The author of this thesis has granted the University of Calgary a non-exclusive license to reproduce and distribute copies of this thesis to users of the University of Calgary Archives.

Copyright remains with the author.

Theses and dissertations available in the University of Calgary Institutional Repository are solely for the purpose of private study and research. They may not be copied or reproduced, except as permitted by copyright laws, without written authority of the copyright owner. Any commercial use or publication is strictly prohibited.

The original Partial Copyright License attesting to these terms and signed by the author of this thesis may be found in the original print version of the thesis, held by the University of Calgary Archives.

The thesis approval page signed by the examining committee may also be found in the original print version of the thesis held in the University of Calgary Archives.

Please contact the University of Calgary Archives for further information,
E-mail: uarc@ucalgary.ca
Telephone: (403) 220-7271
Website: http://www.ucalgary.ca/archives/
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Romantic Longings, Moral Ideals, and Democratic Priorities: On Richard Rorty's Use of
the Distinction Between the Private and the Public

by

Sterling Lynch

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

CALGARY, ALBERTA
MAY, 2001
©Sterling Lynch 2001
Abstract
At one time, the heart of Richard Rorty’s social and political philosophy was a distinction between private and public spheres. The distinction was conceived as a means to prevent two incommensurable projects from coming into conflict, thus, obviating a need to choose between them. After disentangling two problems which Rorty conflates into one, the moral and the political, I will argue that the distinction is irrelevant to the moral problem and inadequate to the political one. Given Rorty’s views, I will argue, he should have solved the political problem by allowing political life to be regulated by democratic consensus. Rorty’s one time unwillingness to regulate political life in this way, I will argue, can be attributed to the influence Romanticism and Moralism has had on his work. Finally, I will suggest that Rorty’s recent work indicates that he now may be willing to accept the political priority of democratic consensus.
Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my advisor, Mark Migotti, for his patient, open-minded, and insightful guidance. Thanks to Bob Ware and Lorraine Markotic for their patience and flexibility. I’d also like to thank Elizabeth Brake for some useful discussions and eleventh hour commentary.

I’d especially like to thank Rocky Jacobsen (Wilfrid Laurier University) for not only introducing me to Richard Rorty’s work but also for his on-going support and guidance.

Thanks to Renilda Van Aerden for her help in all things administrative. I’d also like to thank Edythe Butler for her cottage and for her attentive copy-editing.

Very special thanks to Janice Toker for her “study-break” companionship, her wake-up calls, her regenerative affects, and, most of all, for her friendship.

This thesis was written with the support of a Ralph Steinhauer Fellowship
For Janice
# Table of Contents

APPROVAL PAGE ......................................................................................... ii

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................. iv

DEDICATION ................................................................................................. v

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................ vi

EPIGRAPH ...................................................................................................... vii

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................. 9

CHAPTER I: TROTSKY AND THE WILD ORCHIDS ...................................... 19

CHAPTER II: ROMANTIC LONGINGS AND MORALIST IDEALS ................. 44

        The Moral and the Political................................................................. 49
        The Ironist and the Metaphysician.................................................... 54
        Rorty and the Liberal Ironist.............................................................. 55
        Rorty and the Liberal Metaphysician............................................... 59

CHAPTER III: THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE PRIVATE AND THE PUBLIC 66

        A firm distinction between different kinds of spaces and/or spheres .... 68
A firm distinction between different kinds of vocabularies

CHAPTER IV: ASSESSING THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC DISTINCTION

Assessing the p-p distinction: the moral problem.

Assessing the p-p distinction: the political problem

CHAPTER V: THE PRIORITY OF DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS

A Democratic Mechanism of Arbitration and the Political Problem

Philosophy, politics, and democratic implications

Democratic consensus, idiosyncrasy and the fear of homogeneity

Rorty’s Democratic Turn

CONCLUSION

WORKS CITED
I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. I say let's evolve.
Let the chips fall where they may.

Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*. Screenplay by Jim Uhls. Based on the
book by Chuck Palahniuk. Dir. David Fincher. Twentieth
Century Fox, 1999.
Introduction

By the late 70s, with the publication *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty was making claims that suggested his repudiation of foundational epistemology might have consequences in philosophy that could be loosely called “political”. As he would put it in a later article, if one followed the proposal of his anti-foundational pragmatist to switch “attention from “the demands of the object” to the demands of the purpose which a particular inquiry is supposed to serve”, the effect would be “to modulate philosophical debate from a methodological key into a ethico-political key.” Despite claims to this effect, Rorty carefully avoided drawing any conclusions about “politics” based on his anti-foundational, “political” accounts of philosophical and scientific inquiry. By the mid-eighties, however, Rorty began to publish essays that were specifically concerned with politics and began to associate his anti-foundational views explicitly with a kind of cold war liberalism that had as its central feature a firm distinction between private and public spheres. This line of thought culminated in 1989 with the publication of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In this book, the traditional liberal distinction between the private and the public ceases to be a merely political distinction, and put to work in defence of Rorty’s vision of post-foundational philosophy and is used as a principle with which to organise one’s life, one’s books, as well as one’s society. Rorty does not claim that it is his philosophy that defends his politics, but his politics that defends his philosophy.

CIS makes it clear that Rorty shares with Kant and Nietzsche the ambition to say something important about our personal affections, our duties to others, and the relation of these affections and duties to each other. Whereas Kant thinks we perfect ourselves when our duties to others are given priority in our lives, and Nietzsche thinks we do when we give priority to our personal affections, Rorty insists that an individual can and should give equal weight to both his personal affections and his duties to others. To do this, what is required is a firm distinction between the private and the public, such that one can relegate one’s affections to the private and one’s duties to the public, and then make every effort to keep them separate. By keeping one’s affections and one’s duties (and their corresponding projects) separate, Rorty thinks one will dispel a special moral tension that he himself experienced as a young man and that he takes to be “characteristic of the Romantic intellectual who is also a citizen of a democratic society.” It is a tension one experiences when one is forced to choose between Kant and Nietzsche if one also thinks that both offer very important moral recommendations.

CIS also reveals that Rorty shares with Plato the idea that there are important parallels to be drawn between harmony of the soul and harmony in the state. Whereas Plato locates justice in a metaphorical ideal city-state and then uses this metaphor as a way to model and locate justice in the individual, Rorty does just the opposite. He begins with a recommendation on how one can harmonize one’s personal affections and one’s duties to others and then uses this recommendation as a way to model an ideal state. For Rorty, societies, like individuals, are often forced to choose between the political

---

equivalent of an individual's private affections and public duties. Consequently, he recommends that they, like individuals, be divided into separate and distinct private and public spheres. Such a division will keep personal projects of private affections and social projects of public duty from interfering with each other and make it possible that there will be no reason to choose between them.

Despite the initial attractiveness of this idea once one notices Rorty's inversion of Plato's metaphorical argument, it becomes clear that he is trying to solve two crucially different problems with the same approach. The first problem is one that an individual must confront and the second is a problem that societies must confront. Rorty conflates these two problems, I think, because both originate in a tension that can develop when a choice must be made between projects associated with idiosyncratic personal affections and projects associated with universal duties to others. The philosophical tradition, as Rorty understands it, has attempted to eradicate this tension by deciding in advance which of these two concerns must always receive priority over the other. In particular, Rorty suggests, philosophers, influenced by the philosophical legacy of Immanuel Kant, have tried to give priority to one or the other concerns by making claims about what humans are essentially. Because Rorty thinks that the idea of an essential self, like all other philosophical "foundations", is unprofitable, he claims that the attempt to determine a priori which concerns should always and everywhere receive priority is useless. It is this conclusion that leads him to insist that a firm p-p distinction be employed, both by individuals and by societies, as a kind of tool to avoid the kind of conflicts that might require a choice to be made. Only metaphysics, according to Rorty, could provide a reason powerful enough to favour a priori one concern over the other; in their absence, he
thinks it best to find a means whereby a decision need not be made.

Once one has a clear idea of Rorty’s motivations for employing the distinction between the private and the public, one begins to wonder if the tension between private affections and public duties is as strong as Rorty makes it out to be. Once the influence that Kant and Nietzsche has had on Rorty is noted, it becomes clear that his understanding of the tension between our individual affections and our duties to others is a consequence not of the nature of affections and duties but of his Kantian and Nietzschean understanding of them. In particular, the tension seems to originate in the historical attempt to grant automatic priority to either our private affections or our public duties. However, unless one believes, like Nietzsche, that one’s personal affections must be idiosyncratic and, like Kant, that one’s duties to others must involve universal principles and, unless one believes that both projects must have an equal priority in one’s life, the tension will, I think, be less acute than Rorty makes it out to be.

There are, as I said, two different problems here and two different kinds of “priority” at issue: moral and political. In this thesis, I will argue that giving up on the idea of automatic moral priority, as Rorty does, dispels a particularly problematic feature of the moral problem. However, I will insist that giving up on this idea is all that is required to dispel the tension which concerned Rorty and that, consequently, his p-p distinction is superfluous in this context. Concerning the political problem, I argue that

---

5 Hereafter, p-p distinction.
6 By automatic, I am trying to capture the idea that some particular belief, practice, or concern can be determined in advance to always have an exceptionalness priority over any other belief, practice, or concern. A textbook example of this kind of automatic priority is the one Kant extends to moral principles. No matter the context, situation, or circumstances, we should accept in advance that moral principles, like “Do not lie” must always be obeyed—even when speaking to a murderer who is in search of his next innocent victim.
the p-p distinction is unable to solve it. Because the political problem exists between
different people and, consequently, involves the question of the politically legitimate use
of force, it is impossible for a p-p distinction to function as Rorty at one time seemed to
hope. In the absence of the failed p-p distinction, I will argue that what is required is an
acceptable account of political priority. Consequently, I will sketch an account, an
account, which given his own intellectual commitments, I will argue, it would have made
more sense for Rorty to endorse, an account in which political priority originates in
democratic consensus.

One of the challenges of analysing the work of a living philosopher, particularly
one as prolific as Rorty, is that one is trying to capture a moving target. With Rorty, this
project becomes even more complicated due to his admirable willingness to modify his
views and his less admirable tendency sometimes to sacrifice consistency in favour of
rhetorical flourishes and intellectual play. The challenge, of course, is to capture a view
that has not only transformed but is transforming and to do so charitably. A reward of
taking on this kind of challenge is the satisfaction in discovering that the philosopher you
are criticising is moving in the direction you hoped to see him go. To some extent, I think
this is just the case with Rorty and his social and political philosophy. In the closing years
of the millennium, Rorty's political writings have been subtly shifting in focus. Whereas,
in his earlier writings, there is a palpable uneasiness at the thought of ceding political
priority to democratic consensus, Rorty, in recent years, seems more willing to embrace
it. This shift has been signalled by the fact that Rorty is referring less to the p-p
distinction, less to liberalism and more to democracy. There hasn't been, as of yet, any
official recanting of his earlier political claims, but there are some crucial admissions that indicate an important change in attitude. Consequently, much of the criticism of this thesis should be regarded as being directed at a particular attempt of Rorty’s to associate his anti-foundationalism with liberalism, an attempt he may now also regard as having failed.

Because this thesis is first and foremost an examination of the social and political philosophy of Richard Rorty and is intended only to address his idiosyncratic problem and the solution he proposes for that problem, two important caveats are required. The first concerns Rorty’s controversial views about foundational epistemology and the second concerns the obvious parallels that exist between the problem Rorty hopes to address and a problem at the heart of political philosophy.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will take for granted Rorty’s anti-foundational view that there is no way to determine automatically, by way of philosophical foundations, the beliefs, practices, or political institutions individual inquirers ought to endorse.\(^7\) I do this for two reasons. First, I think there already exists too many critiques of Rorty’s political philosophy that amount to little more than an insistence that he needs some kind of foundational account in order to advance his political views. Rorty has said time and again that he is unconvinced by such claims and has frequently pointed out that

---

\(^7\) I consider this move to be not all that different from John Rawls’ recent attempt to ignore certain traditional questions of philosophy in his own work. The only important difference is that I am willing to state that I am motivated to make this move because I think the traditional questions are unproductive while Rawls remains ambiguous about his attitude towards these questions. Whereas Rawls is motivated to embrace a principle of tolerance and “bypass religion and philosophy’s profoundest controversies so as to have some hope of uncovering a basis of a stable overlapping consensus,” I am motivated to embrace a principle of tolerance because of my views concerning those controversies. Rawls discusses the question of
an insistence on foundations rings as hollow in his ears as a theist’s appeal to the will of
God will ring in his opponent’s ears. This line of criticism, and the dialogue it
encourages, has to my mind been largely unprofitable. In contrast, the most useful
critiques of Rorty’s work I have encountered take his anti-foundational views for granted
(even if just for the sake of argument) and highlight the unresolved issues and
inconsistencies therein. It is in the spirit of this latter approach that I will criticise Rorty’s
work.

Second, by steering clear of the hornet’s nest that surrounds Rorty’s views on
these matters, I will be able to pursue directly an interesting and increasingly	angible
problem. Many philosophers before Rorty shared his attraction to the idea of foundations
because it promised an effective solution to one or another versions of a difficult
problem: How do we decide between two equally situated disputants who have
competing and conflicting claims, beliefs, and/or practices? What I have in mind are
cases when individuals with comparable intellectual skills and experience draw different
conclusions from the same data (thus the phrase “equally situated”). A salient example of
these sorts of disputes are disagreements between Supreme Court Justices on questions of
law. In these kinds of disputes, no disputant is able to dismiss the other’s claim on the
grounds that the other is incapable of reasoning properly, has not taken into consideration
all the relevant information, or isn’t in a position to advance claims concerning the

\(^{8}\) See Richard Bernstein “One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward: Richard Rorty on Liberal Democracy
and Philosophy” as in Political Theory Vol. 15, No.4 (November 1987): pp. 538- 563. and Bernstein,
“Rorty’s Liberal Utopia” as in Social Research Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring 1990); pp. 30–72.
question at issue. What this means in practice is that no matter how deep the disagreement is between the Justices, each vote (i.e. opinion) is given equal weight when deciding the disagreement. Moreover, the opinion of the justices who did support the majority opinion is recorded officially. Individual Justices, of course, might accuse their fellow Justices of incompetence or ignorance but this, in itself, does not invalidate the opinion so accused.

When one has two or more opinions that are understood to have this kind of equal validity, what will settle the dispute? Throughout history, there has been an intuitive appeal to the idea that something permanent and timeless could resolve these conflicts by indicating which of the disputants’ claims should be accepted. From this perspective, both opinions could be considered ‘valid’ but only one, because of its relation to something permanent and timeless, could be correct. For example, according to a somewhat caricatured view of Papal infallibility, the Pope and a Cardinal may both have valid views on some doctrinal matter, but only the Pope’s claim is true due to his special relationship with God. Although it is not settled as to whether a permanent and timeless answer should be abandoned, there is at least one good reason to explore Rorty’s attempt to address this problem without recourse to foundations. Pluralist communities, practically speaking, already consider “capital-T” truth-claims to be unprofitable for the purposes of political debate. The basic fact of pluralism, as John Rawls calls it, arises out of a community’s willingness to accept the idea that no particular individual or group can legitimately assert its will over another individual or group based on claims about

---

1 A disputant might, of course, advance these kinds of ad hominem arguments but they will not count against the legitimacy of the other disputant’s claim insofar as the claim cannot be dismissed on these grounds alone.
knowledge of the good.\textsuperscript{11} For these communities, even if someone \textit{actually} knew with certainty what the good was—if they managed to contact the order beyond time and change—dissenting members of the community would still be permitted to pursue their own idiosyncratic conceptions of the good. Moreover, when pluralism, and the assumptions in which it originates, is combined with a strong principle of equality, citizens of these pluralist communities are, politically speaking, situated to each other in the same way that supreme court judges are situated to each other—no citizen’s claim can be automatically dismissed or automatically given priority. Of course, just because talk of the “one true way of living” has dropped out of the picture and no one can claim to be automatically right, doesn’t mean that conflicts between different members of the community won’t arise; it only means that one way of addressing the problem won’t be considered: appeals to what is or isn’t True. So, when conflicts arise between individuals in pluralist societies, practically speaking, what is required is some means of addressing the conflict that leaves out talk of Truth.

The second caveat concerns the obvious, and already pointed to, parallels between Rorty’s political problem and the problem that pluralist liberal democracies must confront. To ignore these parallels would simply be myopic; however, to imagine that my analysis of Rorty’s problem and his proposed solution has any authoritative relevance for political theory in general would be brash and foolhardy. Given the limited scope of a Master’s thesis, I cannot even claim to offer a definitive assessment of the problem that has occupied the attention of a brilliant mind for almost an entire lifetime. Nevertheless,

\textsuperscript{11} It is crucial for the particularities of Rawls’ project that the relevant pluralism be further specified as “reasonable” pluralism. Reasonable pluralism is defined as a pluralism that is “the outcome of the free exercise of free human reason under conditions of liberty” (\textit{PL}, p. 144). For the purposes of this thesis,
the reader should never lose sight of the fact that Rorty’s problem, while admittedly an
idiosyncratic articulation of a more general problem, does have important if tentative
implications for the question of pluralism and political philosophy in general.

further specification of pluralism is not required.
Chapter I: Trotsky and the Wild Orchids

At the age of fifteen, Richard Rorty went to Hutchins College at the University of Chicago and fell under the spell of absolutist philosophy. Nearly forty years later, in an auto-biographical article entitled “Trotsky and The Wild Orchids,” Rorty informs his readers that what he found appealing about absolutist philosophy was its promise of a secular answer to a question that had come to plague him: How can I reconcile my weird, snobbish, incommunicable interests in something as socially useless as wild orchids with my deep respect for do-gooders like Trotsky? The orchids were important because of the part they played in the development of his self-understanding. His interest in and knowledge of these flowers made him unique and distinguished from his peers. Trotsky, or at least what Trotsky represented to the young Rorty, was of deep importance because of Rorty’s conviction, encouraged by his family’s political affiliations, that “the point of being human was to spend one’s life fighting social injustice.” Unfortunately, the time he spent discovering wild orchids in the Northwest mountains of New Jersey and the time he spent studying them in the public libraries of New York did not leave him much time to be like Trotsky. If the point of being human is to alleviate suffering, shouldn’t he have been devoting most if not all of his time and energy to things that would contribute to its alleviation? The issue would have been much simpler if he had been able to shake the feeling that there was also something very important about the time he spent alone learning about himself as he learned about the beautifully unique flowers.

At college, Rorty thought, or rather hoped, that something like metaphysics

---

(defined as knowledge of or contact with an unchanging, numinous, ineffable, and non-human reality) would be able to eradicate the tension that existed between his idiosyncratic interests and his social hopes. What Rorty hoped to find in metaphysics was the secular equivalent of a divine judge. He wanted to find something that would remain stable over time and history and act "as a criterion for judging the transitory product of our transitory needs and interests." This criterion would not only indicate what one ought to do but its judgements in every case would be uncontroversial for eternity. If philosophy could help him come to apprehend this criterion, Rorty's problem would be definitively solved. Not surprisingly, Rorty already had in mind what answer the criterion would communicate to him. He hoped that philosophy and metaphysics would allow him to "hold reality and justice in a single vision" and, thereby, help him achieve individual perfection and do good for others in one fell swoop. If metaphysics could unite his desire for greater self-understanding with his desire to alleviate suffering, he need not be forced to choose between his two cherished projects. Unfortunately for the young Rorty, philosophy and metaphysics were unable to bring him into contact with a criterion of this powerful sort.

In time, Rorty concluded that "...the whole idea of holding reality and justice in a single vision ... [was] a mistake." Although he sometimes says that the feat is impossible, and sometimes says that the attempt is dangerous, Rorty consistently insists

---

13 Ibid., p. 6.
14 Ibid., p. xvi. Rorty is being deliberately vague with his employment of the word "criterion." The reason is that he wants a word that is general enough to capture the various "things" with which philosophers have been concerned over the years—be it the will of God or, more recently, the world-in-itself. It is crucial to Rorty that these various criteria have typically been non-human.
15 Ibid., p. 9.
16 Ibid., p. 12.
that

one should try to abjure the temptation to tie one’s moral responsibilities to other people with one’s relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or person one loves with all one’s heart and soul and mind.\(^\text{17}\)

The problem lies in the temptation. That it remains is itself a symptom of the fact that the tension that led the young Rorty into philosophy also remains. If one’s idiosyncratic desires are not united with one’s moral responsibilities, one will be forced, at one time or another, to choose between them. If one thinks that these desires and responsibilities are of equal value, there will be no satisfactory means to address the tension one experiences in choosing. Recognising that the tension remains even after one abjures the temptation of unification, Rorty has devoted much of his time and energy to finding a way to circumvent rather than eradicate the tension. Instead of trying to find a way to choose between the two projects, Rorty eventually came to the conclusion that it would be better to find a way to avoid choosing between these two concerns, and their corresponding projects, and thus prevent the tension from developing. By relegating one’s idiosyncratic passions to a “private” sphere and one’s moral responsibilities to a “public” one, Rorty hopes that a firm distinction between these two spheres will make it possible to avoid a choice and, thus avoid the tension.

The autobiographical narrative that Rorty provides in the “Trotsky” article might, at first, seem somewhat artificial. Hindsight is, of course, twenty-twenty and, for Rorty, it is always Whiggish. However, even without this article, the shadows of this problem are apparent in some of Rorty’s early and most technical work.\(^\text{18}\) At any rate, by the time of

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 12 & 13

\(^{18}\) Rorty, for example, reacts favourably to Robert Brandom’s suggestion that there is a connection between
Rorty’s most celebrated work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the connection between his technical work and the problem that drove him to philosophy in the first place becomes more transparent. The heart of this book is a repudiation of foundational epistemology that is predicated on a distinction between causal forces and the purely linguistic activity of justification and a disavowal of the claim that raw feels are privileged representations.⁹ Although Rorty concludes that this repudiation leads to an “emphasis on the priority of the public to the private,”¹⁰ there is a palpable uneasiness surrounding this conclusion. While Rorty happily gives priority to “the public” in the realm of normal and rational discourse, insisting that “[o]ur certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality,”¹¹ he also expresses a hope “that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand

---

⁹ Rorty’s development of eliminative materialism and his later endorsement of a p-p distinction. See Robert B. Brandom “Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism” and Richard Rorty “Reply to Brandom” both in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 157-190. Hereafter, RHC. Brandom discusses Rorty’s eliminative materialism and its relation to epistemic authority on pp. 157-158. In his reply to this article, Rorty writes “[Brandom provides] ... a more flattering view of the course of my work than before. Brandom has suggested a coherence between my earlier and my later writings that had not occurred to me. I had not seen that there was a connection between the eliminative materialism I was urging in the 1960s and the private-public distinction I have been urging since *Contingency Irony and Solidarity*. My unconscious has been more cunning than I had realized” (190).

¹⁰ Although those two claims address, what would be considered by many to be two distinct philosophical disciplines, epistemology and philosophy of mind, according to Rorty the idea of foundational epistemology only begins at their intersection. He writes: “Philosophy as a discipline thus sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and the mind. Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in a study of man-as-knower, of the “mental processes” or the “activity of representation” which makes knowledge possible. To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations” (*PMN*, p. 3).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 192.

¹² Ibid., p. 157.
for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt.” On the one hand, Rorty recommends that we replace the pursuit of foundations with the pursuit of wide-spread agreement, but, on the other, we find him hoping for a culture where no constraint of any kind will be deemed acceptable. What best explains this unease is his worry (which becomes more explicit in his later writings) that an insistence on wide-spread consensus encouraged by the repudiation of foundational epistemology is a threat to individual novelty. In order to generate a consensus between different individuals, in some respect, the individuals in question must have something in common. If they come to agree on most if not all subjects, individuality may be stifled. If “[o]ur inviolable uniqueness lies in our poetic ability to say unique and obscure things” as Rorty suggests in *PMN*, then it is no wonder that Rorty conceives of the pursuit of wide-spread consensus as a kind of threat to a particular kind of humanness. It is, I think, a sign of things to come when Rorty writes, in a book devoted to the elimination of unprofitable philosophical distinctions, that “the universal-particular distinction is the only metaphysical distinction we have got, the only one which moves anything at all outside of space, much less outside of time and space.”

