

RICHARD RORTY:
RETHINKING REDEMPTION IN MODERNITY

Tracy Ann Llanera
BA, MA (University of Santo Tomas)

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University
Sydney, Australia

November 2015

Contents

Abstract	iii
Statement of Authorship	iv
Acknowledgements	v
<u>Chapter I: Rethinking Rorty</u>	1
The Paradox	3
Spiritual Disjointedness	10
Rorty's No to Nihilism	17
The Structure of the Thesis	21
<u>Chapter II: Reconstructing Redemption</u>	25
The Origins	26
Essentialism	36
Edification	41
Redemption	49
The Religious Impulse	55
The Rise of the Literary Culture	59
Liberal Democracy	67
<u>Chapter III: Redemption and the Problems of Modernity</u>	75
A New Self-Image	76
Religious Nostalgia	83
The Philosophical Discussion	87
Egotism	93
Private / Public	102
Self-Creation	108

Solidarity	112
Nihilism and Egotism	118
Post-Metaphysical Redemption	126
A New Redemption	138
 <u>Chapter IV: Tensions and Vulnerabilities</u>	 141
Secularizing the Sacred	145
Modernizing the Religious Impulse	156
Privatizing God	161
Belief and Practice	163
Redemptive Relationships	171
Questioning Egotism	179
Self-Creation and its Anxieties	187
Shaky Solidarities	197
 <u>Chapter V: Conclusion</u>	 207
 Bibliography	 215

Abstract

My thesis reconstructs Richard Rorty's idea of redemption and reveals how it contributes to recent debates on the sacred in a secular age advanced by Charles Taylor, Hubert Dreyfus, and Sean Kelly. In the first two chapters I introduce the paradoxical theme of redemption in Rorty's writings and I argue that redemption deeply motivates Rorty's philosophical project. This creates the foundation for a philosophical legitimation of Rorty's work in relation to the task of diagnosing the modern spiritual condition, which I offer in the third chapter. Here I examine why Rorty, contra Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, identifies egotism rather than nihilism as our primary existential problem. I argue that Rorty offers two modes of redemption from egotism: self-creation and solidarity, which both entail losing the egotistic self in the process of self-enlargement. I then consider the link between egotism and nihilism: that prior to becoming nihilists, human beings first suffer from the egotism that Rorty's self-enlargement strategy tries to address. While there are advantages to Rorty's position, it is vulnerable to objections that I turn to in the fourth chapter. I conclude by praising Rorty's project of redemption for addressing the phenomenon of what Taylor calls being "spiritually out of joint" in a new way, notwithstanding the conceptual and practical problems behind his proposal.

Statement of Authorship

I certify that this dissertation is entirely my original work and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or educational institution. All sources of information used in this thesis have been indicated and due acknowledgement has been given to the work of others.

Signed:

Tracy Ann Llanera

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Nicholas Smith, A/Prof. Jean-Philippe Deranty, Prof. Jeanette Kennett, and Clara Wong for their trust, support, and sincerity throughout the process of completing my dissertation. The kindness of these particular individuals is unbelievable. I also extend my appreciation to Prof. Hubert Dreyfus (UC Berkeley), A/Prof. Mary Varney Rorty (Stanford University), and the librarians of the Special Collections and Archives of UC Irvine for their guidance and enthusiasm. My research visit to the United States has been a true delight because of their company.

For the generous financial support that made this research possible, I would like to thank Macquarie University for the International Research Excellence Scholarship (iMQRES) award, as well as the Department of Philosophy and the Faculty of Arts of Macquarie University, the Australasian Universities Languages and Literature Association (AULLA), the Japan Foundation, the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP) and the UC Dublin School of Philosophy for the various travel grants that have enabled me to attend conferences, publish articles, and make research visits to Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Ireland at various stages of my candidature.

I thank Prof. Alfredo Co (UST) for his wisdom, and Jonathan Ray Villacorta and Tanya Muscat for their friendship! I am also indebted to Daryl Mendoza, Martin Gegajo, Jeffrey Oca, Levine Lao, Marvin Einstein Mejaro, and Wendyl Luna for their help during the final stages of editing.

It is heartwarming to know that I am thought about and cared for despite time and distance. For this and more, I would like to extend my appreciation to family and friends in the Philippines, Australia, and everywhere else. This thesis is dedicated to my mother Aurea, Dawn, and Kevin.

Chapter I: Rethinking Rorty

In his tribute article for Richard Rorty in 2008, Richard Bernstein describes Rorty's corpus of writings as stirred by the singular force of the maxim that "*there is nothing that we can rely on but ourselves and our fellow human beings.*"¹ It strikes one curious, then, why Rorty would capitalize on the religiously-laden idea of "redemption" in his later essays.² In 2001, Rorty published "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises" as a response to Harold Bloom's literary criticism and rejoinder to Martha Nussbaum's literary ethics. In the text, Rorty in particular attacks what he calls egotists, or self-righteous individuals. Egotists believe that they possess all the necessary skills to deliberate the demands of personal and social situations. They are close-minded in their interpretations and usually fail to identify with pain, humiliation, and suffering beyond their own context. Not only do they find it difficult to place themselves in the shoes of others, but they often resist from doing so, believing that they have the divine commandments of a religious tradition or the categorical imperatives of practical ethics to justify their values and choices. Egotism, for Rorty, is a human character that we must correct, and he thinks that literature can help cure us of the rigidity and unkindness that this behavior causes. Reading literature cultivates our capacity to

¹ Richard Bernstein, "Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism" in *New Literary History* 39.1 (2008), 22.

² See Richard Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises" and "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" in *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher Voparil and Richard Bernstein (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). The introduction to Part IV – Pragmatism, Literature, and Democracy of *The Rorty Reader* states that "Redemption from Egotism" was originally published in Spanish and German before coming to print in English posthumously in the reader, and that a draft of the work in English was available in Rorty's Stanford webpage for a short time [302]. There is a discrepancy here, for while the title and the abstract of the article in *Telos* were in Spanish, the actual text was written in English. [See "La Redención del Egotismo: James y Proust como Ejercicios Espirituales" in *Telos* 3.3 (2001), 243-263]. For the German version, see "Der Roman als Mittel zur Erlösung aus der Selbstbezogenheit," trans. Andrew James Johnston in *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung*, ed. Joachim Küpper and Christophe Menke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 49-66. "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" first appeared in *Pragmatism, Critique and Judgment: Essays for Richard Bernstein*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 3-28.

adopt different perspectives when dealing with complex situations. It also invites us to engage in imaginative reflection on practical issues beyond our everyday experience. Rather than religion or philosophy, Rorty is inclined to see literature as the most invaluable cultural tool in steering our civilization to “a decrease in social and individual egotism, and increased flexibility and sympathy in the making of moral decisions.”³

In 2004, Rorty wrote “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” as a culmination of his intellectual correspondence with Bernstein. In this work, he rehearses one of his versions of the intellectual history of the West. Prior to modernity, Rorty narrates that the first binding and overarching principle of Western culture was man’s relationship with the *God* of monotheistic religion, the guarantor of universal truth, meaning, and salvation. Our role was to live our lives in accordance with the Supreme Deity’s will and design. In the next paradigm, this God was dethroned by the *Truth* of philosophy, with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment raising confidence in our ability to represent the way things *really* are. Akin to making gods out of men, the cultural goal of this paradigm (which Rorty sometimes calls scientism) was to decipher the very blueprint of reality. Rorty thinks that at present, this preoccupation with truth or human omniscience is being nudged over by the force of the *Imagination*. This imaginative power is fueled by the objectives of encountering as many human lives as possible, and discovering the various and alternative ways of being human. Rorty chiefly argues that a literary culture powered by the secular imagination can serve the redemptive purposes previously ministered by the religious disclosure of the Word of God or the philosophical articulation of the Truth, only in a manner more suited to the contemporary predicament. A literary culture—a space where human relationships are “mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs”—builds a way of life in which our “non-cognitive relations” to other people, instead of our intimate affair with a Deity or our masterful comprehension of a physical universe, are deemed the most important

³ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 402.

considerations.⁴ Rorty is confident of the enormous potential that this new culture houses in making the world a better, kinder place. He also recognizes its promise in mounting the most genuine sense of human solidarity we can ever generate.

Of significance is what these essays have in common: in both, Rorty talks about a form of human redemption in a literary culture. He contends that the cultivated imagination is the most powerful resource we have when it comes to enlarging our acquaintance with humanity and enriching our ethical relations. While as early as 1967⁵ he had already suggested that our contemporary moral character is most effectively empowered by literature, and since then has written to promote the rise of a culture of imagination, it is only in his more mature works that the *redemptive* purpose of literature and the imagination has been explicitly articulated. This new emphasis in Rorty's thinking about literature and philosophy poses two implications that require a more thorough reflection: first, there is the suggestion that, in Rorty's view, human beings are in need of saving (from something, or from themselves?), and second, there is this idea that it is a literary culture that holds the exclusive power to do this in modernity. Both of these provocative and weighty implications have hitherto been largely unexplored in the scholarship on Rorty, and it is the purpose of this thesis to address them.

The Paradox

What it is that we need to be saved *from* will be discussed at a later stage. For now, it suffices to note how intriguing it is that Rorty is employing the idea of redemption in his writings in the first place. Redemption, after all, is a historical concept that brims with religious fervor. It characteristically belongs to the monotheistic scaffold of the Axial age. According to Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, Karl Jaspers defines this age in *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949)

⁴ Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" in *The Rorty Reader*, 478.

⁵ See Richard Rorty, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture" in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 60-71.

as “a cross-cultural turn in the first millennium BC,” which was able to distinguish “the central monotheistic idea—through Plato’s metaphysical philosophy, the Buddha’s conception of Nirvana, and various religious notions of Eternal Life—that there is a transcendent Divine good beyond everyday well-being.”⁶ What this means is that the belief in the otherworldly transcendent plays a central redemptive role in human lives that are lived according to the Axial framework. To illustrate: in Christianity, the concept of redemption postulates that man is a fallen or faulted being, and therefore humanity needs saving from the horrors of frailty and finitude. Its use presumes that we require deliverance from the stain of original sin, or from the corrupted nature of mortality, or from the reality of all natural evils and moral transgressions. The aim is to escape from our disgraceful human state. Taken to tremendous heights, this means that the religious idea of redemption trembles with the promise of ultimate fulfillment. Redemption in a traditional sense is supposed to culminate in mankind’s final rendezvous with God. Redemption is Dante’s *Paradiso*.

Following this logic of transcending human nature, redemption is also bound up with the idea of the sacred. The sacred is the locus of a manifestation of something great and deific and luminous, as opposed to that which is profane or commonplace. It is an extraordinary rupture of holiness in an otherwise mundane context. Taken in the strong and customary sense of the term, Charles Taylor distinguishes the presence of completely non-anthropocentric powers *located* in “certain places (e.g., temples), times (e.g., feast days), actions (e.g., rituals), or people (e.g., priests, victims) which are sacred, and these contrast with other things in these categories which are merely worldly.”⁷ The sacred is regarded to gleam bright with redemptive power. This means that contact with a sacred presence can be held to affect some change in the ordinary constitution of human beings. In the Catholic tradition, for example, if one participates in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and

⁶ Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, “Saving the Sacred from the Axial Revolution” in *Inquiry* 54.2 (2011), 196.

⁷ Charles Taylor, “Recovering the Sacred” in *Inquiry* 54.2 (2011), 118.

receives the body of Christ, the person is held as partaking in the grace of the Divine. The sacred, then, serves to inspire and transform human ordinariness in the duration of mortal lives.

However, this grand religious architectonic—one that takes redemption and the sacred as sourced from an ultimately non-human power—is a framework that Rorty rejects. Jürgen Habermas says that when it comes to the character of his philosophical project, Rorty has two ends in mind. First, he seeks to convince us from believing in anything immutable and eternal, from anything that bespeaks of the Platonic Forms. This explains his radical attacks against what he regards as their most popular representations in traditional and mainstream philosophizing, embodied in “our conceptual obsessions of Greek philosophy and a fetishism of science that sprouted from the furrows of metaphysics.”⁸ Second, Rorty also wants to show how our “human, all too human” condition serves as “the motor driving the creativity of a restless transformation of society and culture.”⁹ Men are responsible for their history, and are capable of imagining and directing the world’s future. Thus, as an intellectual, Rorty positions himself as anti-metaphysical, anti-dogmatic, and anti-authoritarian—postures that signify nothing less than irreligiosity and an aversion to anything that indicates the transcendent. As a visionary, he desires a culture that has completely freed itself from the clutches of any foundationalist creed. The moral of his utopia is fueled by the energy of self-reliance, and not by any sense of responsibility to the atoms of Science or the laws of God. So if this is the case, why then does Rorty brazenly play with the redemption trope? Does he think that despite their great potential, human beings are also *intrinsically* vulnerable or faulted, and are thus in need of saving? Is he implying that this deliverance requires a power more remarkable than the merely human, which in its very essence is a contradictory posture for a thinker like him to take?

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “‘... And to define America, Her Athletic Democracy’: The Philosopher and the Language Shaper. In Memory of Richard Rorty” in *New Literary History* 39.1 (2008), 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

My reading is that even though the demise of religion is something that Rorty finds celebratory, he uses redemption—a primary component of religious language—to express the need of capturing or retaining the salvific power of the transcendent. Rorty recognizes and finds value in its tremendous power. While he abandons its traditional form and content, he redirects its intensity toward altogether new and secular ends. The implication we find here is that perhaps there is a significance originally rooted in this religious concept that is worth keeping, and that it can be used to address or diagnose something lacking or wrong or terrible in the world today. This attitude of displacing the source of the sacred from the external to the human is a gesture that one finds beaming persistently in Rorty's works. For instance, in "Redemption from Egotism," Rorty judges the devotion of Christian believers galvanized by the mystic texts of Bonaventure and Ignatius Loyola as akin to the spiritual commitment of secularists dedicated to the wisdom of Henry James and Marcel Proust. In both cases, readers embed a sacred importance onto their beloved religious and literary texts. They are crucial literature when it comes to the purpose of intensifying their existential significance. Rorty, however, also highlights their differences: the hope of the religious intellectual "is for union with God, with something sublime, mysterious, unconditioned, belonging to another world;" meanwhile, the objective for the intellectual who exalts James and Proust is to make life cohere as a work of art. This person hopes that "she will someday be able to look back and bring everything together into some sort of pattern—her loves and her rivalries, her fantasies and her defeats, herself in youth and in old age."¹⁰ What this means is that we can treat the religious yearning for sublimity and the literary ambition for self-maturity as charged with a comparable level of spiritual aspiration. While Rorty prizes the latter, there is no question that he considers both as meaningful forms of personal redemption.

Spiritual power that approximates religious intensity is also felt in moments of creative solidarity, according to Rorty. We can examine this idea in the essay "Taylor

¹⁰ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 405.

on Self-Celebration and Gratitude,” where Rorty reviews Taylor’s philosophical contributions on the theme of our modern heritage in *Sources of the Self*.¹¹ In relation to the issue of redemption, Taylor’s argument is that today, a “heightened, more vibrant quality of life”¹² finds vivid expression in epiphanic works of art. According to Nicholas Smith, Taylor makes the claim that when it comes to articulating our contemporary sources of morality, “the modern sense of belonging to a meaningful reality, of *having* a meaningful reality, takes unprecedented imaginative forms.”¹³ This means that epiphanies in art—that is, of instances of subjective, sacred-like experience wrought by the creative imagination—can be understood as an alternative, or even a replacement for religion, if we take them to serve as the locus of our moral sources in the modern world. Two points are relevant for us here. First, Taylor believes that these modern epiphanies are most potently derived from the personal articulation of key figures in the West. His list includes Romantic poets as well as post-Romantic and modernist poets, novelists, and thinkers, ranging from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Charles Baudelaire, John Constable to J. M. W. Turner, Marquis de Sade to Friedrich Nietzsche, James Joyce to Ezra Pound—“an exclusionary few,” in Rorty’s count. The guiding idea here is that while their art is a creation of their imagination, Taylor believes that their works disclose a reality that is *personally indexed* to the artist.¹⁴ Ultimately, Rorty judges that the words of power that they offer are reductive and privatized. He fears that if modern epiphanies were exclusive to these elitist languages, then the spiritual pursuit of democratic happiness would be undermined. Second, Rorty, the pragmatist, also has a problem with the fact that Taylor thinks that the only thing that can satisfy our spiritual urges, following phenomenological tropes, is something *found*, or *revealed*, or *given*, rather

¹¹ Richard Rorty, “Taylor on Self-Celebration and Gratitude” (Review of Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*) in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54.1 (1995), 197-201.

