelled on Deleuze's symptomatological empiricist approach.

I will illustrate this point with an example. Consider the way we talk about natural science, the paradigm of “objective epistemic authority.” If we are confronted by people—even an organised movement of people—who believe that anthropogenic climate change is a hoax, we are not tempted to change our beliefs. We appeal to the way the world is (*climate change is really happening! Just look at the data!*) to make our point. Does this mean that we are authoritarians when it comes to climate change?

The answer depends how this point is put. To respond with “that's the way the world is, and we cannot deny the truth” would be authoritarian—it would embody ‘the idea that human beings *must* humble themselves before something non-human’ (Rorty 1999c, 7 [emphasis mine]). However, if we respond “as a culture we have found it useful to appeal to the consensus of our scientific institutions about the natural world to decide what to believe regarding these matters,”

⁴⁵ The interpretation of Deleuze's politics is hugely contested. My own view is that he resembles a Rortyan “ironist theorist,” who values self-creation but is relatively unconcerned with reducing cruelty, but defending this reading is beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁴⁶ Cf. Patton (2010) 2015 for a plausible reading of Deleuze as an ironist.

we are appealing to an *objective* authority, but acknowledging that the decision to outsource epistemic authority on these matters is a *social* one. Climate change is an aspect of *the way the world is*, but our conception of the way the world is is a product of the institutions we have developed for deciding what to believe. It is no less true for that.

When arguing with climate change deniers (or anti-vaxxers, or creationists), the argument should be understood on two levels. On one level, the discussion is about what to believe about the extra-human world. But such debates often happen *within* our scientific institutions (for example, what killed the dinosaurs is still live debate among scientists). What distinguishes the case of climate change from the dinosaurs is that in the former case what is at stake is *whether we should look to our scientific institutions or practices to decide these issues* (or whether, for example, we should trust fringe scientists because our scientific institutions have been compromised by a conspiracy to harm the West; or whether it is hubristic to trust the consensus of scientists over the word of the Bible). These debates are, on one level, about what the truth is, and on another, about how we should decide what the truth is.

For Rorty “authoritarianism” is the attempt to circumvent this *second* level. It is the attempt to say that there is an authority that overrides human decisions about where to place authority. It manifests in the move of reciting scripture in a debate over whether to trust scripture over scientific consensus (“of course God created the world in seven days, as you can see if you just read *Genesis* . . .”), but also in the move of invoking scientific consensus in this debate (“of course the Earth is billions of years old, as you’ll see if you just examine this meta-analysis of geological studies . . .”). The anti-authoritarian move is to treat this meta-debate in good faith, and to acknowledge that one’s arguments are bound to be circular (“I trust the scientific consensus because it has shown results in our historic attempts to predict and control phenomena, but if that’s not something you think is decisive then I don’t know what to say”).

My point here is to give a template for how we might treat the question of the nature of experience and its relation to language. On the one hand, a Cartesian, appealing to the ontological primacy of the objective, could argue in an authoritarian fashion that *the fact that experience is independent from language is a feature of the way the world really is—as you would know if you would only attend to the nature of experience*. But a pragmatist can still coherently believe that the nature of experience is independent from what we think about it, as long as they acknowledge their meta-level social-practice oriented reasons for taking this view. This is what I wish to do: my argument is that *we should believe that experience has a nature that is independent from language, because believing this will help us to accomplish useful social goals*—specifically, the goal of dealing with hermeneutical injustice. Such an argument should be compelling to a Rortyan, since we agree on the meta-level about which kinds of reasons should influence us on how to allocate epistemic authority. Our disagreement will be about *whether this proposal would prove socially beneficial or not*; we are agreed on whether expected social consequences are the deciding factor. My case has been that it would be best to treat aesthetic experience as we do unconscious desires, the identity of the poet Homer, or the cause of the extinction of the dinosaurs: something that is neither a matter of social authority (as table manners are), nor of subjective authority (as sincere reports of occurrent perceptions or thoughts are), but of objective authority. What killed the dinosaurs should not be decided by our social consensus, nor our subjective judgment, but our practices for deciding how the world is, because *we* have agreed that it is a good idea to treat this question in this way. But nevertheless, it is up to us whether we wish to outsource our social authority to the objective like this, and we are always at liberty to take it back.

6.3 Why Deleuzean empiricism is not givenist

6.3.1 Deleuze's Apparent Givenism

There is still one of Rorty's arguments I must respond to: the anti-givenist argument. In this and the next two sections, I will argue that Deleuze's transcendental empiricism is in fact *motivated* by hostility to givenism. Like Sellars, Deleuze rejects what Sachs calls the 'sensory-cognitive continuum' (2014, 103 and 131): the idea that sensory awareness and propositional thought differ only in degree and not in kind. His theory of linguistic meaning refuses to appeal to nonlinguistic "meaning-makers," and his characterisation of the cognitive role of experience is purely causal.

Nevertheless, Deleuze's philosophy has several features that might make him appear, at first glance, to be a givenist. Indeed, one of the two authors who has written on the question of Deleuze's relationship to the Myth of the Given reads him as an extreme givenist, turning to "intuitive knowledge" to ground his philosophical system (Jelača 2014). (The other author who has explored this connection, however, argues that in Deleuze 'the so-called Myth of the Given is avoided at every level' [Bowden 2015, 192].) In the next three sections, I will review the aspects of Deleuze's empiricism that might encourage Jelača's view: (1) his characterisation of his philosophy as "empiricist"; (2) his endorsement of faculty theory, a philosophical approach that has historically been associated with givenist early modern theories of mind; and (3) his use of "the given" itself in his account of thought.

6.3.2 Empiricism

In his critique of Deleuze, Matija Jelača attributes to him an empiricist foundationalist epistemology (2014, 119). Empiricism, Jelača writes, is the view that (1) we can attain a kind of "intuitive knowledge" which is more basic than conceptual knowledge, and (2) this knowledge grounds all knowledge claims (2014, 92). Deleuze, on Jelača's view, commits himself to such a view when he claims, firstly, that 'we [must] apprehend directly in the sensible that which can only be sensed, the very being *of* the sensible' (*DR* 71, quoted in Jelača 2014, 119), and secondly, when he sets out a process by which this direct apprehension leads to thought (Jelača 2014, 103-104). Jelača's critique draws on all three of the apparently givenist aspects of Deleuze's theory that I mentioned in the previous paragraph. In this section, I will explain Deleuze's non-givenist understanding of empiricism; in the next two, I will first explain why Deleuze's account of the relation between sensibility and thought, and then how his "direct apprehension of the sensible," avoid givenism.