What this discussion of *PMN* also illustrates is that Rorty sometimes sets his sights on a problem that he takes to be not just his own problem but one that “cultures” and/or “societies” must also address. Although Rorty most often credits *CIS* as the work in which he first explicitly endorses and employs a distinction between the private and public, in important essays that predate the publication of this book, Rorty already makes explicit use of the distinction. Most importantly, the distinction is employed, not in order

---

23 Ibid., p. 315.
24 Ibid., p. 123.
to answer a problem that an individual might need to address on his own behalf, but as an answer to a problem that political communities must address: how should deeply significant differences of opinions concerning beliefs, practices, and public policies be settled between individuals with different conceptions of the good. For example, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" begins with an endorsement of Thomas Jefferson's insistence that religious believers privatise their religious beliefs in exchange for religious tolerance. What is meant by "privatising," according to Rorty, is excluding all beliefs concerning "matters of ultimate importance" from debates about public policy and abandoning or modifying them if they "entail public actions that cannot be justified to most of their fellow citizens." The essay is devoted to a defence of a society organised along the lines of this distinction between the private and the public, a kind of society that Rorty takes to be consistent with John Rawls' vision of liberalism. In a reply to Clifford Geertz, Rorty offers the p-p distinction as the best tool for preventing a conflict that can arise between people over the demands of procedural justice and the demands of individual conceptions of the good. This sort of conflict can develop when, for example, the agents of procedural justice, in accordance with those procedures (e.g. first come, first served), provide life-saving treatment to a particular person even when it is claimed, for reasons that are derived from a perspective other than the perspective of procedural

26 Ibid., p. 31.
27 Rorty is notorious for offering "readings" of the historical and contemporary intellectual figures he admires. If one is interested in getting a handle on Rorty's views, it is best not to get too worried about whether or not Rorty provides legitimate interpretations of the writers he "reads." Instead, it is more useful to get a sense of the story that Rorty is trying to tell when he employs these particular intellectual characters (or if you prefer, caricatures) rather than others. Nothing in my analysis of Rorty's work will turn on whether or not he accurately represents a particular writer accurately.
28 "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" as reprinted in ORT, pp. 175-196; p. 175. Rorty discusses in greater detail the idea of privatising religious belief in "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance" reprinted in PSR. In this essay, he reveals that his talk about "matters of ultimate importance" is
justice, that someone else deserves the treatment first. In order to prevent these sorts of conflicts, Rorty insists that a society is best served when its agents of justice don’t allow individual conceptions of the good to enter into their deliberations concerning the application of the procedures of justice. In other words, even if it is an alcoholic career-criminal who is first in line for the treatment and a hard-working, honest mother of two who must wait her turn, so long as the career-criminal arrived at the front of the line legitimately (for example, he arrived very early), he should receive the treatment first. To do otherwise, would introduce virtually irresolvable debates about the good into the process of administering the aid. Consequently, Rorty suggests, every individual should do his best to hide potential sources of conflict from the view of his fellow citizens in exchange for the same courtesy. To this end, Rorty describes his ideal society as liberal and suggests that it be modelled along the lines of “a bazaar surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive private clubs.”

By the time Rorty came to give the lectures that would eventually become CIS, the problem he had faced as a young man, “How should I address the tension that exists when I am forced to chose between my idiosyncratic projects of self-perfection and my projects intended to help other people?” had become entangled with a problem that societies, and in particular pluralist societies, must confront, “How should the conflicts engendered by significant differences of opinion (concerning beliefs, practices, and public policies) between different people be settled?” Indeed, it often looks as if Rorty treats these two problems as one. In order to see this, and to see how these two problems are tangled up

----

borrowed from Paul Tillich’s redefinition of God in terms of ultimate human concern. See, pg. 155.

27 ORT, p. 209.
with a host of other problems (such as the question of whether or not political and in particular liberal institutions require philosophical grounding), one need only closely examine Rorty’s short introduction to *CIS*. It is a comprehensive, if dense, summary of the various strands of thought Rorty pursues in his book and in all his social and political writings. It is also importantly representative of Rorty’s somewhat cavalier attitude and his tendency to intertwine and entangle his two problems. The pages are worth the unpacking.

The first paragraph exemplifies the density of the entire introduction. It reads:

> The attempt to fuse the private and the public lies behind both Plato’s attempt to answer the question “Why is it in one’s interest to be just?” and Christianity’s claim that perfect self-realization can be attained through service to others. Such metaphysical or theological attempts to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community requires us to acknowledge a common human nature. They ask us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others—that the springs of private fulfillment [sic] and of human solidarity are the same. Skeptics like Nietzsche have urged that metaphysics and theology are transparent attempts to make altruism look more reasonable than it is. Yet such skeptics typically have their own theories of human nature. They, too, claim that there is something common to all human beings—for example the will to power, or libidinal impulses. Their point is that at the deepest level of the self there is no sense of human solidarity, that this sense is a “mere” artifact of human socialization. So such skeptics become antisocial. They turn their backs on the very idea of a community larger than a tiny circle of initiates.

In the first sentence, Rorty not only takes for granted the existence of something that can be identified as the private and the public but he also takes for granted that the attempt to fuse them is what Plato’s question and Christianity’s claim have in common. What allows Rorty to make this association is that he understands Plato to have answered his question in the same way that the Christian justifies his insistence on altruism: by an appeal to a

---

26 On this topic, see, for example, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism” as reprinted in *OR*, pp. 197-202.
common human nature. According to Rorty, both Plato and the Christian say that one will want to be just or altruistic because in doing so one will fully realise one's human nature and consequently perfect oneself. In drawing this parallel between Plato and Christianity, Rorty does more than associate the notion of justice with an idea of altruism, he also identifies a striving for perfection with "the private" and a sense of community with "the public." Needless to say, neither of these associations are straightforward. There is no a priori reason to assume that justice and altruism are natural bedfellows. It might just as easily be the case that justice is a by-product of rational self-interest. Nor is there any reason to assume a priori that a striving for self-perfection is something that just naturally contrasts with a sense of community. One can imagine a utopian community where individual perfection is intimately tied to one's sense of community. This is, after all, one of the ideas behind the Christian hope of realising the kingdom of God here on earth.

Given these obvious alternatives, what is important to notice is how Rorty treats these problematic associations as if they are straightforward and unobjectionable—one is tempted to say as if they are "natural" or "given."

The concern that these associations are not as natural as Rorty takes them to be is immediately reinforced when he quickly moves to contrast the Plato-Christian attempt to fuse the private and the public with a particular reaction to it. This reaction, which Rorty associates with Nietzsche and "skeptics," also relies on a claim about human nature but draws a very different conclusion about how this common ground translates into a notion of what is most important to humans. This skeptical reaction resists the Plato-Christian endorsement of altruism by claiming that humans have at their root something like

29 CIR, p. xiii.
Nietzsche’s will to power or Freud’s libido which makes them hostile to solidarity. But how did we arrive at this conclusion? Rorty himself points out that these anti-altruistic skeptics don’t run off into the desert alone but take with them (or hope to take with them) a small group of initiates. There is some notion of solidarity at work here even if it is elitist and selective. Nietzsche was, after all, only introduced as an example of a philosopher who questions the legitimacy of altruism. Unless one already aligns the notion of altruism with the idea of solidarity, there is no reason to conclude that solidarity is threatened because the legitimacy of altruism is threatened. Once one has a clear picture of the Nietzsche-skeptic reaction to the Plato-Christian attempt to “fuse” the private and the public, one begins to wonder what it is about these things that motivates Plato and Christians to “fuse” them and what motivates Nietzsche and skeptics to resist this attempt. Rather than pursue this question, Rorty proceeds as if what is at issue is perfectly transparent and simply describes it as a “familiar standoff.”

Although this first paragraph suggests that Rorty intends to discuss the competing accounts of human nature offered by the Plato-Christian line of thought and the Nietzsche-skeptic reaction to it, in the second paragraph, Rorty shifts gears and suggests that the disagreement over human nature and its interpretation is something of a red herring. He does this by reminding his readers that “the old tension between the private and the public remains” even after historicists like Hegel insist “that there is nothing “beneath” socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human.” Plato and Nietzsche’s concern with human nature is merely a distraction because their appeals to human nature were motivated by a desire to address the tension between the private and
the public. It is this tension which Rorty takes to be the real concern, since it persists even after outdated notions like human nature are discarded.

Rorty then turns his attention to a contemporary conflict that is a consequence of the perennial tension. He writes:

Historicists in whom the desire for self-creation, for private autonomy dominates... still tend to see socialization as Nietzsche did—as antithetical to something deep within us. Historicists in whom the desire for a more just and free human community dominates... are still inclined to see the desire for private perfection as infected with “irrationalism” and “aestheticism.” I urge that we not try to choose between them but, rather, give them equal weight then use them for different purposes. Authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life—can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort—the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel. We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as opposed if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.

Instead of supporting one or the other side of the conflict, Rorty proposes that we try not to choose in favour of one or the other, that they both have “equal weight”, that they are each useful for different purposes and, because of this, their books and views can be thought of as distinct guides to the best means of fulfilling these distinct purposes. One group of writers can guide us with regard to achieving self-perfection while the other group can guide with regard to best serving our fellow citizens. This simple method of settling the dispute between the two camps of historicists has gone unnoticed, Rorty suggests, because of the lingering urge to unite what cannot be united.

What at first seems to be a straightforward recommendation, on closer inspection,
is much more complicated. Notice first the subtle shift in focus between Rorty's characterisation of what is at issue and his response to it. He describes two camps of historicist writers who disagree over the extent and scope of individual autonomy in a just and free community. His response to this disagreement is the suggestion that one can take either side of the feuding historicists as guides to the best pursuit of two distinct goals: the achievement of self-perfection and the achievement of solidarity. But, this recommendation does not actually concern the historicists' disagreement. Rather, it is more appropriately regarded as an answer to the question, "How can I cherish both kinds of writers even though they are in disagreement concerning the extent and scope of individual autonomy in a just and free community?" Rorty's recommendation may be well and good as an answer to this question but it provides no recommendation concerning historicists' deep disagreement. One can agree with Rorty that there is no reason for these writers to be thought of as opposed—that is, trying to hinder each other's projects at every turn—and still admit that they and their views may come into conflict—that is, disagreeing with each other in specific situations. Sorting out one's attitude to the different disputants is not particularly helpful in addressing this conflict.  

Notice also in this passage that Rorty's contrast between a striving for perfection and the achievement of solidarity has suddenly received greater specification. Perfection is identified with self-creation and autonomy and the achievement of solidarity is associated with the shared social effort to make a community's practices and political institutions less cruel. In other words, Rorty connects the idea of self-perfection with

\[\text{Ibid., p. xiv}\]

\[\text{By "address," I mean nothing more than "deal with." I employ this word because I don't want to beg the}\]
Nietzsche's will to power and solidarity with Christianity's altruism. There is, however, no a priori reason to associate self-perfection and solidarity in this way; particularly, as was noted earlier, when there are other associations which can be made. Other than the long list of authors that Rorty considers to be the inspirational source for his claims, Rorty offers no reason as to why private perfection and solidarity must be understood as he understands it. So, when we are informed, in the next paragraph, that the perennial tension between the private and the public originates in the fact that "[t]he vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument [and] [t]he vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium of argumentative exchange" we are forced to wonder upon what this claim of "necessity" relies. It looks as if this rather dramatic claim isn't grounded on anything more compelling than the fact that Rorty happens to admire two particular traditions of writers who have characterised self-perfection and the achievement of solidarity in this way.

Sandwiched between his insistence that there is a necessary distinction between the private and the public and his earlier insistence that the two different groups of historicist writers need not be characterised as opposed, Rorty makes another startling claim. He writes:

There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us do that ["hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision"]. The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged. There are practical measures to be taken to accomplish this practical goal, but there question against Rorty with words like "solve" or "resolve." As we have seen, Rorty does not want "to solve" the problem but, instead, proposes "to evade/avoid" it.

33 Ibid.
is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. What began with a problem that was characterised as a conflict between two groups of historicist writers, and was followed by a recommendation on how one could cherish the work of both these historicist writers, has now been transformed into a claim about how society ought to be organised. This change in focus is motivated by nothing other than the claim that the vocabularies of self-perfection and justice cannot be “fused” at the level of theory. Rorty offers no explanation why this particular theoretical quirk is the appropriate grounds upon which to develop an account of society.

What encourages Rorty to jump to the question of how a society ought to be organised, without offering any reason as to why or how the transition can be made, is that the original conflict between the historicists concerned the role of autonomy in a free and just society. What is at issue in this disagreement, it can be gathered, is the extent and scope of individual autonomy where one camp of historicists want to maximise the autonomy of the individual and the other camp is willing, to some extent, to limit its scope and range. Deciding in favour of one side or the other on this matter would have implications for the question of how to organise society because that is what is at issue. It looks as if Rorty believes that his decision not to favour one side or the other might itself also have important implications for the organisation of society; there is, however, no reason to think that a decision not to choose on this matter should count as a motivating reason to organise society in any particular manner.

To make matters more complicated, Rorty abruptly switches topics and attempts

\[34\text{ibid.}\]
to intertwine his recommendations concerning how best to understand one's relation to
two kinds of books with specific recommendations concerning how one should live. He
writes:

If we could bring ourselves to accept the fact that no theory about the
nature of man or Society or Rationality, or anything else, is going to
synthesize Nietzsche with Marx or Heidegger with Habermas, we could
begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on
justice as being like the relation between two different kinds of tools—as
little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars. One sort of
writer lets us realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that
some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. […] The
other sort reminds us of the failure of our institutions and practices to live
up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public,
shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The one tells us that we need not
speak the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we
may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that
that responsibility is not the only one we have. Both are right, but there is
no way to make both speak a single language.39

What must be pointed out straightaway is that Rorty's comparison of books to tools is
somewhat misleading. While a paintbrush is often used to paint, it cannot tell the painter
that she must paint or even what she must paint. According to Rorty, however, the two
kinds of writers he admires are useful insofar as they indicate the particular
responsibilities that one has in order to properly fulfill two different kinds of projects Rorty
admires. One kind of writer tells us that one has a responsibility to oneself to find one's
own words while the other kind of writer insists that one has a responsibility to one's
fellow citizens. If the issue of whether or not one must listen to these recommendations is
simply side-stepped, there still remains the question of what one should do if the
recommendations of these two writers, in some particular instance, are in conflict. Say,
when an individual must choose between the project of writing self-perfecting haiku and
the project of fighting in the resistance. In such cases of conflict, Rorty insists that the recommendations of both writers be thought of right, equally valid, and given equal weight.

In order to make such a claim plausible, one must insist that the recommendations of each writer are to receive equal priority (say, supreme) in different “domains”. On questions concerning self-perfection one should always follow the views of writers x, y, and z; but, on questions of justice one should always follow the views of writers a, b, and c. It is this sort of attempt to give priority to both views that is suggested by Rorty’s talk of distinct vocabularies, the impossibility of the two kinds of writers speaking the same language, and his later employment of a p-p distinction. However, this “separate domains” approach only remains plausible so long as the domains remain entirely separate or the recommendations that originate in these distinct vocabularies never conflict. If the divide between the two worlds erodes or their recommendations come into conflict, Rorty’s claim that both kinds of writers are right and should receive equal weight won’t be helpful when it is time to choose between them.

At this point in the introduction, Rorty introduces a figure called the liberal ironist, an example of someone who is “content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.”

A liberal ironist, Rorty further specifies, is an individual who also thinks “cruelty is the worst thing we do”, who nevertheless “faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires” and, thereby, abandons the idea that they “refer back to something beyond

---

35 Ibid. Italics mine.
36 Ibid., p. xv
the reach of time and chance.” What this means for the liberal ironist is that there is “no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible.” When Rorty says that the liberal ironist has “no answer” to the question “why not be cruel?” it is important to emphasise that it is these special noncircular theoretical answers to which Rorty refers. Otherwise, Rorty’s rhetoric, at times, makes it sound as if he is giving up on the possibility of any kind of answer. If this were Rorty’s claim, it would be straightforwardly absurd because an answer can, of course, be given; he is only insisting that the answer given will not be grounded in something beyond time and chance. There is, however, middle ground. There can be good answers to tough questions even if it cannot be claimed that these good answers are also grounded in something beyond time and chance.

But what exactly is the liberal ironist giving up on when she gives up on this noncircular theoretical answer? Rorty gives us an idea of what she is giving up on only after he poses three more questions for which the special answers cannot be found: “How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation”; “Is it right to deliver $n$ innocents over to be tortured to save the lives $m \times n$ other innocents? If so what are the correct values of $n$ and $m$?”, and “When may one favour members of one’s family, or one’s community, over other, randomly chosen, human beings?” There are answers to these questions but, Rorty insists, none of them are the special theoretical and well-grounded kind. He writes:

37 ibid.
38 ibid.
39 ibid.
Anyone who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question—algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort—is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities.\textsuperscript{40}

What is most important here is the idea of a hierarchy of responsibilities based on an order beyond time and change. When one gives up on the idea of noncircular theoretical answers, according to Rorty, what one gives up is the idea that there are answers to questions that will always and everywhere be the one and only correct answer that one must always and everywhere obey. The liberal ironist can give an answer to one of the questions above, but no matter how thoroughly convinced she is that the answer is correct, she cannot also claim that this answer will always and everywhere be correct. There is, for Rorty, in the absence of an eternal order, no way of knowing in advance which answer will be the correct answer in all possible circumstances.\textsuperscript{41}

It is important to note that the questions Rorty employs to make his point here are formulated in a way that indicates that they are the sort of questions an individual might ask herself. The reason this is significant is because, in the absence of a timeless order that determines the one correct answer, there is no assurance that every single individual will arrive at the same answer, no matter how long and hard people consider a question. The empirical evidence suggests that there will be different answers and there will be different people who are equally convinced of the merits of those answers. If there is no one answer that can be shown to be correct in every circumstance, this reveals a crucial

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid

\textsuperscript{41} Rorty, in a recent essay, has characterised this distinction between “correct for these circumstances” and “correct in all possible circumstances” as a distinction between “justified to this audience of language users” and “justified to an audience of every actual and possible language user.” See “Universality and Truth” as in \textit{HCR}, pp. 1-29, in particular; pp. 14-19.
question: how will disputes between people with different answers to these questions be settled? Particularly, when the answers affect other people.

At this point, Rorty shifts gears once more, and points out that people who share his views about the non-existence of an order beyond time and change are in the minority. The majority of people not only think that such an order must exist but they also think that if it turns out that such an order does not exist there is no possibility for solidarity. Rorty resists this majority opinion by making a claim very similar to one I made earlier: “hostility to a particular historically situated and possibly transient form of solidarity is not hostility to solidarity as such.”\(^\text{42}\) To deny the majority opinion on the question of an order beyond time and change is to deny the possibility of solidarity only if such an order is the only means to generate solidarity. Consequently, Rorty offers an account of solidarity in which it is generated without the assistance of an order beyond time and change. For Rorty, “[s]olidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.”\(^\text{43}\) The best means to this end, says Rorty, are media which provide detailed descriptions of unfamiliar people, places and things such that they become familiar (e.g. novels, ethnographies, journalism, TV docudramas etc.). By increasing our sensitivity to the pain of others, by making the unfamiliar familiar, Rorty insists that we widen the scope of who is included in our “we” and thus create solidarity. Rorty then connects this idea that solidarity is created through descriptive narratives rather than discovered by theory to his claim that “there is no way to step outside the

\(^{42}\text{CIS, p. xv.}\)
\(^{43}\text{Ibid., p. xvi.}\)
various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes
account of all possible vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling. If a
single metavocabulary that will make sense of all other vocabularies cannot be
discovered, the only way to make other vocabularies intelligible is to translate them
meticulously into our vocabulary—that is, make them familiar—on a case by case basis.

Finally, after suggesting that a fully historicist and nominalist culture would
happily embrace the connection he weaves between solidarity and descriptive narratives,
Rorty changes focus one last time. We move from talk about the utility of narratives to
talk about utopias. For Rorty, the same culture that would embrace narratives in lieu of
theory would also

regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias,
as an endless process—an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom,
rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth.

While one can agree, in the absence of a single order beyond time and change, that the
search for utopia will be endless, it is not clear why it must be a "proliferating realization
of Freedom." After all, there is no reason to assume that the pursuit of Freedom is the
best means to the development of a utopia. Rorty has pointed out himself that the
alleviation of suffering is not only an important utopian goal but one that might very well
conflict with the proliferation of freedom. The important question is this: why does Rorty
automatically associate the proliferation of Freedom as the road to utopia?

After a close consideration of these four pages, which are representative of

---

44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
Rorty's style throughout the book, one can see why the final product was often charged as being confused. *CIS* is an ambitious book that attempts to weave into a single vision Rorty's conclusions about foundational epistemology and how these conclusions relate to the problem that had haunted him as a young man, to the problem that haunts pluralist societies, and to the problem of the legitimacy of political institutions; while at the same time attempting to tell a story about his relation to a number of his intellectual heroes and provide and defend a vision of what post-foundational philosophy might look like. Given the amount of ground he covers in such a short work, it is no surprise that his brevity on many controversial issues generated charges of irresponsibility from specialists in various fields. As my discussion of the introduction suggests, the book is also, at times, without a doubt confused. Rorty runs together problems that are more fruitfully discussed in isolation and this often leads to conclusions that seem almost contradictory. However, calling the book frivolous is not only uncharitable but unfounded. *CIS* is not a wholly successful book; it is, nevertheless, an important experiment from which much can be learned.

There are a host of different aims in this book, but it is first and foremost an attempt by Rorty to address the repercussions of his repudiation of foundational epistemology in the domains of moral and political philosophy. The source of much of the confusion in *CIS* (and his other work on the same subject) is, I think, Rorty's failure to treat the problems generated by his repudiation of foundational epistemology in these two domains as distinct. Although there are obvious similarities between the problem that Rorty highlights in the “Trotsky” paper and the problem he highlights in papers like “Democracy” and “On ethnocentrism,” there is, nevertheless, a crucial difference between
them. The young Rorty's problem, whether to give priority to his idiosyncratic pursuits or
to give priority to projects that will lead to the alleviation of suffering is certainly
analogous to a problem that communities often confront: whether or not to give priority
to idiosyncratic conceptions of the good or to mutually agreed upon procedures of justice
if a conflict should arise between them. The analogy will seem appropriate if, like Rorty,
one assumes that the alleviation of the suffering can only occur within a context of
universally agreed upon principles or procedures. Nevertheless, there is a crucial
difference between these problems. The young Rorty's problem is a problem that one
person must resolve for himself; the second problem is a problem that exists between
different people and, consequently, will raise the question of the politically legitimate use
of force. 46 This difference is substantial enough to insist that the two problems be
considered separately. Unfortunately, it is a difference that Rorty fails to or is unwilling to
recognise.

In order to substantiate this claim, it will be necessary to discuss how a particular
feud in the history of social and political philosophy, between the Romantic and the
Moralist, has had a great influence on Rorty's work in this field. One of Rorty's favourite
rhetorical techniques is to articulate the various philosophical debates which he addresses
in terms that are almost theatrical. He does not so much examine competing philosophical
views as he does examine the philosophical debates of a cast of philosophical characters
and/or caricatures. In this chapter, we have already encountered a number of these
characters and, as I just said, we will encounter still more. It will be useful for the reader

46 It is important that "force" not be so narrowly construed as to only refer to physical violence. There are
other indirect means for the state (or other citizens) to change the practices of citizens. Governments could
employ certain taxation policies and citizens could employ shunning practices.
if, before proceeding, a moment is taken to explain how the principle characters of the
debate which will occupy our attention in this thesis relate to each other.