¹² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 373.

¹³ Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Polity Press, 2002), 223.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

than something we have *made* or *achieved* by virtue of being human beings. Rorty observes that the only thing that Taylor “seems willing to count as a transaction between the world and ourselves is something which the world initiates—a response to a call from something already there in the world.”¹⁵ Taylor’s view is that the external world makes authentic claims on us, so that Rorty characterizes the proper response to its demands as something like “Heideggerian and Rilkean gratitude.” In short, for Taylor, to experience the sacred in the modern world, we need the redeeming input of something fundamentally non-human.

On the first idea, Rorty contends that spiritual force need not be tied to the subjective majesty of privatized or reductive languages. His belief is that we are self-interpreting beings, and that our “self-interpretations are at their best when they are social.”¹⁶ Epiphanies, as Rorty fashions them, should occupy a significant place in the public sphere. He thinks that solidarity—as “utopian social democratic political thought” engineered by the creative imagination—rages with a great spiritual power that is collective and secular in nature. We can mobilize the strength in Walt Whitman’s *Americans*, or John Keats’s “Grand Democracy of Forest Trees,” and Hans Blumenberg’s vision of *The Glorious Social Future*¹⁷ to vivify the hope for a better human life in a democratic world. This response is related to Rorty’s rejoinder to the second idea. He, of course, doubts if our saving grace lies in any non-human moral source. For him, this strategy leads us off track if our goal is to achieve modern secular maturity, for maturity requires ridding ourselves of religious nostalgia—a Rortyan aim that we will review in this thesis. Of importance here is that Rorty follows the faith of his fellow pragmatists William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, who revel in the lyrical strength of great art. Their prime model, the American poet Whitman, wields this power best in terms of animating a nation. In

¹⁵ Rorty, “Taylor on Self-Celebration and Gratitude,” 200.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁷ For more examples, see Richard Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works” in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

the words of Nicholas Gaskill, “Whitman’s belief—powerful enough to energize the aesthetic thought of a philosophic movement—was that a creative poetic style might, within a full-bodied aesthetic experience, give rise to new political subjects and new civic communities.”¹⁸ For pragmatists, shudders of awe and evocations of a better future can flow from this great modern dream of nationalism, and for Rorty, “Deweyan or Whitmanian social hope” is the ideal secular spiritualization that the modern world truly needs.

This reading shows that “the sense of awe and mystery which the Greeks attached to the non-human”¹⁹ is something which a pragmatist like Rorty is willing to transfer to the hope for a happier, kinder future. In this version, the future is an open-ended project. What matters for its actualization is that we are roused to imagine and build it with religious zeal. Of interest here is that Rorty himself acknowledges the significance of employing the vocabulary of religious tradition, pointing out that the social ideals that secular humanists like himself champion are often cast in religious terms,²⁰ and with good reason. The demand, passion, and integrity of secularized ideas like “human dignity” or “social justice” are communicated more clearly when we say that they are sacred and universal and inviolable. We use these Christian or Catholic terms to underscore not only their importance but also their indispensability. Rorty furthermore notes that in articulating egalitarian hope, *The New Testament* is one of the few historical productions that continue to inspire and encourage the vision of a morally edifying world. Regarding it in the same light as *The Communist Manifesto*, Rorty describes the fundamental Christian text as “the founding document of a movement that has done much for human freedom and human equality.”²¹ What these illustrations show is that Rorty’s work can be interpreted to justify something important at stake in

¹⁸ Nicholas M. Gaskill, “Towards a Pragmatist Literary Criticism” in *New Literary History* 39.1 (2008), 176.

¹⁹ Richard Rorty, “A World without Substances or Essences” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 52.

²⁰ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration” in *The Rorty Reader*, 457.

²¹ Rorty, “Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 203.

keeping the idea of redemptive spiritual power alive. It plays a vital role in substantiating and motivating our personal, collective, and future-oriented social hopes.

Spiritual Disjointedness

This conviction about spiritual power is something Rorty shares with Taylor,²² Dreyfus, and Kelly,²³ who are among the main figures in the contemporary discussions about the philosophy of the sacred in a secular age. While at first Rorty seems like an unlikely candidate in this exchange, my thesis will show that his philosophical view about human redemption can contribute to the ongoing debates. To preview: the four thinkers coalesce in affirming that the demystification of the world is the result of our turn to modernity. They all find value in retaining some form of spiritual enthusiasm. They also think that there are many redemptive possibilities available for us today. The main differences between them, however, lie on the question of what predicament we primarily need redemption from, as well as the source and nature of this “saving power” in modernity.

We can begin to understand the modernity problem being diagnosed here by exploring the phenomenon that Taylor calls as being “spiritually out of joint.” He argues that persons, in any culture or in any age, and apart from their natural pains of “hunger, sexual frustration, ill-health, death, loneliness,” can also experience bouts of intense existential meaninglessness. This experience is commonly conceptualized as “being lost, or condemned, or exiled, or unintegrated, or without meaning, or insubstantial, or empty,” and that in each culture there appears to be a way of addressing these experiences:

Corresponding to each of these descriptions of breakdown
is some notion of what it would be to overcome it, to have

²² See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, “Recovering the Sacred,” and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²³ See Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (Free Press, 2011) and “Saving the Sacred from the Axial Revolution.”

integration, or full being, to be justified, or found, or whatever. But more, there is a notion of 'where' this integration, fulness, etc., might come from, cosmic order, or identity with Brahman, or unity with God, or harmony with nature, or the attainment of rational insight, or finding the strength to say "yes" to everything one is, or hearing the voice of nature within, or coming to accept finitude, or ..., again the list stretches on indefinitely.²⁴

We can derive two basic things from Taylor's statement. First, while spiritual disjointedness is a phenomenon that different people from different cultures may experience in similar ways, there is no universal redemptive answer that can function to cover all of its cultural variations. Redemption, according to this reading, is always dependent on the specific character of the cultural environment. Second, culture itself *suggests* the kind of redemption that suits its nature and needs. The "saving power" is always particular to each context, and may be explicit or implicit in form. If this power is unclear or ineffective in serving its redemptive purpose, it becomes an important philosophical task to identify and illuminate the correct or appropriate salvific clues that are given and available in a certain culture.

Traditional accounts of redemption, in short, address this crisis of spiritual disjointedness. Since the modern world is experiencing a version of this phenomenon that is unique to its era, it also requires a renewed philosophical consideration. At present, the need of finding self-integration and spiritual satisfaction suited to the specific conditions of modernity has been responded to in different ways. Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly in particular advocate either a recovery of religious faith or a retrieval of sacred experiences to tackle this issue. While I offer oversimplified interpretations of their accounts in the subsequent paragraphs, I think it would not be misleading to assert that they share a common explanation about the nature of modern spiritual disjointedness, as well as a common strategy for modern redemption.

²⁴ Charles Taylor, "The Moral Topography of the Self" in *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory*, ed. Stanley B. Messer, Louis A. Sass, Robert L. Woolfolk (Rutgers University Press, 1988), 300.

The three thinkers share the belief that we should refer to a redemptive power that is not of a completely human source. This is because they think that one big reason why we have become spiritually out of sync with our culture is related to our modern turn to secularism and/or humanism.²⁵ The human-centered outlook of modernity advocates that there need not be room for God (or small gods) to make sense of human affairs. People are capable of making decisions that fit their ends, and they can consequently take charge of their own fate. As György Markus maintains, the modern condition is constituted as “a form of culture, that is, as not being simply natural, or God-ordained, but as something man-made and re-makable which conforms with equally humanly created and changeable standards and ends.”²⁶ This version of modern humanism involves the adoption of a utilitarian stance—one that declares our right to use the world to fit our needs and desires, and shape it according to the ways that will best maximize the cumulative experience of human happiness. Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly contend that there is something wrong in a modern condition where all meanings and ends are man-made, for this outlook encourages the view that there are no other horizons of significance that can be deemed as more important than human welfare and ambition. At its extreme, what this view can eventually lead to is nihilism: the lamentable framework that since all meanings are humanly projected, then nothing truly and fundamentally matters. The rhetoric here is that since everything we believe in is arbitrarily created, then there is

²⁵ The term humanism is referred to here as the extreme deification of man. Bernstein outlines the reasons behind humanism's bad reputation: “It has been used by its critics to identify everything that they think is wrong in the modern world. The locus *classicus* for the contemporary critique of humanism is Heidegger's “Letter on Humanism,” but the attack on humanism has been helped along by the way in which “humanism” has become a “whipping boy” for Levi-Strauss, Althusser, and Foucault. From Foucault's perspective, “humanism” which the modern world takes to be its greatest contribution to culture turns out to be the *pharmakon* that kills—it names everything that is wrong, stolid, self-deceptive and bleak in the modern world. When unmasked it seems to be the ideology of the new regime of power/knowledge—the ideology of the “disciplinary society”, “the age of bio-power”, the “carceral archipelago”. In the new post-modern, post-structuralist Manichean theology, “humanism” seems to function as the name for the Kingdom of Darkness.” [See Richard Bernstein, “What is the Difference That Makes a Difference? Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty” in *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2* (1982), 355].

²⁶ György Márkus, “A Society of Culture: The Constitution of Modernity” in *Culture, Science, Society: The Constitution of Cultural Modernity* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2011), 18.

no significant reason to prefer one belief over another, or to even feel passionate or committed about anything at all. Nihilism is the disposition that all human convictions, contingent and fragile as they are, ultimately dwindle down to insignificance. As it serves as a strong manifestation of spiritual disjointedness in modernity, Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly assess the danger of this nihilistic position in their respective works.

In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor observes that one principal malaise of modernity is individualism. Individualism, overlapped with the two other problematic traits of the primacy of instrumental reason and the atomist model of freedom, has steered us toward a great danger that he calls “anthropocentrism”—the idea that there is nothing else more important than the individual and her journey toward self-determination. If we follow Taylor’s view, the cultivation of this anthropocentric framework eventually yields a flattened world where all significances are abolished. We are driven into a space where “there aren’t very meaningful choices because there aren’t any crucial issues,” and the effect of this is “a loss of meaning and hence a trivialization of our predicament.”²⁷ For Dreyfus and Kelly, God’s death in the culture of the West can be interpreted as the collapse of a “... grounded, public, and shared sense that there is a single, unquestioned set of virtues—Judeo-Christian virtues—in accordance with which one’s life is properly led.”²⁸ A familiar modern response to the demise of the theocentric framework is the conviction that modernity’s most sacred triumph is the freedom to choose and unchoose life-commitments. This perspective of human empowerment is a narrative that runs in both the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and the literature of David Foster Wallace. Unfortunately, instead of experiencing spiritual and moral liberation in the modern age, Dreyfus and Kelly argue that many human beings find the challenge of choosing their own way of existing a terrifying prospect. They contend

²⁷ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 68.

²⁸ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 44.

that this is because the threat of nihilism can lead to a life that lacks the gravity of unwavering commitment. Recognizing the power of choice specifically as a *burden*, according to the two, is thus a “peculiarly modern phenomenon,” for the sense of existential uncertainty spreads “in a world that no longer has any God or gods, nor even any sense of what is sacred and inviolable, to focus our understanding of what we are.”²⁹ This black sentiment culminates in Wallace’s literary masterpiece, *Infinite Jest* (1996), which talks about our fascination with distractions. The book portrays how modern entertainments allow temporary escape from the weight of our moral responsibilities and relieve us of the burden of choice. It also alarmingly renders how revering human freedom as our generation’s sacred commitment has led to the increase of the experience of smothering moods of disinterest, boredom, angst, and loneliness in modernity.

Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly find this nihilistic attitude of the modern age deplorable; hence, they venture to show that there is a way back to some form of re-spiritualization. Their strategy of redemption involves revealing how the world participates in crafting meaningful sacred experience. They argue that there are things and events that pulsate with a power outside humanity’s skin, and that if we are properly attuned to them they can serve as our richest sources of meaning. Taylor is interested in a comprehensive examination of disenchantment and secularism in the modern world. What he finds problematic in modern philosophy is that it neglects the articulation of the idea of a moral source, which Taylor defines as “something the contemplation, respect, or love of which enables us to get to get closer to what is good,” or a moral basis that can arouse “a motive which empowers us to live up to what is higher,” and can help us live in accordance to what is “valuable, worthy, admirable.”³⁰ Among the moral sources that Taylor mentions are Plato’s Idea of the Good, the God of Christianity and Judaism, as well as the modern notions of Kantian rational agency and human dignity. He argues that while these

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 92-96.

centralizing socio-cultural principles that command our awe and respect may change—he compellingly traces the transformations of these elements in *Sources of the Self*—the crucial role of a moral source needs to be occupied if human beings are to find inspiration and live spiritually integrated lives. In this sense, his project captures the importance of being in touch with the spiritual power of moral sources. His view is that while these elements were beaming clearly in the past, we have lost touch with them in the present world. The next step to take, hence, is to retrieve or rediscover these redemptive sources.

In “Recovering the Sacred,” where Taylor responds to the project of polytheistic re-enchantment in Dreyfus’s and Kelly’s book *All Things Shining*, he offers two paths of modern redemption. They involve the exploration of both “what arises in interface between Dasein and the world” (*interstitial*), and also of what occurs in “the anchored-in-reality-beyond-us” (*anchored*).³¹ The first way requires our recognition of a redemptive space that is opened up by the meanings that we can decipher in the “interface.” He believes that there is a dialogue that occurs between human beings and the universe, and that in their interaction non-random and non-subjective meanings can arise for us as agents-in-the-world. These meanings are manifested through more fluid and subtler languages—such as in “the sense of the force running through nature and ourselves, as with Wordsworth,” or in Durkheim, the sociality of the sacred, which “helps constitute us as moral beings.”³² But aside from these *interstitial* modern sources, Taylor also suggests a second, stronger way to combat a nihilistic disposition and achieve reorientation toward the sacred. His view is that what is genuinely sacred can only be transcendent, and what is ultimately transcendent can only be God. Since the idea of transcendence remains inescapable in the secular age, it then demands a recharged philosophical and moral articulation. What we need now is thus a redefinition and a re-examination of God’s role in modernity, for we stand to lose insight about our own moral and spiritual identities

³¹ Taylor, “Recovering the Sacred,” 119.

³² *Ibid.*, 118.

if the religious, philosophical, and artistic talk of the *anchored* is dropped and ignored.

Meanwhile, Dreyfus and Kelly suggest that the *anchored* should be abandoned and the *interstitial* be retained for the purpose of realizing a renewed polytheistic redemption in the modern world. They think that a qualified appropriation of the most significant elements of the past, that is, of human life prior to the monotheistic age, can educate us as to how we can get in touch with moments of the sacred in modernity. *All Things Shining* endorses the profound attractiveness of the model of Ancient Greek spirituality. It argues that in Homer's world, the height of human excellence would reach its peak when human beings were in sync with the mood that a god set up to illuminate a particular situation, e.g., when the moods of courage (Ares), eroticism (Aphrodite), power (Zeus), wisdom (Athena) were appropriately heeded by a certain individual or by a collective group as a response to certain events. Similarly, their proposal is that today we can re-enchant our modern lives if we learn how to get in touch with what is most significant in different situations. To be specific, Dreyfus and Kelly argue that some people who perform great heroic deeds or display amazing skill—the best athletes, artists, and writers of our day—are at many times at a loss to explain their extraordinary performances or works of art. Dreyfus and Kelly suggest that perhaps, at their best, these individuals did not act completely on their own. They hypothesize that during those moments, these people relinquished full self-control and became attuned to the sacred in their situation. In doing so, they were able to *shine* as human beings. Thus, the two philosophers raise the explicit argument that modernizing ancient Greek polytheism gives us the best chance for redemption from modern nihilism. Specifically, “to lure back these Homeric gods is a saving possibility after the death of God: it would allow us to survive the breakdown of monotheism while resisting the descent into a nihilistic existence.”³³

The big task at hand, then, is to find a way to make this spiritual experience more available for a greater number of people. Following Martin Heidegger, Dreyfus

³³ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 61.

and Kelly believe that since “the greatest poets speak from something beyond themselves,”³⁴ then reading great works of art can serve as a good way of learning the skills required for identifying, focusing, and experiencing these spiritually edifying moods. They argue that we can retrieve these moods in literature and the margins of our culture. To remedy the nihilistic perils of the modern age exemplified by “Eliot’s indecision, Beckett’s interminable wait, and Auden’s expressionless world; even to the stomach-level sadness of Wallace’s American millennium,” we can learn when and how to heed “Homer’s wonder and Aeschylus’ caring mood of cultivation, Dante’s bliss, Luther’s joy, and Descartes’ calm mood of quiet reflection”³⁵ as counter-moods. Moreover, they say that we should be open to recognizing when the sacred is possibly at work, and not simply dismiss these encounters as contingency or meaningless luck. These sacred instances may include the times we are overtaken by the force of a great event (such as hearing an inspiring speech or listening to powerful music), or at moments when we feel cared for by the universe (like when a person is miraculously saved from certain death). In these times, there is no other more appropriate recourse but to express gratitude toward the inexplicable. The significant point that Dreyfus and Kelly make is that it is not when we are in control of ourselves that we are able to live intense, meaningful lives. Rather, great things have an increased chance of happening when we are attuned to the moods that liberate the best in us and infuse our lives with excellence and wonder.