Deleuze is far from the only philosopher to attempt to develop an anti-givenist empiricism. For example, John McDowell explicitly characterises his (and Sellars's) philosophy in this way (2009, §§1-2), even giving his theory the same name as Deleuze's: transcendental empiricism (McDowell 1999; cf. my §6.2.3). Similarly, Rorty attributes such a goal to Dewey, despite being dubious about its success (Rorty [1994] 1998b).

When Deleuze calls his philosophy "transcendental empiricism," he explicitly rejects the idea that he is providing a theory of knowledge. In the preface to *DR*, he writes that 'Empiricism is by no means [...] a simple appeal to lived experience [*l'expérience vécue*]' (xvii). The key to understanding this anti-epistemological orientation in Deleuze's empiricism can be found in his

idiosyncratic reading of Hume.⁴⁷ ‘[I]n Hume’, Deleuze writes, ‘there is something very strange which completely displaces empiricism, giving it a new power’ (*D* 15). He complains that historians of philosophy often reduce empiricism to an inverse form of rationalism, where sense-data play the epistemological role that rationalists give to innate ideas.⁴⁸ Deleuze contends that if we simply treat experience as a stage on the way to knowledge, we will fail to understand what is distinctive about it (*DR* 216; cf. Somers-Hall 2013, 128): rather than a theory of knowledge, transcendental empiricism advances a ‘science of the sensible’ (*DR* 71). Although Deleuze acknowledges that empiricism does involve a critique of innateness (*DR* 193), he refuses to make sense-data (or “intensity”) into a successor-concept to innate ideas. Rather, Deleuze’s understanding of empiricism privileges the idea that there is something creative and generative in thought itself, which stands opposed to *both* innatist rationalism and sense-datum empiricism.⁴⁹

The creativeness of thought, for Deleuze’s Hume as well as Deleuze himself, is bound up in with the rejection of the idea that relations are internal to their terms.⁵⁰ Rather, on his empiricist approach, things are *constituted* by the relations that they are caught up in rather than having a nature which dictates how they relate to other things. This move, which is mirrored in Rorty’s late philosophy,⁵¹ rejects a presupposition of empiricist givenism: the view that ‘The fundamental concepts pertaining to observable fact are logically independent of one another’ (Rorty [1963] 2014, 102). On Deleuze’s view, empiricism ‘a practice of cultural and *conventional* formations [...] rather than a theory of the human mind.’⁵² This anti-epistemological orientation, writes Roffe, is what makes Deleuze’s reading of Hume so unique: he ‘completely avoids the epistemological emphasis that has dominated almost the entire history of Hume’s reception.’⁵³ Nevertheless, it is more appropriately called empiricism than rationalism because, in a *causal* sense, ‘on the path which leads to that which is to be thought, all begins with sensibility’ (*DR* 190).

Colebrook writes that ‘Deleuze did not see transcendental empiricism as a theory; it was a challenge’ (2002, 69). Specifically, transcendental empiricism is the challenge to think experience without positing any transcendent explanatory principle, such as its teleology towards knowledge, the transcendental subject, or innate ideas. By setting himself this challenge, Deleuze takes empiricism to be the best-suited approach for *avoiding* givenism. In order to do this, he will turn to a revised and renewed theory of the faculties.

6.3.3 Faculty Theory

‘Deleuze’, writes Roffe, ‘is perhaps unique among philosophers of the late twentieth century in maintaining an active interest in the theory of the faculties, which he considered decisive’ (2009, 78). This is because, like Sellars (*AR* 285), Deleuze saw Kant’s radical separation of sensibility from the other faculties (such as reason and the understanding) as fundamental, and built his own theory from this insight (*KCP* 19; *DR* 188). Despite its Kantian heritage, however, Deleuze’s

⁴⁷ Although, as Rölli has observed, Deleuze’s early reading of Hume is still atomistic, whereas his later transcendental empiricism avoids atomism through its invocation of the concept of the virtual (Rölli [2003/2012] 2016, 13 and 253-258).

⁴⁸ Deleuze (1972) 2004a, 162. Jelača, in fact, makes this exact association in the opening paragraph of his article (92).

⁴⁹ *DR* 193 and Deleuze (1986) 2007, vii.

⁵⁰ Deleuze (1966) 2004; (1989) 1991, ix.

⁵¹ Rorty 1996d and 1996c, 11-12.

⁵² Deleuze (1989) 1991, ix; cf. Deleuze (1972) 2004, 163 and Baugh 1993, 19.

⁵³ 2009, 68. Cf. *ES* 107-108.

theory of the faculties is hugely transformed and, I shall argue, this transformation saves it from the mechanistic, givenist picture that one finds in Kant's first *Critique*.

If one's goal is avoiding givenism, there are three reasons that one might be dubious of faculty theory. The first of these is that faculty theory has historically been used to present a mechanistic image of cognition which confuses the orders of causes and reasons. The second is that if it is to avoid affirming the first thesis of Sellars's inconsistent triad, faculty theory must provide an account of the relation between the faculties which does not treat the harmonious co-operation of sensibility and the understanding as pre-established or necessary. Finally, as Sachs has argued, Kant's account of the faculties is guilty of a form of "endogenous" givenism (forthcoming, 669)—that is, the givenness of the mind's own structure to itself (cf. Kerslake 2009, 76).

The first of these concerns can be found in Jelača's critique of Deleuze. In his paper, Jelača sets out the process by which encounters with sensibility give rise to thought. First, the faculty of sensibility encounters a sign; it sends a shock to the faculty of memory, which is directed towards its own object, which Deleuze calls the *memorandum*; this in turn spurs the faculty of thought into activity (DR 190-191; Jelača 2014, 103-105). 'Thus,' writes Jelača, 'for Deleuze, thought always begins with an immediate apprehension of difference in itself. Deleuze could hardly be any more explicit about his belief in the idea of intuitive knowledge' (2014, 105). This is because, Jelača argues, Deleuze takes sensory episodes of direct apprehension to ground knowledge—a kind of epistemic, or at the very least semantic, givenism.