We first encountered two kinds of, what Rorty calls, metaphysicians. Broadly
speaking, these are people who think the point of inquiry is to get into contact with a non-
human power. Rorty distinguishes the two kinds of metaphysicians we have encountered
based on their views about the lessons that can be drawn from human nature. Plato and
the Christians ask us to make those beliefs which we share in common with all other
humans the most important in our lives. In contrast, Nietzsche and the skeptics suggest
that the lesson to be drawn from human nature is that we should make those beliefs which
are uniquely our own most important in our lives. The second set of characters we
encountered are what Rorty calls historicists. These are people who have given up on the
idea that there is anything called human nature and instead insist that humans are
completely the product of socialisation. These historicists are similarly divided over what
beliefs humans should give the most priority to in their lives. What divides the historicists
are two different desires. There are historicists (e.g. Heidegger and Foucault) who want to
give priority to projects of autonomous self-creation and there are historicists (e.g. Dewey
and Habermas) who want to give priority to projects that will create a more just and free
society. The only thing Rorty offers in the way of explanation as to why it is these
historicists prioritise these projects is to say they desire the outcomes of the respective
projects.

In the next chapter, I will introduce two other characters that figure prominently in
Rorty’s work: the Romantic and the Moralist. In his introduction, Rorty, unfortunately,
judges his own historical account somewhat by contrasting Nietzsche, a kind of
Romantic, with Plato and Christians, the historical precursors to that which Romanticism is a reaction. According to Rorty, Romanticism is a reaction to Kant’s Moralism—which Rorty takes to be the outcome of Kant’s unification of Plato’s metaphysics with Christianity’s altruism. Kant unified Plato with Christianity by claiming that humans had “a common moral consciousness.” This consciousness, according to Rorty, acts as an internalised version of Plato’s metaphysics and as secular motivation for Christianity’s divine sanctioned altruism. The Romantics reacted to Kant’s Moralism by appropriating the idea of a quasi-divine, essential self and associating it with a human’s idiosyncratic poetic imagination rather than a universal moral consciousness. What motivated this appropriation was the Romantic’s deep respect for artistic achievement. Although the Romantics and the Moralist were both kinds of metaphysicians (Rorty understands essentialism as a kind of internalised metaphysical claim), their historical feud provides us with a perspective from which to make sense of the incommensurable desires of Rorty’s two camps of historicists. These desires originate in the lasting influence of Romanticism and Moralism. The historicists who are concerned with autonomous self-perfection are latter-day Romantics and the historicists who are concerned with creating a more free and just society are latter-day Moralists.

We have already encountered what Rorty calls the liberal ironist. In the next chapter, we will encounter her dialogical opponent, the liberal metaphysician. According to Rorty, what divides these two figures is their conflicting opinions on whether or not liberalism, in order to justify itself, must have appropriate metaphysical grounding. The liberal ironist is someone who embraces, without unifying, the desires of both the Romantic and the Moralist. In private, she will seek out her own idiosyncratic self-
perfection and, in public, she will attempt to create a more free and just society.

Consequently, she expects the society in which she lives to be organised in accordance with these goals and, for this reason, her political utopia is a society organised in accordance with the liberal distinction between the private and the public. It is this distinction that will allow her to be both a Romantic and a Moralist. Rorty, unfortunately, never explains in any detail why the liberal metaphysician happens to be liberal. I will argue, in the next chapter, that the feud between the Romantic and the Moralist has important repercussions for this debate as well.

---

47 In order to avoid cumbersome and awkward sentences, I tend to anthropomorphise Rorty’s distinction somewhat by writing as if it is capable of performing tasks such as “allowing” the liberal ironist to be both a Romantic and a Moralist. Too much should not be made of this rhetoric. This mild anthropomorphisation is not different nor is it more significant than the tendency to say that hammers “allow” us to build structures and guns “provide” reasons for action.
Chapter II: Romantic Longings and Moralist Ideals

According to Rorty, social and political philosophy, from at least the time of Kant, has been fuelled by an on-going conflict between two factions. One, the Moralists, whom Rorty sometimes characterises as the Kantians, are primarily concerned with humanity's universally shared social responsibilities and devote themselves to the discovery and identification of what all humans have in common. From this, they think they will be able to generate a universally applicable moral code that primarily articulates one's duties to one's fellow humans. The other faction, the Romantics, whom Rorty sometimes characterises as Nietzscheans, are primarily concerned with the pursuit and achievement of their own idiosyncratic self-perfection. Unlike Moralists, Romantics have little interest in, and are even antagonistic towards, whatever humans might have in common. Since life's greatest failure, for Romantics, is to find themselves living a life not of their own creation; they devote their energies to extricating themselves from what they have in common with others. Kant is responsible for the feud between these two intellectual figures, according to Rorty, because it was he who was best able to formalise a distinction between the moral and the aesthetic such that the moral was associated with the universal, the necessary, the eternal, and a concern for suffering and the aesthetic with the idiosyncratic, the contingent, and the fleeting. While Kant's Moralists favoured the moral side of this moral-aesthetic distinction, the Romantics, because of their great respect for aesthetic achievement (understood in terms of maximal originality) reacted to Kant's Moralism by arguing that he had got it wrong. The Romantics accepted Kant's distinction but instead argued that the essentially human was to be found in an aesthetic, as opposed to, a moral faculty. Ever since the drawing of these battle-lines, according to
Rorty, "romanticism and moralism, the insistence on individual spontaneity and private perfection and the insistence on universally shared social responsibility, have warred with each other."  

If, with Rorty, one finds oneself an admirer of both these traditions because one deeply respects the objectives of each (artistic self-mastery and the alleviation of suffering), then one is likely to feel oneself pulled in opposite directions. After all, the Romantic’s project requires one to extricate oneself from the very thing with which the Moralist’s project requires one to align: that which is common to all humans. Of course, as much as one may feel, in some sense, pulled between these two projects, one will be in a real bind only if either project is judged to have moral priority over all other projects.  

A project is said to have moral priority when it is claimed that one is in moral error if one fails to pursue it. This idea of moral priority is particularly problematic for someone who admires equally two kinds of projects, such as the Romantic and the Moralist’s, that work at cross purposes and may even be mutually exclusive.  

In order to lay claim to this moral priority, both the Romantic and the Moralist rely on particular claims about the essential nature of humans. The Romantic, for example, claims that what makes a human essentially human is his idiosyncratic aesthetic faculty. In order for an individual to be thought of as fully human, that is to meet the expectations of his own humanity, according to the Romantic, he must not only express and/or create himself but must also, in this process of self-creation, create a self which is

---

48 CIS, p. 30.  
49 The expression “moral priority” is my own. Rorty sometimes uses expressions like “moral significance” or “moral privilege.”  
50 Much of “The Contingency of Selfhood” is dedicated to “reading” Nietzsche’s will to power and Freud’s libidinal impulses as having distinctively aesthetic consequences.
maximally original. To fail in this project is to fail as a human and is to fail to meet the moral responsibilities generated by one’s humanity. Consequently, for the Romantic, to adopt someone else’s description of oneself, or even simply to adopt the beliefs, values, and/or desires of another person (living or dead), is akin to a moral failing. The Moralist similarly relies on claims about the essential nature of humans to give his project moral priority. However, the Moralist considers the essential human faculty to be his universal moral conscience. In order for an individual to be thought of as fully human, that is to meet the expectations of his own humanity, according to the Moralist, he must act in accordance with principles which not only concern the alleviation of suffering but are also capable of universal acceptance by all humans. With both projects claiming moral priority, the problem for Rorty becomes how to choose between these two projects.

In order to make it clear why the idea of moral priority makes the debate between the Moralist and the Romantic acute, it will be useful to consider what appears, on first consideration, to be a plausible solution to this problem. Is it not possible simply to divide an individual’s day, week, or even his life into two equal portions and, thus, allow both projects to be pursued equally. Both camps will certainly admit that no single activity or kind of activity can be pursued at every moment of a person’s life; but this admission does not prevent either side from insisting that the amount of time devoted to the particular project they prioritise be maximised over all others. Because both camps claim that their projects have moral priority, both camps will insist that their project should occupy most of the time available in a person’s life, no matter how small or large of a

31 For example, Rorty writes, “To fail as a poet—and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being—is to accept somebody else’s description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most elegant variations on previously written poems” (CIS, p. 28).
percentage this turns out to be. Moreover, both camps would be dissatisfied if some other
project received an equal amount of time because, properly speaking, in order for x to
have priority in the full and proper sense of the word, nothing else should be equal to it.
So long as each side aims to secure moral priority, there simply is no compromise that
will satisfy either camp. Even if one were able to demonstrate that, of all the projects that
could be undertaken by an individual in one lifetime, the Romantic and the Moralist’s
project should receive equal “priority” over all others, and that this was priority enough
for both camps, one would still lack a principle for deciding between the two projects in
individual cases of conflict. Since there is no way to know for certain what the future
holds in store, alternating back and forth, choosing one project one time and the other
project another time, does not guarantee that an appropriate equilibrium will be
maintained. Presumably, the only way to settle the conflict between the Romantic and the
Moralist is to prove that one project or the other should have, for whatever reason, the
priority which both sides claim.

Unfortunately for Rorty, given his own philosophical commitments, this obvious,
and traditional solution, is not available to him. Because he thinks the very idea of an
essential self is unprofitable, he cannot argue that one project rather than the other is in
fact representative of what is essentially human such that it ought to have moral priority
over all other projects. Rorty, as we have seen, is unwilling to propose a resolution to this
tension in which the Romantic’s project and the Moralist’s project are combined or
“fused” because he thinks such a move also requires essentialist claims of one sort or
another. Because he believes philosophy is unable to choose between these two
alternatives without relying on essentialism, Rorty proposes that we simply “evade the
Rather than choosing one project over the other, and rather than find some way to unite both projects into a single project, Rorty proposes that we “…treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.” Rorty recommends that individuals who are torn as he is think of themselves as liberal and accept the idea of a strong distinction between the private and the public. By associating the Romantic’s longing with the private and the Moralist’s hopes with the public, it is this distinction, Rorty claims, that will eradicate the tension one might experience; because the distinction will make it possible to avoid choosing between the two projects.

In light of our previous discussion concerning the feasibility of dividing a person’s life temporally, it can be seen that Rorty’s p-p distinction is only feasible once he discards the idea of moral priority. Otherwise, a simple division is inadequate to satisfy the Romantic and the Moralist’s claims that their projects should receive moral priority. Even if Rorty suggests that the two projects each have priority in distinct “spheres,” the size or scope of the two spheres, like the amount of time spent on each activity in the temporal distinction, would become the object of debate. If the scope of the two spheres were demarcated in some kind of unequal fashion, this itself would become an expression of priority. Of course, once the two projects are equalised, as in the temporal distinction, Rorty still needs to offer an account of how to decide between the two projects in cases of conflict. Rorty proposes that his distinction will simply avoid this problem by separating the two projects in some way that will prevent the tension from developing.

52 Ibid., p. 35
53 Ibid., p. xv.
The Moral and the Political

As I suggested in Chapter I, there are two distinct problems which Rorty addresses with his p-p distinction that he often conflates: the moral and the political. Now that the influence of the Romantic and the Moralist on Rorty’s work has been explored, it will be possible to substantiate this claim and elucidate some crucial features of these two problems as Rorty understands them.

The feud between the Romantic and the Moralist, as Rorty understands it, can generate a problem that a single person must confront. Broadly speaking, it can be summarised in the question, “How will I address the tension between my longing for self-perfection and my desire to alleviate the suffering of others?” In order to see how the feud between Romantic and the Moralist can also generate a problem that involves a conflict between different people, consider Rorty’s concept of redescription, an activity which he understands as being central to projects of self-perfection.

Generally speaking, for Rorty, redescription is the activity of generating “a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it.” 54 Although redescription is most often associated with the activity of intellectuals, Rorty insists that it is an activity of which anyone is capable. 55 Whenever an individual causes a state of affairs—more often than not his own understanding of himself—to be understood in a new light, to be talked about in a new manner, a redescription is said to have occurred.

54 Ibid., p. 90
55 See, Ibid., p. 90 where Rorty designates redescription as the generic trait of the intellectual. On p. 37, Rorty’s tells his reader that redescription is an activity in which any individual can engage. He writes, “… the intellectual (the person who uses words or visual or musical forms for this purpose) is just a special case—just somebody who does with marks and noises what other people do with their spouses and children, their fellow workers, the tools of their trade, the cash accounts of their businesses, the possession they accumulate in their homes, the music they listen to, the sports they play or watch, or the trees they pass on their way to work.”
While history has a tendency to regard major redescriptions in the positive light of progress, Rorty admits that being redescribed, as either an individual or as a culture, can often be humiliating. He writes:

Consider what happens when a child’s precious possessions—the little things around which he weaves fantasies that make him a little different from all other children—are redescribed as “trash,” and thrown away. Or consider what happens when these possessions are made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, child.36

If projects of self-perfection require individuals to redescribe themselves, the world, and everyone around them, and if this activity of redescription causes humiliation or suffering, the tension between the Romantic and the Moralist will come to a head as a tension between different people. If your project of self-perfection leads to my suffering or the suffering of others, I might ask and expect that limitations be imposed on your project. Alternatively, you might ask me to tolerate some measure of suffering or humiliation because it is associated with your project of self-perfection. When these sorts of conflicts arise, a Moralist will recommend that the alleviation of our fellow human’s suffering should take priority even if it results in less time and space for self-perfection. The Romantic will, of course, suggest the opposite. The political problem, when understood from the perspective of the historical feud between the Romantic and the Moralist can be summarised in the question “How will conflicts between the desire for self-perfection and the desire to alleviate the suffering of others be addressed when these desires originate in different people?”

The crucial difference between these two problems is that the moral problem involves only one person while the political problem involves a number of different
people. In the first problem, when the individual who is forced to choose renders a
decision, it involves giving priority to one of his own beliefs or desires over another one
of his own beliefs and desires. However, because the political problem involves a conflict
between different people, when a decision is rendered, it affects the wishes and desires of
actual living breathing agents. Unless one is willing to extend political status to an
individual’s libidinal forces, or other psychic forces, the two conflicts are simply not
analogous. The crucial difference is that there is a requirement to offer our political peers
(if they are to be regarded as peers) reasons why force will be employed to prevent them
from doing what they otherwise think they should do. In order to see the difference
between these two problems and how Rorty sometimes runs them together, consider an
example that figures prominently in Rorty’s work, in which the tension between the
Romantic and the Moralist develops: the assessment of literary works.

Because both traditions have a particular understanding of what a life ought to be
devoted to, it is natural that each one judges art, in particular books, in accordance to this
aim. For the Romantic, books which are written as a part of an individual’s quest for self-
perfection are judged to be the most important; for the moralist, it is those books which
are written with an eye to the good of the community in which he lives. Rorty suggests
that the employment of a distinction between the private and the public will allow us to
avoid making a decision one way or the other on this matter. He writes:

The pursuit of private perfection is a perfectly reasonable aim for some
writers.... Serving human liberty is a perfectly reasonable aim for other
writers.... There is no point in trying to grade these different pursuits on a
single scale by setting up factitious kinds called “literature or “art” or
“writing”; nor is there any point in trying to synthesise them.57

56 Ibid., p. 90.
57 Ibid., p. 145
The point is simple: because each kind of book serves a different, non-competing, equally good purpose, there is no need to claim that one kind of book is intrinsically better than the other. When a writer sits down to write a book he can choose to write whichever “genre” of book he chooses for himself. Complimenting one genre of book with the title “literature” or insisting that a writer must combine both genres only introduces unnecessary complications into the task of choosing what kind of book to write. What Rorty seems to be saying in this citation is no more complicated than why can’t we just leave it to writers to decide what they want to write for themselves?

As simple and appealing as this point is, it only seems simple and appealing as an answer to the question: “What kind of book should I write?” There is another conflict in which the question of what kind of books should or shouldn’t be written can be addressed. What if the book I write, in the course of my attempt to perfect myself, is offensive to your deeply held beliefs or involves or encourages humiliating or cruel practices? What if, due to your deeply held convictions, you consider my book to be in itself an act of cruelty against you or some other group of people? You might insist that I be prohibited from distributing—or even producing—the book and that the prohibition be enforced. This kind of conflict is significantly different because the question of priority is now intimately intertwined with the use of political force.

What encourages the moral and the political problems to be run together is that, for many people, the moral problem isn’t as benign as Rorty portrays it to be. For some, the Romantics and the Moralists come easily to mind, there is an important sense in

---

58 Arguments of this kind are frequently directed at pornography and hate literature.
which a writer ought to choose one kind of writing project rather than the other, if he wants to meet the obligations generated by his very humanity. In effect, the moral issue becomes less benign the instant there is an attempt to say in advance what a person, in this case a writer, ought to do in every circumstance. In other words, the moral and the political problem intersect, intertwine and become entangled exactly at the point where there is an attempt to tell the individual what he should, in every case, do or, in this case, write. Whether or not particular books are judged to be of greater value is largely unproblematic; unless there is some attempt to prohibit and/or to encourage the production of one kind of book, in every case, over some other based on these claims. People will, of course, argue about the value of books but, so long as there is no attempt to prohibit or censor particular kinds of books, controversy will be unsubstantial. The moral question, “what should I do?” only becomes problematic if I am automatically in moral error for choosing one course of action rather than another. Similarly, the political question, “What should we do?” only becomes problematic when some individual and/or group attempts to prohibit, limit or control by way of political force some other individual and/or group. The moral and the political problems are easily confused because they both require accounts of priority, albeit different kinds.

What will count as a satisfactory account of priority for the two distinct problems will be importantly different. For this reason, whether or not Rorty explicitly recognises it, I think it will be more profitable to understand him as trying to solve two distinct problems with his endorsement of a liberalism which has as its core feature a firm distinction between the private and the public. The first problem can be summarised with the question, “How will I address the tension between my Romantic longings and my
Moralist hopes?" and the second can be summarised by the question, "How will conflicts between the Romantic longings of some people and the Moralist hopes of others be addressed." What remains to be seen in greater detail is how Rorty's p-p distinction is intended to address these two problems. In Chapter III, I will offer an account of Rorty's distinction that highlights these details.

Before proceeding, it will first be necessary to address a possible exegetical concern regarding the emphasis I have placed on the Romantic and the Moralist's influence in Rorty's work. The rest of this chapter will be an attempt to alleviate any concern that the emphasis I have so far placed on the feud between the Romantic and the Moralist is an inappropriate reading of Rorty's work. Because I will be making important claims about the influence of these two philosophical movements on his work, it is best to dispel any doubts about its relevance now before proceeding. Moreover, my effort to defend this reading will only advance our understanding of the Romantic, the Moralist, their historical conflict, and how it relates to the problems Rorty is trying to address.

The Ironist and the Metaphysician

The emphasis I have so far placed on the Romantic and the Moralist may seem suspicious because Rorty devotes a large portion of his work to a discussion of two intellectuals he dubs respectively the non-liberal Ironist and the liberal Metaphysician. Rorty most commonly takes Michel Foucault as the paradigmatic anti-liberal ironist and Jurgen Habermas as the paradigmatic liberal metaphysician and anti-ironist. In order to bracket out possible objections to Rorty's readings and understanding of these thinkers, I will simply avoid whenever possible referring to them by name. I will, instead, simply refer to the anti-liberal ironist and the anti-ironist liberal.

---

59 It is important to note that the political conflict between the Romantic and the Moralist summarised with this question represents only one example of the kind of deeply significant disagreements that lead to political conflicts. Because this is the kind of conflict that most concerned Rorty, it will occupy our attention for now. I will argue later that it is Rorty's preoccupation with this particular conflict that prevents him from fully endorsing the democratic implications of his views.

60 Rorty most commonly takes Michel Foucault as the paradigmatic anti-liberal ironist and Jurgen Habermas as the paradigmatic liberal metaphysician and anti-ironist. In order to bracket out possible objections to Rorty's readings and understanding of these thinkers, I will simply avoid whenever possible referring to them by name. I will, instead, simply refer to the anti-liberal ironist and the anti-ironist liberal.
particular, concerned with their differing attitudes towards liberalism. While it is
uncontroversial that these two kinds of intellectuals loom large in Rorty's project, I will
argue that it is the Romantic sentiments Rorty attributes to the non-liberal ironist and the
Moralist sentiments he attributes to the liberal Metaphysician that generate their
disagreements concerning liberalism. In order to support this claim, it will be necessary to
examine Rorty's attempt to convince the Ironist that she should be a liberal and his
attempt to convince the metaphysician that liberalism has no need of metaphysics.61

**Rorty and the Liberal Ironist**

Rorty characterises the Ironist as someone who

1. has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she
currently uses... ; (2) ... realizes that argument phrased in her present
vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) ... does
not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in
touch with a power not herself.62

While (2) and (3) basically rearticulate Rorty's commitment to the view that there is no
Archimedean point from which absolute and final certainty can be ascertained, there is no
necessary connection between this commitment and the claim articulated in (1).

---

61 Nancy Fraser is one critic who has called attention to the influence of Romanticism on Rorty's social and
political thought. See "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy" in
*Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (University of
Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 92-110. She suggests that his writings are "the site of a struggle between... a
Romantic impulse and a pragmatic impulse" (Fraser, p. 94). It is I think more accurate to say that there is a
struggle between the romantic's longings and the moralist's hopes that Rorty associates with pragmatism.

62 Sometimes, Rorty tends to emphasize pragmatism's Romantic implications. For example, in "Nineteenth
Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," Rorty credits Nietzsche and James as independently
replacing Romanticism with pragmatism and, in so doing, legitimating the idea that "there can be a kind of
rationality without argumentation, a rationality which works outside the bounds of what Kuhn calls a
"disciplinary matrix," in an ecstasy of spiritual freedom" (COP, p.149). Alternatively, Rorty often
emphasizes pragmatism's Moralist implications. For example, in "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism," he
writes "To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our
conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance" (COP, p. 166) It isn't Romanticism
and pragmatism that are in conflict, but the Romantic and Moralist sentiments Rorty associates with his
version of pragmatism.
Recognising the contingency of one’s beliefs, recognising that they are a product of history and chance, in no way requires one to have radical and continuing doubts about one’s final vocabulary. Rorty makes this point himself, when he writes that individuals can “see themselves as contingent through and through, without feeling any particular doubts about the contingencies they happen to be.” If it is the case that one can recognise the contingency of one’s final vocabulary without also having radical and continuing doubts about it, as Rorty suggests, why does the ironist have these radical and continual doubts about her final vocabulary?

As best as I can make out, the anxiety originates in the Romantic longing to make oneself into a maximally original, self-created product. This is a longing that the ironist has not because she recognises the contingency of her final vocabulary, but because she admires a literary tradition which measures success by one’s ability to escape from the influence of one’s intellectual predecessors. Unfortunately, Rorty sometimes obscures the fact that the ironist’s radical and continuing doubt originates in this Romantic longing.