Rorty’s No to Nihilism

Rorty, however, advocates a completely different narrative. Contra Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, he does not target the problem of our being spiritually out of joint. He does not regard nihilism and meaninglessness as the modern phenomena that we need saving from. In fact, if we peruse Rorty’s works, there are perhaps only two instances in which nihilism makes its appearance in interesting ways, and they

³⁴ Dreyfus and Kelly, “Saving the Sacred from the Axial Revolution,” 198.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

occur decades apart. The first is his 1972 review of Stanley Rosen's *Nihilism*, where Rorty treats the phenomenon as a philosophical issue. Rosen's view is that if we abandon Plato and follow the Wittgensteinian-Heideggerian route in understanding language, history, and philosophy, then we will arrive at a relativist and nihilistic state of affairs. We will lose hope over the lack of philosophical and moral foundations of human existence. Rorty counters this account by saying that Rosen "confuses despair over the success of the Platonic project and despair over human life," and that seen from the Wittgensteinian/Deweyan/Comtean view that Rorty supports, "Platonic philosophy is, like Christianity, just one somewhat parochial development which our society may have outgrown."³⁶ He thinks that if our culture were to get over philosophical absolutism, what it will result in is not the dystopia that Rosen dreads. Quite the reverse, we will arrive at a *positive* kind of nihilism: a state in which human beings, not anymore answerable to Platonic Ideas, have become fully responsible for themselves and their future. Rorty's provocative conclusion about repudiating the past in favor of philosophical innovation, as ironic as it sounds, is this: "one can see what Rosen calls "nihilism" as the latest and best product of the Socratic tradition."³⁷

Nihilism appears for the second time in "Redemption from Egotism." Rorty concludes this more recent essay by talking about an example of an existential issue that can represent a form of nihilism:

Although not everybody should try to overcome themselves, everybody can and should hope to end their lives with some sense of what it meant, how it hung together, what form it took. This is easy to do if one's life was nothing but remorseless grinding dawn-to-dusk toil, or if it was lived within the confines of a backwoods village, or of a narrow and unquestioned faith. Yet these are just the sorts of lives that people who use novels as aids to spiritual development think of as in danger of

³⁶ Richard Rorty, Review of *Nihilism* by Stanley Rosen in *The Philosophy Forum* 11 (1972), 104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

“meaninglessness.” (Think here of the novel-reading heroines of *Madame Bovary* and of Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street*). The epithet is used because such people think that a life has meaning just insofar as the person living it is able to find some unity in, impose some form on, as great a variety of persons and things and events as possible.³⁸

Rorty points out here that nihilism can threaten not only when universal foundations are unreliable, but also when the sources of human roles and meanings are fixed. While repetitiveness and predictability can impose sense and value in a person’s life, they can also highlight its lack of variety and excitement, and perhaps even its Camusian absurdity. The latter consequence can lead an individual to brood the dark question: “is there more to life than *this*?” This threat of meaninglessness, in Rorty’s view, can be pacified if we entertain projects of self-creation—an opportunity for personal redemption that a literary culture prepares us best to do. In short, Rorty suggests that redemption from relativism and meaninglessness is possible by welcoming a new philosophical self-image and by developing human creativity.

Apart from these two illustrations, there is nothing else interesting about nihilism that we can get from Rorty. Nihilism is not his concern. In fact, as we shall investigate in this thesis, Rorty argues that what we must address with urgency is *egotism*. The problem in the modern world is not that we are living in de-spiritualized conditions, but the fact that most human beings today behave with a narcissistic sense of self-satisfaction. They are too close-minded and militant about their outlook and behavior. It appears, then, that Rorty is much more concerned about moral redemption, rather than salvaging spiritual meaning in the modern world. He is more inclined to use redemptive power to correct human behavior rather than revive an atmosphere of existential meaning and save us from spiritual disjointedness. Furthermore, while Rorty also focuses on available modern sources such as art, literature, and poetry to find redemption from egotism, his ambitions are very different compared to Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly. He is not persuaded that

³⁸ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 406.

utilizing these resources to go back to God is a direction we should reconsider again. Neither is he convinced that employing “subtler languages” can help us find our inner link with a larger order, or map out our place as human beings in the world.³⁹ He also disagrees with the idea that we can be attuned to powers beyond our human capabilities in the secular age. While redemptive power is important to human life, Rorty does not commit to a recovery of any sacred force in the traditional sense—if by traditional we mean the view that covers both monotheistic faith and Ancient polytheism. In short, Rorty has neither a God, nor gods. He eschews anything that approximates metaphysical comfort. He thinks that to confront whatever problems we have in the current age—problems ranging from egotism, uncertainty, contingency, and even meaninglessness—all we need is to learn how to hurdle with our aloneness in the world. It is through this process that we imagine and formulate our own sources of redemption. His position is crystal clear: *only we can redeem ourselves from ourselves.*

The Rortyan stance thus presents a challenge to the contemporary philosophical discourse on spiritual disjointedness and redemption. It prompts the following questions: what exactly is Rorty’s overall conception of redemption, and what is its significance in relation to the modern debates about the sacred? Why does he say that instead of nihilism, egotism is the great human perdition we need saving from? Does egotism so deeply and negatively afflict our moral and spiritual lives that we need to curb its spread? If we can prove that redeeming humanity from its egotistic will is a significant endeavor to pursue, how can we link Rorty’s view with the mainstream accounts of nihilism and redemption forwarded by Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly? All these questions require us to formulate a new philosophical interpretation of Rorty’s idea of modern redemption. In doing so, a number of critical issues will also emerge. Does Rorty’s version of redemption present an adequate portrayal of our present condition? If the answer is yes, will the kind of redemptive

³⁹ See Taylor, “Subtler Languages” in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 81-92 and Richard Rorty, “In a Flattened World” in *The London Review of Books* (9 April 1993), 3.

power derived from anthropocentric sources and the pragmatist framework he endorses be sufficient to address this need for non-egotistic moral and spiritual integration? If the answer is no, can we then say that there is a certain complacency or blindness in Rorty's purely human view that needs to be exposed? In sum, how should we judge Rorty's vision of redemption as something worth validating and supporting?

The Structure of the Thesis

Examining Rorty's project of modern redemption is a difficult and challenging task indeed. Unlike Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, whose works offer clear accounts and justifications of nihilism, redemption, and the sacred in the modern age, Rorty's own position regarding moral and spiritual redemption comes in bits and pieces. His project demands a robust and critical reconstruction. It is also necessary to validate Rorty's connection to these two other contemporary narratives of redemption so that we can reveal what he can contribute to the debate. I will undertake these two tasks in Chapters II and III of my thesis. I will address the adequacy of the redemptive project reconstructed and justified in these chapters in Chapter IV. Finally, I offer my conclusion in Chapter V.

To get into more detail: the chapter that follows (Chapter II) raises the claim that the theme of redemption can be read to as a motivational force behind Rorty's philosophical project. In the first part, I introduce two basic ideas that undergird the redemptive theme: first, that Rorty aims to direct us away from the Western tradition of metaphysical essentialism; and second, that the motivation behind his own philosophical project is edification—the enlargement and transformation of the self. In the next two sections, I focus on the nature of Rortyan redemption. I begin by presenting Rorty's reconceptualization of the original, pre-philosophical religious redemption to a contemporary form of spiritual redemption. Rorty argues that redemptive power is expressed either through relationships (with God, or with other people) or truths (religious belief and science). He seeks to dispose of the latter

source and uphold a version of the former form. Next, I characterize the pluralist nature of redemption in Rorty's literary culture, and link its appeal to the rise of liberal democracy. I emphasize Rorty's conviction that the literary culture is, for now, the best imaginable situation in the modern world for accommodating diverse spiritual aspirations. I conclude with a recapitulation of the discussion and an introduction of the important themes that will be raised in the next two chapters.

Chapter III offers a philosophical legitimation of the Rorty's vision in relation to the task of diagnosing the spiritual condition of the modern world. I begin by accounting for Rorty's claim that we should welcome a new self-image in modernity. What constitutes this change in self-conception are a greater sense of linguistic creativity, imaginative self-reliance, and future-orientedness. We are obliged to own up to this kind of moral maturity, as well as dispel religious nostalgia, if Rorty's version of modern redemption is to be made available for all. In acknowledgement of Rorty's proddings to welcome a modern self-image, I then examine why he chooses egotism over nihilism as an existential problem, thereby differing from Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly. I then reconstruct Rorty to show that he offers two modes of redemption from egotism: self-creation and solidarity. I argue that both entail losing the egotistic self in the process of self-enlargement. Self-enlargement, in short, is Rorty's antidote to egotism. I then reveal the connection between egotism and nihilism: that prior to becoming nihilists, human beings first begin as egotists. The main constructive argument of my thesis is that by addressing the religious and philosophical egotism that precedes modern nihilism in his account of redemption, Rorty helps us find a way to assuage the horrors of nihilism before they even begin. This is a new perspective to understand how we can experience meaning and spiritual fulfillment in the modern world, which the accounts of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly have neglected to integrate. This is how my thesis reveals the value of utilizing Rorty as a conversant in contemporary debates on the philosophy of redemption and the sacred.

Despite my sympathies for Rorty's vision, I also raise critical questions about his efforts at redemption in Chapter IV. First, I think that his pragmatism remains conceptually inadequate to meet the ambitions of traditional religion, especially in terms of responding to our existential aspirations and in utilizing the spiritual power of religion to support democracy and egalitarianism. Second, I interrogate Rorty's replacement for traditional religion: the literary culture. I argue that Rorty fails in considering how beliefs play an integral role in sustaining human relationships and fostering redemptive hope. Third, I complicate Rorty's view of egotism. I argue that his view loses stability when we scrutinize the nature of modern religious fundamentalism and when we attempt to substantiate the idea of non-egotism. I end by raising questions about using self-creation and solidarity as our redemptive, self-enlarging paths from egotism. Finally, I conclude with a reiteration of the strengths and weaknesses of Rorty's vision of redemption in the last chapter.

This philosophical project about modern spirituality, secularism, redemption, and the sacred that I am embarking on in this thesis has an interesting history. In his unpublished memorial lecture for Rorty, Dreyfus narrates:

Dick always cared about the general state of the philosophical discussion. I remember back in 1994, when we were in Cerisy talking about Rorty and Habermas, I mentioned on one of our walks that I was go[i]ng to write on the relevance of Homeric Polytheism for our current cultural condition. Grinning he said, "Then I'll write on poly-atheism. We'll start a Great Debate." It was a causal [casual] remark but he did it in his article, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism." In fact he beat me to the Press."⁴⁰

Rorty passed away in 2007, the same year that Taylor published *A Secular Age*, his monumental book about modernity and religion. Dreyfus and Kelly published *All Things Shining*, their shared account of Homeric polytheism, in January 2011. The special issue on the theme "The Secular and the Sacred," where the works of Taylor,

⁴⁰ Hubert Dreyfus, "Memorial for Richard Rorty" [unpublished]. Correction in brackets mine. Many thanks to Prof. Dreyfus for sending a copy and allowing me to use this piece in my research.

Dreyfus, and Kelly finally come to critical engagement, was published in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* later that year. The much-awaited book *Retrieving Realism* by Dreyfus and Taylor, which deals partly with religious pluralism in the last sections, was published by Harvard University Press this month (June 2015).⁴¹ The picture that these facts paint looks something like this: a grand philosophical discussion, one involving three of the most influential philosophers of our time, would have taken place at some point today; unfortunately for us, contingency got in the way in Rorty's case. It is thus with great hope that this thesis will rekindle enthusiasm for Rorty's voice in the "Great Debate"—a debate that would have probably happened a little differently, if the tides had taken another turn.

⁴¹ Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Chapter II: Reconstructing Redemption

The task of this chapter is to justify the claim that human and cultural redemption can be interpreted as a driving force behind Rorty's philosophical project, and that following this direction opens up new avenues of insight and interpretation. I identify the key role that redemption plays in both the content of Rorty's work and his manner of philosophizing, as well as offer a new way of approaching his philosophical motivations. I go about this task by first introducing a debate on hermeneutics between Dreyfus, Taylor, and Rorty in 1980 that indicates Rorty's original interest in the theme of redemption. I trace the reasons why this issue was overlooked then, and proceed to justify why I am reinvigorating the discussion in my thesis. I then move on to compare and contrast the ideas of "essentialism" and "edification," which Rorty first raises in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). I reveal that the connection between edification and the theme of redemption lies in the notions of self-enlargement and self-transformation. After establishing a historical foundation to my claim, I then provide a detailed reconstruction of the subject of redemption. Redemptive power, for Rorty, is best expressed through human relationships (and the many ways these relationships are expressed and symbolized), and not religious and scientific truths. His proposal is to democratize and pluralize these multifarious sources of human redemption in his literary culture. This interpretation should provide us with a working model to link and compare Rorty's vision of redemption with other contemporary accounts in Chapter III, as well as make a critical analysis of the justifiability and effectiveness of his idea of redemption in Chapter IV.⁴²

⁴² Rorty is already infamous for making contentious philosophical claims, and this section will further highlight his controversial take on metaphysics, epistemology, and the works of other philosophers. I do not offer any judgment about the merits and faults of these cases in this thesis. Instead, my focus is to reconstruct and analyze the idea of redemption, and show how re-reading Rorty's story can give us a fresh understanding of his writings and reveal its new contributions to philosophy of religion and cultural politics.

I now begin by rehearsing an interesting philosophical exchange that transpired more than thirty years ago, which intimately reveals Rorty's earliest liaison with the theme of human redemption. We shall discover in the future sections that this exchange between Dreyfus, Taylor, and Rorty anticipates the contemporary discussions about redemption and the sacred.

The Origins

The sixties and seventies displayed a strong resurgence of interest in hermeneutics, largely precipitated by the publication of Hans Georg-Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.⁴³ This led to much philosophical discussion on the role of interpretation in the natural and the social sciences, as well as human existence more generally. A good illustration of these debates is a themed issue of *The Review of Metaphysics* in 1980, which includes contributions by Rorty, Dreyfus, and Taylor.⁴⁴ According to Dreyfus, at that time the various debates around hermeneutics converged around two core concerns: methodology and practice. The first point deals with how the natural and the human sciences approach their respective objects. It asks whether there exists a crucial difference between the way we know the material world (*Natur*) and the way we understand human beings (the realm of "mind" or "spirit"—*Geist*). Presuming that the answer is yes, the second point entertains the personal and political repercussions that the acknowledgement of this difference brings upon society. Dreyfus's presentation of the issues provides the framework for the discussion with Taylor and Rorty.

⁴³ See Hans Georg-Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960).

⁴⁴ See *The Review of Metaphysics* 34.1 (1980): Hubert Dreyfus, "Holism and Hermeneutics," 3-23; Charles Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," 25-38; Richard Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 39-46; and "Rorty, Taylor and Dreyfus: A Discussion," 47-55.