Jelača's account fails to appreciate the significance of two features of Deleuze's faculty-theory: (i) its status as an *ontology of thought* rather than a *theory of knowledge*, and (ii) Deleuze's critique of "recognition" and "common sense." Concerning (i), Deleuze's work during the 1960's is marked by a hostility to phenomenology (cf. NP 184; DR 181), and in particular to its centring of *consciousness* in its approach to thought. He begins his introduction to Spinoza by arguing that '*thought [...] surpasses the consciousness that we have of it*' (18) and stating his aim to explore the depths of the unconscious. Similarly, in NP, he argues that consciousness is 'nothing but the symptom of a deeper transformation of the activities of entirely non-spiritual forces' (36 [§2.1]); and in PS, he cautions that if 'we remain on the level of conscious perception,' we will never understand Proust's account of the sensory encounter (PS 39). Deleuze's de-centring of consciousness is even his key point of departure from Sartre, whose work had been a catalyst for Deleuze's own intellectual trajectory.⁵⁴ '[K]nowledge,' on the other hand, 'implies consciousness, or more precisely the belonging of representations to a single consciousness within which they must be linked' (KCP 13). In other words, unless both sensing and believing can be treated as episodes of a *single* consciousness, sensing something cannot *entail* knowing its nature. Knowledge—at least on the givenist picture—implies a knower, but unless consciousness is unified, there is no way to establish the existence of a knower or their identity with a senser.

Although Deleuze does not deny the existence of the subject or of consciousness, he treats them neither as given, nor as the complete picture. Colebrook writes that 'Before "the" subject of mind, [...] there are what Deleuze refers to as "larval subjects": a multiplicity of perceptions and contemplations not yet organised into a self' (2002, 74; cf. DR 151 and Deleuze [1967] 2004c, 97-98). Starting from the existence of *life*, Deleuze endeavours to explain the genesis of subjectivity and consciousness, as well as their limitations (DR Ch. 2; Deleuze [1995] 2001). Deleuze's philosophy as a whole, throughout his career, can be understood as an attempt

⁵⁴ LS 120-121; cf. Somers-Hall 2012, 23ff. and Boundas 1993.

to answer the question he posed in his first book: ‘how is the subject constituted in the given?’ (*ES* 87). In other words, how do these larval subjects develop into the empirical consciousnesses that we are familiar with?

Deleuze’s attention to the genesis of subjectivity has a reverse side as well. Because the faculties are not given as a complete system with pre-established relationships, they are deeply diverse. The intensive object of the sensory encounter—the *aisthêton* or the sign—is *unrecognisable* (*DR* 183) by our other faculties. It is, to use Deleuze’s paradoxical diction, “‘something’ which simultaneously cannot be sensed [...] and can only be sensed’ (*DR* 310; cf. 303 and 183-189). What Deleuze means is that the *aisthêton* can be sensed, but this sensing cannot be conceptualised, remembered, imagined, or communicated with any other faculty. It is an exercise of sensibility *alone*. Similarly, each other faculty has its own “transcendent object,” which it alone can apprehend.

Deleuze’s account here can be more clearly understood if we examine what it *rejects*. Two of the postulates of the Dogmatic Image of Thought, which we examined in §6.2.3.3, are what he calls the postulates of “common sense” and “recognition.” These are, in short, the principle that objects of cognition are communicated harmoniously between the faculties of a single *subject*,⁵⁵ and that each faculty can apprehend the same *object* as another faculty (*DR* 178). In other words, common sense is the idea that the mental faculties are unified *a priori* within a particular subject or consciousness. The correlate of this is “recognition,” the idea that the faculties can converge their activity upon a single object—in other words, recognition ensures that it is the *same* object that is sensed, remembered, imagined, conceived, and spoken of.

The best illustrations of these two postulates can be found in Descartes, in cogito argument and his wax example respectively (*DR* 176). In the cogito, Descartes establishes his own existence by attempting to doubt it. He discovers immediately, however, that he cannot doubt that he exists, because the very act of doubting reveals to him that he does. Furthermore, this discovery teaches him what kind of thing he must be:

what then am I? A thing that thinks. But what is that? A thing that doubts, understands, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions’ (Descartes [1641] 1984, VII 28)

Here Descartes assumes a common sense from the outset. He begins not by recognising that “there is doubt,” but already with “*I* doubt”—the subject is assumed. Furthermore, he assumes instantly that doubting is a mode of thinking, which entails the possibility of understanding, denying, willing, imagining and sensing. In this simple act, Descartes discovers not only the existence of doubt, but also the existence of the subject and the structure of the faculties.

The postulate of recognition has a parallel structure, only this time Descartes discovers the harmony of the faculties in apprehending a single *object*. In the wax example, Descartes conducts a phenomenological analysis of his experience of watching a single piece of wax melt. Although it changes its appearance in every sensory modality, he is able to recognise it as self-same throughout: he perceives it as a single object changing over time. From this observation, he deduces that it is his faculty of understanding that contributes the unity to the sensory object, and consequently, that his mental faculties act in unison on the objects of experience rather than

⁵⁵ *DR* 177. Deleuze takes the term “common sense” from its scholastic and Aristotelian usage, and it should not be confused with our contemporary use of the term.

simply taking in stimuli passively.⁵⁶ Together, common sense and recognition imply each other (DR 180), and they give us a picture of the world as divided into unified subjects, with faculties that operate harmoniously in apprehending unified objects (Somers-Hall 2013, 104-108).