For example, he maintains that:

The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness.64

This citation is somewhat jarring because of Rorty’s final claim that the ironist has no criterion of wrongness. If the ironist has no criterion of wrongness to cause her worries, we would be left with the unlikely claim that the ironist’s radical doubt simply springs

---

62 CIS, p. 73.
63 Ibid., p. 87.
into being *ex nihilo*.

Fortunately, using Harold Bloom’s notion of the strong poet as a point of departure, Rorty does develop a criterion of wrongness for the Ironist. According to Rorty, the greatest failure for Romantics like William Blake and Nietzsche is to discover that the self one has created for oneself is not wholly and completely original. This fear creates an intellectual anxiety which forces Romantic intellectuals to call constantly into doubt the legitimacy of their vocabularies. The criterion of legitimacy, or rightness, is originality and, naturally enough, the criterion of legitimacy, or wrongness, is unoriginality. It is the Romantic longing not to be a “mere” copy or replica which generates the ironist’s criteria of wrongness and which lies at the heart of her radical and constant doubts. The relevance of this Romantic longing becomes more evident when Rorty suggests that ironists are reluctant to endorse liberalism because of the way in which “it does not allow room for self-creation, for private projects.” In other words, ironists are unwilling to be liberals because they fear that liberalism will limit the types of projects that they might pursue and, thus, limit their chance for self-perfection. Liberalism is regarded as a threat to the ironist’s Romantic longing to perfect herself by becoming a

---

65 Ibid., p. 75.
66 See, in particular, “The Contingency of Selfhood” as in CIS. As a matter of summary, Rorty concludes this chapter with the following comment: “We shall see the conscious need of the strong poet to demonstrate that he is not a copy or a replica as merely a special form of an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own” (Ibid., p. 43). For Harold Bloom’s account of the strong poet, see *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1997).
67 Curiously, Rorty’s most recent characterisation of the Ironist fails to even mention the Ironist’s radical and continuing doubt. See “Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy” as in *Truth and Progress* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 307-326. Hereafter, *TP*. Rorty writes, “Roughly, the ironist is a nominalist and a historicist who strives to retain a sense that the vocabulary of moral deliberation she uses is a product of history and chance—of her having been born at a certain time in a certain place.” See, *TP*, p. 307n2. I can’t be sure if Rorty’s omission of the idea of radical and continuing doubt which figures so prominently in *CIS* is a revision or an oversight.
completely original product of her own design.

While these observations demonstrate the relevance of the Romantic longing to Rorty’s understanding of the ironist, it is in Rorty’s attempt to convince the ironist to be a liberal that the ironist’s Moralist leanings emerge. Rather than arguing against the ironist’s claim that liberalism inhibits projects of self-creation, Rorty instead simply asserts that liberalism’s tendency to inhibit freedom is compensated by its tendency to reduce the level of suffering for its citizens. Needless to say, this assertion does not address the substance of the ironist’s worry. In effect, Rorty accepts the ironist’s claim that liberalism limits projects of self-creation but then attempts to persuade her that liberalism should be endorsed because it compensates for the limitations imposed on self-creation with its tendency to facilitate projects that alleviate suffering. Although Rorty insists that liberalism “contains the institutions of its own improvement”, it is not exactly clear why an ironist, given her Romantic urges, would find an optimised “balance between leaving people’s private lives alone and preventing suffering” at all tempting.

After all, if the ironist prioritises her quest for self-perfection above all else, she already has an opinion of what counts as the optimal balance: always leave me and my private life alone. The only ironist who would find Rorty’s comments persuasive is one who is already convinced that the alleviation of suffering is a project for which it is worth compromising at least some small part of her project of self-perfection. A liberal ironist must, therefore, be an individual who is willing to limit her Romantic longings in order to

67 CTS, p. 63.
68 Ibid. Rorty writes, “My disagreement with ... [the ironist] amounts to the claim that this decrease [in suffering] does, in fact, compensate for those constraints [on projects of self-creation].”
69 Ibid.
facilitate her Moralist hopes; otherwise, Rorty's suggestion would simply be unpersuasive. That Rorty's ironist has both Romantic and Moralist sympathies is all the more transparent when one considers Rorty's proposed treatment of "pure" Romantics who think the suffering of others is beneath their concern. These sorts of individuals, Rorty recommends, need merely be labelled "mad" and disregarded when one attempts to justify liberal democracies. If an ironist were similarly unconcerned with the suffering of others, if she had no Moralist sympathies, she would presumably also be dismissed as mad by Rorty and, therefore, disregarded.

Rorty and the Liberal Metaphysician

A metaphysician, according to Rorty, is someone who remains attached to the idea that there is "a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances" which "... will help us determine what our final vocabulary should be." If this reality isn't described as something which actually forces individuals to align themselves with it, it is described at the very least as something with which individuals have a moral obligation to align themselves. It is this idea of a reality, which is not only separate and distinct from human inquirers but which is also, at the same time, something towards which inquirers have some obligation to align themselves, that is of central importance to the metaphysician. This is because it allows the metaphysician to insist that some choice, activity, or belief rather than some other one is "Good", "Right", and "True" in an important sense that justifies humans choosing, acting, or believing one way rather than another. Metaphysicians of different ilks may disagree about how one determines

70 ORT, p.187.
what reality expects of us or even what it is, but what they all hold in common, Rorty suggests, is a belief that it is contact or alignment with this reality that justifies, in a special irrefutable sense, choosing one act, desire, or belief over another.

The particular kind of metaphysician with which Rorty is most concerned is unique in so far as he agrees with Rorty that the essentialism employed by the traditional Romantic and Moralist is philosophically bankrupt. This metaphysician, nevertheless, remains a metaphysician because he wants to preserve the idea that certain beliefs, desires and/or practices can be judged to have special priority over other beliefs, desires, and/or practices. Rather than seeing this priority as being determined by a belief's relation to something essentially human, Rorty's metaphysician thinks this priority is determined by a belief's relation to a particular set of practices. If a belief is the outcome of a particular set of practices, described as "domination-free communication," it can be said to have special priority over other beliefs that do not survive the scrutiny of these practices.\textsuperscript{72}

Because Rorty is committed to the view that liberal societies should accept as binding whatever the outcome of democratic encounters happens to be, a claim he takes to be the Deweyean analogue of the metaphysician's notion of domination-free communication, it is no surprise that he claims the difference between his own view of liberalism and the view of the liberal metaphysician is purely rhetorical and "concern[s] only the self-image which a democratic society should have, the rhetoric which it should

\textsuperscript{71} CIS, p. 74 & 75.

\textsuperscript{72} Rorty never discusses in any detail what exactly these practices are. This is, I suspect, that he is presuming that his reader will be familiar with Habermas' lengthy examination of this topic. Rorty gives some sense of what he means by "domination-free communication" when he suggests Habermas' work represents "a good way to restate the traditional liberal claim that the only way to avoid perpetuating cruelty within social institutions is by maximizing the quality of education, freedom of the press, educational opportunity, opportunities to exert political influence, and the like" (Ibid., p. 67).
use to express its hopes. Whereas the metaphysician claims that the outcomes of domination-free communication ought to receive special priority because inquirers who employ such practices converge on beliefs, desire or practices that have universal validity, Rorty is content to give priority to the outcomes of democratic encounters for no other reason then that they are the outcome of such encounters. In other words, Rorty thinks the lingering metaphysical sentiment is superfluous. Just as morality was able to survive the death of the idea of a divine judge, liberalism will survive the death of the idea of metaphysical foundations.

Unfortunately, in characterising the difference between his own position and that of the liberal metaphysician’s position as one merely of rhetoric, Rorty obscures a crucial point. The liberal metaphysician holds to his metaphysics in order to solve a specific problem. In particular, this metaphysician is worried by what Rorty refers to in passing as “exciting, romantic disclosures of new worlds” which are a threat to established institutions. The metaphysician holds onto his metaphysics in order to answer the Romantic who is unwilling to accept the legitimacy of a particular belief, desire, or practice that is the outcome of a democratic encounter. In the event of a conflict between the Romantic’s respect for idiosyncrasy and the Moralist’s respect for universalism, it is the metaphysician’s metaphysics which is intended to explain and justify why an idiosyncratic belief must be put to the test of free and open encounters and why beliefs that are universally agreed to be good or true ought to have special priority over beliefs which cannot make similar claims to universality. Rorty’s liberal metaphysician is

---

73 Ibid
74 Ibid., p. 66
attempting to give an updated non-essentialist account of why the Moralist's respect for
universalism ought to take precedence when it runs into conflict with the Romantic's
respect for idiosyncrasy. Rorty misses this crucial point, perhaps, because he assumes that
his distinction will make it possible to avoid a decision when such a conflict arises; if
there is no need for a decision then there is no need for further justification.

After this discussion of the non-liberal ironist and the liberal metaphysician, it
should be clear that what is centrally at issue between these two intellectual figures is the
Romantic's longing and the Moralist's hopes. The liberal ironist is an individual who is
deeply committed to the Romantic longing for self-perfection but remains sympathetic to
the Moralist project of alleviating suffering. Despite these sympathies, the Romantic in
the ironist is still worried that liberal democratic structures will tend to favour universal
projects intended to alleviate suffering, at the expense of her idiosyncratic projection of
self-creation. In contrast, the liberal metaphysician is a latter-day Moralist who holds
onto his metaphysics in order to justify the priority he gives to universally accepted
beliefs over idiosyncratic beliefs. In both cases, it is the Romantic and Moralist influences
that encourage the ironist and the metaphysician to endorse a specific arrangement of a
community's basic institutions and to endorse a particular means to resolve conflicts
between different people. The liberal ironist would like to see a society that maximises
individual freedom but still manages to alleviate suffering. The liberal metaphysician is,
of course, not opposed to the idea of individual liberty, but, nevertheless wants to insist
that beliefs for which there is an appropriate and widespread consensus should receive
priority. What is centrally at issue between these two figures is not metaphysics, as Rorty
implies, but the question of whether idiosyncratic beliefs or universal beliefs should
receive priority and this question is, of course, complicated by Rorty’s tendency to
associate self-perfection with maximal originality and the alleviation of suffering with
universalism. Metaphysics only becomes an issue because the metaphysician wants it to
justify the priority he gives to universally held beliefs and because the ironist, who has
given up on the idea of metaphysics, is unconvinced by such a justification.

One of Rorty’s principle claims in CIS is that both ironists and metaphysicians
should be equally satisfied by a liberalism grounded in a firm distinction between the
private and the public, thus, eliminating any need for further debate. This is a
questionable claim because the Ironist and the Metaphysician’s accounts of priority, in
particular political priority, are so polarised. I will not pursue this question in any great
detail because it is in his employment of a p-p distinction that Rorty is able to cast
liberalism as being attractive to both the ironist and the metaphysician. By emphasising
one or the other sides of the p-p distinction, Rorty is able to emphasise one or the other of
the two competing notions of political priority and, thus, make liberalism look attractive
to both the ironist and the metaphysician. For example, when he addresses the ironist’s
worry that her individual freedom will be threatened by liberalism, Rorty emphasises the
part of his liberalism that gives political priority to the individual, but, when he addresses
the liberal metaphysician’s insistence that universal beliefs should have priority, he
emphasises the aspect of his liberalism that gives political priority to democratic
consensus. This crucial shift in emphasis is only possible if there are two separate and
non-conflicting “domains” in which each kind of political priority can take precedence. If
his distinction fails to function as he intends it and it is unable to create two such
domains, then his means of making liberalism look attractive to both the ironist and the
liberal metaphysician fails with it.

It is worth noting that Rorty’s attempt to cast his brand of liberalism as satisfactory for both the ironist and the liberal metaphysician encourages him to formulate two distinct accounts of liberalism. Liberalism can be loosely defined as a political theory which combines two distinct political principles: a freedom principle and a democratic principle. The freedom principle states that governments (and other citizens) should whenever possible leave citizens alone and the democratic principle states that citizens should accept as binding any wide-spread consensus that is the outcome of free and open democratic deliberations. In order to see how these two principles are uneasy partners, one need only consider the very real possibility that there will be democratic outcomes with which an individual does not agree. Depending on which principle receives priority in such deadlocks, there are two very different kinds of liberalism that can be generated from these two principles. By shifting political priority from one principle to the other, Rorty can, at times, trumpet liberalism’s commitment to personal freedom and, at other times, emphasise its commitment to generating and enforcing community wide consensus. When Rorty discusses the ironist’s concerns, he emphasises the freedom principle and downplays the democratic principle. When he discusses the liberal metaphysician’s concerns, he emphasises the democratic principle and downplays the freedom principle. Because neither account of liberalism totally repudiates the principle which it does not prioritise, there is enough of a family resemblance between the two to allow Rorty to unwittingly (or intentionally) switch imperceptibly back and forth between the two accounts as it suits his needs. As I said above, this equivocation is a consequence of his employment of a p-p distinction. Because, I will argue in Chapter IV that Rorty’s
distinction cannot function as he hopes it to, there is little reason to pursue this matter in
greater detail.
Chapter III: The Distinction Between the Private and the Public

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a clear understanding of Rorty’s p-p distinction. This project is not as straightforward as it might at first seem, since Rorty never offers a precise or authoritative articulation of the distinction. Rorty most often writes as if his readers have at their disposal a clear and distinct picture of what such a distinction amounts to and how it is intended to operate. To complicate matters further, Rorty also writes as if it is uncontroversial that his distinction is able to accomplish the task he sets to it. He simply assumes, without offering any kind of explanation, that it can prevent the tension between Romantic longings and Moralist ideals from developing by somehow separating them in such a way that one need not choose between them. Because Rorty sees little reason to explain or defend the character of the distinction itself, and chooses instead to devote his energies to a defence of the implications of its successful employment, the project of developing a clear understanding of what the distinction amounts to will require some detailed exegetical analysis.

Evidently, the distinction is intended to demarcate what Rorty calls “the private” and “the public” but this fact is not particularly useful to our purposes without further details as to what is meant by these terms. In order to do this, it will be useful to survey the various dialectical pairs with which Rorty frequently associates “private and public.” I have compiled, in the following table, a list of these other dialectical pairs.
When one surveys these pairs, what is immediately revealed is the influence that the Moralist and the Romantic have had on Rorty’s understanding of what he means by “private” and “public.” On the public side, the twin concerns of the Moralist are the two threads which figure prominently. For example, what connects Trotsky and science is the Moralist’s emphasis on one’s duties to others and universalism. Trotsky was once representative of Rorty’s own desire to help others while science, according to Rorty, is distinguished, in part, by its ability to create and employ universally shared and widely accepted premises, beliefs, habits of action, language games, etc. This connection is neatly captured in Rorty’s understanding of social justice as the collective attempt, based on shared premises and practices, to alleviate suffering. On the private side, it is the twin concerns of the Romantic—self-creation and the idiosyncratic—which are, more or less common to all. For example, Rorty’s understanding of metaphors as units of language that are unique, with no place in any previously played language game, corresponds to the Romantic’s notion of self-perfection in which a person is expected to recreate himself until he is maximally original.  

75 Rorty discusses his “Davidsonian” account of metaphor, in CIS, on pp. 16–20. His most comprehensive discussion of metaphor can be found in “Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor” as in ORT, pp. 162-172. Donald Davidson’s account of metaphor, upon which Rorty builds his own, can be found in “What Metaphor Means” as in Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 245-264.
With a clearer sense of what Rorty means by private and public, it is now possible to examine how Rorty intends to distinguish between the two. Things are immediately complicated by the fact that there is a subtle shift in Rorty's employment of the terms "private" and "public." Although, he frequently employs these terms as nouns, he also employs them as adjectives and this most often occurs when Rorty discusses what the distinction is intended to distinguish. For example, the distinction is often described as distinguishing between two particular places or, more ambiguously, particular "spheres." Alternatively, he discusses the distinction as if it is intended to distinguish between two portions of an individual's final vocabulary—where "final vocabulary" is understood as the "set of words ...[humans] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives." While there are certain parallels between these two articulations of the distinction, it is worth considering each separately.

A firm distinction between different kinds of spaces and/or spheres

I will start with the only account of the p-p distinction that provides any substantial details. The account begins with Rorty's recommendation of the "construction of a world order whose model is a bazaar surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive private clubs." The individual clubs, which are described as being composed of "moral equals," do not, as a practice, associate with other clubs, "neither knowing nor caring what the people in the club over on the other side of the bazaar are like." Each club faces an area in which occurs a daily economic bazaar and the only time that members of a club interact with the members of other clubs is in the context of this specifically

---

76 CIS, p. 73.
77 ORT, p. 209.
78 Ibid.
defined physical space. Rorty writes:

I picture many of the people in such a bazaar as preferring to die rather than share the beliefs of many of those with whom they are haggling, yet as haggling profitably away nevertheless. 80

The bazaar, therefore, always involves people interacting with other people with whom they have nothing in common, all for the mutually selfish purpose of economic benefit. During the course of interaction, when individuals with radically different values encounter each other, "[they] smile a lot, make the best deals [they] can, and, after a hard day's haggling, retreat to [their] club." 81

Three salient features in this bazaar metaphor are worth highlighting. First, the metaphor suggests, with its employment of the club and bazaar imagery, that the private and the public refer to actual physical locations that have clearly demarcated and stable physical boundaries. The second feature is the role that accessibility plays in determining which space is private and which space is public. The private is a physical location where people with the same values, habits, and/or practices are admitted and people who do not share those values, habits, and/or practices are excluded. There exists in this space, no matter how many occupy it (a private club can be as small or as large as is required), a deep and abiding agreement among all members, on a wide variety of issues. In contrast, the public is a physical location that is universally accessible to any and every individual, regardless of her values, habits and/or practices. Out there, a lot of disagreement is ignored.

The third feature of the metaphor worth highlighting concerns the motivations for

81 Ibid., p. 209.
creating private and public spaces. Unfortunately, Rorty is mostly silent on what motivates the formation of a private club. He is clear that its members share similar values and common interests but he never explicitly states what motivates the formation of a club. It is not clear if private clubs are formed because its members disagree with the members of another club on some key value or if the clubs are private for the sake of privacy itself. In other words, do I establish private clubs because I want to be as homosexual or as homophobic as I would like whether or not those homophobes or homosexuals on the other side of the bazaar like it? or, do I establish a private club because I want this particular clutch of people to live in close proximity even though no particular conflict exists between my clutch of people and some other clutch? In one article, Rorty suggests that private clubs help marginalised groups achieve their autonomy by physically excluding the very people who have marginalised them and this suggests that private clubs are formed as a consequence of some sort of conflict; but, this does not preclude the possibility that individuals also create private clubs for reasons that have nothing to do with conflict. For this reason, we must assume that both motivations are possibilities. Unlike that of private clubs, the existence of bazaars can be readily explained. People with widely different values interact in bazaars because such interaction leads to mutual economic benefit. True, people with widely different values might visit the public space to do no more than look at and talk with people of widely different values but Rorty’s suggestion that the members of private clubs neither know nor care what other folks do in their clubs implies that this is not a strong motivation for

81 Ibid.
82 See “Feminism and Pragmatism” as in TP, pp. 202-227; p. 223.
the creation of a public space.

Despite the apparent simplicity and effectiveness of this metaphor, it is unclear whether or not Rorty intends his p-p distinction to be understood in terms that are so structural. Despite the fact that this bazaar metaphor rather forcefully suggests that the private and the public should be, first and foremost, understood as designating actual physical locations, Rorty, can be found resisting a characterisation of the distinction along these lines. In fact, he seems to deny outright the possibility that the p-p distinction delineates two distinct physical spaces when he writes, “this distinction is emphatically not the distinction between the domestic hearth and the public forum.” And yet, Rorty’s suggestion that the distinction can assist marginalised groups by physically excluding individuals who are unsympathetic or even antagonistic to their project reinforces the idea that the private and the public is intended to refer to actual physical locations. It is possible to incorporate, into the structural understanding of the distinction, Rorty’s insistence that the private and the public is not to be confused with the private hearth and the public forum by suggesting that, with this claim, he is simply trying to avoid associating the private and the public with a distinction between “my own home” and “not my own home.” After all, Rorty most often employs the metaphor of a private club and this image preserves the notion of a confined physical space without limiting an understanding of this space to the domestic hearth.

Nevertheless, Rorty’s insistence that the p-p distinction is not analogous to a distinction between the domestic hearth and the public forum might mean that an interpretation of the bazaar metaphor which focuses on the idea of actual physical spaces
is uncharitable. The spirit of the metaphor might be better captured by understanding the
distinction as distinguishing between different sociological spaces rather than actual
physical spaces. A sociological space is demarcated not by walls but by the coming
together of people. If a group of like minded-individuals gather by the fruit-stand in the
bazaar, or in a multi-purpose meeting room at a community centre, or even at a clearing
in the woods, this makes the space “private” whether or not the walls are different each
time they meet or even if there are no walls at all. Alternatively, whenever and wherever
there gathers a number of people with radically different views, perhaps, the cafeteria in
the aforementioned community centre, this space will become “public.” Understanding
the distinction in this light chimes with Rorty’s tendency to refer sometimes to public and
private “spheres” instead of spaces.

Although there is no obvious way to decide between these two interpretations of
the bazaar metaphor, the structural interpretation of the distinction, at the very least, has
one important advantage over the sociological interpretation: a p-p distinction between
clearly demarcated physical locations provides a clear and unambiguous image of how
different projects or different groups of people are to be kept from interfering with each
other. There is intuitive appeal to the idea that conflict can be prevented by putting an
actual physical barrier between those things which might come into conflict. Because
private clubs are physically accessible only to those people who agree with whatever is
going on in the club, there is no reason for outside antagonists to intrude. Moreover, the
exclusivity of access, when combined with actual walls, also provides a mechanism for
resolving conflicts that might develop within a club when an individual member changes

83 Ibid., p. 308n.
her views from that which was previously agreed upon. When one change’s one’s views, one is no longer admitted into the club. If the walls of the private clubs are high and thick enough, it is easy to believe conflict would be near impossible.84

In contrast, without walls, it is not clear how the line between the private and the public will be demarcated in the sociological interpretation of the metaphor, nor is it clear how conflict will be avoided. When I witness a certain practice with which I don’t agree, but am at the same time not suppose to interfere with or hinder because it involves a group of like-minded individuals, what reason is there for me not to? Without walls, there isn’t anything “private” about this activity other than the fact that the activity can continue despite my disapproval of it. If, in the sociological interpretation of the distinction, it is simply my tolerance of your practice that prevents a conflict from arising, there is no obvious reason why the “occupant(s)” of a perfectly visible “private” sphere should be able to insist on my tolerance, nor is there a transparent reason to expect that I will extend this tolerance. This is because what is at issue is the legitimacy of my intention to prohibit the practice I find reprehensible. Insofar as my tolerance is insisted upon and enforced, it seems my intentions have been judged to be illegitimate but without any reasons being offered as to why. Once this observation is made of the sociological version of the p-p distinction, one begins to wonder if it is relevant to the structural version of the distinction, as well. Walls can separate my activities from your activities, but it is not clear why walls should count as a reason against my claim that a particular aberrant practice should be prohibited. The presence of a wall may impede my ability to

84 I say “near” because an individual’s project of self-perfection might, for example, involve a universally focussed evangelical component. We need only think of missionaries, travelling salespersons, and tele-marketers to imagine how walls may never be thick or high enough to avoid all conflict.
interfere with an aberrant practice but this doesn’t count as a reason why I shouldn’t interfere. What is at issue is whether or not it is legitimate for me, or for the state, to prohibit the practice. The erection of walls, real or metaphorical, does not speak to the legitimacy of my intentions.

It is significant that our discussion of this version of the p-p distinction, up to this point, has lent itself to being associated with a conflict that might exist between different people. This is, of course, what I have called, the political problem. When different people are in conflict, or have the potential to be in conflict, walls will keep them separate and this provides a pretty straightforward example of how the private and the public can be distinguished such that private and public activities will be kept separate. It is not, however, sufficient for Rorty to show that the projects can be separated, he must demonstrate that this separation will prevent conflict. The sociological version of the distinction highlights how this second step is much more complicated. Simply to insist on tolerance, whether with the demarcation of sociological spaces or with the construction of walls, does not, at first glance, appear to be particularly effective when the question of whether or not one should be tolerant is exactly at issue. When one turns to the moral problem, the potential inadequacies of the p-p distinction is different. One might choose to perfect oneself only behind the closed doors of the private club and only alleviate suffering when one is beyond the walls of the private club in the bazaar but this decision does not help a person avoid the choice between two different projects with competing claims of moral priority. A person must still choose between the competing projects in terms of how much time she spends in each space. The sociological version of the distinction is similarly ineffective for this problem.
A firm distinction between different kinds of vocabularies

Rorty's second prominent version of the p-p distinction is a kind of internalisation of the version just discussed and emerges as a response to the sometimes cruel aspects of the activity of redescription but applies equally to any activity that involves some measure of cruelty. As was mentioned earlier, for Rorty, the project of self-creation requires one to redescribe oneself, one's surroundings, and one's associates on a constant basis. These redescriptions will, sometimes, be as cruel as they are necessary to one's project of self-creation because in order for one to fully create oneself, it is often the case that one must redescribe one's peers in ways that they would not approve. Rather than distinguishing two different spaces and/or spheres, one private and one public, in which different types of redescription can occur, Rorty distinguishes between two parts of one person's final vocabulary. He writes:

[w]e need to distinguish between redescription for private and public purposes. For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. The part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such [public] actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated.  