Dreyfus and Taylor contend that there is a firm methodological distinction between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*.⁴⁵ In general, they think that the former functions by way of universal laws, and the latter through the context-bound interpretation of meaningful actions. They perceive the natural sciences as concerned with providing an account of reality that is independent of the human subject. These disciplines are in the business of accumulating systematic knowledge and formulating unified (or unifiable) theories about nature, and are at their best when they employ universally valid terms and operate under standardized conditions. Natural science, in this sense, can be understood as an enterprise of mutual cooperation in the pursuit of objective knowledge. Meanwhile, the human sciences function by the method of interpretation. The hermeneutic claim is that human experience and action can only be expressed using subject-related terms that cover an ever-evolving domain of human feeling and understanding. Unlike the natural sciences, the human sciences perform most meaningfully and efficiently in a state of tension—that is, when they are able to articulate and analyze human behavior and culture “in the perpetual revolution and conflict of interpretations.”⁴⁶ Rorty, however, problematizes this opposition by stating that there is no crucial difference between the two scientific domains. Following the Jamesian pragmatist doctrine that “the trail of the human serpent is over all,” he argues that while things in the universe can be

⁴⁵ Dreyfus argues that the essential difference between the natural and the human sciences is that the former functions as a normal discourse and the latter as an abnormal one. While in the natural sciences commensurability is ideal, in the human sciences it usually means a call for hermeneutic help: “while in the natural sciences it is always possible and generally desirable that an unchallenged normal science which defines and resolves problems concerning the structure of the physical universe establish itself, in the social sciences such an unchallenged normal science would only indicate that an orthodoxy had gained control.” [Dreyfus, “Holism and Hermeneutics,” 17]. Taylor’s claim is that the kinds of understanding required for the operation of the natural and the human sciences are different. Scientific understanding is geared toward absoluteness. It is concerned about providing “an account of the world as it is independently of the meanings for human subjects, or how it figures in their experience.” [Taylor, “Understanding in Human Science,” 31]. Meanwhile, human understanding considers desirability conditions and subject-related terms of value such as emotions, aspirations, longings, etc. in its assessment. These are exactly the conditions and terms that natural scientists are expected to bracket out in their work to fulfill the requirement of absoluteness.

⁴⁶ Dreyfus, “Holism and Hermeneutics,” 18.

causally independent of us, nothing can be representationally independent of us.⁴⁷ Since we are unable to describe reality without some form of intervention from the human agent, we can neither formulate a fully objective method nor reach holistic theoretical commensurability.

Against Dreyfus and Taylor, Rorty argues that there is no deep or truly interesting epistemological split between the natural and the social sciences. They simply have different objects of inquiry. Given that there is no way to arrive at absolute terms and foundational conditions when we explain and interpret, it may be hence more helpful to shift our perspective from that of *methodology* to *attitude*. The latter way is how Rorty reads Gadamerian hermeneutics. Rorty's notion of a "universal hermeneutics" is not a method, but "a universal willingness to view inquiry as muddling through, rather than conforming to canons of rationality—coping with people and things rather than corresponding to reality by discovering essences."⁴⁸ This pragmatic claim helps free us from the trap of thinking that there is an ideal method to approach reality. Rorty reminds us that science is important if our goal is to describe a set of epistemic conditions around which there could be a general agreement. It normalizes procedure so that consensus is made possible. This objectifying attitude of science, however, is useful and appropriate only for some ends, but not for all. Going further, Rorty raises the stakes of the debate by stating that Dreyfus's and Taylor's insistence to divide knowledge into non-human and human is symptomatic of a larger issue we face in our relationship with science. When Dreyfus invokes distinctions between "having a true theory" vs. "finding one's way about," or Taylor between "subject-related terms" vs. "non-subject related terms,"⁴⁹ Rorty maintains that they remain trapped within a philosophical vocabulary that is committed to the concept of truth as correspondence, and an intellectual tradition that prioritizes epistemic value over other ends. Rorty

⁴⁷ See Richard Rorty, "Charles Taylor on Truth" in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 86.

⁴⁸ Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

polemicizes against this fixation with the “Truth” and the “Real” throughout his philosophical career. This, for him, is indicative of a pervasive and debilitating culture of *scientism* in modernity.

Scientism is the idealization of the scientific practices that define and manage its targets of interest. It operates by way of a detached, impartial, and objectifying outlook that is regarded necessary to think and act in accordance with universal reason—a point of view inherited from the Enlightenment. Rorty argues that this paradigm is motivated mainly by the values of prediction and control. It aspires to discover the most basic epistemological, political, and moral order that underlies thought and experience. In its most extreme form, the scientistic culture seeks to gain mastery and command of the overall constitution of the world and its inhabitants. The problem Rorty identifies with this behavior is that it *dehumanizes*: it participates in the forging of a stultified, mechanized life that functions without regard for pluralism and spiritual possibility. Rorty follows Dreyfus in recognizing that the dangers of scientism are ultimately those that Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault have warned us about in their writings on technology and the disciplinary society. As devotees of the Romantic legacy, Rorty, Dreyfus, and Taylor are all in agreement that a more satisfactory *ethos* should replace scientism. But what sets Rorty apart is that he believes that this goal is conditional upon the abandonment of distinctions that betray a loyalty to Platonic ideals, which he thinks the others remain attached to. Only if we let go of the belief that there is such a thing as “Truth” will the culture of scientism ultimately lose its firm grip on our cultural consciousness.

To clarify: while Rorty does not advocate the death of the scientific voice, he thinks that it should be shorn of its privileged status. This change would be a matter of coming up “with a cultural paradigm which embodied... less of the Cartesian tradition of scientism.”⁵⁰ A good way of approaching this new culture, according to him, is by replacing the notion of “discovery of essence” with that of “appropriateness of a vocabulary for a purpose” when we assess our activities. He

⁵⁰ Rorty in “Rorty, Taylor and Dreyfus: A Discussion,” 47.

points out that we use other languages apart from the scientific one to meet other goals, such as in moments when we find ourselves fighting against social injustice, or when we are declaring our love to another person. What Rorty wants is a broader and more heterogeneous alternative to scientism—an *ethos* that recognizes the legitimacy of the different voices that compose “the conversation of mankind.” Rorty joins Michael Oakeshott in acknowledging the various activities that constitute human experience. Oakeshott deems that the most notable of the languages that articulate these experiences are practical activity, science, and poetry. These voices serve very different ends: “and just as activity in practice is desiring and obtaining, and activity in science is inquiring and understanding, so poetry is contemplating and delighting.”⁵¹ Rorty, like Oakeshott, laments the monopolization of the scientific voice of knowing, which rose to primacy in the 17th century and has established the standard of what all kinds of discourses ought to aspire for—the absolute and incorrigible truth. As discussed previously, our misfortune is that the superiority of the scientific voice prevents us from realizing the significance of other, and perhaps even more important human ends. Valuing the conversation of mankind, at least as Rorty presents it, ensures that the only dominant virtue in such a culture is plurality.

Admittedly, this turn from a discourse on the scientific method to the fate of human civilization is a startling inflation of the original debate on Rorty’s part. But I think that it is not so odd if we consider that there is something tremendous at stake in proposing this shift. As if guided by this thought, Rorty expands the exchange to messianic proportions by arguing that a cultural conversation can help combat the formation of a purely rationalistic, non-romantic technocratic age. Martin Heidegger

⁵¹ Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” (1959) in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1962), 223-224. The differences between these three voices are excellently conveyed here: “And further, a word or a verbal construction may have a recognized home in more than one universe of discourse: ‘the French Revolution’ for Blake was a poetic image, for de Tocqueville it represented a historical image, for Napoleon a practical image; the word ‘democracy’ for some people represents a quasi-scientific image, for many it signifies a practical image (the symbol of a condition desired and to be approved), for de Tocqueville it stood for an historical image, but for Walt Whitman it was a poetic image. In short, the character of an image is revealed in its behavior, in the sort of statements which can relevantly be made about it and in the sort of questions which can relevantly be asked about it.” [226].

is a decisive figure here, for he takes very seriously the need for salvation from the effects of modern mechanization. In “The Question Concerning Technology,”⁵² Heidegger contends that the most pressing peril we face now is that we live under the dominion of *Ge-stell* [Enframing]. This is an era where man’s drive to instrumentalize and surmount everything in his path has reached its peak. It is an epoch of scientific prowess where “no object has significance in itself and where the “orderability” of everything, from energy and statistics to machines and persons, is all-important.”⁵³ This mechanizing, reifying framework blocks all other possible ways for man to relate with world. It obstructs how the world can manifest or speak. It also kills any possibility of transcendence. This, however, should not be a cause of despair. Alluding to Friedrich Hölderlin’s hymn “Patmos,” Heidegger also declares that “where danger is, grows the saving power also.”⁵⁴ This means that modern technology carries both ruination and hope, and so could only be overcome from within. While man cannot bring this change of Being by himself, he must be prepared to welcome the possibility of what Heidegger calls an “impending turn.”⁵⁵ He believes that it is only by reflecting on the essence of modern technology that we can decipher how we can relate anew to it. He proposes that this essential reflection should occur in a region that is both akin (as *techne* and as *poiesis*, or as a skillful way of unconcealing/revealing/bringing forth reality) and different (from *Ge-stell*/Enframing, or a challenging-forth or ordering of the world) from that of modern technology. This sphere, for Heidegger, is the domicile of art. He argues that going back to the original meanings of technology and art can reveal the meaning of Being in modernity. If we relate to them the right way, then we can be delivered from our

⁵² “Die Frage nach der Technik” was first published in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfulingen: Günther Neske, 1954).

⁵³ William Lovitt, Introduction to Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), xxx.

⁵⁴ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 28.

⁵⁵ See Heidegger, “The Turning” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 36-49.

present situation. In short, the saving power of technology and art can illumine new pathways of world-making previously hidden from our modern view.⁵⁶

Rorty concurs with the Heideggerian proposal that in order to be saved from the negative ramifications of scientism, we should learn how to forge a new and non-scientistic way of relating to modernity. Heeding Dreyfus's reading of Heidegger, Rorty supports the activity of "keeping in touch with the practices that have made us who we are and to which the disciplinary society cannot do justice."⁵⁷ It is important to find possibilities of dealing with nature, material objects, and human beings that neither simply objectify nor subjectify. Contra Heidegger, Rorty contends that the solution is not dependent on any relationship that implies transcendence or the non-human. The spiritual language that can redeem us from the perils of technological modernity is a strictly and altogether human one. Rorty believes that we must learn to speak this pluralistic, edifying language by ourselves: "Heidegger decides that, since the Nazis didn't work out, only a God can save us now. Dewey, it seems to me, is saying: No, neither something like the Nazis, nor something like the descent of the spirit, but just conversation. That is, just us on our own."⁵⁸

While Rorty remains very unclear about what this conversation is like, we can infer that for him there is something wrong with the language of our modern situation and that we have to be rescued from its risks. For taking this position, Dreyfus indicts Rorty as a "religious, practical hermeneuticist"⁵⁹—someone who, like Heidegger, engages the question of redemption or damnation of human beings. It is noteworthy that Rorty does not repudiate Dreyfus's charge. He does not deny that he is such a thinker. For someone all too eager to reject the existence of God, the soul, or the essence of human dignity, it seems most unlikely that he would embrace the (on the face of it, *religious*) idea of redemption—but this is just what he does in this philosophical exchange. He confesses that what he is truly concerned about roams

⁵⁶ See also Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001).

⁵⁷ Dreyfus in "Rorty, Taylor and Dreyfus: A Discussion," 51.

⁵⁸ Rorty, *ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁹ Dreyfus, *ibid.*, 51.

larger than epistemology or ontology. His alternative to a culture of scientism—the conversation of mankind, which involves the task of “finding new, newer, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking”⁶⁰—is something which he believes as standing for the destiny of the whole human enterprise. It deserves to be accorded the weight of religious seriousness. Thus, according to my reading of this particular set of events, Rorty discloses to Dreyfus and Taylor that his own views are stirred by the possibility of human redemption very early on.

Unfortunately, Rorty’s early attempt to turn our philosophical interests from epistemology and hermeneutics toward a discourse on redemption has gone by unnoticed. Interpretative and critical works published about Rorty—largely dealing with issues about mind, language, truth, metaphilosophy, and pragmatism—have never truly touched upon the argument that redemption energizes his intellectual project.⁶¹ My hunch is that this oversight might have something to do with the fact that in the late seventies, the Anglo-American scene was dominated by philosophical theories that were too narrowly focused to embrace Rorty’s grand vision. His contemporaries were more concerned with specific sets of problems concerning mind,

⁶⁰ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 360.

⁶¹ Rorty’s impact on these specific philosophical areas is evidenced by the number of works collated by James Tartaglia in *Richard Rorty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2010), which to date serves as the biggest collection of secondary material about Rorty. Half of the 85 essays, which comprise two out of the four volumes, deal primarily with these five topics. The rest, which covers specific thinkers and related themes, also directly or indirectly connect up with these ideas. Furthermore, the nature of the earliest compilations of essays on Rorty—e.g., *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)*, eds. Alan Malachowski and Jo Burrows (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990); *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. Herman Saatkamp, Jr., (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995); *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000)—shows that his readers were mostly responsive to his critique of analytic thought and neo-pragmatism. The more recent collections, however, better reflect what Habermas describes as “the peculiarly romantic, and very personal triple voice of metaphilosophy, neopragmatism, and leftist patriotism” in Rorty’s philosophy—see *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, eds. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 2010); *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy to Cultural Politics*, eds. Alexander Gröschner, Colin Koopman and Mike Sandbothe (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); *Richard Rorty*, eds. Charles Guignon and David Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, eds. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2001). That said, research that links Rorty’s project with the ideas of redemption is still left wanting. My thesis examines this neglected but very important perspective.

science, and language to entertain such a large Romantic-pragmatic shift. Furthermore, the proposal of a conversation of mankind, which Rorty also intimates in *The Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, was simply too short, vague, and sketchy. Bernstein's memorable rebuke of this section of the book was that despite its potential, it was ultimately unconvincing: "there were some catchy phrases like "therapy," "edification," and "the conversation of mankind," but no clear sense of what even a successor discipline to traditional philosophy might look like."⁶² In addition, while Rorty's writings enjoyed wide influence in philosophy and the broader humanities, his contribution was eventually reabsorbed into mainstream philosophy. The focus of most readers, especially at that time, was Rorty's biting criticism of the analytic hegemony and his apparent abandonment of it. This well-documented view continues to populate the debates around pragmatism and epistemology today. In summary, Rorty's early work was insufficient in moving the discussion toward a new philosophical culture. These reasons may explain why despite its promise, Rorty's ambition of redemption was not followed through in philosophical scholarship.

It was only upon the publication of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), as well as *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (1991) and *Truth and Progress* (1998) that the theme of redemption was picked up again. These essays house Rorty's attempts to show the culturally enriching possibilities available when we engage other voices—particularly that of literature, politics, poetry, and art—in the conversation of mankind. However, it is significant to mention that in these collections, Rorty only implies the idea of redemption. In the introduction to *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, which was published eleven years after his initial talk with Dreyfus and Taylor about saving Western culture, Rorty actually sounds as if he has backtracked on redemption. He mentions to his readers that they should judge his essays only as "weak thought"—a kind of "philosophical reflection which does not attempt a radical criticism of contemporary culture, does not attempt to refound or remotivate

⁶² Richard Bernstein, "Rorty's Liberal Utopia" in *Social Research* 57.1 (1990), 32-33.

it, but simply assembles reminders and suggests some interesting possibilities.”⁶³ This posture of intellectual humility certainly does not sound as if Rorty expects his contributions to make a substantial difference. This, however, is contradicted by the fact that Rorty raises vivid and inspiring ventures about utopian social hope in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (1998) and *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007). He also returns to the theme of redemption in a literary culture in the last decade before his death, as we have seen in Chapter I. We can then postulate that these utopian ideals seem to embody less and less of what weak thought is expected to serve in a philosophical conversation. In fact, they stand as salient proposals about how we could search for and foster, if one may say so, the “saving power” in modern culture.