In most early modern models of the faculties—for example, Descartes’—common sense and the possibility of recognition are guaranteed because the faculties were taken to differ only in *degree* (KCP 19). On Descartes’ account, for example, the faculties differ in terms of the clarity and distinctness of their objects, with sensory perception providing the most confused and obscure objects and the understanding providing the clearest and most distinct.⁵⁷ Similarly, on a Humean account, impressions and ideas are distinguished by their degree of “force and vivacity.”⁵⁸ Such an approach guarantees the possibility of recognition so long as the faculties are united in a single consciousness, since there is no obstacle in principle to any one faculty’s being able to apprehend the object of another.

Deleuze, however, rejects these assumptions, following a model taken from Kant: the faculties (and their objects) are different *in kind*. This point, which he calls ‘One of the most original points of Kantianism’ (KCP 19), provides Deleuze’s model for his own faculty theory. A theory in which the faculties are distinguished in kind, unlike one in which they differ merely in degree, does not establish common sense or recognition from the outset: one must first explain *how* an object can be communicated (a relatively trivial question for degree theories). Kant, to Deleuze’s disappointment, betrays this insight by making common sense into an *a priori* ‘subjective condition of all “communicability”’ between the faculties.⁵⁹ But nevertheless, ‘Kant seemed equipped to overturn the Image of Thought’ (DR 180): by preserving Kant’s account of difference in kind while rejecting common sense, Deleuze is able to save what is living in faculty theory and discard its most givenist elements.

Against Kant, Deleuze argues that the diversity of the faculties is ontologically prior to the unity of subjects or objects. His model for this understanding comes from Proust’s account of “involuntary memory.”⁶⁰ The year after Deleuze wrote his book on Kant (subtitled ‘The Doctrine of the Faculties’), he published the first volume of *Proust and Signs*, which set out a radically different model of the faculties. Proust’s genius, argues Deleuze, was to oppose acts of recognition to incommunicable *encounters*, in which faculties operate on objects that they alone can apprehend.⁶¹ Proust, Deleuze writes, ‘counters the logical or conjoined use of all our faculties—preceded by an intelligence that brings them all together in the fiction of a ‘total soul’—by a nonlogical and disjunct use, which shows that we never command all our faculties at once’ (PS 70). Deleuze takes *In Search of Lost Time* as a taxonomy of these diverse objects of the

⁵⁶ I am taking my reading of Descartes here from Deleuze (esp. DR and WG) and Sarkar 2003. For Descartes, recognition is derived from common sense (which is discovered through the cogito), but this is not essential to our argument. For example, in the Transcendental Deduction, Kant grounds the subject (the transcendental unity of apperception) and the (transcendental) object in each other (Somers-Hall 2012, 19-22).

⁵⁷ Gewirth 1943, §3; Guérault (1953) 1984-5, vol. II, 217-218.

⁵⁸ Cf. Hume (1748) 2007, §II.1 (18).

⁵⁹ KCP 18; cf. DR 181 and Rölli (2003/2012) 2016, 38.

⁶⁰ Deleuze also takes his model from Kant’s analytic of the sublime, which he celebrates as a rare moment in Kant in which the postulates of the Dogmatic Image are suspended (AZ K; KCP Ch. 3; [1963] 2000; WP 2). However, I have chosen the example of Proust because Deleuze sees Proust’s break with common sense as complete, whereas Kant’s is highly localised.

⁶¹ Deleuze finds a surprising precursor for Proust in Plato, who made a parallel distinction (PS 64; DR 182; Plato 1997c, 523a ff.), although he complains in DR that Plato betrayed his insight by interpreting this discovery by imposing a mythical analogue to recognition (DR 184-185).

faculties, which he calls “signs,” dividing them according to the faculty that is able to explicate them (*PS* 55).

Every faculty, argues Deleuze in *PS*, has both a “voluntary” and an “involuntary” exercise. (In *DR*, he will call these the “empirical” and “transcendent”⁶² exercises.) The “voluntary” or “empirical” exercise of a faculty is its use in acts of recognition—for example, the contribution of sensibility to the continuous perception of Descartes’ wax is the empirical exercise of sensibility, and the contribution of the idea of unity was the empirical exercise of the understanding. The “involuntary” or “transcendent” exercise, however, apprehends an object *beyond* what can be grasped in acts of recognition or communicated to the other faculties (hence, it is “transcendent”). The most famous example of this is Proust’s encounter with the madeleine, a pastry which he had eaten during his childhood (Proust [1913] 1992, 52ff. and [1927] 1992, 217ff.). Rather than comparing the taste of the madeleine with his memories of other madeleines in order to subsume it under a concept (as would be the case in an act of recognition), the sensory encounter immediately shocks his memory into apprehending Combray, the town of his childhood. But this is not a recognisable Combray which one could recall from past experiences, or which one could reconstruct in one’s imagination. Instead, through the involuntary memory, Proust’s narrator encounters ‘Combray [...] not as it was or as it could be, but in a splendour which was never lived, like a pure past which finally reveals its double irreducibility to the two presents which it telescopes together’ (*DR* 111). This is Combray as it could *only* be remembered: not as a past sensation that was once present, but as an encounter with ‘the past as it is in itself’ (*PS* 38), the past *as past*. Although there is a relation between sensibility and memory, it is purely causal: sensibility apprehends the aisthēteon in the madeleine, spurring memory into apprehending the pure past in Combray, which in turn sets further faculties in action.

It is, of course, possible to perform empirical (or, in the language of *PS*, “voluntary”) acts of judgment: ‘acts of recognition exist and occupy a large part of our daily life: this is a table, this is an apple, this is a piece of wax, Good morning Theaetetus’ (*DR* 178). But these are not fundamental to thought itself—rather, they are fundamental to the *communication* of thought and, indeed, are made possible by means of social convention (*PS* 12; cf. *ES* 46). ‘The form of recognition’, writes Deleuze, ‘has never sanctioned anything but the recognisable and the recognised; form will never inspire anything but conformities’ (*DR* 178).