What Rorty proposes here is that when one tries to perfect one's self through redescription, one may be as cruel as is required for this project and he proposes that when one attempts to alleviate the suffering of others through redescription, one must be aware of one's own potential to humiliate. Because what one redescribes is one's own final vocabulary, this recommendation leads to the idea that a person's final vocabulary can be divided into two portions. One portion of an individual's final vocabulary will not
be subject to the criticism or evaluation of others and can be remade by whatever means and in whatever manner is required for a person to perfect herself. The portion of the final vocabulary that relates to activities that promote solidarity and the alleviation of suffering must incorporate an awareness of her own potential to humiliate. Instead of creating different spaces within a particular community, Rorty recommends the creation of the metaphorical equivalent of spaces inside the individual. A person’s “final vocabulary can be and should be split into a large private and a small public sector, sectors which have no particular relation to one another.”85 Rorty thinks this division will make it possible for a person to do whatever is necessary to perfect herself and avoid humiliating others.

In order to make this claim plausible, Rorty develops the “final vocabulary” equivalent of the bazaar metaphor’s walls—that is, an account of how the distinction prevents these two vocabularies from coming into conflict. In order to do this, Rorty insists that vocabularies of self-creation and vocabularies of suffering-alleviation are essentially different and incommensurable. Like oil and water they simply stay apart. As we have already seen, he holds that

There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us do that [hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision]. [...] The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange.87

Rather than advocating that a wall be built between private and public vocabularies to keep them separate, Rorty instead argues that there is something in the very nature of these vocabularies that makes it impossible to unify them. Walls don’t need to be erected;

85 CJS, p. 91-92.
they are already built in. This approach to the question of how it is public and private vocabularies will not come into conflict with each other is curious for two reasons. First, it is patently false that vocabularies of self-perfection and vocabularies of justice cannot be unified. Second, the very idea that vocabularies have essential natures is wholly incompatible with Rorty’s general anti-essentialist stance.

In regard to my first claim, there are innumerable examples of individuals who created themselves in their own image even as they alleviated suffering. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, JR and Mary Wollstonecraft spring easily to mind. What is of particular relevance about these three examples is that all three re-created their final vocabularies in order to escape the humiliating vocabularies thrust upon them (and others like them) by colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. If these remarkable individuals had not created new and unique final vocabularies, it is unlikely that they would have had the impact that they did have. One need not even rely on the example of such remarkable individuals in order to demonstrate that vocabularies of self-creation can be combined with vocabularies of justice. All that is required to combine these two kinds of vocabularies is a vision of one’s perfected self as a person who spends a lot of time helping others. Not surprisingly then, despite the force with which he makes the claim that projects of self perfection and projects intended to alleviate suffering cannot be united, Rorty quietly admits that these two projects can be united, if accidentally, for some people. He writes, “For a few such people—Christians (and others) for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others—the two

---

86 CIS, p. 100.
87 Ibid., p. xiv. Italics mine.
questions "What shall I be" and "what sort of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?" come together." 88

The explanation of Rorty's curious attempt to advance such an implausible claim, which he himself sometimes denies, is his surprisingly essentialist claim that the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily unshared and the vocabulary of justice is necessarily shared. If an actual stand-off of this kind exists between these two types of vocabularies, then it would indeed be impossible to unify the two projects. However, for a philosopher who claims "there are never, in practice, standoffs," it is surprising to see him attempting to create just such a stand-off by attributing a necessary or essential nature to these two kinds of vocabularies. To see how incongruous this suggestion, that vocabularies of self-creation and vocabularies of justice are necessarily opposed, is with Rorty's typical attitude towards such claims, consider the following:

It would be better for philosophers to admit there is no one way to break such standoffs, no single place to which it is appropriate to step back. There are, instead, as many ways of breaking the standoff as there are topics of conversation. [...] Because of this indefinite plurality of standpoints, this vast number of ways of coming at the issue sideways and trying to outflank one's opponent, there are never, in practice, any standoffs. [...] We would only have a real and practical standoff, as opposed to an artificial and theoretical one, if certain topics and certain language games were taboo—if there were general agreement within a society that certain questions were always in point, that certain questions were prior to certain others, that there was a fixed order to discussion, and that flanking movements were not permitted. That would be just the sort of society which liberals are trying to avoid—one in which "logic" ruled and "rhetoric" was outlawed. 89

Given the sentiment of this citation, it is clear that one cannot take too seriously Rorty's

88Ibid., p. 143. See also, PSH, p. 13. Rorty writes, "the [two projects] will, for some people, coincide—as they do for those lucky Christians for whom the love of God and of other human beings are inseparable, or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought of social justice."
89CIS, p. 51.
insistence that vocabularies of self-perfection and vocabularies of justice are necessarily incommensurable when he himself admits that stand-offs of this sort are simply artificial. In addition to demonstrating the curious inconsistency of Rorty’s insistence that vocabularies of self-creation and vocabularies of justice are essentially opposed, this citation also provides an explanation as to what might have motivated Rorty to consider, if only briefly, the idea that these two vocabularies are essentially incommensurable. There must be for Rorty, as he suggests in this citation about others, some topic, language game, or belief that is for him taboo or sacred.

It is here that the influence of the Romantic, the Moralist, and their historical conflict, remerge. On one hand, Rorty is unwilling to relinquish a Romantic understanding of self-perfection in which it is thought that self-perfection requires one to become maximally original. On the other hand, he is also unwilling to relinquish the Moralist’s claim that vocabularies of justice require some kind of universalism. If one believes that the Romantic is correct about perfection and the Moralist correct about justice, then one will of course think that the vocabularies corresponding to these projects cannot be unified. It isn’t anything about the desire to create oneself or the hope to alleviate suffering that requires vocabularies of self-creation and vocabularies of justice to be incommensurable; it is, instead, Rorty’s commitment to a particular Romantic conception of self-perfection and a particular Moralist conception of justice. Unless it is the case that self-creation and total originality are necessary bedfellows and universalism and justice are similarly united, the vocabularies of self-creation and vocabularies of suffering-alleviation aren’t necessarily incapable of unification.

Moreover, even if one assumes for the moment that vocabularies of self-
perfection and vocabularies of justice are incompatible, this does not preclude the possibility that one might at some point be forced to choose one vocabulary over other. If it is true that it is impossible to unify two vocabularies, and their corresponding projects, this makes it more likely that one will be forced to choose between them. There are, for example, only a fixed number of hours in the day and only so many years in a life. If these two vocabularies and their projects cannot be united and if there is not enough time in a day or one lifetime to devote oneself to both, one project will have to be sacrificed for the other whether they are irrelevant to each other or not. What is important for the time being is this: if it is the case that these two vocabularies cannot ever be unified (a claim about which there is some doubt), there doesn't appear to be any clear mechanism to help an individual avoid making a choice. This observation is crucial because the whole point of employing Rorty's p-p distinction is that it is suppose to do just what has been left unexplained.

So, when this distinction is applied to the moral problem, it is not clear how this distinction between different vocabularies will help a person avoid making a choice between two competing projects with similar claims of moral priority. A person will still be required to decide how much of her final vocabulary will be idiosyncratic and how much will be held in common with others. When this distinction is applied to the political problem, as is suggested by Rorty's insistence that an individual's private vocabulary is no one else's business, Rorty expects the division to justify an individual's insistence that other people may neither know nor interfere with my private vocabulary and its corresponding projects of self-creation. For this problem, the mere fact that someone chooses to divide her final vocabulary along the lines of Rorty's distinction does not seem
enough to justify this insistence on non-interference. If one thinks of a private vocabulary as a kind of private diary, my decision to conceal from other people particular beliefs and desires that are irrelevant to our common projects might in fact be a good enough reason to insist that other people have no business or right to interfere with these beliefs and desires or even to know them. But one will resist characterising a private vocabulary as a kind of personal diary when one recalls that a final vocabulary is intimately tied with a person’s practices because it is used to justify them. It isn’t difficult to imagine someone who, in the full sight of others, alleviates the suffering of others and who, when alone or among select intimates, engages in activities that are not only of deep significance to her project of self-perfection but reprehensible and cruel in the eyes of others. In fact, it is not even difficult to imagine that this person prohibits the very same cruel activity that she cherishes when she is alone. Our reaction to this person’s dual life will be considerably different if she actually engages in her cruel fantasies rather than simply writes about them. If someone writes or speaks a language in order to justify a practice in which she never actually engages, one might accept that these words are “none of our business” but so long as the activity which the vocabulary is intended to justify is actually engaged in, one is unlikely to accept the same claim. When a person insists that her vocabulary and its corresponding activity should not be interfered with and another person thinks that it should be, the division between the two types of vocabularies does not do much to substantiate the former person’s claim.

In this chapter, I clarified and highlighted the salient features of Rorty’s p-p

---

90 This kind of hypocrisy is nothing new. The most benign example is the parent who prohibits her child from engaging in an activity which she herself frequently engages in.
distinction. In the process of doing this, I have focussed particular attention on how it is
Rorty expects his distinction to separate either an individual person’s conflicting
Romantic or Moralist desires, in the case of the moral problem, or two people with
conflicting desires, in the case of the political problem. Such attention has revealed a
certain implausibility in the notion that these things can be separated as Rorty suggests.
With this, in the next chapter, I will assess the p-p distinction in relation to the two
problems.
Chapter IV: Assessing the Private-Public Distinction
In chapter one, it was argued that Rorty sets for himself two related but importantly different problems. Although his understanding of the two problems, as I argued in chapter II, are both deeply influenced by the historical feud between the Romantic and the Moralist, the two problems themselves are importantly different. Because the moral problem is generated by a tension that one person must address and the political problem is generated by a conflict that exists between different people, it is hasty to assume that both problems can be solved by a single solution. Because the second problem involves questions concerning the legitimate use of political force, there are complications for this problem that simply don’t exist for the first. Rorty, of course, thinks that one approach, a firm distinction between the private and the public, will be sufficient. While this may turn out to be the case, it also may not. Consequently, in this chapter, I will assess separately the distinction’s usefulness in addressing these two problems. Before proceeding directly to this task, it will be useful to summarise what has been so far discussed.

Fundamentally, Rorty’s problem originates with his claim that the vocabularies and projects of self-perfection cannot be united with the vocabularies and projects of justice. They cannot be united, according to Rorty, because projects of self-perfection require one to develop a vocabulary that is maximally original and projects of justice require one to develop a vocabulary that incorporates universally accepted principles. This generates a tension for individuals who want to pursue both kinds of projects. The word “tension” is employed by Rorty to invoke the idea of one being pulled in opposite directions. Because the two projects cannot be united (i.e. one cannot perfect oneself in one’s uniqueness as one pursues projects of justice), an individual is forced to choose
between pursuing one or the other projects.

Faced with this problem one might expect Rorty to either dissolve it or solve it—that is either demonstrate that the problem does not actually exist or provide an account of how one might choose between the two projects. Dissolving the problem is not an option for Rorty because he takes the fact that the two projects cannot be united to be fundamental. Solving the problem is not an option for Rorty because he thinks the choice between the two projects can only be made if one relies on one or another form of essentialism. Alternatively, Rorty might have tried to prevent the tension from developing. For example, if the two projects could be unified, there would be no requirement to choose and, consequently, no tension. Rorty, as we have seen, dismisses this option. There is another way in which one could prevent the development of the tension. If the problem originates in the attempt to decide between two incommensurable projects, one could propose a third alternative from which to choose. Rorty, for this reason, proposes a distinction between the private and the public in order to generate just such an alternative. The distinction is supposed to make it possible for a person to avoid choosing either of the projects. However, Rorty’s third alternative is not another kind of project from which to choose but is, instead, simply an option not to choose. Because the problem is a consequence of being required to choose between only two alternatives, if this third one is plausible, Rorty could effectively prevent the problem from developing.

There is, as I’ve said, a second problem that Rorty addresses with his distinction. I have characterised this problem as a conflict between different people. The word "conflict" is intended to emphasize that those involved are in deep disagreement on some matter. In particular instances, this problem might be dissolvable if those in disagreement...
can be shown that they are not actually disagreeing. There will, however, be many cases of genuine disagreement and it is this that concerns us. As with the first problem, Rorty is unwilling to choose either of the disputants and the nature of the debate precludes the possibility that the two opinions can be synthesised (although, in this case, such a synthesis would count as a solution to the problem rather than as a means of preventing it). Once again, the remaining option is to offer some means whereby the conflict is prevented from developing; Rorty once again proposes the employment of a distinction between the private and the public. If one can prevent the two disputants from coming into conflict on the relevant issue, then a decision need not be made.

**Assessing the p-p distinction: the moral problem.**

The moral problem that Rorty’s p-p distinction is intended to solve originates in the tension that can exist for one person when she is forced to choose between projects of self-creation and projects intended to alleviate the suffering of others. For Rorty, it was a question of whether he ought to devote his energies to socially useless wild orchids or to some undisclosed project intended to alleviate suffering. In chapter two, it was explained that the problem—that is, the tension—originates in the differing opinions of the Romantic and the Moralist over which project ought to have automatic moral priority over every other kind of project. To address this problem, Rorty proposes that one employ a p-p distinction as a means to evade the choice and thus dispel the tension. However, as we have seen, so long as the idea of moral priority remains associated with the two projects, it is impossible to evade the choice. Even if she equally divides her life (temporally or spatially) between the two projects, there will still be individual instances of conflict in which she must choose between the two projects and the p-p distinction
does not help her avoid that decision. So long as the idea of automatic priority remains pertinent, a decision cannot be avoided—with or without a p-p distinction.

Of course, as we have seen, Rorty gives up on the idea of automatic moral priority. Both the Romantics and the Moralists claimed that their particular project had special automatic priority because it was somehow representative of one’s essential humanity. If one accepts, as Rorty does, that there is no essential human faculty from which such special moral obligations can be automatically generated, one gives up on the idea that any project can have automatic priority. As I have already, the special tension Rorty experienced when he had to choose between the two incommensurable projects was not caused by any feature of the projects, or their corresponding vocabularies, but, instead, was caused by the competing claims of automatic priority that the Romantic and the Moralist insist upon. The fact that the projects cannot be unified becomes acutely problematic only if one also thinks that both should have a special and equal priority in one’s life. If one gives up on the idea of automatic priority, the special tension goes with it; one need no longer worry about being automatically in moral error for simply choosing one project rather than the other. The choice will be difficult but, at the very least, one will no longer have to worry whether one’s decision corresponds to a criterion, independent of the situation, which will automatically determine the moral value of the decision.

In order to see this point more clearly, let’s consider, as a concrete example, a specific question important to Rorty: what kind of book should a writer choose for herself to write? That this question remains a live one at all can once again be attributed to the historical conflict between the Romantic and the Moralist. One legacy of this conflict is a
moral-aesthetic distinction which organises books along the lines of those which have “a moral message” and those which are “aesthetic.” As is the case with all projects in general, the Romantic and the Moralist prioritise the kind of book which corresponds to their side of the distinction by relying on talk about essential human faculties. In this case, there is the added twist that you are not only a better person for writing a particular kind of book, but you are also writing a better book. Not surprisingly, both traditions insist that honorific expressions like “literature” or “art” be used only in reference to their preferred style of book and insist on dismissing all other kinds of books as “merely x,” where x is an expression of inferiority. There are two distinct tasks Rorty sets to his distinction in the face of this debate. First, he wants to do away with the moral-aesthetic distinction by encouraging a new way of distinguishing and organising books. Specifically, he wants to “distinguish between those books which help us become autonomous from books which help us be less cruel.” Second, the distinction is suppose to encourage literary critics to discard an unprofitable obsession with the creation of hierarchical classificatory systems and to discard the idea that “everyone who writes a book should have the same aims or be measured by the same standards.”

What Rorty most wants to resist is the attempt to privilege automatically one type of book over the other. What makes the debate about books interesting is that expressions like “literature” and “art” are employed as terms of praise that also carry with them a moral imperative to write one type of book rather than another. It is this idea that there is a single type of book that one ought to write that makes the question, “What type of books should I write?” problematic—particularly if one thinks that both types of books

---

91 CIS, p. 141.
have their merits. But what is it that generates this idea of moral priority? Both the Romantic and the Moralist think that the particular project they cherish is intimately connected with what it means to be human. If one is willing to discard the idea of a essential self, as Rorty is, then the idea that there is a single type of book that one ought to pursue should be discarded as well. Because the decision to write one type of book rather than another is a decision that one individual makes, once the idea of automatic moral priority is swept aside, the individual can choose without the worry that she will automatically be in error for choosing one project rather than the other. In other words, once one accepts that there is nothing like “the aim of the writer” one is free to choose to write as one wants without the risk of automatic moral condemnation. There will, of course, be plenty of times when we choose to write one type of book rather than another (time constraints, the demands of our publisher) but there shouldn’t be any of the special tension that the young Rorty confronted because there will be no automatically right choice, and consequently, no automatically wrong choice. As Rorty frequently points out, there simply isn’t one general a priori answer that can decide for us what to do in advance of the actual conflict. All that can be done is to sort out the conflicts as they arise case by case. If one is willing to give up on the idea that there is an essential human faculty which one has a moral obligation to express appropriately, then there is no important reason to talk about private and public spaces, spheres, vocabularies, or activities when one is deciding what sort of book one should write.

One reason why someone might want to talk about a distinction between private and public books is because it might help literary critics see connections between

---

87 Ibid., p. 145.
different kinds of books which were not previously visible. Of course, this is what any useful classificatory distinction is supposed to accomplish. In this respect, private-public is no different from Rorty proposing that books be organised with a happy-sad distinction, a male-female, or a poor-rich distinction. Whether or not literary critics choose to organise books with one distinction rather than another will depend on whether or not the distinction actually leads to new and interesting connections. So long as Rorty makes no attempt to privilege his distinction over other distinctions, or suggest that one side of his distinction is privileged over the other, there is nothing here to be decided before hand. Like any other tool, a literary classificatory tool will prove its merit only in the work it accomplishes.

When one returns to the general moral problem and examines the tension that can exist between all kinds of projects and not just writing projects, this deflationary assessment of the p-p distinction stands. Once one gives up on the idea of moral priority grounded in essentialism, one need no longer worry about one’s choice being subject to automatic moral condemnation. It should not be misconstrued from this that it is impossible to accuse someone of moral error. The assessment of moral error will be based on the given circumstances of particular instances of moral deliberation rather than the brute application of a priori moral claims. The substance of Rorty’s point is that one cannot automatically be held in moral error simply because one chooses one kind of activity rather than another. Just as in the case of books, Rorty insists there is no way to decide a priori what one should do when faced with the choice of alleviating suffering or perfecting oneself. He writes:

our responsibilities to others constitute only the public side of our lives, a
side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no automatic priority over such private motives. Whether it has priority in any given case is a matter for deliberation, a process which will usually not be aided by appeal to “classical first principles.” Moral obligation is, in this view, to be thrown in with a lot of other considerations, rather than automatically trumping them.  

If one is willing to accept the sentiment of this citation, there is no need for anything like the p-p distinction. It is less complicated simply to say that there are a multitude of activities which can occupy our lives and that sometimes one can choose to do one of them rather than the others and that there is no general answer which can tell us what to do in every situation. It isn’t necessary to complicate matters with talk of distinctions between the private and the public. Given that Rorty’s general dismissal of the idea of a moral priority grounded in essentialism does all the work that is necessary to dispel the tension he once struggled with, why does he feel it necessary to continue to talk about the p-p distinction as an answer to the moral problem?

The answer, I think, lies in Rorty’s admission that he at one time thought that one of the two goals of philosophy “is to achieve argumentative power over others.” When this is combined with another admission, that “[a]s far as [he] could see, philosophical talent was largely a matter of proliferating as many distinctions as were needed to wriggle out of a dialectical corner,” I think Rorty’s motivations for employing the p-p distinction are revealed. The distinction is not intended to merely divide the two kinds of projects but it is also intended to act as an argumentative tool when one defends the choice that one made between the two projects. For example, after the occupation forces

93 Ibid., p. 194.
94 See PSH, p. 10. The other goal “is to enter into a state in which all your own doubts are stilled, but in which you no longer wish to argue.”
leave and you are accused of complacency by the leaders of the resistance because you spent the time of occupation writing self-perfecting haiku instead of actively resisting the occupation, the p-p distinction will allow you to defend yourself on the grounds that you had a right to pursue a private rather than a public project. Alternatively, if you devote your energies to writing “topical trash” that is both popular and a contribution to social hope, the distinction will allow you to defend your work from the accusations of Romantic aesthetes who think you are not an artist. In other words, Rorty expects the distinction to act as a kind of a priori defence for aesthetes when they are reprimanded by do-gooders or when the do-gooders are scoffed at by the aesthetes. He wants the distinction between the private and the public to act as a kind of argumentative trump card when either one is accused of having done wrong.

Although Rorty is willing to give up the idea of automatic moral error, he is unwilling to give up on the idea that one can be automatically correct. He is not entitled to this move. If one cannot automatically be wrong for choosing to pursue one activity over another, one cannot automatically be right for pursuing one, rather than the other. Based on the given circumstances, it may have been incorrect for you to spend your time writing haiku or writing fluffy but helpful human interest stories. Even though Rorty extends the idea of automatic correctness to both sides of the distinction, it does not make the move any more legitimate. Whether or not choosing one activity rather than another was correct or incorrect will depend on the specific given circumstances in which the choice was made. Whether or not the activity was considered private or public is not particularly relevant to sorting out if you made the right choice or not.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
It is, perhaps, necessary for me to state explicitly that I am not trying to convince Rorty or others that all talk about the private and public is illegitimate or wrong. My only point is that too much should not be made of the distinction. Like the literary application of the distinction, talking about private and public projects may be for some people a useful way to organise a life—particularly for people like Rorty who just can’t see a way in which to unite their affections and their responsibilities. What I am resisting is Rorty’s attempt to think that his organisational tool can do more for us than this. When I am forced to choose between two activities, there is no reason to think that, because the activities are judged to be either private or public, one should receive any more or any less weight than the other in my moral deliberations. In the same vein, the p-p distinction cannot be used as a reason to insist that for all people projects of affection cannot be united with projects of responsibility. All that can be said is that sometimes for some people they can be united and sometimes they cannot.

My judgement that the p-p distinction is superfluous when applied to the moral problem is supported by the “Trotsky” article discussed in chapter one. Although this article is devoted to providing autobiographical details which are intended to help explain Rorty’s controversial claims about philosophy and politics, he never once refers to the p-p distinction which occupied such a central place in his most prominent political writings. When, in this article, he discusses CIS, which he describes in another article as having the p-p distinction as its core, he writes, “that book… argues that there is no need to weave one’s personal equivalent of Trotsky and one’s personal equivalent of my wild orchids together. […] they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do
so. This recommendation is considerably softer than the claims that one encounters in CIS. Most noticeably, whereas Rorty once claimed it was necessarily the case that vocabularies of self-perfection and vocabularies of justice could not be united, he here makes the much softer claim that there is no obligation or particularly strong reason to unite them. So long as this is Rorty’s only claim, nothing like a p-p distinction is required. The “Trotsky” article indicates that Rorty might now realise that his p-p distinction was not only expected to do too much but expected to do things which his own views would deem unacceptable.