So what good does it do to return to Rorty’s original endorsement of “the conversation of mankind”? What perspective can we gain from identifying this salvific bud in his philosophical project, and how does it connect to his later notion of redemption in a literary culture? My idea is that reviving our interest in this overlooked question allows us to investigate if redemption deeply motivates Rorty’s philosophical project. I think it is plausible to insist on this bold thesis. Doing so illuminates Rorty’s eagerness behind changing the thematic from the scientific method to a literary culture as early as 1980, even without any guarantee that this suggestion would catch on. Again, the important lesson is that for Rorty, what we speak about matters immensely in the projection of our human culture, and what he wants the philosophical conversation to be about is how to build a better world for human beings.

This practical, and broadly-speaking, moral motivation can be argued as constitutive of his secular faith, though his version is definitely less prescriptive than

⁶³ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism and Post-Nietzschean Philosophy” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6. See also Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds., *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

Plato's *Republic*, or Comte's *Religion for Humanity*, or even Marxist Communism. This pious secular belief is something he expresses vividly here:

My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law. In such a society, communication would be domination-free, class and caste would be unknown, hierarchy would be a matter of temporary pragmatic convenience, and power would be entirely at the disposal of the free agreement of a literate and well-educated electorate.⁶⁴

Rorty's hope for solidarity is the closest he gets to a belief in transcendence, and one way to approximate the future that he holds sacrosanct is by examining the contemporary ways for us to achieve it. This perhaps explains the prolific quantity of works he has produced to reverently depict this ideal culture, with special emphasis on democracy, egalitarianism, freedom, education, and literature. These texts, as the succeeding sections of this thesis will show, can be surveyed with a messianic eye. Doing so allows us to speculate more deeply about what we can get out of Rorty's philosophical contribution in terms of redemption.

To substantiate the claim that redemption is a driving force behind Rorty's philosophical project, I begin by underlining two notions that inspire Rorty's writings: first, that he directs us away from the Western tradition of essentialism; and second, that he philosophizes with edification as his end. I argue that Rorty's employment of these strategies reveals his underlying redemptive motivations. I also explain how his methods of dismantling our traditional way of philosophizing can help welcome the redemptive voice of literature after God and Science.

Essentialism

⁶⁴ Richard Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism" in Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 40.

The corpus of Rorty's works sings a consistent and unforgiving anti-authoritarian motif. Corollary to this posture is his claim that it is impossible to believe in any grand, cohesive explanation of everything. Any discipline that suggests this—be it by way of philosophy, science, or religion—ought to be put into question. As a pragmatist, Rorty is distrustful of anything that stands for absolute and non-human authority, and is alert to point out any manifestation of a God-surrogate. He thinks that we are not dependent on any authority apart from ourselves and other people. He sees himself as an anti-foundational thinker whose therapy—pragmatism—is in the business of smashing the idea of the mind as our “glassy essence,” of demolishing universalist myths, and of “discarding the image of the fierce father figure.”⁶⁵

This wholesale skepticism requires one to argue at a metaphilosophical level, and for this reason Rorty rehearses his own narrative of essentialism. He thinks that the Western philosophical tradition's quest for objectivity, a quest common to the fields of science and the divine, began with Greek philosophy's desire to rise above arbitrariness and common opinion:

Parmenides jump-started the Western philosophical tradition by dreaming up the notion of Reality with a capital R... Plato was enchanted by this hint of something even more august and unapproachable than Zeus, but he was more optimistic. Plato suggested that a few gifted mortals might, by modeling themselves on Socrates, gain access to what he called “the really real.” Ever since Plato, there have been people who worried about whether we can gain access to Reality, or whether the finitude of our cognitive faculties makes such access impossible.⁶⁶

This ancient epistemological worry has been reincarnated in different ways by philosophers in the modern period, and the contemporary inheritors of the

⁶⁵ Rorty, “The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell's Version of Empiricism” in *Truth and Progress*, 152.

⁶⁶ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism and Romanticism” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers IV* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 105.

Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition have proceeded to treat knowledge as the central feature of their discipline ever since.⁶⁷ According to Rorty, they carry the stubborn tendency of congealing theories into core truths that can serve as the solid and unwavering bedrock of human understanding. This frame of thinking aims to arrive at the ideals of “Human Nature,” “God,” or “Good.” It seeks to construct a system of knowledge, a universal language, or a fundamental ethics that we can pattern our entire lives on. Rorty, as we shall more fully discover later on, thinks that this philosophical obsession is related to the question of what we need redemption from in modernity. This aspiration can even be considered as the fount of our modern anxieties, which can be relieved in part by abandoning our culture’s seemingly unquenchable metaphysical desires.

But why does Rorty take this radical position—a position that sounds as equally, if ironically, absolutist? It is because for him, dismantling the philosophical legacy of Western essentialism is integral for endorsing a politically-motivated pragmatism. Rorty philosophizes with the view that there is neither a break nor any important difference between theory and praxis. As Dreyfus correctly observes early

⁶⁷ In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty suggests that the privileging of this triadic root of modern epistemology was not an inevitable philosophical turn. Rather, it was more a product of historical contingency, “to some purely accidental peculiarities of how the philosophical tradition moved from Aristotelianism to the kind of modern philosophy we associate with Descartes, Locke, and Kant.” [Frank Ankersmit, “Rorty and History” in *New Literary History* 39.1 (2008), 81]. Rorty thinks that Aristotle already had less use of methodology as he viewed knowledge as the union of subject and object, which would have annulled their gap. Descartes, however, chose to stick with the knower/known paradigm, and this core assumption thereafter dictated the linear flow of modern thought. Rorty indicates that philosophy would have been otherwise if we listened to Aristotle’s voice in the conversation. For him, the West can be understood not as a product of a rational historical progress, but as a synergized combination of contingent events. Rorty is thus sympathetic to alternative histories that could be borne out of the phenomenon of contingency, and has offered versions of them in his writings. He thinks, for instance, that modern morality would have been more socially inclusive if we took our signal from Hume’s sentimentality over Kantian reason. He argues that the former theory invites the development of imaginative identification rather than disinterested moral abstraction. [Richard Rorty, “On Moral Obligation, Truth and Common Sense” in *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty, and Kolakowski*, eds. Jozef Niznik and John Sanders (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996) 48]. If philosophy followed the Humean trajectory, we would have tempered our obsession with finding a perfect rational standpoint for ethics, and also realized that the universal rational being is impossible to conceptualize! Our contemporary moral focus would have then been geared toward establishing fellow-feeling and cultivating sympathy.

on, Rorty regards theory as a *kind* of practice,⁶⁸ and does not view philosophy (or religion, or politics) as a self-contained activity. While a discipline can bracket or isolate its scope and concerns, it remains beholden to its history. Its practices can directly or indirectly affect other areas of life, too. Rorty assumes this stance in many works, and in doing so he divulges that his opposition to traditional philosophy has a substantive moral point. In *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999), for instance, he attacks the dualisms that serve as the bulwark of epistemology ("Truth without Correspondence to Reality"), metaphysics ("A World without Substances or Essences"), and morality ("Ethics without Principles"). The practical question he engages is whether or not the employment of Platonic dualisms—e.g., appearance/reality, truth/opinion, good/evil—participates in strengthening or weakening the pragmatic goals of happiness and solidarity. Rorty takes happiness roughly to mean the advancement of human flourishing and the chance for self-individuation on both the private and public level. The best culmination of solidarity, meanwhile, is a robust social democracy of a classless, casteless, egalitarian society. It stands for the liberal goal of having "a society that gives us freedom to live as we choose so long as others have the same freedom, and justice and equality with adequate material sources for all."⁶⁹ Rorty's pragmatism reckons that achieving these ends is prevented by the philosophical essentialism that, consciously or otherwise, permeates our thought and action. He offers a variety of illustrations to show how this is dangerous to human happiness and cooperation.

While all his arguments against essentialism are impossible to rehearse here, it will suffice to focus on Western culture's tendency to essentialize human beings—which, as we shall see later, is related to the question of what Rorty thinks we need redemption from. From the get go, he criticizes our propensity to keep looking for

⁶⁸ Dreyfus in "Rorty, Taylor and Dreyfus: A Discussion," 50. For a reading of Rorty's motivations behind using philosophy as cultural critique that is sympathetic to my interpretation, see Colin Koopman, "Challenging Philosophy: Rorty's Positive Conception of Philosophy as Cultural Criticism" in *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy to Cultural Politics*, 75-106.

⁶⁹ J.B. Schneewind, "Rorty on Utopia and Moral Philosophy" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 480.

one truth about human nature. He views philosophy as replete with theories that purport a solid explanation about the self. The ancient and medieval notions that “moral intuitions are our recollections of the Form of the Good,” or that human beings “are the disobedient children of a loving God,” or that persons “differ from other kinds of animals by having dignity rather than mere value”⁷⁰ are claims that populate, albeit in modified form, the current discourses on human rights, law, theology, and moral philosophy. That capitalist workers are alienated from their humanity, or that men are “merely vehicles for selfish genes,” or are “eruptions of the will to power,”⁷¹ are propositions that pervade the analyses of the status of the modern subject. Rorty of course thinks that there is nothing *intrinsically* wrong about coming up with varying descriptions of the self. They are useful for different purposes. The proliferation of newer and fresher ways of understanding the human being also proves the irreducibility of the concept. What Rorty takes issue with is our tendency to prioritize certain descriptions to the point that they congeal into dogma. This attitude encourages the homogenization of our expectations of how people should behave. Oversimplified, this view entails that our universal human nature is discoverable by way of reflection.

Rorty thinks that this narrow disposition is both problematic in theory and destructive in practice, because as a strategy it tends to ignore the richness of human diversity. History brims with hatreds and cruelties justified on account of people falling short of the natural or ideal human standards—take, for instance, the terrible conduct against heretics and madmen and homosexuals, who in certain contexts were regarded as guilty of the sin of irrationality or immorality. Rorty argues that part of the process of initiating change—with the caveat that it is not the *first* or *only* step—involves abandoning the essentializing perspective and adopting a more inclusive one. He proposes that it is better to understand man as a “fuzzy and

⁷⁰ Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality” in *The Rorty Reader*, 354.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 355.

promising project”⁷² which, over time, is enlarged by the contributions of scientists, existentialists, poets, novelists, depth psychologists, sculptors, anthropologists and mystics. Rorty believes this accumulative description should be steered toward accommodating more and more kinds of human beings, all of which would have different versions of fulfillment and happiness. By doing so, we increase our chances of including a greater variety of people as part of the community we hold important. This is what pragmatists like him aim to achieve:

Convinced that there is no subtle human essence which philosophy might grasp, they do not try to replace superficiality with depth, nor to rise above the particular in order to grasp the universal. Rather, they hope to minimize one difference at a time—the difference between Christians and Muslims in a particular village in Bosnia, the difference between blacks and whites in a particular town in Alabama, the difference between gays and straights in a particular Catholic congregation in Quebec. The hope is to sew such groups together with a thousand little stitches—to invoke a thousand little commonalities between their members, rather than specify one great big one, their common humanity.⁷³

Rorty is clear that toppling the sovereignty of essentialism can give us a shot at a less divisive world. We must devalue “the quest for knowledge from the status of end-in-itself to that of one more means towards a greater human happiness.”⁷⁴ He believes that our bequeathed epistemological legacy should be replaced with a political hope for something better.

Edification

Rorty’s openness toward alternatives brings us to the second theme that colors his theorizing: edification. For if essentialism should be done away with, how can he,

⁷² Rorty, “A World without Substances or Essences” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 52.

⁷³ Rorty, “Ethics Without Principles” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 87.

⁷⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xiii.

as a pragmatist, positively contribute to philosophy apart from his profound skepticism and his endorsement of ameliorist politics? My view is that analyzing the way Rorty talks, reads, and writes about philosophical texts is key to answering this question. To reiterate, his strategy involves not only dealing with the content of a philosophical debate, but also bringing out its consequences for culture and politics. I think this way of engaging ideas has something to do with his practical aim of edification. We find a clue about edification in Rorty's foreword to *Heidegger, Authenticity and Modernity*, a collection of essays penned in honor of Hubert Dreyfus. Rorty wrote that reading Heidegger does not tempt him to ask "whether the phenomenology of Dasein in Part I of *Being and Time* gets human existence right."⁷⁵ Unlike Dreyfus, whom he thinks reads for adequacy, Rorty distinguishes himself by proclaiming that he reads in order to be edified. Heidegger could either be interpreted as someone telling us how things *really* are about modernity or technology or the human condition, or someone who offers "interesting, and possibly useful, alternative descriptions of what is going on—descriptions which one need not choose."⁷⁶ Rorty prefers to write about Heidegger the second way.

Edification, in this case, appears to be a technique of reading philosophy (and other forms of writing, like literature or poetry) that is not concerned about getting things correctly. For Rorty, there is more to interpretation than unearthing the original meaning. This is in line with his view that great theorists should not be considered as decipherers of "Truth." It is better to appreciate them as intellectual revolutionaries who show us fresh ways of appropriating our condition. Rorty's remark also supports the idea that every reader is driven by personal motives and inclinations. The reader should be given free rein to make use of available descriptions—to "pick them up, use for various occasions and purposes, and then lay them down again."⁷⁷ Reading, in this sense, can be described as a continuous,

⁷⁵ Richard Rorty, Foreword to *Heidegger, Authenticity and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, Vol. 1, eds. M. Wrathall and Jeff Malpas (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), xii.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

demanding exercise of the creative imagination. Rorty finds the edifying strategy attractive because it functions to expand one's imaginative vision. So in contrast to the religious idea of edification as moral or spiritual *upliftment*, or a vertical ascent to holiness or grace, I raise the claim that Rorty's version is designed for intellectual, moral, and spiritual *enlargement*, or a horizontal expansion of the self. It will be contended in this thesis that the self's creative and centrifugal engagement is the means to redemption in a literary culture. To show how Rorty's use of edification is related to the theme of redemption, I divide my discussion into two: first, I focus on Rorty's early notion of what edifying philosophy is and illumine the purpose it serves in his work; and second, I emphasize that the goal of reading and writing for edification is self-transformation.

Rorty first introduced edification in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by making the distinction between systematic and edifying philosophy. The former puts epistemology at the center. Its aim is to perfect an ultimate paradigm of knowledge that makes justification and defense unnecessary. Among the most notable systematic thinkers are Aquinas, Descartes, Hobbes, Newton, Husserl, and Russell. For Rorty, their works uphold objectivity and rationality: great epistemological virtues that are prized beyond mere agreement or convention. He however argues that this kind of thinking is obsolete, for "it [has] failed to draw the necessary conclusions from the "linguistic turn" and [has] remained ensconced in the outmoded paradigm of "representation.""⁷⁸ Edifying philosophy, by contrast, is suspicious of epistemology and reacts critically to theories that claim to penetrate the essence of reality. Its paradigmatic figures—Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein and Heidegger—react against systematic theories. They poeticize our familiar surroundings and help us come up with new aims, new words, or new disciplines. Edifying philosophy, for Rorty, stands as a testament to

⁷⁸ Richard Wolin, "Richard Rorty in Retrospect" in *Dissent* 57.1 (2010), 75. The linguistic turn, and how Rorty's attitude about it changed over time, will be examined in Chapter III.

openness in theory. Its lesson is that incessant reconceptualization makes the world a more interesting place.

In 2007, however, Rorty disavowed his previous use of the distinction. Judging it as a false start, he called to mind his lack of familiarity with post-Hegelian European philosophers who were able to resist the lure of Kantian representationalism in the late seventies. Instead of the systematic/edifying dichotomy, he proposed to treat the Hegelian slogan of philosophy being “its time held in thought” as the crucial turning point of modern thought.⁷⁹ He has then proceeded to follow this dictum by pitting absolutism/foundationalism against the likes of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, and also tying its results up with Deweyan pragmatism and its neo-Hegelian story of liberal, democratic progress. This wider scope allows Rorty to concentrate on the difference between “bad ahistoricist philosophizing” and “good historicist philosophizing.”⁸⁰ In doing so, Rorty thereafter avoids the accusation of caging philosophers as either thinkers who build or thinkers who destroy. Dividing philosophy as either systematic or edifying, after all, is self-defeating. Method-wise, it is fairly obvious that philosophers both construct arguments and react against others. They can also change from being systematic to edifying (and vice-versa) at different stages of their career, so that

⁷⁹ Rorty, “Intellectual Autobiography” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 13-14.