We are now in a place to respond to Jelača: is Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism a theory of intuitive knowledge? The answer, it should be clear, is either “no,” or “yes” with extremely heavy caveats. Although Deleuze often describes sensibility as “apprehending” the aisthēteon (e.g. *DR* 71, 189), it is clear in *DR* that this apprehension is a causal relationship rather than a rational one. Elsewhere, he describes sensibility as “sensing” and “grasping” it (184-185), and he describes the aisthēteon as “forcing” sensibility (183, 190), “giving rise” to it (184), or “perplexing” it (184). Nowhere does he speak of “knowing” the aisthēteon or any other transcendent object; one’s relation with a transcendent object is neither rationally evaluable nor inferentially articulable. So if transcendental empiricism could be called a theory of intuitive knowledge, it would be radically unlike any other knowledge and incapable of being taken up in an epistemology.⁶³ Jelača, for his part, takes a “yes, but” approach to sensory knowledge in

⁶² Although both “transcendent exercise” and “transcendental exercise” appear in the English translation of *DR*, the distinction is not made in the French, in which “*exercice transcendant*” is used consistently.

⁶³ Jelača takes the term “[intuitive] knowledge” from Deleuze’s work on Bergson (*B*, [1956] 2004a and [1956] 2004b), in which Deleuze discusses the “method of intuition.” However, as Somers-Hall has observed, this is not a

Deleuze: He argues that Deleuze defends an occult theory of the encounter as an ‘*other knowledge*,⁶⁴ a knowledge of the sensible rather than the intelligible (123), which is undiscoverable through science or the philosophies of representation (96).

Rather than staging my disagreement with Jelača on the grounds of terminology (“is the encounter a kind of knowledge or not?”), I will examine what it would have to do in order to be an instance of the Myth of the Given. We have already seen that it is not a case of the Myth of the *epistemic* (or, consequently, the empiricist) Given, since the encounter cannot be taken as a premise in reasoning. Nor does it provide us with premises for reasoning, since it concerns fundamentally incommunicable objects. Reasoning, in the sense that Sellars and Rorty are interested in, falls under the recognition-model, which is intersubjectively trained and regulated. Deleuze, however, is interested with those aspects of mental life that fall outside that model, and which operate in the Sellarsian space of causes.

Curiously, despite Deleuze’s theory sharing a name with McDowell’s anti-givenist theory of experience, they respond in diametrically opposed ways to the Sellarsian problematic. While both thinkers seek to avoid the givenist confusion of the space of causes with the space of reasons, Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism does this by breaking with common sense and recognition, while McDowell’s does it by explicitly and consistently applying their model to sensibility. For McDowell, ‘experience has its content by virtue of the drawing into operation, in sensibility, of capacities that are genuinely elements in a faculty of spontaneity [...] [which] must also be able to be exercised in judgments’ (1994, 46-47). In other words, for McDowell, sensory experience is *only* contentful insofar as its contents can be taken up in acts of recognition. It is entirely confined to the space of reasons, and although our conceptual capacities are noninferentially activated in experience, they are activated in accordance with a learned, challengeable and revisable conceptual vocabulary. Deleuze, by contrast, *severs* the transcendent exercise of the faculties both from the space of reasons and from the possibility of recognition. It is this aspect of Deleuze that makes his non-givenist account of experience, rather than McDowell’s, perfectly suited for the task of identifying hermeneutical gaps. For Deleuze, rather than McDowell, provides a non-givenist theory of experience that operates independently from our learned conceptual structures and, consequently, can be used to locate gaps in those structures.

So far, I have only defended Deleuze from epistemic and empiricist givenism. But what of the two other kinds of givenism I discussed: semantic givenism and endogenous givenism? I will begin with the Myth of the semantic Given, which Sachs defines as ‘the thesis that cognitive significance, objective purport, requires something with a *semantic* status, or a kind of *meaning*, independent of and yet bearing on the meaning of objectively valid judgements’ (2014, 29). This is the kind of givenism that Sachs identifies in Sellars’s critique of C.I. Lewis, who held that although qualia may not serve as premises for reasoning, they are the fundamental objects of denotation.⁶⁵ Consequently, on Lewis’s account, qualia are the unmoved movers of *meaning*. Do Deleuze’s aisthētea have this kind of bearing?

It is exactly this question that Bowden examines in his 2015 paper ‘Antirepresentationalism and Objectivity in Rorty, Brandom, and Deleuze.’ Bowden broaches the

method for arriving at *immediate* knowledge so much as one for locating breaks in representational structures (2012, 78-79; cf. Roffe 2014, 30-38).

⁶⁴ Jelača 2014, 95 and 99. Jelača gets this phrase from Deleuze (1956) 2004a, 23.

⁶⁵ Sachs 2014, 29; Cf. Lewis 1929, 77 and Sellars, LA 21 (§85).

question of givenism in Deleuze by examining the production of the *loquendum*, the transcendent object of the faculty of language. The loquendum is that which can only be said (in the transcendent exercise of language), but which cannot be said in the empirical use of language which is bound up in acts of recognition (*DR* 202). Here we must turn from Proust to Lewis Carroll—for Deleuze takes *nonsense* to be the paradigmatic loquendum.

What is unique about loquenda is that they are ‘indifferent to questions of truth or falsehood [...] [and] must have no fixed and stable objects or subjects’ (Bogue 1989, 71). For Deleuze, as for Rorty, all linguistic meaning begins as nonsense: words with no determinate designation, signification, or manifestation (*LS*, Ch. 3; *CIS* 16). Nonsense words have a “sense” for Deleuze, but this sense is empirically a non-sense, as it is unusable in acts of recognition. What distinguishes nonsense from everyday, empirical propositional discourse is its generative power. The meaning of everyday language (what it *expresses*) can be made explicit by taking the sense of each proposition as the *designated* of another proposition (e.g., “The meaning of ‘man is an animal’ is that man is an animate body”). This process can be extended to infinity (“The meaning of ‘The meaning of ‘man is a rational animal’ is that man is an animate body’ is that . . .”). In a point that Bowden likens to Brandom’s inferentialist approach to meaning (Bowden 2015, 190), Deleuze argues that meaning is determined by a process of making it explicit (*DR* 202). Linguistic designation is a limit-phenomenon: as we make the inferential relations of a sentence explicit, we also more precisely determine its denotation (*DR* 201). But it is never completely determined.