Assessing the p-p distinction: the political problem
As I have said, the crucial difference between the moral and the political problem is that the latter, unlike the former, concerns a conflict between different people. People can have many kinds of disagreements, but these disagreements only become political problems when they concern the social permissibility of a particular belief or practice. This is because these sort of conflicts can involve the legitimate use of state power. Either the state will be expected to insure that a person’s particular belief or practice is prohibited or it will be expected to insure that no one interferes with the beliefs or practices of another person. By state, I mean, the independent institutions, or institutions, which will be charged with the responsibility of enforcing the rules, regulations and policies of the society of which it is a part. Rorty tends to understand this problem primarily as a conflict between Romantics and Moralists, or, more broadly, as the conflict between the Romantic urges and Moralist ideals of different people; but it need not be so

96 TP, p. 307n2.
97 PSH, p. 13.
narrowly construed. Although my assessment of the p-p distinction’s effectiveness in addressing the political problem will be framed in the terms relevant to the conflict between the Romantic and the Moralist, my arguments will be applicable to any political conflict. The wider relevance of this assessment is due in large part to the influence that Romanticism and Moralism has had on the language of political debate. More often than not, when one encounters disagreements concerning the permissibility of beliefs or practices, one will find the disputants discussing the priority of individual autonomy and the duty to be just.

Imagine that there are two individuals (or two groups of individuals) living in one community. These two individuals are in disagreement over what one of them can do. Jane wants to engage in an activity that she takes to be of central importance to her own project of self-creation. Jack disapproves of this activity because he considers it to be a cause of suffering and, for this reason, he wants to prohibit Jane from engaging in this activity.99 Jane is unwilling to respect Jack’s prohibition because she thinks the activity is of central importance to her idiosyncratic project of self-creation. At this point, Jack will petition the state to intervene. How are we to resolve this fundamental political problem? Rorty, like many liberals before him, suggests that a firm distinction between the public and the private will make it possible to eliminate the need for a decision that favours one or the other disputants. Jane’s activity, because it is part of her project of self-creation, is protected, not open to censure by Jack or the state. No choice needs to be made because there is, in effect, no conflict.

99 Whether or not Jack’s claim is plausible will be settled when the question of whether or not Jane’s activity counts as an instance of cruelty is addressed. In the absence of foundations, the idea of plausibility is just as malleable as the other points of debate that will be hereafter discussed.
The first objection to Rorty's proposed answer is that the distinction between the private and the public does not actually dispel the conflict but simply shifts the terms of the debate and/or eventually hides it. In order to see how the distinction will do this, it will be necessary to imagine how the argument between Jack and Jane will proceed. If Rorty's distinction is unable to dispel the conflict, this will count as an important objection against it.

Rather than arguing about the permissibility of Jane's activity, Jack might argue that Jane's activity is not really private at all. Jane, as a response, will provide a list of reasons why her activity is private. For example, in Rorty's account of the distinction, Jane can claim that her project is private because it is of central importance to her project of self-creation. Jack can reply that it is not private because it causes suffering to others.

Where the disputants were once arguing about the permissibility of a specific act, the argument will now shift to an argument about the relevant features of the class or kind, "private." Whether or not the activity in dispute possesses these features will determine if it is indeed permissible. Jill will insist that her project fits the kind, "private," or insist that it bears close enough of a family resemblance to other "private" projects and, consequently, conclude that her activity is permissible. Without recourse to the idea that there is a natural kind, "private," that will unequivocally settle the debate, it will continue fruitlessly. One can expect the debate to be fruitless because one of the key features of a private project is that its associated activities are permissible and this is exactly what is at issue.

Once this line of argument becomes tiring, Jack might use Jill's idea of a private project to insist that his own project of self-creation requires him to stamp out by
persuasion or force any cause of suffering that he encounters. Insofar as Jill is insisting that he not interfere with her activity, she is interfering with his private project. Rather than argue that Jack’s project doesn’t count as a private project, which would just rehash the previous argument about what makes a project private, Jane might instead insist that when she and her like minded friends gather to pursue their activity, they will not be interfering with Jack’s project so long as he minds his own business. As far as Jane is concerned, Jack can do whatever Jack wants to do on his own time, as long as it doesn’t interfere with what she chooses to do on her own time. To this, Jack will insist that Jane’s activity, insofar as he is sometimes forced to witness the activities of Jane and her friends, interferes with his private life. Jane will insist that mere visibility does not count as interference because Jack can look away or simply be more tolerant. Jack will insist that Jane’s activities are intrusive because she undertakes them in or near an area that Jack has every right in which to be present; so it isn’t at all convenient or appropriate for him to simply grin and bear it. In order for Jane not to infringe on his project of self-creation, by forcing him to ignore one of his central hopes and desires, he will insist that she must undertake her abhorrent activities far from view. If not, Jack will expect Jane to be tolerant of his efforts to dissuade her from her activities. To this, Jane will insist she has every right to conduct her activities near the shared resources to which Jack wants access and will insist that the idea of tolerance does not require her to tolerate his interference.

99 At this point, Jane may choose to leave or she may convince Jack to leave. But, distance is little more than a wide wall. Walls, as was mentioned earlier, hardly seem adequate to the task of keeping antagonistic groups or individuals out of conflict. More will be said on this below. There may have been a time in our history when one could put enough distance between two antagonistic groups that the conflict would effectively be dispelled but those days, until the advent of interstellar travel, are long gone. Not to mention, of course, that if the shared resource that originally brought these two groups together was valuable enough, one could expect a lively debate about who should be required to leave.
At this point, one can expect a hearty debate to commence about the nature of tolerance and what counts as interference. Although the terms have shifted, the point at issue remains the same. Jane’s insistence on tolerance is just a refashioned version of her insistence that her act is permissible. Jack’s insistence that his activities do not count as an intrusion or are, at the very least, a justified intrusion, is just a refashioned version of his claim that it is appropriate for him to prohibit Jane’s activities. Again, nothing is resolved.

Debate continues fruitlessly and no decision is reached. In an effort to avoid further conflict, both parties conduct their activities behind the closed doors of private clubs. They ignore the other person’s activities so long as they don’t see or hear of it and interact with each other so long as it is productive and does not ever involve those things upon which they cannot agree. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that this non-decision will resolve anything. Jack will be the first to experience dissatisfaction with the arrangement. Although, he doesn’t directly encounter Jane’s reprehensible activities, knowing that they continue unabated will be enough to motivate his concern. Although he never sees or hears the evil and no one ever speaks of the activity which he considers impermissible, this does not do anything to change opinion that it shouldn’t be permitted to continue. Jane might initially take satisfaction in the arrangement because she and her associates can pursue their activity in peace; however, in time, she too will become dissatisfied with this arrangement. Everyday, when she goes to the bazaar to engage in trade, she witnesses various activities that, although she is untroubled by them, causes her

[100] One can also easily imagine a new debate starting about what counts as a wall: can I only perform my activity on my own property? What if I rent a hotel or a theatre? Are these the kind of walls that count as private.
to wonder why they can be openly engaged in simply because Jack is untroubled by them. Even if the permissible activities in the bazaar are strictly limited and a simple barter language only ever employed, such that nothing but economic activities are permitted in the bazaar, after being shushed one too many times by the likes of Jack, Jane will resent the fact that an activity which she dearly cherishes must be hidden away behind closed doors because Jack, and others like him are intolerant. This hardly seems fair. So, even as Jack is preparing to break down Jane’s door to put a stop to her abhorrent practices, Jane and her friends are preparing to burst out of those very same doors. At this point, the debate begins anew.

Although this short narrative does not cover every turn in the argumentative road, it does capture the spirit of its rocky terrain. It begins with an argument about whether or not an act is permissible. If an agreement is not reached, the argument turns down a number of narrow dead ends that lead nowhere because, although the terms of the debate change, the substance of the disagreement remains the same. This is not to say that agreement can’t ever be reached. Sometimes, a trip down one of those dead-ends may cause one of the disputants to see his or her position in a new light. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to imagine a debate where both sides are unwilling to give ground. Traditionally, this is the point at which some notion like “truth” or “God’s will” might enter the picture to act as kind of binding arbitrator. Rorty, of course, has given up on the project of finding such an arbitrator. For our purposes here, it is enough to point out that history has demonstrated that the debate will simply shift to an argument about who has most accurately seen truth or who can best hear God’s word. A convenient example of this
kind of argument is the bickering between the Moralist and Romantic camps over who has properly limned the true nature of humanity. Eventually, if people get tired of the argument, they may stop arguing but this does not resolve the conflict. Short of sudden and complete amnesia or forever remaining in a state of total ignorance about the other person or group's activities, it is impossible to imagine any mechanism that will keep the disputants apart for long.

While a physical wall or an insistence on tolerance is not in itself a strong enough mechanism to keep the antagonists apart there is perhaps a way to reinforce the wall and/or buttress the idea of tolerance with other considerations. For example, this debate began because Jane's activity was a cause of suffering. Perhaps, one could stipulate that acts of cruelty—that is, acts that cause suffering—are always intolerable. To this end, one finds Rorty insisting that "we" liberals—that is, people who support his notion of a firm distinction between the public and the private—are also by definition "... people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do." Jane would either simply not engage in her practice because it is cruel or it would be self-evident that such a practice could be prohibited. This approach, while initially promising, quickly reveals itself also to be a dead-end. Even if one disregards the question, "why cruelty" or "why only cruelty and not a whole host of other criteria," one will encounter the problem that cruelty is a rather malleable notion. For example, while many vegetarians consider the consumption of meat to be an act of cruelty, many meat-eaters will admit that animals are harmed but, at the

101 CKB, p. xv.

102 In a move that is suspiciously essentialist, Rorty insists that an activity that is cruel or the cause of suffering and/or humiliation is universally intolerable because pain is the one thing that is universally human. He writes, "[the ironist] ... thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but just susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not
same time, resist the claim that such harm is cruel. The reason some vegetarians insist
that meat-eating is cruel and the reason some meat-eaters resist this claim is because both
realise that the idea of cruelty is closely associated with the question of permissibility.
Cruel acts are precisely those acts that cause a pain too great to be ignored. It would be
foolish for a society to deploy political force in order to prohibit every act that is a cause
of pain (most life-saving surgical procedures would be included on this list); but, once
this admission is made, deciding which acts cause pains that are “too great” will be
tantamount to deciding which acts are permissible. There are certainly extreme instances
of cruelty that most people would recognise as such but, outside of these instances, there
is no reason to think that cruelty is any less controversial a concept than “private.”
Insisting that cruelty and acts that cause suffering and/or humiliation is always grounds
for prohibition is of no great help, because what counts as cruelty, suffering, and
humiliation is highly contested.\textsuperscript{103}

It is important that I not be misconstrued as suggesting that agreement on these
issues cannot be reached. I am concerned with the specific and difficult problem that
develops when two or more equally situated disputants hold opinions upon which they are
unwilling or unable to compromise (because to compromise on this point would be to
compromise on who they think they are). Rorty’s answer to this problem, that we avoid
the decision, is not viable. There is simply no wall high enough to do anything more than
hide or delay the conflict.\textsuperscript{104} Whatever mechanism one proposes to keep the antagonists

\textsuperscript{103} This move is also complicated by the fact that it looks, sometimes, like Rorty wants the concern for
cruelty to have no influence on what one does in one’s private life. See my discussion of Rorty’s version of
the distinction that applies to different kinds of vocabularies.

\textsuperscript{104} Admittedly, delaying the conflict may sometimes end it. Antagonistic individuals and groups may
apart will itself become the contested issue. Rorty's p-p distinction cannot prevent the
debate, it simply delays or rephrases it. Instead of arguing about whether or not this
activity is permissible, one is left arguing whether or not the activity counts as "private"
or any other number of issues that are fundamentally analogous to the question of
permissibility.

This leads to the second and more important objection to Rorty's employment of a
p-p distinction. There is a good reason to think, even if one can imagine a way to keep the
disputants appropriately separated, that the idea behind the distinction's purpose is
flawed. Recall that, its intended purpose is to provide a means whereby a decision can be
avoided. If the point of the distinction is to avoid rendering a decision in favour of either
disputant, refusing to decide in favour of one rather than the other will not succeed in
producing this outcome. In many disputes, to decide not to decide effectively favours the
position of one of the disputants over those of the other. When one simply avoids
rendering a decision on the question of whether or not a particular activity ought to be
prohibited, one effectively decides against the disputant who wants the activity
prohibited, since the activity can continue unabated. More importantly, the activity is
able to continue unabated because political power is deployed to prevent interference.
The walls of private clubs are not impenetrable nor is the tolerance of private spheres
natural. If a person insists that a practice be prohibited, it is only by the employment of
political force that she will not interfere with it. The state will either have to protect the
walls or enforce tolerance. It is for this reason that Rorty's p-p distinction is fatally

simply come to tolerate each other out of habit or even come to realise that their difference are not so deep
or volatile. On the other hand, historical case studies of the very real and very dangerous consequences of
the return of sublimated political conflicts, like the former Yugoslavia, demonstrate the risks of trying to
flawed. In the attempt to evade a decision, it surreptitiously and illegitimately makes one and, consequently, is unable to achieve the very purpose for which it is intended. The distinction favours one of the disputants and, does so, without providing a reason any more substantial than a refusal to decide.

This kind of approach to the political problem looks even more dubious when the disputants are thought of as political equals, as they are in pluralist liberal democracies. If the claims of both disputants, in the absence of further considerations, are equal, to favour one claim over the other for no other reason than an unwillingness or inability to decide is highly unsatisfying to both disputants. It is unsatisfying because the issue at hand is never addressed: that is, whether or not an activity can be legitimately pursued; or whether or not force can, with political legitimacy, be deployed to prohibit it. Because no reasons are provided to legitimate the practice, there is no reason the non-decision decision should be respected by the disputant who had her claim dismissed. In her mind, no reason has been provided that justifies the continuance of the act. On the other side, the disputant who thinks the act is permissible has not been given any reason why it should be limited to the confines of a private sphere—whatever that may amount to. It is a limitation that has been imposed without any reason being offered in defence of its imposition. Because nothing has been claimed about the legitimacy of her activity, there is no reason for her to respect this restraint. Because the distinction doesn't offer any reasons why an activity should be permitted or restrained, there is, literally, no reason why either disputant will be satisfied with this outcome.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{105} This objection, that the p-p distinction provides no satisfying reason why it should be respected, is, I think, powerful given Rorty's recent claim that "what philosophers have described as the universal desire
In this chapter, I advanced two claims. First, I argued that Rorty’s p-p distinction is superfluous when applied to his moral problem because, as he understands it, the problem only develops because two opposed factions, the Romantics and the Moralists, insist that their projects ought to receive priority over all other projects. Once one dispenses with the idea of moral priority, as Rorty does, the problem, in its general or theoretical form, goes with it. There is no reason to employ a distinction because there is no problem left to solve. This is not to say that people can’t and shouldn’t sometimes talk about their private and public projects. As with books, this kind of talk may prove to be a useful way to organise one’s life. It is, however, to insist that this is all the distinction can and should do in relation to the moral problem. It is also to insist that the distinction cannot tell us how to organise our lives or what activities we ought to pursue, because to do so is simply to reintroduce the notion of automatic priority and refashion the old problem in new terms. Second, I argued that the p-p distinction is not only unable to function as Rorty intends it, but is also flawed in principle. The distinction is intended to make it possible for a decision to be avoided when there is a conflict between people. However, in certain instances, the decision not to make a decision, practically speaking, dismisses and denies the claim of one of the disputants. Moreover, because this non-decision does not offer any justification, there is no reason to suppose that either disputant will be satisfied with or respect this approach to the problem.

Of course, the failure of the p-p distinction leaves Rorty, and others sympathetic to his anti-foundational philosophical views, and those sympathetic to the principle of for truth is better described as the universal desire for justification.” See Richard Rorty, “Universality and
pluralism with an unanswered question: how will we resolve the tension between the
Romantic's desire for self-perfection and the moralist's desire to alleviate suffering when
it develops between different people or, more generally, how are we to resolve a dispute
between equally situated disputants in a pluralist society? It is at precisely this point that
philosophers have traditionally entered the picture and attempted to solve the problem by
appealing to some foundation or another. Rorty, who once thought that philosophy and
metaphysics could answer this problem, after deciding that they could not, concluded
from this that a decision could not be rendered at all and consequently developed an
account where a decision need not be made. My critique of Rorty's p-p distinction has
argued that the decision not to make a decision in these kinds of cases is both ineffective
and fundamentally flawed. The implication is, of course, that what is needed in such
disputes is a decision. However, without the authoritarian might of truth or God to settle
this issue, how can one resolve the dispute? One potential for resolving these disputes,
that I would like to consider seriously, is a democratic mechanism of arbitration. In the
next chapter, I will sketch an account of such a mechanism and provide some reasons
why such an account might be effective in these solutions. I will argue that this is the sort
of approach, given his own views, that Rorty should have taken and might have taken had
he not be unduly influenced by a Romantic conception of self-perfection.

Truth" as in RHIC, pp. 1-30; p. 2.
Chapter V: The Priority of Democratic Consensus

In the previous chapter, I argued that Rorty’s p-p distinction, when applied to his moral problem, is superfluous and, when applied to the political problem, unable to function as he intends it to. I also argued that the ambitions behind Rorty’s p-p distinction are misplaced when applied to his political problem, because it represents an attempt to avoid a decision exactly where a decision is required. In this chapter, I will propose an answer to Rorty’s political problem that does not shirk from the responsibility of choosing between the disputants. Based on ideas that Rorty himself advocates, I will propose that conflicts between equally situated disputants be decided by a democratic mechanism of arbitration. I will also argue that this approach to the political problem, given his philosophical commitments, is the one Rorty should have and, indeed, might have endorsed had he not been unduly influenced by the Romantic’s conception of self-perfection and the Moralist’s tendency to associate universalism with the idea of democratic consensus.¹⁰⁶

A Democratic Mechanism of Arbitration and the Political Problem

In the previous chapter, I argued that, in principle, whenever there is a conflict between equally situated disputants, a decision must always be rendered otherwise one illegitimately, by default, favours one disputant rather than the other. I say, “in principle,” because practically speaking a decision cannot always be rendered immediately. And delaying a decision can sometimes not only be practically expedient but also useful. I say, “illegitimately,” because in the absence of a specific decision one disputant is favoured

¹⁰⁶ There is some resemblance between my idea of a democratic mechanism of arbitration and Habermas’ highly refined views. This is a consequence of the fact that Rorty’s democratic views, of which I am
without any reason being given for that favour. An insistence that a decision must be rendered, and an insistence, for argument's sake, that there is no obvious reason to choose between the two disputants, leaves one in want of some mechanism with which to break the deadlock. Because agents typically want to have at least some minimum sense of control over their own affairs, it is unlikely that a coin toss or some other mechanism of chance will be widely accepted. Since the will of God or the demands of truth are currently out of reach, one is left to look towards another individual or a group of individuals to decide the issue. As far as an individual is concerned, despots, monarchs, dictators, philosopher kings, experts and any other kind of single supreme judge that one can imagine are options and have been historical choices. The alternative to letting one person decide the matter is, of course, to allow a group of individuals to decide. Depending on the size of the group that is selected to arbitrate and who is included in it, the mechanism of arbitration becomes increasingly democratic. Once it is settled that a group of individuals will arbitrate, and the disputants agree to accept their decision as binding, the process of dispute resolution is, in principle, straightforward: whichever disputant is selected by the method of arbitration will have his position favoured and enforced. If one assumes that both disputants keep their word and respect the outcome concerned here, are influenced by Habermas' work. However, I am not familiar enough with Habermas' work to assess how deep the similarities may be.

There is also the risk that relying on this mechanism would encourage a stubborness born not out of deeply felt convictions but out of a willingness to take a gamble on chance. Purists will insist that a mechanism of arbitration is only fully democratic once every member of the community is included.

For simplicity's sake, for the time being, I will not worry about what counts as "the most support." An appropriate percentage can be hashed out once the principle of democratic arbitration is accepted. One can imagine that the figure might be anywhere between 50 % + 1 and 100%. This is, nevertheless, an important question to be settled once the idea of the political priority of democratic consenus is accepted. Rorty, for example, has made it clear that he doesn't think a simple majority is very convincing in the way of settling opinions, but he has also made it clear that he thinks to insist on 100 % agreement is too stringent. See
of the arbitration, the conflict is, for the time being, resolved. Any conflict resolution procedure that proceeds along these lines, I will call a democratic mechanism of arbitration.

The idea of arbitration is emphasised because the mechanism is intended, first and foremost, to decide between the claims of disputants. The method of arbitration is described as a mechanism in order to emphasise that it will be procedural and will, eventually, be modelled in the socio-political practices of a community and in its basic institutions. Finally, the mechanism of arbitration is described as democratic because the procedures will be designed so as to allow a significant percentage of a community’s population to determine which of the two disputant’s claims should be favoured and enforced. For the time being, it is enough to say that a significant majority of the community’s population, of which the disputants are members, must be consulted and, of those who participate, a significant majority must decide in favour of one disputant’s claim if it is to be the one favoured and enforced. Like other forms of binding arbitration, the disputants must accept the process of the democratic mechanism of arbitration in advance of knowing its outcome and also must agree to accept its outcome whatever it may be. In effect, this notion of a democratic mechanism of arbitration is created by marrying the practice of binding arbitration to a democratic principle—that is, the idea that political priority be granted to whatever opinion is agreed upon by a majority of individuals in a free and open discussion involving all or most members of a given community.

*Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace* as in TP, pp. 43-62; pp. 50 & 55.

115 It should be said that a democratically agreed upon Charter of Rights could be, and might even need to be, drawn up in order to prevent certain sorts of outcomes. Of course, such a Charter would have to be open to democratically sanctioned change and conflicts in regards to its interpretation would need to be settled democratically.
community. It is this mechanism that I think is the best means to resolve Rorty’s political problem.

It is important to make clear what it is that I hope to accomplish. I cannot claim that the comments in this chapter represent an unequivocal defence of the political priority of democratic consensus. Rather my primary objective is to argue that Rorty (and, by extension, others who believe that Truth-claims are unprofitable in political debate) should accept the unmitigated political priority of democratic consensus in instances of political conflict. In other words, when a conflict arises between two or more people about what is or isn’t a permissible activity (such as exists between the Romantic and the Moralist), I propose that the conflict be settled by the majority opinion of the community in which the disputants reside. Although this might seem like a rather minute academic exercise, this claim has implications that go beyond Rorty-scholarship. As I said in the introduction, contemporary pluralist communities, insofar as they encourage and embrace pluralism, are in want of a mechanism of dispute resolution that does not decide issues based on Truth-claims. So long as pluralist communities exists, the idea of a democratic mechanism of arbitration may have wider relevance.