⁸⁰ Rorty is fond of raising metaphilosophical distinctions, and then recanting or reshaping them according to his purpose. Hiley points out examples of this philosophical behavior: “sometimes it is the difference between pure and impure philosophy, sometimes between professionalized philosophy and cultural criticism, sometimes between philosophy that is constructive and philosophy that is destructive, sometimes between capitalized Philosophy and uncanceled philosophy.” See Richard Rorty, “Keeping Philosophy Pure,” *Yale Review* (1965); “Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture,” *Georgia Review* (1976); “Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey,” *The Review of Metaphysics* (1976); “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,” *New Literary History* (1978-79); Introduction, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). [David R. Hiley, *Philosophy in Question: Essays on a Pyrrhonian Theme* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 145; 190-191]. Rorty continues this pattern of classification in his later works—see “Solidarity or Objectivity?” (1984); “Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics” (1989); “Analytic and Conversational Philosophy” (2003). Interestingly, what is common among the many oppositions he creates is that the bad sort always exemplifies the traits of ahistorical essentialism, and the good ones do not.

making sharp distinctions about their intentions so decisively is unjust to their conceptual dialectic.⁸¹

Rorty's abandonment of his original dichotomization of systematic and edifying philosophy, however, does not mean that he has discarded edification

⁸¹ Rorty's changing opinions of the *Heidegger of Being and Time* (1927) and the later one in "The Question Concerning Technology" (1949) illustrates this phenomenon well. He offers opposing accounts of the good Heidegger and the bad Heidegger at different stages in his own writings. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty narrates that Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey were, in the beginning, ensnared in the Kantian conception of philosophy. The search for objectivity and the escape from finitude served as foundational in their early work. It was only after they started questioning their philosophical motives that they became historicist, reactive, and edifying. Here, Rorty considers their edifying final texts as accounts of admirable intellectual maturation. [5]. However, Rorty changes his tune about Heidegger in a later essay. In "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language," he argues that the early Heidegger, who developed "the Dewey-like social-practice pragmatism of the early sections of *Being and Time*," slipped back to escapist metaphysics in his later work. Wittgenstein meanwhile took the opposite direction by admiring philosophical purity in *Tractatus* (1921) and then rejecting it for contingency and history in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953): "whereas Heidegger continued his own quest for authenticity by attempting to win himself a place in the history of Being as the first postmetaphysical Thinker, Wittgenstein's attitude toward philosophy became steadily more casual." [Rorty, "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 60; 62]. In this account, Heidegger regressed back to the philosophical grandeur of permanence and infinity. These differing cases in Rorty's interpretation support the notion that it works better to abandon the distinction between systematic and edifying philosophy. Another reason why Rorty's division works against him is that it implies that philosophy will lose its relevance if there are no more systems to react against. But this is not Rorty's position at all. He thinks that Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein and Heidegger will continue to be read by intellectuals, even if their ideas may play a different role in future discussion. While philosophy today is considered an epistemological discipline, it need not always be the case. It can have a new face, one which could move beyond construction and reaction, Platonism, and metaphilosophical scientism. In fact, it is already being understood in different ways in the contemporary period. Rorty, for instance, classifies the modern conceptions of Western philosophizing as Husserlian (or "scientistic"), Heideggerian (or "poetic"), and pragmatist (or "political"): projects that pursue different ends and ally themselves with different disciplines. [Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 9]. He also points out the division between analytic/ahistorical and non-analytic/historical camps of philosophy. While both carry the name of the same discipline, they are radically different in terms of approaches and aims. Rorty explains: "...The analytic tradition regards metaphor as a distraction from that reality, whereas the non-analytic tradition regards metaphor as the way of escaping from the illusion that there is such a reality. My hunch is that these traditions will persist side-by-side indefinitely. I cannot see any possibility of compromise, and I suspect that the most likely scenario is an increasing indifference of each school to the existence of the other. In time it may seem merely a quaint historical accident that both institutions bear the same name." [Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 23]. Furthermore, Rorty thinks that there are always new puzzles and purposes that can be triggered by thinkers who, by sheer genius, are able to blaze new conceptual trails. Idiosyncratic thinkers—the likes of Derrida and Wittgenstein and Dewey—can appear out of nowhere and ignite lightning bolts to revolutionize philosophy. In short, philosophy is not at risk of "coming to an end." [Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 394]. Readers will pick up the problems of particular intellectual traditions and engage their questions.

altogether. The characteristics of edifying practice remain alive in the works of the philosophers he admires. Their reconceptualizations of philosophical hand-me-downs teach us new ways of thinking and speaking. They take us “out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.”⁸² When it comes to expanding our self-conception, for example, Rorty counts both Nietzsche and Freud as edifying philosophers.⁸³ The two have been instrumental in breaking mindsets reified by classic philosophical thought. While their works can be approached reductively, their primary role in our intellectual culture has been revolutionary. According to Rorty, Nietzsche helps us investigate the question of what it entails to be greater, grander human beings by proposing the idea of *Übermensch*, and Freud has added the unconscious and sexuality in our modern repertoire of self-understanding. Their contributions were able to destabilize our predisposed notions of the self and allowed readers to enlarge their acquaintance with other human possibilities.

This brings us neatly to the second point about edification: that it is an attitude of reading and writing that aims toward personal transformation. Rorty describes his own process of transformation in his autobiography:

I have spent my life rummaging through libraries, hoping to be bowled over—transformed—by some fiercely imaginative, utterly original book. Exalted by one such book, I would then come upon another, hard to reconcile with the first. Then I would try to bridge the gap between them, to find ways of restating what was said in each so as to allow for what was said in the other, to do what Gadamer calls “fusing horizons.”⁸⁴

⁸² Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 360.

⁸³ See Richard Rorty, “Dewey and Posner on Pragmatism and Moral Progress” in *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 74.3 (2007), 915-927 for his take on the former, and “Freud and Moral Reflection” in *The Rorty Reader*, 259-278 on the latter. Rorty also analyzes them together in Part II: *Ironism and Theory of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁸⁴ Rorty, “Intellectual Autobiography” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 3.

Reading with edification in mind means that the person actively appropriates and refashions new resources for his or her own objectives. As an attitude, it signifies a dedication to a perpetual course of re-envisioning the self, others, and the world based on creative encounters with different texts. Not only can it be imaginative as a strategy, but it could also be critical, reactive, and even subversive, since the point is to initiate a change that can range from the trivial to revolutionary. The risk here is the tendency to offer unfair treatment or interpretation of ideas. Rorty himself admits to making creative “misreadings” of texts. Following his description of a strong misreader, he is known to beat philosophical texts “into a shape which will serve his own purpose.”⁸⁵ Rorty does not see this as a negative or an unjustified trait, for truth and accuracy are not his main philosophical goals. He reconstructs other thinkers’ arguments to buffer his own claims, given that this is the point of offering a fresh and edifying reading of the text in the first place.

Rorty admits that in his essays in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, a reader can find his “own, sometimes idiosyncratic, restatements of Jamesian and Deweyan themes.”⁸⁶ These restatements go as far as recommending his version of what philosophers should have said in order to make their ideas more palatable to his pragmatist agenda. In terms of religion and romantic utilitarianism, for example, he suggests that James should have been satisfied with “The Will to Believe” rather than ending with his “brave and exuberant “Conclusion” to *Varieties of Religious Experience*.”⁸⁷ In articulating “our continuity between us and the brutes,”⁸⁸ Rorty also thinks that Dewey should have dropped the talk of “experience” as the replacement for “consciousness.” The strategy of edification elucidates why Bernstein raises the charge that in his career, Rorty has given “ruthless and violent” re-readings of

⁸⁵ Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 131. For more about Rorty’s strategy of reinterpretation, see Wojciech Małecki, “On a Man Who Died from Reading Too Much Heidegger, or Richard Rorty as a Reader” in *Contemporary Pragmatism* 11.1 (2014).

⁸⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xiii.

⁸⁷ Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 36-37.

⁸⁸ Rorty, “Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin” in *Truth and Progress*, 297.

philosophers—that he is guilty of fabricating a Nietzscheanized James or a Wittgensteinian Derrida or a Heideggerianized Dewey. Rorty retorts that these hermeneutical extravagances were done not out of any trivial reason. For him, the works of these thinkers can be linked to a culturally metamorphic purpose: “I want us to see all six of them as heralds of a new dawn—not just a new stage in the history of philosophy, but a new self-image for humanity. I think of them all as assisting in the takeover by what I call a “literary culture,” a culture unlike anything that has existed in the past.”⁸⁹ We can therefore hypothesize that Rorty makes edifying readings in order to corroborate his philosophical views and get aid for envisioning social hope. He restructures texts to fit his own benevolent end and in order to convince us—and perhaps even more so, himself—that the new hope lies in human redemption in a culture of literature. He finds it inspiring to imagine a time when people, freed from the reductive, essentialist curse of religion and science, would have found new avenues for moral and spiritual growth.

Returning to the contention that redemption embodies Rorty’s intellectual project, we realize now that there exists a reason why Rorty is never content to juggle arguments in tight philosophical debates. His metaphilosophical approach has always been concerned about what philosophy can do for us, and about what role it can play in remodeling the world’s future. This, perhaps, is what we can call Rorty’s participation in the conversation of mankind. Habermas reminds us that in the contemporary age, Rorty was successful in making the task of philosophy a theme to consider:

So that is the one task of philosophy: to exercise its addresses in an awareness of the contingencies of life on earth, in particular the contingencies that impact on the presumed foundations, on what we take to be our “final” vocabularies. In this way, Rorty practiced something of what the ancients called “wisdom.” And he used a word

⁸⁹ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 474.

for this practice that is not by chance of religious origin,
namely “edification.”⁹⁰

Edification, going back to a Christian context, suggests the growth and improvement of a person’s moral, religious, and spiritual knowledge. It aspires for a life that becomes larger and more meaningful every day. Rorty, in his own way, is concerned with this. Philosophizing for him is not just a sport of professional argumentation; it is directed toward how we can make sense of life in the present and re-envision it meaningfully. And as we shall see in the reconstruction of Rorty’s idea of redemption in the coming sections, the conviction against essentialism and the attitude of edification will continue to pulse beneath his arguments and illustrations. This is especially the case when he appropriates the nature and history of human redemption, and emphasizes the difference between redemptive power and redemptive truth.

Redemption

In his 2005 Turin lecture entitled “An Ethics for Today,” Rorty states explicitly that redemption, at least as it is traditionally conceived, is a bad idea. The religious notion of redemption operates with the assumption that human beings are composed of a mortal body and an immortal soul. In order to be saved, the higher, spiritual interests of the latter should triumph over the lower, animal needs of the former. If we follow this system, we only experience intimations of redemption in moments “when reason conquers passion, or when grace defeats sin,”⁹¹ and we find its inexpressible culmination in a blissful union with God in death. Rorty argues that this salvation story is a wrong turn in our self-conception. This is because we do not need to be redeemed by a deity or by the power of universal reason in the first place. For Rorty, we “are not degraded beings, not immaterial souls imprisoned in material

⁹⁰ Habermas, “‘... And to define America, Her Athletic Democracy,’” 9.

⁹¹ Richard Rorty, “An Ethics for Today” in *An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 13.

bodies, not innocent souls corrupted by original sin.”⁹² The unquenchable thirst for eternity and the ideal of the *summum bonum* that the onto-theological tradition has rammed into us are misguided desires that we now, fortunately, are slowly unlearning. Following Nietzsche, Rorty thinks that we are simply clever animals who have discovered that mutual cooperation can better fulfill each other’s private and public, present and future desires. As a utilitarian pragmatist, he believes that our only need is to be made happier.

It is too easy to interpret this capsizing of the nature and responsibility of human beings, alongside his pragmatic deflation of metaphysical and religious principles, means that Rorty holds no spiritual aspirations at all. This accusation is justified if one equates spirituality to religious transcendence—if spirituality is understood as a yearning to achieve immortality in an immaterial world and in infinite time. But Rorty argues that while transcendence is not something he believes in, his brand of “atheist’s religion”⁹³ is based on “an exalted sense of new possibilities opening up for finite beings.”⁹⁴ This romantic, spiritual, and edifying hope for the future is something that he shares with modern philosophers in the liberal, utilitarian, critical, and pragmatist traditions. Rorty thinks that they all commonly profess a general hope for “a world in which human beings live far happier lives than they live at the present time.”⁹⁵ He agrees with both J. S. Mill and William James that the right

⁹² Ibid., 13. For his interpretation of pragmatism in relation to religion, see Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism” in *A Companion to Pragmatism*, eds. John Shook and Joseph Margolis (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 257-266. In this essay, Rorty vividly presents the behavior of a person under the spell of religious authoritarianism: “To have a sense of Sin, it is not enough to feel guilty. It is not enough to be appalled by the way human beings treat each other, and by your own capacity for vicious actions. You have to believe that there is a Being before whom we should humble ourselves. This Being issues commands which, even if they seem arbitrary and unlikely to increase human happiness, must be obeyed. When trying to acquire a sense of Sin, it helps a lot if you can manage to think of a specific sexual or dietary practice as forbidden, even though it does not seem to be doing anybody any harm. It also helps to anguish about whether you are calling the divine Being by the name he or she prefers.” [257].

⁹³ Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994), 166. [Cf. Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 161].

⁹⁴ Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, 14.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

beliefs to have and the right actions to perform are the ones that will promote human happiness best. He also sympathizes with Karl Marx's point that instead of contemplating about the afterlife, we should devote all our energies to increasing the amount of happiness in the world instead.⁹⁶

While the ideals of God and Reason have been used to articulate traditional possibilities for human happiness and moral and/or spiritual development, they should not be regarded as the only ones that can serve this purpose. In fact, as we have seen earlier, for Rorty believing in their supreme authority might be doing our culture more harm than good. Recognizing that there are many possible projects of human fulfillment, he finds it necessary to uphold a pluralistic vision of utopia. Rorty follows Mill in heeding Wilhelm von Humboldt's classic liberalist tenet that "the grand leading principle... is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity."⁹⁷ Rorty recognizes that "there are diverse, conflicting, but equally valuable forms of human life,"⁹⁸ and that persons should be entitled to admire their own moral, spiritual, and spiritual heroes and abide by their ideals. He argues that democracy is the most suitable political system that we have imagined so far that can accommodate this pluralism. So at their best, people and governments ought to recognize that their practical responsibility is to keep a free and democratic space alive, where various and multiple resources for human flourishing are available. In the world Rorty envisages, "everybody gets to worship his or her symbol of ultimate concern, unless worship of that symbol interferes with the pursuit of happiness by his or her fellow citizens."⁹⁹ Together with Dewey and Whitman, he dreams of a future society where "the possibility of as yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness"¹⁰⁰ will come to fruition.

⁹⁶ Rorty, "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 4.

⁹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Longman, Roberts & Green, 1869). See epigraph.

⁹⁸ Rorty, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 29.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

Rorty's secular version of redemption—one that does not aspire to escape time and chance, but simply hopes that we can be better and happier than we are today—displays deep convictions that are spiritual in nature:

So, pragmatists transfer to the human future the sense of awe and mystery which the Greeks attached to the non-human; it is transformed into a sense that the humanity of the future will be, although linked with us by a continuous narrative, superior to present-day humanity in as yet barely imaginable ways. It coalesces with the awe we feel before works of imagination, and becomes a sense of awe before humanity's ability to become what it once merely imagined, before its capacity for self-creation.¹⁰¹

Albeit not otherworldly in any sense, we can agree with Peter Dews's observation that despite Rorty's numerous misgivings against religion, Rorty's later works display "a conception of human emancipation able to house aspirations formerly nurtured by religion."¹⁰² The spiritual charge in the desire to be redeemed, in Rorty's reading, is transformed from being a matter of universal, immortal bliss in the arms of a loving Father to a hope for individual, mortal forms of happiness that each person can hope to achieve in his or her lifetime. The picture we finally get is that for Rorty, "the metaphysical and religious convictions concerning the nature of ultimate reality should be converted into moral-political aspirations for humanity at large."¹⁰³

To retain these massive spiritual hopes in familiar terms, it is hardly surprising that Rorty, instead of rejecting the notion of redemption altogether,

¹⁰¹ Rorty, "A World without Substances or Essences" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 52.