It is nonsense that reveals that linguistic meaning is a *product* rather than a semantic given. Nonsense words should be understood as simulacra, which do not represent (or signify, or denote) anything at all. Hunting for the snark is indeterminate between the search for a meaning and the pursuit of a thing: ‘Perhaps [...] sense is the Snark’ (*LS* 23), Deleuze writes, as it occupies an indeterminate frontier between words and things (*LS* 32). What is distinctive in Carroll’s poetry is that it does not collapse this indeterminacy: the snark is sought both with tools and mental attitudes (“They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care . . .” [Carroll {1876} 2012, V.1]); it is both an idea and a creature (I.55 and IV.33); and characters repeatedly equivocate between actions and words (“You may charge me with murder—or want of sense” [IV.13]; “[...] the Bellman bold/In a hasty parenthesis cried” [III.33-34]). This suspension reveals the essential indiscernibility between the questions “what kind of thing is a snark?” and “what does the word ‘snark’ mean?”, and consequently, the fact that the denotation of a word cannot be a *result* of its relation to things, but rather the consequence of relations within a language. For Deleuze, meaning is always relational, and never atomistic.

Not only, then, does Deleuze avoid the Myth of the semantic Given but, as Peter Kügler has argued, ‘[his] account of signification is of an inferentialist kind’ (2011, 325)—the approach put forward by Sellars, developed by Brandom, and endorsed by Rorty. On this point, Bowden writes that ‘for Deleuze, as for Brandom [and Rorty], the empirical and socially articulated operation of making sense of what we are saying is simultaneously the semantic determination of what we are talking about’ (2015, 193). Two aspects of Deleuze’s work, however, distinguish him from the approach taken by Sellars and the neopragmatists: firstly, his overwhelming focus on the space of causes rather than the space of reasons, and secondly, his decision to describe the space of causes in terms taken from literature and early modern philosophy, rather than science. While this means that he uses many terms that Sellars, Rorty and Brandom would insist on confining entirely to the space of causes (for example, “apprehension” and “concept”), the distinction is nevertheless rigorously preserved in Deleuze’s distinction between the empirical

and transcendent exercises of the faculties, only the first of which is epistemically or semantically efficacious.

What, finally, about the endogenous given: the givenness of the mind's structure to itself? By now it should be clear that Deleuze's critique of the Dogmatic Image of Thought is, at its core, a critique of the Myth of the endogenous Given. As we saw in §6.2.3.3, rather than being given, Deleuze sees the nature of thought as something that is fundamentally *obscure*, and that is only revealed through shocks, surprises and gaps. The Dogmatic Image is produced by the privileging of what is most communicable, both intrasubjectively and intersubjectively, about thought. But this fails entirely in explaining either the *genesis* of the faculties (Deleuze [1963] 2000, 62) or the ways in which they operate independently from common sense (*DR* 190; *PS* 60-65).

To summarise, Deleuze avoids the Myth of the Given in all of its forms. The Myths of the empiricist and epistemic Givens are avoided through Deleuze's rejection of recognition and common sense; the Myth of the semantic Given is avoided through Deleuze's inferentialist theory of sense; and the Myth of the endogenous Given is the target of his critique of the Dogmatic Image. But, nevertheless, Deleuze uses the word "given." In my final section, I will explain why his discussion of the given is benign, and perfectly compatible with a rejection of all Myths of the Given.

6.3.4 The Given

To quote Carl Sachs, 'not all Givens are Mythic' (2014, 156). In order for a Given to be Mythic, it must play a particular cognitive-semantic role. As I wrote in §2.1.1, mythic givens have the following structure: they are both cognitively *efficacious* and cognitively *independent*. For example, the epistemic given is epistemically efficacious (it grounds inferences) and it is epistemically independent (it is unaffected by other beliefs, and it stands in no need of grounding). So, do Deleuze's givens have this structure?

Deleuze's use of the term "the given" is best captured by two quotes from *DR*. The first of these is the following: 'Diversity is given, but difference is that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse.'⁶⁶ This quote is the *answer* to a question that Deleuze poses throughout *DR*: by what means is the given given? His answer is that, for the given to be given as diverse (i.e., as individuated into a diversity of different, recognisable objects), there must be a non-atomised, intensive and generative difference that gives rise to it. So, while Deleuze does not reject the atomised given, he does reject the idea that the fundamental explanators of thought are atomised—rather, they are differential tendencies that are not themselves given in experience.

But were Deleuze's explanation to stop here, it would still be givenist, because the fundamental components of experience would remain logical atoms. But the key to Deleuze's escape from the Myth can be found in a second quote, in which he describes the function of the given in thought:

In recognition, the sensible is not at all that which can only be sensed, but that which bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived. [...] It therefore presupposes the exercise of the senses and the

⁶⁶ *DR* 293. By "difference" Deleuze means intensive difference, which we examined in §6.2.3.1.

exercise of the other faculties in a common sense. The object of an encounter, on the other hand, really gives rise to sensibility with regard to a given sense. It is not an *aisthēton* [sensible] but an *aisthēteon* [to-be-sensed]. It is not a quality but a sign. It is not a sensible being but the being *of* the sensible. It is not the given but that by which the given is given. (*DR* 184)

The given, then, is given to the *empirical* exercise of the faculties (and given *by* the transcendent exercise). But as we have seen, the empirical exercise has two properties that prevent it from being givenist. Firstly, the empirical exercise is only possible insofar as there is a harmony set up between all of the faculties; so, the faculty of language dictates what may be given just as much as the faculty of sensibility. And secondly, the sense of an object of recognition is never given, even if the object itself is. Rather, it is determined by an interminable process of sense-generation. The first of these moves prevents Deleuze from endorsing the epistemic given (because sensibility does not *give* the object alone), and the second prevents him from endorsing the semantic given (because sense is not determined by the object, but by a process of semantic articulation).

Both Deleuze and Sellars avoid the Myth by dividing what was previously taken to be “the given” in half. The Myth of the Given, to recall, was the myth that there is a cognitive content that is *both* cognitively efficacious *and* cognitively independent. For Sellars, the given was a poorly-analysed composite of *sensa* (which are causally, but not cognitively efficacious) and noninferential internal reports (which are cognitively efficacious, but not independent). Deleuze similarly sees his predecessors as having confused two quite different things: the causes of perception (intensity, and the transcendent objects of the faculties) and the recognisable givens of perception. The former are causally, but not cognitively efficacious (in the Sellarsian sense of providing warrants or grounding meanings); the latter are cognitively efficacious but not independent (their sense is determined by their explication). Consequently, despite using the term “the given,” Deleuze is a radical anti-givenist, and his philosophy in *DR* and *LS* is one of the most thoroughgoing critiques of the Myth of the Given in recent Continental philosophy.

7. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have argued that Richard Rorty was wrong when he advised philosophers to drop the term “experience” rather than re-defining it. I have made this argument by appealing to the cultural-political principles that animated his later work, according to which we should evaluate philosophical positions by looking to the consequences that endorsing them would have on politics and culture more widely. Because Rorty’s most explicit application of this approach was in his papers on feminism, I have looked to the work of feminist philosophers in order to assess its impact. Although linguistic historicist pragmatism is a promising approach for articulating and analysing a number of feminist concerns,¹ Linda Martín Alcoff’s paper ‘Rorty’s Antirepresentationalism in the Context of Sexual Violence’ (2010a) presented a challenge that I found him unable to address. This challenge, which I spelled out using Miranda Fricker’s concept of maximal hermeneutical injustice, was as follows. There are situations in which an individual is harmed because of the absence from her vocabulary of a term (or concept) that is important for understanding her experience, and in which this absence is the product of unjust epistemic exclusion (what Fricker calls ‘hermeneutical marginalisation’). While a Rortyan approach is well-suited to identifying and overcoming situations of hermeneutical marginalisation (Dieleman 2010 and 2015), it faces two difficulties when it comes to the important remedial project of dealing with these harmful conceptual absences (‘hermeneutical lacunas’ or ‘gaps’): firstly, it prevents us from *locating* them, and secondly (as Alcoff discusses), it puts us at a rhetorical disadvantage when *defending* the redescriptions that we use to fill them. In both cases, this is because Rorty’s approach prevents us from being able to deploy the idea that our language might not adequately express our experience, or that new language might be express aspects of our experience that were previously indescribable.

Nevertheless, Rorty had good reason to be dubious about philosophical experience-talk. Historically, such talk has tended towards a variety of philosophical authoritarianism—the view that there is something beyond human social practices that has the authority to dictate which practices we should follow—and, in particular, it has tended towards empiricist givenism—the view that immediate experience is one such authority. Bringing together the critique of authoritarianism with the critique of givenism was one of Rorty’s most distinctive philosophical innovations: Carl Sachs writes that ‘it was Rorty’s achievement to recognize that both the Given and God are species of normative violence.’² Even when a philosopher has been careful enough not to use “experience” in this way—as, for example, Rorty thinks Dewey was (with occasional exceptions)—the risk of being read in such a way makes use of the term inadvisable.

¹ Seigfried has persuasively made the case for a feminism drawn from the classical pragmatists (1996, esp. 20ff.). As for the use of a specifically linguistic pragmatism for feminist philosophy and politics, Susan Dieleman’s work over the last decade has defended a Rortyan approach on a number of fronts (Dieleman 2010, 2013, 2014, and 2017), most prominently in its ability to empower feminists to overcome “epistemic exclusion” (2012 and 2017).

² Sachs 2017, 279. Sachs defines normative violence as ‘the injury committed when someone attributes to him or herself the authority to speak on behalf of the normative as such’ (2017, 278).

I endorsed both of Rorty's first two arguments, against authoritarianism and against givenism. As for the third—against philosophical experience-talk in general—my contention has been that Rorty misestimates the relative risks of philosophical experience-talk and language-talk. The “replaceability argument,” as I have called it, contends that (a) there are significant dangers associated with philosophical experience-talk; (b) that such talk can be replaced without significant loss by talk of language and shared social practices; and (c) that talk of language and shared social practices lacks the dangers of philosophical experience-talk. My approach has been to argue that there is a significant risk with rejecting philosophical experience-talk completely (leaving only everyday experience-talk): losing the ability to deal with hermeneutical lacunas. In other words, I have rejected (b). This risk is sufficient to justify taking a combinatory approach to the experience-language debate, rather than Rorty's exclusionary one.³

The combinatory approach that I recommended is based on Rorty's 2002 paper ‘Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God’ ([2002] 2007). In this paper, Rorty clarifies that his social-practice approach to authority is a *meta*-epistemological principle, not an epistemological one—in other words, it is a recommendation for how we should conceive of our epistemic practices rather than a radical critique of those practices themselves. There is still a place for “the world” to justify some kinds of claim (such as “this liquid is acidic”), so long as we have established a social practice for working out when the world has justified a claim or not (for example, the practice of taking the colour of litmus paper as justifying claims about acidity). What is interesting about the place of objectivity on Rorty's account is that we can agree on markers for things that we don't yet have words for—for example, we can develop practices for marking where new theoretical entities such as elements, pathogens or kinds of matter are needed before we are able to describe them to our satisfaction.⁴ My approach has been to recommend that we place experience⁵ in this sphere, rather than the subjective sphere, where we (socially) recognise sincere reports as the highest authority. This would allow us to develop ways of marking surprising phenomena which lie in need of *experiential* explanation, rather than limiting our understanding of experience to what we can verbally report. On my recommended approach, we could develop ways of marking out areas for investigation, places where we think our explanations may be lacking because of a hermeneutical gap.

The problems identified by Rorty remained, however. It was paramount to avoid a conception of experience that was givenist or authoritarian. It was also essential that the approach to experience I recommended actually gave us the vocabulary to locate hermeneutical gaps and defend the redescriptions we used to fill them.⁶ In order to do this, I turned to Gilles Deleuze's “expressionist” empiricism, in which aesthetic experience is treated as an intensive field that expresses itself in extensive phenomena such as perceptual objects, linguistic utterances, facial expressions, behavioural tics and deliberate actions. Experience, on this model, is always expressed—it is not private. But it is only rarely expressed deliberately in such things as reports or actions, and it is not intrinsically knowable or articulable. By following the *involuntary* expressions such as surprising behaviours, tics and stutterings, we can develop a *symptomatology*,

³ I argued against Dieleman's characterisation of Rorty's approach as “combinatory” in §5.2.1.