Rather than argue for the acceptance of a democratic mechanism of arbitration because of some claim about the legitimate sovereignty of the people, or some claim about the authentic expression of humanity’s freedom, or about the epistemological value of consensus, I will argue, instead that the mechanism is the best method with which “to fix” political “belief.” In this view, political debate and decision making is understood to be just another species of inquiry and the democratic mechanism of arbitration will be endorsed on the grounds that it is the best means with which to bring to an end, if only
temporarily, this kind of inquiry. Because what we are concerned with is political inquiry, and the fixation of a political belief, one should not make too much of the word “belief” or what it means “to fix” it. The conflict between the disputants is the political analogue of the doubt that leads to inquiry and the mechanism of arbitration, insofar as it chooses one side or another, is the political equivalent of the fixation of belief. By the “fixation of belief,” when one is speaking politically, all that is meant is that a decision has been rendered concerning the actions of members of a given community in the circumstances that gave rise to the conflict. This inquiry is not epistemological and, consequently, its conclusions are silent concerning the truth of such claims. The only purpose of a political inquiry is the satisfactory resolution of a conflict between the equally situated disputants.\footnote{Because I have argued that a decision must be made in regards to such conflicts, what is at issue is whether or not the best mechanism of arbitration for these kinds of disputes is one designed in accordance with the democratic principle.}

The primary motivation for endorsing a specifically democratic mechanism of arbitration originates in Rorty’s anti-foundational account of scientific inquiry and recent socio-historical studies that attribute the achievements of Western science, primarily, to the scientific community’s ability to generate consensus and the specifically democratic

\footnote{I am, in this paragraph, self-consciously employing Peircian terminology, as it appears in “The Fixation of Belief.” See Essays in Philosophy of Science ed. Vincent Thomas (USA: Liberal Arts Press Inc., 1957); pp.3-38. It should be, by now, needless to say that there is a great deal of philosophical terrain and history between C. S. Peirce and Rorty. In 1903, Peirce, in a footnote attached to the same article mentioned above, was already distancing himself from William James’ attempt to dislodge Peirce’s pragmatism from its Realist origins. Peirce’s non-Realist realism in unequivocal: He writes, “To satisfy our doubts, therefore, it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect [But which, on the other hand, unceasingly tends to influence thought; or in other words, by something Real—added 1903]” (P. 24.). Although Peirce would have no truck with my own non-realist perspective, I don’t think it inappropriate to borrow his account of inquiry, since we disagree only on what it is that will fix belief.}
means it has employed to generate that consensus. In Rorty’s view of scientific inquiry, western scientists have been successful in generating widespread consensus within their respective communities because they have “frequently been conspicuous exemplars of certain moral virtues.” The sort of virtues that Rorty routinely emphasises are a willingness to rely on persuasion rather than force, to accept and encourage free and open inquiries, to respect the opinions of one’s colleagues, and to be patient. In other words, science has been successful in solving the problems that have been set to it because scientists have conducted their inquiries democratically. Because the history of science provides good evidence to support the claim that democratic procedures are conducive to the successful resolution of scientific inquiry, it makes good sense to apply similar procedures to the problems of political inquiry. Moreover, it provides good reasons to believe that these procedures will be equally successful in settling political belief.

Rorty’s account of science is, to be sure, highly controversial. The work he most often marshals in support of his views are Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd Edition (The University of Chicago Press, 1970) and Mary Hesse’s Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). Rorty characterises his position as “left-wing Kuhnianism” in order to distinguish his understanding of scientific inquiry from some of Kuhn’s more conservative philosophical assertions. Rorty’s understanding of science and inquiry can be found in the first six essays of ORT. Needless to say, any definitive defence of the democratic mechanism I am proposing will need to address this controversy head-on. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to do this, so, in deference to the controversy, I will claim only that these democratic procedures are instrumental to, rather than solely responsible for, the success of science.

This is an incredibly bold statement but it is the claim Rorty makes. In particular, see “Is Natural Science A Natural Kind” as in ORT. Because my concern here is Rorty’s views, it is not illegitimate to use this bold claim. Of course, if this claim is to be used in a more general defence of democracy (which is not my concern here) much more work will be needed to substantiate it. If it were the case that I was not taking Rorty’s account of science for granted, this claim would need to address arguments that there is something importantly different about practices of inquiry that concern people and not objects. If philosophers like Charles Taylor are correct, and there is something essentially different about human activity such that the “sciences of humanity” require methods of inquiry distinct from “the natural sciences,” it may not be as easy to make the move I am suggesting. However, in Rorty’s account of science there is no such worry. For Taylor’s views see “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man” as in Readings in The Philosophy of Social Science eds. Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), pp. 1821-211. Rorty discusses his account of the relationship between the social and
The principle reason to think that Rorty's political problem will be best solved by the proposed democratic mechanism of arbitration is the fact that it directly addresses what is at issue in a political conflict and, in doing so, provides a reason for disputants to accept decisions that are not in their favour. Recall, one disadvantage of Rorty's p-p distinction is that it does not provide any reasons why disputants should accept the political force employed to enforce the constraints associated with the p-p distinction. The distinction is unable to provide such reasons because it makes no claim about what is at issue in the conflict it seeks to address (whether or not a particular activity or belief should or should not be prohibited). In contrast, the democratic mechanism of arbitration will explicitly pass judgement on whether or not a particular activity is permissible. The decision will be justified by the fact that the majority of the community, after a free and open discussion concerning the relative merits of both disputant's claims, explicitly supports one claim over the other or some other compromise. This claim will, in turn, be justified by the claim that there is a good reason to believe (e.g. the success of science) that the most successful solutions to problems are those which are endorsed by the majority of a large pluralistic community of conscientious and democratic inquirers. Unlike a p-p distinction, the democratic mechanism of arbitration provides specific reasons why a particular decision should be respected.

To see this point more clearly, imagine for a moment that the outcome of a democratic mechanism of arbitration is that a certain kind of activity be whenever...
possible let alone. Although this outcome imitates a p-p distinction, it is importantly different. Most importantly, the recommendation to let certain activities alone is the outcome of an explicit, democratically-accepted, political choice and is not a by-product of an attempt to evade a decision. This difference is crucial because, if a decision of this kind is reached, the decision process itself serves to explain how and why the tolerated projects are let alone. The required tolerance will be grounded, generated, and encouraged in an actual specific decision to tolerate rather than at the arbitrary insistence of another individual or a wall as it is in Rorty’s p-p distinction. Furthermore, if the tolerance erodes, or the circumstances change, or an unforeseen conflict emerges, a clear mechanism is in place to resolve any future conflict. The p-p distinction has no such mechanism in place. People are simply left to argue it out with no specific or fair way to bring debate to a close.

Another virtue in favour of a democratic mechanism of arbitration is that it will encourage, within the communities in which it is employed, a kind of freedom and mutual recognition that Rorty’s p-p distinction cannot. In a community strictly regulated along the lines of Rorty’s p-p distinction, there are a whole host of beliefs that must be excluded from the “public” domain of political inquiry and debate. In effect, one is prohibited from openly expressing one’s views and this kind of public censure limits the extent to which members of a community might recognise each other as equals. After all, many of a person’s most important beliefs must be hidden away so as to avoid the risk of conflict. In sharp contrast, a democratic mechanism of arbitration censures no belief and any and doctrines” (PL, p. xx).

In practice, of course, all sorts of “private” beliefs make their way into public debate. This only helps substantiate my point that a p-p distinction is incapable of functioning as it is intended.
every kind of belief can be employed in the process of trying to win the favour of the group of arbitration. A democratic mechanism of arbitration encourages this kind of openness because it is designed to address conflict as opposed to hiding it. The more opinions expressed in any particular deliberation, the more likely it is that a satisfactory resolution will be reached; because there will be more alternatives from which to choose. Political freedom of this kind, which is simply not permitted in a society governed in accordance with Rorty's p-p distinction, will not only encourage a plurality of voices—that will in turn encourage the development of unexpected and novel approaches to political problems—but it will increase the potential for mutual recognition. The most obvious reason for this is that no beliefs or practices need be hidden away. Although a particular practice may be prohibited, the person who endorses such a practice is recognised as an equal insofar as his claim is taken to be a legitimate object of discussion and consideration by other members of the community and, in the second place, the question of the legitimacy of the practice can always be reopened, for example, if a decision is overturned and a new decision is needed. Recall, a democratic mechanism of arbitration makes no claim about the epistemological status or the moral value of prohibited beliefs, it merely determines which claim will receive political priority in particular instances of conflict. Although purely procedural constraints may be required in regards to the reopening of debate in order to prevent sheer stubbornness or spitefulness from ruling the day (say, a particular claim can not be reintroduced for a fixed period time or if the specific given circumstances of a situation changes), the fact that the mechanism of arbitration settles only the political status of beliefs and practices means that prohibited beliefs and practices are always open to reconsideration. In a society divided by a p-p
distinction, this kind of mutual recognition, one that involves a recognition of the whole person, is impossible because of the attempt to hide difference in order to avoid conflict.

Because this thesis is primarily concerned with Rorty’s work in social and political philosophy, there is an important question that must be asked: why did Rorty resist the democratic implications of his own views. After all, my endorsement of the democratic principle is primarily inspired and/or borrowed from his views, and he himself frequently tells his readers that we

...should be content to call “true” (or “right” or “just”) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open and encounter.\footnote{19}

Instead of embracing this democratic conclusion, Rorty for almost a decade employed and defended a p-p distinction in order to limit the scope of his democratic conclusions by preserving and safeguarding a “sphere” in which the individual will is always and totally sovereign. Behind a wall or “veil of tolerance”, the individual was to be allowed to act in whatever manner he desires, regardless of the opinion of others and whatever consensus is reached about what counts as permissible or impermissible behaviour. Since this idea of absolute private freedom is contrary to the democratic principle he endorses in the citation above, it will be useful to highlight what it is exactly that motivated Rorty to resist a full endorsement of this democratic principle. After doing this, I will allay these worries and, in so doing, dismiss some plausible objections to the democratic mechanism of arbitration.

**Philosophy, politics, and democratic implications**

Before turning to the question of why it is Rorty resisted the democratic
implications of his views, it must first be established as to whether there are any such implications. While the democratic mechanism I have sketched above, based as it is on Rorty’s views, suggests that there are such implications, is there any reason to think this? Rorty, for example, frequently suggests that his views need not necessarily have only democratic implications. He writes:

Philosophy and politics are not that tightly linked. There will always be room for a lot of philosophical disagreement between people who share the same politics, and for diametrically opposed political views among philosophers of the same school. In particular, there is no reason why a fascist could not be a pragmatist, in the sense of agreeing with pretty much everything Dewey said about the nature of truth, knowledge, rationality and morality.¹²⁹

Rorty’s point is not so implausible when one remembers that he often describes Nietzsche, an avowed totalitarian, and Heidegger, an unrepentant Nazi, as proto-pragmatists concerning the nature of truth, knowledge, etc.¹²¹ However, Rorty undercuts his claim that his anti-foundational pragmatism is so malleable as to be used for any political purpose when he admits, “[f]or all that, Dewey was not entirely wrong when he called pragmatism ‘the philosophy of democracy’.”¹²² What allows this vacillation is Rorty’s description of philosophy and politics as being “not that tightly linked.” The key concern is just how “tight” the connection between philosophy and politics can be or whether or not the connection even needs to be all that tight for philosophical views to

¹¹⁹ CIS, p. 67.
¹²⁰ PSH, p. 23.
¹²¹ In addition to the political claims of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Mark Migotti tells me that Carl Schmitt is a political philosopher who thinks that the correct political implications to derive from views similar to Rorty’s anti-foundationalism is totalitarianism. See for example The Concept of the Political (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1976). For Rorty’s account of how Heidegger’s views intersect with pragmatism, see “Heidegger, contingency, and pragmatism” as in EHO; pp. 27-65. Rorty peppers much of his work with references to Nietzsche and how his views intersect with pragmatism. There is much to be found in CIS.
¹²² Ibid., p. 24.
have important, if not decisive, implications for politics. After all, while Rorty wants to insist there is no such thing as “a philosophical view... which will lend itself only to good causes,” he still thinks his anti-foundational pragmatism is relevant enough to imply, in politics, that we should “substitute hope for the sort of knowledge which philosophers have usually tried to attain.” There is, even for Rorty, some connection between philosophy and politics.

It is important first to notice that the political implications of Rorty’s views, by his own admission, originate in his repudiation of foundational accounts of knowledge and representational accounts of belief. His antipathy towards these accounts are “among other things, a protest against the idea that human beings must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality.” Rorty’s views offer an account of inquiry in which it is no longer conceived of as the process of determining to which non-human power humans must subjugate themselves. While this anti-authoritarian account of inquiry is the first crucial step to substantiate the claims that Rorty’s views have important democratic implications, it is, by itself, not sufficient. Just because we need not subjugate ourselves to something non-human, it does not follow that we must pursue a democratic ideal which “requires us to set aside any authority save that of a consensus for our fellow human.” One might, it seems, just as easily claim, that one isn’t required to subjugate oneself to any and all authority—

including the authority of democratic consensus. The second step concerns the question

123 Ibid., p. 23.
124 Ibid., p. 24.
125 Richard Rorty “Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism” as in Revue Internationale de Philosophie No. 207 (1999); pp. 7-20, 7.
of justification. If Rorty is correct in his claim that a belief has no greater epistemic status
due to its relation to a non-human power, whether or not a belief is justified, whether or
not it has "warranted assertibility," will be the final measure of its worth. A belief is
justified, has warranted assertibility, according to Rorty, when it coheres with our own
beliefs and the beliefs of our peers. This means that justification is always relative to an
audience and this means that if a justified belief is what you want, you will have to
convince your fellow inquirers of its merits. Of course, insisting that justification is
relative to an audience does not commit us to any particular view on how one should
justify one's beliefs. One might choose to use violence and intimidation to force one's
fellow inquirers to change their beliefs to cohere with one's own. Are there good reasons
to think that this method of justifying one's beliefs is unacceptable and one should
employ only democratic methods? To put it differently, are there good reasons to think
that an anti-foundational pragmatist couldn't be violent and anti-democrat as well?

Whether or not there exist any good reasons why one shouldn't use force to
generate consensus is precisely the point at which the question of whether or not Rorty's
philosophical claims have democratic implications will be settled. The anti-foundational
democrat might insist that the anti-foundational views he shares with the anti-democrat
make it impossible for him to justify his violent methods for generating consensus. The
anti-democrat cannot appeal to God's Will or Truth; so he, just like the democrat, is
required to turn to his fellow inquirers in order to justify his anti-democratic methods and,
surely, they would not endorse such a method. To this, the anti-democrat might insist that
he has no interest in justifying his claims to others and has of yet not been given any good

\[126\] Ibid.
reason to think he should have such an interest. Alternatively, he will point out that this community does not support his methods but it is possible for him to imagine a community of inquirers that would. Because the democrat must concede the anti-democrat's second point (there have been such communities, there are such communities, and there is no reason to think there won't continue to be such communities), he will try to provide good reasons why the anti-democrat should not only be interested in justifying his beliefs to others but also to justify them according to democratic procedures. One might, as I already have done with the procedures of science, point to particular instances in which the employment of democratic procedures has had useful and worthwhile results. Unfortunately, this line of argument will only be convincing if the anti-democrat agrees with what is meant by "useful" and "worthwhile." The anti-democrat might, as the Romantic does with the procedures pertaining to the creation of art, just as easily point to instances in which the employment of anti-democratic procedures has had useful and worthwhile results. The democrat, at this point, might try to cast the form of life encouraged by a democratic community in an attractive light, but the anti-democrat could just as easily do the same concerning his own anti-democratic utopian community. Both sides will continue to offer reasons why an anti-foundationalist must be democratic or anti-democratic and there is no reason to expect that any one reason will decisively decide the matter.

It is because his views don't provide a decisive reason why an anti-foundationalist can not also be an anti-democrat that Rorty thinks the connection between philosophy and politics is not that tight. He writes:

I think we have to rest content with saying that no philosophical thesis,
either about contingency or about truth, does anything *decisive* for
democratic politics. By 'decisive' I mean doing what... Habermas wants
to do... The most that an insistence on contingency can do for democracy
is to supply some more debating points on the democratic side of the
argument.127

Rorty doesn't see a tight connection between philosophy and politics because he thinks
that, in order for such a connection to be tight, philosophy must provide a *decisive*
reason—the kind of reason Habermas wants—in favour of one kind of politics over
another. The kind of reason that Habermas wants, according to Rorty, is a reason that
cannot be countered and, consequently, is capable of forcing any and all audiences to
accept the claim it is said to justify. If one agrees with Rorty that it is only a lingering
metaphysical hope that makes the possibility of such a super-reason seem plausible, one
will wonder why he characterises his anti-foundationalism, in this passage, as falling
short of this lofty goal. It isn’t a shortcoming that philosophical views cannot provide
anything more than “a debating point on the democratic side of the argument” because,
without recourse to a “winner-takes-all” kind of reason, all that anyone or any view can
do is provide these kind of debating points. Once one is on Rorty’s intellectual terrain,
one must admit that justification involves nothing more than the attempt to convince
people of the error of their ways and the merits of your own. There is no single debating
point that will do this automatically, but each debating point mustered in support of a
view or against an opponent’s view goes some way towards making a case. Accumulation
of enough such points might convince an opponent opinion of the merit of one’s view.

If Rorty only means to say, when he says that his anti-foundational views aren’t so
tightly connected to politics, that they will not in and of themselves force a person to be

---

127 "Universality and Truth", p. 14
democratic then he is, of course, correct. However, just because his views don’t provide or act as the kind of super-reason that Habermas wants, it doesn’t follow from this that they don’t provide any reasons in support of democracy. The connection between philosophy and politics might not be as tight as the metaphysician would like it, but it is tight enough to claim that his philosophical views have important political implications. Even if his philosophical views do not provide a decisive reason in defence of democracy and even if other political implications can be drawn from them, it is still legitimate to say that they have implications that support the legitimacy of democratic procedures. They won’t, independent of other reasons, settle the matter, but they will contribute something to the debate. As far as implications go, one could hardly expect anything else.

This point is partially obscured because Rorty most often discusses the political relevance of his beliefs in the context of the debate between the democrat and the anti-democrat. Because these two disputants are so diametrically opposed, it is difficult to imagine reasons other than Habermas’ super-reasons that either disputant would take to be decisive. While this is an important and hard case, it tends to obscure the argumentative utility of reasons that are not expected to be able to convince every imaginable disputant. A reason need not be effective in every debate, with every audience, in order for it to be counted as a good and useful reason. There are all kinds of debates in which the disputants are not so diametrically opposed as to be unaffected by all reasons but super-reasons. Rorty’s views might not be particularly useful against the unequivocal anti-democrat, but they can be effectively employed against an opponent

128 Rorty makes a point similar to this against Habermas—although with a different spin. Rorty wants to insist he can’t imagine what a reason that could work against any and every audience would look like and suggests that claiming one’s reason could do that is just an empty boast. See, “Universality and Truth.”
who shares some of his political sympathies. For example, Rorty’s views would be unconvincing to purely Romantic anti-democrats like Nietzsche and Heidegger but they might be able to convince a liberal ironist that to cede complete political priority to democratic consensus—that is, to become a democrat rather than remain a liberal—makes good sense. Rorty’s error is to sometimes write as if reasons which do not have universal aspirations do not have any argumentative utility at all.\footnote{I am not the only one who has noticed this tendency in Rorty. Richard Bernstein writes, “Rorty constantly slides from a strong sense of “rational justification” to a weaker and more reasonable sense of justification. When he criticises our ability to give reasons in support of the central beliefs of our final vocabularies, he means we cannot give definitive knock-down and foundational justifications. But this should not be confused with giving historically contingent fallible reasons to support our beliefs. This is what Rorty himself is constantly doing. We don’t need strong foundations in order to assess whether reasons given in specific inquiries are good reasons.” See, “Rorty’s Liberal Utopia”, p. 54.}

Democratic consensus, idiosyncrasy and the fear of homogeneity

Rorty’s reluctance to embrace fully the democratic implications of his views begins at the problematic intersection between his anti-foundational account of language and his admiration of a literary tradition in which the quest for maximal originality is sacrosanct. Rorty’s commitment to an anti-foundational account of language and its corresponding holistic understanding of meaning commits him to the view that “[t]o have a meaning is to have a place in a language game.”\footnote{An important consequence of this view is that if one utters a meaningful sentence, it is an indication that the utterance has a place in a pre-existing language game. Because it is required of an utterance that it have a place in a pre-existing language game in order for it to have a meaning, a completely original utterance—that is, an utterance which has no place in any pre-existing language game—will necessarily be meaningless. In other words, a maximally original or idiosyncratic utterance, or, for that matter, final vocabulary, will, from the perspective of...}
normal language users, appear to be nothing but gibberish. This conclusion is problematic for Rorty because it requires the Romantic’s idea of self-perfection, maximal originality, to be not only characterised as nonsense but it also implies that democratic communities, because of their emphasis on consensus, will never favour a maximally original belief, practice, or final vocabulary. If, with Rorty, one cherishes the idea behind the Romantic’s vision of self-perfection, one will be reluctant to endorse a democratic mechanism of arbitration since it appears to be necessarily antagonistic to the Romantic’s project of self-perfection.

In order to see clearly Rorty’s worries consider a community that takes seriously his recommendation to accept as true the outcome of democratic encounters. Because this method of arbitration requires dialogue and eventually consensus, it must, even if minimally, rely on shared meanings, practices, language games and other common terms of reference. Since the very thing that the Romantic wants to pursue is, by definition, ineffable and beyond these common terms of reference, how can he hope to defend his project of self-perfection? If widespread assent is the condition of success in a democratically settled conflict, that which the Romantic hopes to achieve, once achieved, is effectively indefensible. Because it simply isn’t possible to convince a group of people to endorse a belief that is, by definition, unrecognisable to them as a belief, it looks as if democratic procedures are intrinsically antagonistic to Romantic projects. Although Rorty is, of course, worried about the Romantic, his worries run deeper. If a democratic mechanism of arbitration disadvantages the Romantic’s claims due to their radical idiosyncrasy, it looks as if these procedures will also disadvantage claims that are unique

131 CIS, p. 18
enough to be not transparently understood by others. It looks as if democratic procedures are not only antagonistic to the Romantic's project but are also inherently antagonistic to anything that is idiosyncratic and novel.

This worry is further aggravated by Rorty's tendency to associate the Moralist's idea of universalism with the idea of democratic consensus. For the Moralist, a universally shared belief should not only be obligatory but it should also be central to the individual's own self-understanding. Because of the moral priority that the Moralist gives to these beliefs, he also insists that the more beliefs an individual has in common with others the better. If a democratic mechanism of arbitration's reliance on consensus implies this kind of universalism, then it looks as if a measure of cultural homogeneity will almost certainly be a by-product of democratic procedures. While this is, for Rorty, a worry in itself, the threat of cultural homogeneity only underscores the fact that novelty and idiosyncrasy appear to be threatened by a mechanism of arbitration that relies on democratic consensus.

There are, therefore, two interrelated issues that contribute to Rorty's reluctance to embrace the democratic implications of his anti-foundational views. Rorty is concerned that a community which gives political priority to democratic consensus will be antagonistic to idiosyncrasy and will be prone to homogeneity. The first concern can be

---

131 My best guess is that Habermas is most responsible for encouraging Rorty's association of the Moralist's idea of universalism with democratic consensus. This is not, of course, meant to attribute these views to Habermas but, instead, to Rorty's characterisation of Habermas' views.

132 Unfortunately, I cannot find any single quote that will neatly demonstrate that these two worries are indeed Rorty's worries. Nevertheless, I think it is a fair characterisation of a sentiment that runs through all of Rorty's work. His concern for the idiosyncratic can be found in his insistence that "We should let a hundred flowers bloom" (COP, p. 219) and his worry about cultural homogeneity can be discerned in his insistence that a person's public vocabulary, the part of him which consists of universally shared beliefs, should be as small as possible (CIS, p. 106).
traced back to the Romantic’s association of self-perfection with the maximally original and the second can be traced to Rorty’s association of the idea of democratic consensus to the Moralist’s idea of universalism. If these are the only concerns (and I think they are) preventing Rorty from embracing the democratic implications of his views, if they can be convincingly dismissed, one might expect Rorty to endorse something like the democratic mechanism of arbitration that I have proposed.133

In order to dismiss the first worry, that democratic procedures are necessarily antagonistic to idiosyncrasy, one need only point out that it is generated by an illegitimate equivocation between the Romantic’s idea of the maximally original and the ordinary understanding of originality.134 In order to see this, one must first recognise the artificiality of the Romantic’s idea of maximal originality. In formulating the idea of maximal originality, the Romantic tradition, as understood by Rorty, emphasises the importance of difference, idiosyncrasy, and novelty in the assessment of originality and then identifies their goal of maximal originality with difference alone. What the Romantic fails to recognise is that originality, as it is conventionally understood, requires, is, in fact, dependent upon commonly held meanings, terms of reference, language games etc.. The claim to originality is, first and foremost, a claim about something’s relation to sameness,

---

133 Dispelling these worries will also be crucial to a more general defence of the priority of democratic consensus. At the centre of J.S. Mill’s *On Liberty* (as in *Utilitarianism* ed. Mary Warnock (London: Collins, 1974); pp. 126-250.) is an impassioned defence of individuality. Mill, with his famous worries about a “tyranny of the majority,” locates much of this worry, as Rorty does, in the perception that a community which allows public opinion to hold sway will be intolerant to originality and be prone to homogeneity. He writes: “Originality is the one thing that unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of. They cannot see what it is to do for them: how should they? If they could see what it would do for them, it would not be originality” (195) and “A more powerful agency than all these, in bringing about a general similarity among mankind, is the complete establishment, in this and other free countries, of the ascendancy of public opinion in the State” (204).