¹⁰² Peter Dews, "'The Infinite is Losing its Charm': Richard Rorty's Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 646. According to Smith, Rorty shares this ambivalence toward the role of religion in human life with Kant and Habermas, for the legacy of critical thought is a tradition "where we find we find scepticism towards religion's knowledge-claims, and suspicion towards its underlying motives, co-existing with admiration for its capacity to frame and sustain hope." [Nicholas Smith, "Rorty on Religion and Hope" in *Inquiry* 48.1 (2005), 76-77]. He frames Rorty's dilemma as concerned with consolidating "radical social hopes" which religion has helped support, inspire, and animate, by way of a pragmatism that is antagonistic to Platonism and orthodox monotheism—two traditions that Rorty severely criticizes.

¹⁰³ Dews, "'The Infinite is Losing its Charm': Richard Rorty's Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 646.

actually reconceptualizes it afresh if we follow this reading. He leaves behind its familiar theological conception and modernizes redemption to fit our contemporary age. As we have mentioned in Chapter I, in “Redemption from Egotism,” Rorty calls for an end to the state of smug self-satisfaction with one’s cognitive and interpretative abilities, and invites readers to expand their imaginations and find spiritual growth through literature. In “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” he rehearses an account of Western intellectual history as driven by the desire to be saved from our mortal limitations as human beings. We can now see more clearly that in both works, Rorty’s ideal of redemption can be understood primarily as a non-traditionalist (and hence, *non-essentialist*) desire for the *edification* and *self-enlargement* of human beings. Smith captures this by rephrasing Rorty’s version of human redemption as “a longing for one’s life to be “made good” by virtue of some kind of participation in the life of this larger, awe-inspiring thing.”¹⁰⁴ The project, he states, is all about “a self-developing, self-transforming, and in a manner of speaking “self-completing” encounter with something larger than oneself.”¹⁰⁵ Following Rorty’s pragmatism, the general idea behind this edifying desire for redemption is the trust that despite our contingency and finitude, coming into contact with a being/s or thing/s that bears “redemptive power” can infuse meaning and purpose into our lives, and can also help us achieve our own projects of happiness in the future.

Rorty recognizes that this redemptive orientation toward the self-enlarging possibilities of human beings is constituted by “a fuzzy overlap of faith, hope, and love.”¹⁰⁶ What this overlap means is that whether or not the ideals we uphold are religiously or secularly motivated, they equally and legitimately bear powerful spiritual importance in the life of the believer or follower. For Rorty, worshipping our respective “symbols of ultimate concern” can guide, develop, and even

¹⁰⁴ Smith, “Rorty on Religion and Hope,” 82.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 160.

transform us. He cites Dorothy Allison's conviction that while mortal redemption can center around different cultural (transcendent and non-transcendent) spiritual ideals, what is striking is that they all seem to function in the same way:

There is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto—God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger. Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.¹⁰⁷

For Rorty, the expression of redemptive need is manifested in our insistence to engage in a continuous spiritual romance with someone or something we deem as larger and greater than us. This is because these ideals motivate us to aspire for an improved version of ourselves. The quality of this redemptive relationship can be assessed by its capacity to draw out and bring to life powerful experiences, something like “overpowering hope, or faith, or love (or sometimes, rage),”¹⁰⁸ which Rorty believes are responses that will fundamentally differ for every person. Thus, he sees the importance of defending the idea of democratic pluralism, to ensure that no overarching principle becomes authoritative aside from the mutual respect and tolerance for each other's sources of happiness and redemption.

Rorty seems to imply here that there already exists an abundant supply of potent spiritual resources in our present culture. They are only hidden from us, or perhaps are unavailable to us now, because we have not had the opportunity to elevate them at the level that traditional religion has occupied in our private lives. But neither should we allow for this cultural elevation to happen, if in so doing we are tempted to think that a single ideal can monopolize the possibility of redemption

¹⁰⁷ Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature*, 181. [Cf. Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 161].

¹⁰⁸ Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 161.

for everyone else. Once again, the importance of democratic pluralism is highlighted: there is a greater chance for multifarious spiritual forces to proliferate in a space where various projects of redemption are accepted and democratized. Poetry, or literature, or solidarity can take the place of religion in the individual's life and have legitimate claim. But unlike the hegemonic attitude of traditional, institutional religion toward spiritual ideals, Rorty's treatment of these "symbols of ultimate concern" is more liberal and pragmatic. Since there is neither any final truth at stake, any ultimate standard of excellence to follow, nor any neutral criteria to judge these ideals,¹⁰⁹ then one is free to select his or her idols for edification. Rorty thinks that one can choose to accommodate one god, or many. One can desert a previous ideal and cherish another spiritual resource, if the new one suits or appeals to a person's evolving needs, desires, and concerns better.¹¹⁰ One can follow the dictum of the romantic polytheist for self-enlargement: that since "different poets will perfect different sides of human nature, by projecting different ideals,"¹¹¹ then experimentation with available spiritual sources is actually commendable. All these suggestions can be interpreted as part of the Rortyan gamble in favor of a radically pluralist vision. While in his pluralistic society, there will be no objective way of measuring and ranking human needs and desires, there will be no lack of moral and spiritual resources for meaning and happiness to choose from either. This is the generosity of Rorty's romantic polytheism, which is the kind of climate he hopes will pervade the literary culture.

The Religious Impulse

¹⁰⁹ Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Rorty romanticizes the possibility of a different (and deeper) sense of self-enlargement and edification for himself had he pursued a different ideal. He intimates this regret in "The Fire of Life," one of his last, posthumously published essays. Over prose, he imagines that he should "have spent more time with verse" when he was younger. He says that poetry—a creative art that can succinctly capture a universe of experience in image, rhyme and rhythm—not only provided comfort on his deathbed, but also made him reflect that he would have lived more fully had he enriched his vocabulary with more "old chestnuts" roasted by candescent imaginations. [Rorty, "The Fire of Life" in *The Rorty Reader*, 520-521].

¹¹¹ Rorty, "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 35.

Beneath the discussion above lurks a very basic question: where does this desire for redemption come from in the first place? Rorty thinks that this yearning to be saved from our self-limitations—whether through the help of God, gods, or other forms of spiritual and moral hopes—ultimately has a non-cognitive, pre-philosophical religious root. The original redemptive impulse for spiritual enlargement, for him, is unmediated by the requirement of any universal, systematic, or theological argument or proposition. Religion without Platonic or philosophical intrusion has no need for epistemic defense; it only requires a utilitarian justification. Following Kierkegaard, Rorty shares the view that the redemptive value of one's relation to God is irreducible to a creed.¹¹² It is unbound by ordinary language and logical coherence. This means that it is not the rational deciphering of God's nature or the knowledge of his attributes, but the experience of transformative intimacy between a lesser being with a greater being that truly matters. Simply put, religious redemption in the purest sense is not activated by the content of religious belief, but by the *effect* that the relationship has on the life of the religious follower.

Redemptive religion, in its uncontaminated and undiluted form, is disinterested in questions of truth for Rorty. Rather, its importance lies in the fact that the relationship between the human and the non-human serves the purpose of making one's existence significant, be it by seeing God or gods as "the object of adoration or self-negating love or fearful obedience."¹¹³ Rorty illustrates, for example, that "beliefs are irrelevant to the special devotion of the illiterate believer to Demeter, or to the Virgin of Guadalupe, or to the little fat god from the left at the temple down the street."¹¹⁴ What is pertinent is that the spiritual romance nourishes and gives substance to the life of the believer, or at the very least gives him or her the inspiration to continue living in a particularly meaningful way. To explain more clearly the point that the intellectualization of religious belief is not what truly saves,

¹¹² Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 391-392.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 393.

¹¹⁴ Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" in *The Rorty Reader*, 477-478.

Rorty analogizes religious faith with the experience of love.¹¹⁵ Devoting oneself to a compassionate God even in the face of extreme and unnecessary human suffering, as well as loving a person undeserving of such passion or unable to requite the same feelings, can be easily judged as irrational, insensible, or unfulfilling options of living a good, happy life. But the presence of a reasonable justification and a coherent set of beliefs are not the requirements for redemption in faith and love. These relationships redeem the believer and the lover, if only because they would not be able to go on living without trusting that divine and eternal justice exists, or without feeling the mere presence of the errant or indifferent beloved. They nurture these relations, as uneven and as unfair and as irrational as they are, because they are essential for deepening and intensifying the experience of life.

Rorty strengthens his case against religious faith as a system of truths by claiming that pre-philosophical religion does not require any *specialized* knowledge of God or gods for the purpose of redemption. On the part of the follower, the sincerity or worthiness of his or her devotion to the ideal is the most important. This divinistic innocence pervades “the relation between a pious but uneducated Athenian of the fifth century and an Olympian deity, like that between an illiterate Christian and Christ.”¹¹⁶ The rightness of belief, in these polytheist and monotheist examples, simply takes a backseat to deep conviction. Religious power here derives its original fuel not from truth, but for the most part in feeling. Rorty also adds that the nature and ends of this pre-philosophical, religious bond may also vary. For instance, the nature of a religious connection with a non-human person may be “one of adoring obedience, or ecstatic communion, or quiet confidence, or some combination of these.”¹¹⁷ These expressions of religious experiences are multifarious in content and

¹¹⁵ Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 158.

¹¹⁶ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 393. It is noteworthy, from the point of view of the thesis, that Rorty uses *illiterate* devotion to illustrate his point, given that his alternative to religion is a kind of “redemption by words,” or at least redemption through a literary culture.

¹¹⁷ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 477.

execution, but they all effectively serve the objective of infusing personal meaning and spiritual significance in the lives of devotees. In terms of purposes, a religious link can either function as a source of inspiration and happiness for the faithful, or commit a worshipper to a particular way of life, or provide protection from nihilism and empower a believer against despair, or even serve all three ends. Redemption, in all these cases, lies in the transformative changes that trusting a certain relationship with something or someone more powerful can bring. Hence, the objectivity and universalizability of one's religious source of redemption are incidental and secondary in Rorty's view. As in the idyllic case of the relationship between God and the mystic, a redemptive religious relationship at its best is simply inexpressible and inexhaustible via common language. What we can gather from all these are two things: first, that for Rorty, it is not the knowledge of the deity but the consequences of the intimate encounters that are important. These experiences are the ones that genuinely hold and sustain redemptive power. The second idea is that non-cognitive, religious redemption is fundamentally a *private* relationship between the self and the awe-inspiring being.

Yet despite Rorty's insistence that the original religious impulse is fueled not by truths but by relationships, he recognizes that the overarching response to the spiritual call of self-developing and self-enlarging redemption is the formulation of redemptive truths. This is based on the idea that redemption essentially comes in the form of having true and correct beliefs that are commensurable and universal for all human beings. This transforms the private, intimate, and non-cognitive dimension of religious redemption into something public, shareable, and cognitive. It puts priority in having the right content so that one is guaranteed the universally correct effect. Rorty argues that the objective of redemptive truth is to provide "a set of beliefs that would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves."¹¹⁸ As a system of belief, it is designed to "produce maximal clarity and maximal coherence" and would redeem "by virtue of its explicit content, not because

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 475.

of its non-cognitive relation to a particular audience.”¹¹⁹ Believing in this truth means trusting that there exists a right and objective context for acknowledging and judging human life—one which allows human beings to appear as they truly are, and which in turn reveals the proper nature of their needs, desires, and goals. Redemptive truth functions as the centralizing principle that fulfills “the need to fit everything—everything, person, event, idea, and poem, into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined and unique.”¹²⁰ It stands for a hope that a final framework for living exists, one that can completely answer the question of what mankind is good for.

Rorty argues that in the history of the Western tradition, religion and philosophy offer truth-claims that have served these redemptive purposes. Both have tried to satisfy the desire for a universal non-human authority for belief. He also thinks that both have failed. In what follows, I finally rehearse Rorty’s narrative of human redemption, beginning with the role of religion and philosophy in this story and the rationale behind the demise of these redemptive truths. I show that for him, the contemporary form of redemption that we must now embrace is the literary culture—a culture where our responsibility as human beings is tied not to God or to Nature, but only to ourselves.

The Rise of the Literary Culture

Redemption by truth means full theoretical and practical reconciliation with whoever or whatever holds the supreme authority over all things. Prior to the modern period, making sense of how things fit together required a divine author as the guarantor of completeness and salvation. Orthodox monotheism—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—promised this redemption by *institutionalizing* the belief in God. These religions posited a being that is the uncaused cause, the creator of the world, and the ultimate source of meaning for all. As redemptive truth, the idea of a

¹¹⁹ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 391.

¹²⁰ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 476.

supreme deity provided the foundation of our lives. It supplied a fixed arrangement of references in theory and practice. Our ideas of truth and knowledge, good and evil, beauty and love all reflected a transcendent dimension. Rituals and prayers, sinners and saints, holy men and heretics served as actions and characters for guiding our traditional way of experiencing the world. The great texts of religion, philosophy, and literature—*The Holy Bible*, Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* or *City of God*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Aquinas's *Summa Theologiæ*, and Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* or *Divine Comedy*—were designed to illuminate our intellectual and moral bond with God. Devout belief and participation in decreed practices were intended to lead the virtuous to a heavenly paradise, where God and men could achieve unification after death. Simply put, a deferential relationship with the ultimate being was accompanied by the promise of full epistemological, ethical, and spiritual significance.

This theistic synthesis eventually crumbled in our turn to modernity. Rorty points out that with the rise of humanism, people started questioning the infallibility of religious belief and losing faith in religion. These efforts peaked philosophically with the Kantian declaration that as rational beings, we were capable of defining and abiding by universal moral obligations without divine help. Due to argumentative vulnerability, the "God" of religion was replaced by the "Truth" of philosophy by the intellectuals of the West. To fill the spiritual void caused by the loss of refuge in religious belief, Rorty argues that "after Kant, philosophers began to have the notion that if culture was going to be saved it would be saved by them, because they could explain the nature of rationality, method, and progress."¹²¹ Philosophy's offer on the table was an appeal to universal truth: the promise that we can be led to a harmonious set of beliefs through rigorous inquiry. The secular, philosophical version of redemptive truth—which Rorty zeroes in as materialist metaphysics, the "apotheosis of the results of natural science"¹²²—was based on our trust that

¹²¹ Rorty in "Rorty, Taylor and Dreyfus: A Discussion," 54.

¹²² Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" in *The Rorty Reader*, 480.

everything can be subsumed into a rational, universal system. This scientific outlook legitimized the conviction that we can explain away the mechanisms of nature together with the dispositions of our behavior and action. It claimed the ability to provide an empirical foundation for ““grounding” our culture, our moral lives, our politics, our religious beliefs, upon “philosophical bases.””¹²³

Rorty argues that today, modern science as redemptive truth has been proven insufficient in supplying redemptive significance. Discoveries and experiments are, of course, useful to mankind: they provide verification to our ordinary intuitions, allow us to predict and control phenomena, and help us to gain mastery over our environment. Our success in scientific endeavors offers us “an edifying example of tolerant conversability,”¹²⁴ where ideal social cooperation is shown as possible. But while science is a good model for solidarity, it remains an impoverished resource for our spiritual aspirations according to Rorty. Materialism as “a last theory of everything” is deficient for the purposes of offering moral substance to a person’s life or providing motivation for self-flourishing. Rorty points out that the question “so what?” to science began to be posted by literary intellectuals from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Charles Baudelaire to Nietzsche. With them, Rorty claims that science has not done much to provide a vocabulary for “either political guidance or individual redemption”¹²⁵—tasks which at least monotheist religion as redemptive truth was able to fulfill for thousands of years. The realization that science single-handedly cannot satisfy the search for meaning in life, for Rorty, heralds the search for a better response to our enduring desire for redemption.

To reiterate: while their influence on Western culture is by no means over, Rorty thinks that the nature of religion and philosophy as a set of beliefs has worked against them. As redemptive truths, a supremely powerful God, susceptible to recurring doubt, is unreliable; the quest for Truth, in which scientific propositions are

¹²³ Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 112.

¹²⁴ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 486.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 485.

the optimum results, is an impoverished one. In short, the idea that salvation can only be derived from a collection of true and correct beliefs—i.e., if we are able to come to terms with God, or if we can unlock the intrinsic nature of reality, then our search for meaning is triumphant—has failed as a model of redemption. For Rorty, redemptive truth should be considered as a residue of antiquated cultures that are obsessed with the transcendent and the eternal. But if such is the case, is it then possible to realize a different kind of redemption? Can we found a new *ethos* that can accommodate the fullness of redemptive power (as in pre-philosophical religion) but without epistemic dependence on an incorrigible, universalizable truth?