⁴ In fact, it is just such an approach that Sellars took to occurrent sensations and thoughts in his “Myth of Jones.”

⁵ Specifically, aesthetic experience.

⁶ A sense-datum empiricist answer, for example would fall into difficulties here due to its inability to explain situations in which we do not have direct knowledge of our experiences.

which traces these back to experiences for which voluntary expression and awareness has been blocked.⁷

Because of its emphasis on the difference in kind between the different mental faculties, such as sensibility (which I have been calling “aesthetic experience”), understanding, imagination, language and memory, Deleuze’s empiricism is ideally suited for avoiding givenism—the confusion of sensation with conceptualisation and knowledge. Deleuze’s way of avoiding it, however, is precisely the opposite of Rorty’s. While Rorty advised philosophers to cut “experience” out of their analyses entirely (leaving the term purely to its role in non-philosophical language games) so as not to confuse it with the linguistic or epistemic aspects of our lives, Deleuze pursued the project of analysing its structure and behaviour in its own right, without presupposing any role for it in knowledge or any subject to organise it. In short, Rorty attempted to prevent the confusion of experience with language by analysing it *less*, while Deleuze pursued the same project by analysing it *more*.

Deleuze’s approach is more promising for dealing with hermeneutical injustice because it allows us analyse the conditions in which experiences are not being easily expressed in language. Several recent studies have explored this connection in order to derive an ethics from Deleuze’s work—an ethics that remains open enough to encounter the unrecognisable sign, while durable enough to explicate the sign rather than falling into chaos.⁸ Such accounts revolve around the experience of disruption and recontextualization when faced with something that disrupts our conceptual, representative categories. On this topic, Levi Bryant writes:

On the one hand, when confronted with a paradoxical encounter we can descend back into the empirical and explain it in terms of a failure of recognition. [...] On the other hand, we can capitalize on the encounter by treating it as an opportunity to determine the nature of the faculty in which it manifests itself or shows itself as a sign. The first approach treats the referent as the primary term of importance, while the second seeks to determine the nature of the tendencies out of which these are actualized. [...] In the first approach we ignore the limit suggested by the paradoxical instance of the encounter, while in the second we treat it as both the condition and the indication of thought. (2008, 100-101).

In short, when we encounter something which we cannot identify, we have two options. On the one hand, we could either see this as an empirical failure of recognition—perhaps we have made an error somewhere, or we haven’t learned the right concepts yet. (Bryant likens this approach to Sartrean bad faith, the refusal to acknowledge one’s own freedom.) Or on the other, we could face up to the disruption as something positive, not a mere lack in our conceptual resources. Here we could see the encounter as a demand to think creatively and anew, to explicate and transform both the object of the encounter and ourselves. It is this latter approach which empowers us to deal with situations in which someone is hermeneutically disadvantaged, in which we cannot identify what they are experiencing (or worse, in which we can identify it in a way that harms them, such as identifying trauma as prudishness). ‘[T]he question of the ethical’, Bryant writes, ‘is that of how situations must be re-composed in response to this moment of crisis’ (2011, 27). This is an anti-foundational approach through and through—it treats ethical responsiveness as a matter of creative experimentation, not of the correct application of a

⁷ I take this understanding of blockages of expression from Vignola 2017.

⁸ For example, Bryant 2011, Bryant 2008, 100-101, Bogue 2012, Chs. 1 and 5, Cull 2011, Gilson 2011, Gilson 2014 and Massumi 2002, xxii ff.

principles (DR 213-214). And, for this reason, despite not being *linguistic*, it is pragmatist through and through.

Bibliography

Guide to Abbreviations

Works by Gilles Deleuze

- B *Bergsonism* ([1966] 1988)
 CC *Coldness and Cruelty* ([1967] 1989)
 CMI *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* ([1983] 2013)
 CTI *Cinema II: The Time-Image* ([1985] 2013)
 DI *Desert Islands and Other Texts* ([2002] 2004)
 DR *Difference and Repetition* ([1968] 2014)
 ECC *Essays Critical and Clinical* ([1993] 1998)
 ES *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature* ([1953] 1991)
 EPS *Expression in Philosophy: Spinoza* ([1968] 1990)
 F *Foucault* ([1986] 2006)
 KCP *Kant's Critical Philosophy* ([1963] 2008)
 LS *The Logic of Sense* ([1969] 2004a)
 N *Negotiations* ([1990] 1995)
 NP *Nietzsche and Philosophy* ([1962] 2006)
 PS *Proust and Signs* ([1964/1972] 2008)
 SPP *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* ([1970] 1988)

Works by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

- AO *Anti-Oedipus* ([1972] 2013)
 KML *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* ([1975] 1986)
 ATP *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1980] 2013)
 WP *What is Philosophy?* ([1991] 1994)

Works by Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet

- AZ *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z* ([1996] 2011) (DVD)
 D *Dialogues II: Revised Edition* ([1977] 2007)

Works by Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Lefebvre

- WG *What is Grounding?* ([1956] 2015)

Works by Richard Rorty

- AOC *Achieving Our Country* (1998b)
 CIS *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989a)
 CP *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982a)
 EHO *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (1991e)
 MLM *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy* (2014)
 ORT *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (1991d)
 PCP *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007)

- PMN *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)
 PSH *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999a)
 TCF *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself* (2006a)
 TP *Truth and Progress* (1998a)

Works by Wilfrid Sellars

- AR 'Autobiographical Reflections' (1975)
 EPM *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* ([1956] 1997)
 GEC 'Givenness and Explanatory Coherence' (1973)
 ICP 'Is Consciousness Physical?' (1981)
 LA 'The Lever of Archimedes' (1981)
 MGEC 'More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence' (1979)
 SK 'The Structure of Knowledge' ([1971] 1975)
 SM *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* ([1968] 1992)
 SPR *Science, Perception, and Reality* (1963)
 SRK 'Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience' (1967).
 SRLG 'Some Reflections on Language Games' (1954)
 SSIS 'Science, Sense Impressions, and Sensa: A Reply to Cornman' (1971)

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