134 After this section, I will highlight some recent work of Rorty’s that indicates he now recognises the undue influence that the Romantic’s conception of novelty has had on his work.
the common, the ordinary, etc. If there are no common terms of reference upon which such a claim can be asserted and assessed, a claim to originality cannot be made. Insofar as the Romantic’s idea of maximal originality disregards this fact, it distorts the way in which originality is ordinarily understood. Originality, as it is normally understood, isn’t threatened by a democratic mechanism of arbitration; only the Romantic’s artificial understanding of originality is threatened. The worry that idiosyncratic, novel, or original beliefs, projects, etc., will be automatically dismissed out of hand only seems troubling if one illegitimately injects the absolute unintelligibility of the Romantic’s artificial idea of the maximally original back into what is normally understood of as originality. As long as one emphasises the important difference between the idea of the maximally original and normal originality, it becomes clear that a democratic mechanism of arbitration is antagonistic to the former rather than the latter. 135

Although it cannot be claimed that a democratic mechanism of arbitration is necessarily antagonistic to novelty, it still seems antagonistic to the Romantic notion of maximal originality and this, to a Romantic, may be enough to warrant the imposition of a limitation on the political priority of democratic consensus. In response to such a claim, it is best just to be straightforward and insist that this notion of maximal originality is unintelligible. Donald Davidson’s claim, frequently employed by Rorty, that “nothing…could count as evidence that some form of activity should not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech

135 Stubbornness, ignorance, pride, resentment, and jealousy are, of course, all potential threats to originality. These are human habits with which all political systems must cope and there are no legitimate reasons to think that democratic procedures will encourage them any more than any other political procedures.
behaviour," works as well against the Romantic’s notion of maximal originality as it does against the idea of conceptual schemes. Any belief, practice or final vocabulary that had nothing in common with the beliefs, practices, or final vocabularies of any language user would simply be unrecognisable as a belief, practice, or final vocabulary. Any evidence in support of the claim that a belief, practice, or final vocabulary is maximally original is, in effect, evidence in support of the claim that the so-called belief, practice, or final vocabulary isn’t any of those things. Because Rorty is willing to admit that the very idea of maximal originality, like the very idea of a conceptual scheme, is simply nonsense and “that there can be no fully Nietzschean lives, […]—no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-redescribed past …”, his willingness to accommodate the Romantic’s project is best explained as having originated in the worry generated by the equivocation between the Romantic’s notion of maximal originality and the ordinary understanding of originality that I addressed above. Once that equivocation is noticed, there seems to be little reason to go to any special lengths to accommodate the Romantic’s project.

If this straightforward approach is unpalatable, there are two other comments to be made on this matter. First, it need only be pointed out that conflict, just like consensus, requires some shared terms of reference. A maximally original belief, practice, or final vocabulary, if such a thing could exist, is by definition unrecognisable to anyone but its author and, consequently, would be unobjectionable to everyone. If a maximally original belief is unobjectionable then it cannot become involved in a conflict between different

---

people and will not be subject to the outcomes of a democratic mechanism of arbitration. Since maximally original beliefs will never be subject to the outcome of a democratic mechanism of arbitration, it makes no sense to say they are threatened or unfairly treated by it. Finally, the Romantic may insist that his views require some kind of special consideration from the members of his community because of the unique nature of that which is the goal of his project of self-perfection. He might, for example, insist that his project of self-perfection requires him to engage in activities that are admittedly recognisable to others and impermissible by their lights but are also entirely necessary if he has a chance of attaining his unique goal. At this point, one need only point out that the Romantic’s project of self-perfection is only one among many visions of perfection in a pluralist society and, consequently, cannot automatically claim any special privilege. The Romantic is welcome to try to convince the other members of his community of the merits of his claims, so long as it goes into the mix with all the other similar claims. A democratic mechanism of arbitration is indifferent to which side carries the day, so long as it is the side that wins the appropriate level of support.

The second of Rorty’s worries, that communities which give priority to democratic consensus will tend to become homogenous, originates in his tendency to associate democratic consensus with a Moralist’s understanding of universalism in which it is insisted that universally agreed upon beliefs should not only be pursued but once achieved must also be given priority in one’s life. Moreover, the Moralist insists, one should also maximise the number of beliefs of this kind that one holds. In order to allay the fear of homogeneity, it will be necessary to highlight the important differences

---

137 CIS, p. 42.
between democratic consensus and the Moralist's idea of universalism. In doing so, it will be clear that a democratic mechanism of arbitration does not encourage the kind of cultural homogeneity that a Moralist's universalism might.

What is most in need of emphasis is that the achievement of democratic consensus on some matter carries with it no further recommendation on how one should incorporate what has been agreed upon into one's own self-understanding. Democratic consensus has priority only for, and does not extend beyond, the context of the particular situation that brought about the conflict. So long as particular democratic decisions are respected, individual members of the community are free to incorporate what has been agreed upon into their own final vocabulary however they wish. For example, a political decision to prohibit prayer in school need not affect one's opinion on either the appropriateness of prayer in school or one's opinion of prayer in general. It may, of course, affect one's opinion but there is no necessary reason why it must. So long as the decision is respected, an individual can believe whatever he wants about its merits. A democratic mechanism of arbitration is indifferent to why a person obeys a decision, so long as he does.

This crucial difference between the Moralist's idea of universalism and the political priority of democratic consensus can be sharpened by emphasising that the Moralist's idea of universalism attempts to unite a political claim about the best way to resolve disputes between different people with a strong moral claim about what beliefs, values, and practices an individual person must most value. A democratic mechanism of arbitration does not require any such connection between political priority and moral priority because there is no necessary reason to infer from widespread, even universal, consensus, that whatever has been agreed upon is something that everyone must cherish.
and make central to their self-understanding. For example, almost all Canadians agree that driving on the right-hand side of the road is the best practice for the smooth flow of traffic. It is safe to say that this habit of action, despite its universal acceptance in Canada, does not have any particular priority when it comes to most people’s self-understanding. This demonstrates that an universality of opinion concerning x does not necessarily indicate the moral importance of x. There are countless universally held beliefs like this that are only trivially related to one’s self-identity. There are, of course, universally held beliefs that also receive moral priority in individual lives, but the fact that there are universally held beliefs that do not receive this priority, demonstrates that something other than universal agreement must generate the moral priority. If there is no reason to think that a universally accepted belief or practice should also have moral priority, there is certainly no reason to think widespread democratic consensus does. One would need to provide an argument in order to claim that democratic consensus is an indicator of moral priority. I neither offer any such argument or think any such argument need be made. So long as the belief that one should respect the decisions of democratic mechanisms of arbitration is pretty high in the scale of priority, the decisions themselves can have as much or as little importance as individuals decide for themselves.}

Of course, political priority will always, in some respect, affect what an individual can do but this is distinct from determining what priority one assigns to one’s beliefs and practices. If a decision has been rendered in which a particular course of action must be carried out in a particular given circumstances, an individual must abide by that ruling or

---

138 I put the caveat “pretty high” because, in some cases, it need not be the highest. For example, a belief that God’s will should always be obeyed might receive higher priority but, because the believer in question thinks God’s will demands that society be ruled by democratic consensus, he will still accept the political
face the consequences. This does not, however, determine what a person will choose to
prioritise. It only affects how one will act on these priorities. In the same way that a
person must modify the enactment of his priorities to suit the limitations of his physical
environment, a person can prioritise whatever belief or practice he chooses so long as he
modifies its enactment to suit the limitations of his political environment. In extreme
cases, a person may feel morally obliged not to obey a decision and engage in act of civil
disobedience, but, more often than not, it will probably be enough to cherish—without
enacting—a belief or practice that has been censured while one lobbies for the issue to be
reopened.

In order to further allay worries that a democratic mechanism of arbitration will
lead to cultural homogeneity, it is important also to emphasise that a democratic
mechanism of arbitration should not be associated with the Moralist's moral claim that
one should maximise the number of universally held beliefs that one has. The mechanism
is intended only to settle disputes between people that are otherwise irresolvable. So long
as there is no conflict, there is no need to turn to a democratic mechanism of arbitration,
and no need to seek democratic consensus. In other words, the mechanism will operate
within climate of general permissibility. The number of issues for which democratic
consensus will be required will be directly related to the number of beliefs or practices
over which there is serious disagreement. Of course, if people are always stubborn
enough, it is possible that a serious conflict over any and every belief could be generated,
but, practically speaking this is inconceivable. To paraphrase Pierce: "there must be a real

priority of democratic consensus."
and living [conflict], and without this all discussion is idle.\textsuperscript{139} To cite an example related to the idea of arbitration that I am employing, every case of contract negotiation between union and management need not go to binding arbitration in order to be settled. Because there is no reason for every belief or practice to be settled upon by democratic consensus, there is no reason to expect individual members of a community to end up holding a whole lot of the same beliefs.

Once the Moralist’s notion of universalism is disentangled from the idea of democratic consensus, there is no reason to believe, especially in a contemporary pluralist society, that the latter will promote cultural homogeneity. Humans, in Rortian terms, are made up of a whole host of beliefs that bear no necessary relation to each other. In many cases, the only thing which binds these widely arranged beliefs is that a particular individual has chosen to hold them all. To insist that humans are, at their core, one, two or even three sets of beliefs is overly simplistic. The individual human is a mosaic of beliefs within mosaic of beliefs within mosaics of beliefs. How these beautiful, sometimes chaotic mosaics will connect with other mosaics is anyone’s guess. When they do connect—that is, when they agree—there is no reason to imagine such agreement will influence or affect other beliefs. They, of course, might affect other beliefs but what is just as likely is the development of many, tiny, specific and case by case instances of consensus.\textsuperscript{140} Because different people with different beliefs will reach consensus on

\textsuperscript{139} I have, in this quote, substituted “conflict” for “belief” so there are no epistemological implications. See, Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief”, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{140} This idea is a consequence of joining Rawls’ idea of an overlapping consensus to Rorty’s idea that solidarity is achieved in noticing the little details that one has in common with one’s fellow human. Rather than imagining, as Rawls does, one huge overlapping consensus, concerning one big issue (the arrangement of the basic institutions of society) I imagine a host of tiny ones concerning the resolution of specific conflicts.
some issues and disagree on others, because there is no reason to think the subject of consensus will receive priority in an individual person's webs of belief, and, finally, because there is no reason to think that people need to reach democratic consensus on all things, there is no good reason to fear that the political priority of democratic consensus will lead to a homogenous culture.

In addition to this unnecessary association of democratic consensus with universalism, the Moralist's influence also encourages Rorty to make an unnecessary association between universalism and the alleviation of suffering. In the absence of the moralist's idea that universal consensus confers moral priority on those matters for which this kind of consensus is achieved, there is no reason to imagine that there is a necessary connection between universalism and the alleviation of suffering. There is, after all, no reason to think that an instance of suffering, in order to be alleviated, need be universally recognised as such. So long as suffering is recognised, whether by one person or many persons, and someone chooses to alleviate it, nothing more is required. Certainly, the more people who are convinced that something counts as an instance of cruelty the more likely such instances will be reduced in number, but widespread recognition of an instance of cruelty is a goal rather than a condition of such projects. In point of fact, as Rorty points out himself, idiosyncratic identifications of suffering are essential if there is any hope to expand the range of what counts as suffering.

There is, of course, one respect in which democratic procedures, such as the democratic mechanism of arbitration, strive to be universal. To be most effective, the democratic mechanism of arbitration must be universally accessible to all the members of the community in which it has effect. The key word here is "accessible." Every arbitration
need not involve every member of the community but, in an ideal model, every member would participate in every arbitration. However, it is enough that no one who chooses to participate be arbitrarily excluded. This condition of universal accessibility is important because the mechanism of democratic arbitration will be more likely to settle opinion satisfactorily if a wide variety of opinions on the matter under consideration are recognised and considered. The insistence on universal accessibility is motivated by practical rather than moral concerns. If as many differing opinions as possible are recognised and considered in the course of deciding the matter, one is all the more likely to fix political belief satisfactorily. This insistence on universal accessibility has none of the moral consequences associated with the Moralist's universalism.

Rorty's Democratic Turn

In the years since the publication of *CIS*, Rorty has been talking more about democracy and less about liberalism and this is all the more significant because when democracy is addressed now, Rorty is more willing than ever to leave off the adjective "liberal." Although a favourable attitude towards the idea that political priority should originate in democratic consensus has always been present in his work, it has never been unequivocal. As we have seen, when Rorty endorses this idea, he, at the same time, makes an effort to limit the extent and jurisdiction of its authority either by employing a p-p distinction or by insisting on the poet's privilege to scorn—whenever and wherever—the consensus of a community. In his recent work, however, there is a greater

---

141 Rorty talks about the poet's privilege in order to defend Foucault against Nancy Fraser's charge that his philosophy requires "an adequate normative perspective." See, Richard Rorty, "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault" as *EHO*, pp. 193-198; p. 198. He writes, "Foucault, like Nietzsche, was a philosopher who claimed a poet's privileges. One of these privileges is to rejoin "What has universal validity to do with me?" I think that philosophers are as entitled to this privilege as poets, so I think this
willingness to cede to democratic consensus an unequivocal political priority.

For example, in *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty praises Walt Whitman and John Dewey for encouraging the development "of a new sort of individual... one who will take nothing as authority save free consensus between as diverse a variety of citizens as can possibly be produced." This strong endorsement of the political priority of democratic consensus is reinforced a few pages later, when he discusses what I have called his political problem—that is disagreements between different people—and he makes the following recommendation:

Insofar as human beings do not share the same needs, they may disagree about what is objectively the case. But the resolution of such a disagreement cannot be an appeal to the way reality, apart from any human need, really is. The resolution can only be political: one must use democratic institutions and procedures to conciliate these various needs, and thereby widen the range of consensus about how things are.

What one finds in this citation is an insistence that deep disagreements between individuals can only be decided by democratic procedures that rely on and require the development of wide-spread consensus. What is most important about this passage is that Rorty does not try to limit these methods of dispute resolution to a particular set of beliefs or activities. In other words, Rorty's acceptance of the political priority of democratic consensus is becoming less and less equivocal.

Of course, it may be the case that Rorty just assumes that his reader is familiar with his often discussed distinction between the private and the public and, as a result, assumes that his reader will realise that democratic consensus only has political priority in

---

134


143 Ibid., p. 35
the public sphere of social life. However, in the same essay, Rorty gives his readers a reason to think that he is less wedded to his p-p distinction than he once was. At the very point one would expect Rorty to introduce his p-p distinction in order to emphasise that the political priority of democratic consensus has its limits, he instead criticises, using Whitman as his mouthpiece, a contemporary response to pluralism, multiculturalism, that is extraordinarily reminiscent of what Rorty had previously described as a liberal utopia.

Rorty writes:

>This Romance of endless diversity should not, however, be confused with what nowadays is sometimes called “multiculturalism.” The latter term suggests a morality of live-and-let-live, a politics of side-by-side development in which members of distinct cultures preserve and protect their own culture against the incursions of other cultures. Whitman, like Hegel, has no interest in preservation or protection. He wanted competition and argument between alternative forms of human life—a poetic agon, in which jarring dialectical discords would be resolved in previously unheard harmonies.  

What is most striking about this characterisation of multiculturalism, and Rorty’s attempt to distinguish it from his own endorsement of diversity, is its transparent resemblance to the private-club/bazaar metaphor which was discussed in chapter II. Multiculturalism, as he understands it, promotes exactly the “private club” culture for which Rorty, as we have seen, once hoped. Moreover, the features of multiculturalism that he now looks upon disparagingly—the live-and-let-live attitude which facilitates a mutually ignorant side-by-side cultural development—were once the very features which he took to be the redeeming virtues of a society organised along the lines of a p-p distinction.

To what can this rather dramatic, if as of yet not fully realised, turn towards an unmitigated endorsement of a democratic principle be attributed? The most important
factor, I think, is Rorty’s realisation that Romanticism, as I argued in the previous section, has had too great an influence on him. He writes:

I have been in danger of over-romanticizing novelty by suggesting that great geniuses can just create a new vocabulary ex nihilo. I should be content to admit that geniuses can never do more than invent some variations on old themes, give the language of the tribe a few new twists.  

This citation neatly supports one of the central claims of this thesis: Romanticism has had too great an influence on his philosophy and, in particular, his social and political philosophy. It is the Romantic’s vision of self-perfection, what I have called maximal originality, that encouraged Rorty to regard the political priority of democratic consensus as a threat to the development of novelty. Once it is made clear that the idea of maximal originality is nonsense—that is the idea that one can create a vocabulary that is so unique as to be unrecognisable to anyone but its creator—and that novelty, as it is normally understood, has little in common with this idea, it also becomes clear that democratic consensus is not necessarily antagonistic to “a life in which there is a chance to compose one’s own variations on old themes, to put one’s own twist on old words, to change a vocabulary by using it.”  

Although, it is clear that Rorty is starting to recognise this point, I also argued that the Romantic’s historical opponent, what Rorty calls the Moralist, has had an undue influence on Rorty’s reluctance to endorse the priority of democratic consensus. It is because of this influence that Rorty unnecessarily entangles the idea of universalism with the idea of democratic consensus. Untangling these two ideas goes a long way to demonstrating that democratic consensus, because it need not

144 Ibid., p. 24.
145 See “Reply to Brandom” as in RHC, p. 188
have universal pretensions, is not a particular threat to individuality, idiosyncrasy, or novelty.

Another telling sign that Rorty is more willing to endorse unequivocally the political priority of democratic consensus is that he has ceased to associate his much cherished goal of cultural diversity with the Romantic quest for maximal originality but is now associating it with his idea of romance. Despite the apparent similarity between “Romantic” and “romance,” there is, for Rorty, a significant difference in meaning. In “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” Rorty defines romance as nothing more than “the ability to experience hope, or faith, or love (or, sometimes rage).” Although Rorty insists, with some Romantic flourish, that romance can carry us “beyond argument” and “beyond presently used language,” where it carries us is decidedly un-Romantic. Romance, that is our ability to feel intense hope, takes us to what Rorty identifies as a secular version of “something greater than ourselves to hold onto.”

For Rorty, that thing greater than ourselves to which romance will carry us is the human community and this, of course, is the very last place a Romantic would like to find herself carried. Diversity and pluralism, something Rorty always saw as threatened by the political priority of democratic consensus, is now being regarded by Rorty as a by-product of give and take of democratic procedures rather than the stubborn insistence of Romanticism.

This chapter began with a sketch of a democratic mechanism of arbitration that is

146 Ibid., p. 189.
147 pSH, p. 161.
in large part inspired by Rorty’s anti-foundationalism. The purpose of this mechanism of arbitration is to resolve Rorty’s political problem and I outlined reasons why this mechanism would be an appropriate means for settling such a dispute. My primary objective has been to argue that Rorty, given his own views, should be willing to endorse something like the mechanism of arbitration I have proposed. I suggested that his reluctance to endorse such a view was a consequence of the undue influence that the historical feud between Romanticism and Moralism has had on his work. After scrutinising and disentangling key Romantic and Moralist claims that contribute to Rorty’s reluctance to embrace the political priority of democratic consensus, I discussed how, in recent years, Rorty has been making claims that are increasingly democratic and decreasingly liberal. So, in large part, what I have argued for in this chapter has been substantiated by Rorty’s own turn towards democracy.
Conclusion

First and foremost, this thesis has been concerned with the social and political philosophy of Richard Rorty and, in particular, his distinction between the private and the public that lies at its centre. The express purpose of this distinction is to allow one to avoid choosing between the Romantic desire for self-perfection and the Moralist desire to create a more free and just community. By dividing society into private and public spaces and or/spheres and by understanding humans as having private and public vocabularies, Rorty thinks it is possible for an individual to pursue projects which best fulfil each of the desires. Rorty thinks, due in large part to the influence of the historical feud between the Romantic and the Moralist, that such a distinction is required because these two desires and their corresponding vocabularies and projects cannot be unified. Without the prospect of such unification, Rorty worries, there is a tendency to see these two desires, and their corresponding projects, as opposed. By separating the two projects with a p-p distinction, Rorty hopes to make it so that one will never have to choose between them.

While there is intuitive plausibility to Rorty’s proposed distinction, I argued that the distinction is not particularly helpful in regards to the moral problem and the political problem. In the moral problem, once one gives up on the idea of automatic moral priority, the special tension with which Rorty was concerned is eliminated and there is no need for a p-p distinction—except, perhaps, as a philosophically trivial principle with which a person might organise her life. Concerning the political problem, I argued that the ambition of the distinction—that is, not to render a decision when there is a conflict between two or more persons concerning the permissibility of a belief or practice—is inappropriate. This is because what exactly is at issue is whether or not a practice should
be permitted to continue and a decision not to decide permits the practice to continue without any reasons being given that speak to the question of permissibility. For this reason, I argued that what is required for such disputes is a decision and I proposed that the decision be rendered by a democratic mechanism of arbitration. The principle feature of this mechanism that concerned me was the political priority it ceded to democratic consensus. What this means is that whatever decision is accepted by a majority of the community members in which the disputants reside shall be enforced with use of the state’s power as required. My principle reason for providing a sketch of this mechanism was to argue that Rorty, given his anti-foundational views, should be willing to grant political priority to democratic consensus rather than limiting its influence with a p-p distinction. Finally, I cited recent work by Rorty that suggests that he may already be moving in the direction I have suggested.

At the outset, I made a point of limiting the scope of my conclusions to what Rorty, given his views, should have endorsed, although I admitted that the project might have wider relevance than simple Rorty scholarship. I alluded to this wider relevance because some of the consequences of Rorty’s anti-foundational views, although controversial, are in some respect mirrored in the actual political practices of contemporary pluralist societies. As communities become increasingly pluralistic, the question of whether or not one’s beliefs are justified in a way that goes beyond “warranted assertibility” is becoming increasingly less relevant. Disputants in the course of any particular political debate may employ rhetoric that invokes the idea that a particular belief is worthy of support due to its relation to a non-human criterion but,
because this insistence alone will not be convincing to a fellow inquirer who locates the
Truth of her claim in a different criterion, such claims have no practical argumentative
effect. Any disputant who relies solely upon these kinds of claims will have a difficult
time convincing others of the merit of those claims. The upshot of all this is that
contemporary pluralist societies require some mechanism with which to settle political
disputes that is neither itself grounded in any particular claims about Truth nor going to
decide disputes based on any particular claims about Truth. The contemporary relevance
of pluralism allows Rorty’s social and political philosophy to become a kind of case study
for the question of whether or not such a mechanism is plausible. This is because, in the
end, like pluralists, all Rorty has ever had to say about Truth is “... you cannot aim at
something, cannot work to get it, unless you can recognize it once you have got it. […]
We shall never know for sure whether a give belief is true, but we can be sure that
nobody is presently able to summon up any residual objections to it, that everybody
agrees that it ought to be held."149 Other than as a means to warn people not to be too sure
of their beliefs, talking about Truth has no useful role to play.

Although the parallels are clear, I have resisted the temptation to draw any
conclusions about the wider problem based on the present examination of Rorty’s work.
To do that would be to take on a set of issues far too large to deal with effectively here.
For example, because I target only Rorty’s claims, I can appeal to an account of science
that supports my views on the role of democratic consensus that, if I were to appeal to
such an account in the context of the wider debate, would require a good deal more work
to justify it. In the end, this thesis represents a small tentative step in the direction of what

149 “Universality and Truth”, p. 2.
might, with further work, become a more comprehensive and general defence of the
political priority of democratic consensus.
Works Cited