Rorty answers with a resounding yes, and looks toward what he regards to be the emerging contemporary culture of the West for the answer. Noting the loss of religious and philosophical influence on the reflective consciousness of the present generation, he explains that since the turn of the 19th century, imaginative literature has replaced the authority of both religion and philosophy “in forming and solacing the agonized conscience of the young,” and that novels and poems have now become “the principal means by which a bright youth gains a self-image.”¹²⁶ Following the impoverishment of our moral resources in a postmodern culture, intellectuals have reacted by turning “the enrichment of our vocabulary of moral reflection over to novelists, poets, and dramatists.”¹²⁷ In addition, when it comes to identifying with more and more human beings, genres such as “ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama” have become more effective than theory, and that the “novel, the movie, and the TV program” have now become more relevant than the sermon and the treatise.¹²⁸ The point is that for the purposes of increasing our sense of self-reflexivity, enlarging our present self-conception, and utilizing a more extensive range of moral references, a new cultural context has developed in

¹²⁶ Rorty, “Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 66.

¹²⁷ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection” in *The Rorty Reader*, 271.

¹²⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, xvi.

modernity. Its advantage is that this time, its pluralistic and democratic nature can house multiple sources of redemptive power.

Rorty coins this as the cultural turn to literature. Its orientation is not anymore directed towards “a non-cognitive relation to a non-human person” as in pre-philosophical religion, or “a cognitive relation to propositions” as in theology or philosophy. Instead, it focuses on the self’s “non-cognitive relations with other human beings.”¹²⁹ The redemptive potential of this culture lies in treating all human artifacts such as “books and buildings, paintings and songs”¹³⁰ as mediums for enlarging our human acquaintance and as resources for imaginative recontextualization. In this environment, religion and philosophy are subsumed under a broader domain where they are treated, among many other options, as creations of the human imagination that can aid us in attaining existential significance. What is considered redemptive in the literary culture is fundamentally related to our encounters with beings and things and events—even those which seem plain and ordinary to the eye—that “might conceivably have moral relevance—might conceivably alter one’s sense of what is possible and important.”¹³¹ This means that there are now many candidates to the quest of discovering what purposes we can possibly have and finding out what kind of persons we can become. While it is clear that the sources of transformative spiritual power are not necessarily confined to written texts, Rorty zooms in on the *effect* of the massive rise of literary consumption in modernity to justify his characterization of the literary culture. The increase of readership, he argues, has opened up a way for people in the modern world to entertain new purposes, imagine different ways of living, and reinvigorate their current perceptions. Rorty focuses on the consequences of reading literature to execute his point about the importance of democratizing our sources of redemption.

¹²⁹ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 478.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 82.

Redemption via literature should not be understood solely as a project of inspiring and initiating changes in personal behavior. It is more than that. For Rorty, to say that something has moral relevance means that it fundamentally affects an individual's overall outlook about life. Günter Leypoldt rightly points out that one common mistake in interpreting Rorty's view is that he simply wants literature to serve as a program for moral reflection, in the sense that it offers guidance for ethical conduct. Leypoldt thinks that unlike Martha Nussbaum, who focuses on the link between the literary form and its moral value, Rorty regards the redeeming importance of literature in a much broader way. The power of literature, in Rorty's view, does not lie in serving as an aesthetic response to the moral objective of being/becoming good. At its best, it is highly significant to the process of "world-making"—a task geared toward the renovation of a person's self-conception.¹³² This means that the literature one reads does not have to be classically great in order to be morally edifying; what truly matters is that the experience of reading a particular work can change the moral and spiritual horizons of the reader. Thus, attacks of literary elitism against Rorty—e.g., questions such as "do Henry James's superior narrative skills contribute to the moral depth of his vision?"¹³³—are misplaced.

To clarify the point about moral elitism further, we can understand the redemptive, inspirational value of literature as neither restrained by the style or form of writing, nor by the work's reputation. Even if *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not included in the Western traditional canon as one of the best literary works ever produced, Rorty finds that it contributed monumentally in inspiring a nation to undermine slavery. Compared to what are regarded as classically great works, it participated more than most in the cultivation of moral progress. What this shows is that there exist no

¹³² Günter Leypoldt, "Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making" in *New Literary History* 39.1 (2008), 145–163. "World-making" here is to be understood in a distinctly Rortyan sense, and should not be construed in relation to Nelson Goodman's original and popularized conception of the term. For Rorty's appraisal of this idea, see "On Worldmaking," Review of *Ways of Worldmaking*, by Nelson Goodman, *Yale Review* 69:2 (December 1979), 276–79.

¹³³ Leypoldt, "Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making," 146.

formulae for inspiration in a literary culture, making it pointless to demand a hierarchy of spiritually redeeming texts. This is impossible to create, because according to Rorty, what is appealing to an individual can only tell us something about the person or the community that he or she belongs to, and not much else. This is why we are unable to get an interesting answer if we inquire “what greatness-making properties *The Iliad* and *The Idiot* share.”¹³⁴ We should also remember the fact that the relativism of inspirational value becomes clear “when we try—and typically fail—to be awed by the purported masterpieces of cultural traditions other than our own.”¹³⁵ The claim here is that while we can anticipate which works will appeal to us based on our *Bildung*, we cannot know in advance what might bring about a meaningful, self-metamorphosing redemption.

In short, there is no reliable way of measuring and ranking which books and people and things can transform us most deeply. One man’s redemption may not necessarily be another’s. In Weberian terms, a person can simply be “religiously unmusical,” but responsive to the moral proddings of literature or visual art. Following Dewey, if we reorient “religious power” to a broader range of phenomena, we realize that self-significance “is sometimes brought about by devotion to a cause; sometimes by a passage of poetry that opens a new perspective; sometimes as was the case with Spinoza—deemed an atheist in his day—through philosophical reflection.”¹³⁶ Following this trail of thought, personal redemption in a literary culture should thus be understood as a search for one’s finite god or subjective truth as a human being. It is a concern that is individual, unique, and private. Hence, for Rorty, it does not make sense to diagnose and prescribe higher or better forms of perfecting one’s existence. Doing so leads us back to treating people and things cognitively—of reifying them as ideal redemptive truths. In sum, genuine redemptive power is unleashed through a relationship with a person or a thing,

¹³⁴ Rorty, “Reply to Miguel Tamen” (Essay: “Inspirational Value and Causal Pressure”) in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 632.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934), 14.

whoever or whatever they are. In Rorty's vision, these encounters do not simply add to one's knowledge, but also affect and inform one's morals, hopes, and existential direction. That is why an individual must be open to becoming thoroughly contextualist, and be prepared to acknowledge that the next place that one visits or the next person one falls in love with can change one's way of life. We can thus think of Rorty's democratization of redemption as his version of re-spiritualizing the modern world.

A point worth considering is that when it comes to describing his literary culture, there are times when Rorty's redemptive emphasis lies on the possibilities of self-enlarging transformation, as we have seen in the discussion above. But at other times, Rorty also muses about a bigger redemptive story of collective cooperation, where the point is to overcome the past to create a better future. Instead of a vertical relation of ascent between man and God/Nature, this culture of solidarity prioritizes the horizontal relations of commonwealth between human beings.¹³⁷ This commonwealth, according to Rorty, is achievable in modern liberal democracies, where people are allowed to pursue their own goals and forms of happiness as long as they do not trample on other people's projects. So how then can we make sense of this change of tune?

The answer is that these two phenomena are intertwined in Rorty's narrative of redemption. The culture of reading literature, according to Rorty, rose to prominence at the same time as the culture of democracy in the 19th century,¹³⁸ and has been progressing steadily since then. The time when human beings recognized the need to appropriate rights and opportunities for themselves coincided with the rise of literary resources to support this realization. Using his private and public distinction, Rorty claims that literature in modernity was able to appeal to two goals. Some books were able to illustrate "what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life—can be like" (e.g., the philosophical and fictional works of

¹³⁷ Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, 17.

¹³⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 82.

Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov), and others were able to show how we can be “engaged in a shared, social effort—the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel” (e.g., the political treatises of Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls).¹³⁹ Following Leypoldt’s rendition of the Rortyan story, we consider imaginative recontextualization as dually geared toward the private pursuit of autonomy and the formation of solidarity: “the inspirational sublime is a central attribute of literary world-making; another is the power to create the sort of empathetic identification that encourages human solidarity (non-competitive and non-hierarchical).”¹⁴⁰ We will come to a deeper understanding of the redemptive significance of self-creation and solidarity in Chapter III.

Aside from responding to the modern objectives of private fulfillment and public cooperation, Rorty also celebrates the democratic use of textual material in the modern world. The practice of criticism—at least the kind that T.S. Eliot, Lionel Trilling, and Harold Bloom have engaged in—comprises not simply the appraisal of poetry and prose, but extends to the genres of “theology, philosophy, social theory, reformist political programs, and revolutionary manifestoes.”¹⁴¹ Rorty applauds interdisciplinarity as a robust sort of intellectual activity for interpreting the modern culture, as he thinks that the democratization of societies goes hand in hand with the extensive use of literary sources. In short, redemption in a literary culture is a living possibility today because we cherish and engage our democratic achievements more than ever. The success of Rorty’s redemption should thus be regarded as conditional upon our love for freedom—a modern achievement which, for him, we should vigilantly treasure and fight for.

Liberal Democracy

¹³⁹ Ibid., xiv.

¹⁴⁰ Leypoldt, “Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty’s Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making,” 156.

¹⁴¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 81.

Rorty thinks that the liberal democratic ideal is the best political structure to house our private and collective aspirations, and that we are coming to the point at which this redemptive framework is *practically* realizable. The 20th century has witnessed successful political transitions toward democracy, and this trend is still continuing—a fact that Rorty approves of, as he thinks that in terms of fostering social happiness and cohesion, “just ordinary liberal democracy is all the ideology anybody needs.”¹⁴² Rorty admits that at this stage there exists a tremendous global disparity in terms of wealth, education, comfort, and leisure, which constrains human flourishing and the freedom to pursue individual happiness. He also recognizes that not all nations are welcoming of the Western democratic structure, and some are in fact militantly resistant to this cultural change. But these problems do not dampen his support for democratic politics. In “Philosophy and the Future,” Rorty claims that “while mass democracy may be a specifically European invention, the idea of a democratic utopia finds resonance everywhere.”¹⁴³ When people are conscious of the cruelty and oppression of the privileged and the powerful, suggesting that we shift to a more egalitarian framework would not only appear appealing to the disadvantaged, but more so, it would be just, according to Rorty. Even in the most oppressive of cultures, he goes on, people have become more open to favor the protection of social and political freedoms. This ideal of social justice is behind the slavery abolition acts in the 19th century and contemporary movements to oppose social persecution, gender discrimination, and racism. Furthermore, Rorty cites that inspirational stories of forgiveness between warring clans, or political reconciliation to heal ancient hatreds and curtail social violence, are ripe indications that entrenched practices can be abandoned in a globalized world. This buoys the claim that our sense of solidarity can be extended, leading Rorty to contend that “every culture, no matter how parochial, contains material which can be woven into

¹⁴² See Zbigniew Stanzyck, “There is a Crisis Coming: A Conversation with Richard Rorty” in *2B: A Journal of Ideas* 11-12 (1997), 18-29. [Cf. Richard Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 60].

¹⁴³ Rorty, “Philosophy and the Future” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 204.

utopian images of a planetwide democratic political community.”¹⁴⁴ Hence, Rorty regards his vision of redemption as feasible in the modern world—a world that is growing more and more responsive to the liberal values of autonomy and solidarity.

This rendition of redemption in a literary culture gives the impression that for Rorty, there is a certain historical logic at play. His version of spiritual progress appears teleological: we begin from a state of immaturity, believing that “the theistic and rationalistic philosophical traditions assured us that there was something powerful on our side—God or Reason,”¹⁴⁵ and now we have come of age with the realization that we are truly mortal, alone, and following Nietzsche, “human, all too human.” The rise of the human imagination, for him, should “occasion pride rather than despair.”¹⁴⁶ But is Rorty following a similar logic that runs in the philosophical narrative of Nietzsche and Hegel? These two philosophers understand human life as determined by or converging toward a historical destiny. Nietzsche believes that the intrinsic movement of Western metaphysics is undergirded by the desire to promote and value its own interest.¹⁴⁷ This desire is called the “will to power”—a mode of Being that aims to rule and master everything that is. This will to power begins with Platonism and finally finds its accomplishment through the conscious determination of the *Übermensch*. Rorty thinks that Nietzsche’s criticism of religion and philosophy belongs to this story of the will to power: our reliance on a Godhead and “[the categories of reason] represent nothing more than the expediency of a certain race and species — their utility alone is their ‘truth’.”¹⁴⁸ Hegel, meanwhile, entertains the vision of a predetermined history that converges at the realization and completion of self-consciousness, in which art, religion, and philosophy serve as the three moments

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Rorty, “Reply to Susan James” (Essay: “Politics and the Progress of Sentiments”) in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 430-431.

¹⁴⁶ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 479.

¹⁴⁷ See Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead’” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 53-112, for an analysis and criticism of the Nietzschean metaphysics of the “will to power,” which Rorty follows in his interpretation.

¹⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), sec. 608. [Cf. Rorty, “Pragmatism and post-Nietzschean philosophy” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 2].

of the “objective spirit.” Believing that he was able to resolve the dialectical oppositions of metaphysical thought, and had determined “the structure of fully unfolded reason,” he left behind two tasks: either illuminate the world in its correct view, as taken up by the right Hegelians, or realize “an image of the world pervaded by reason” by the Left.¹⁴⁹ The important idea in both responses is that they have kept the Hegelian faith that we can reconcile the world’s contingencies with a rational destiny. For both Nietzsche and Hegel, then, our final redemption lies in the fulfillment of something that naturally drives or determines humanity. Should we then read Rorty’s literary culture this way? Can we rest confident that the redemptive promises of this literary epoch will eventually emerge and stay?

While Rorty regards Nietzsche and Hegel as his philosophical idols, and attributes to them the present culture’s increased emphasis on self-reliance, it would be a mistake to conclude that he is philosophizing like them, at least according to this interpretation of these two thinkers. Rorty does not prescribe a logic behind his redemptive story; rather, he treats our redemptive possibilities in a literary culture as a product of a fortuitous historical contingency. Rorty, unlike Nietzsche, believes that there is no metaphysic underlying our emancipation from the previous authority of religion and science. There is no innate principle driving this story to a conclusion of human dominance. Also, what Rorty admires most in Hegel is not the self-realizing ambition of the Spirit, but the empowering suggestion that our culture cannot be read from a neutral background. It should always be regarded as a product of our “present discursive practices,” as contrasted with “alternative past or proposed practices.”¹⁵⁰ If one interprets this as a fully historicist claim, then one “would envisage intellectual and moral progress not as getting closer to anything but as the process by which the kaleidoscope keeps getting bigger and more colorful.”¹⁵¹ Rorty

¹⁴⁹ Dews, “‘The Infinite is Losing its Charm’: Richard Rorty’s Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 638.

¹⁵⁰ Rorty, “Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 24.

¹⁵¹ Rorty, “Intellectual Autobiography” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 22-23.

is aware of the contingent nature of redemption in his literary culture, and it would be wrong to read his literary culture as our final end. While philosophy has served as a transitional genre to the literary turn, he also muses that we have come to this point mostly because the socio-economic conditions in modernity have made it possible for “more and more people to become literate, and to have enough surplus time and energy to read books, magazines, and newspapers.”¹⁵² This environment has led to the widening of people’s imaginations and introduced alternative sources of spiritual experiences and vocations. The literary turn, therefore, can be better explained as a product of different events that by chance worked toward our moral and spiritual benefit.

Furthermore, while Rorty is optimistic about the redemptive promises of the literary vision, he cannot guarantee its cultural sustainability. It is too dependent on the steadiness of the socio-political paradigm of the modern West. In his reply to Susan James’s “Politics and the Progress of Sentiments,” where James argues that Rorty’s assurances about liberalism are unwarranted, Rorty confesses that he actually does not have much confidence in the stability of liberal values. He thinks that mutual respect, tolerance of diversity, and social cooperation would be in peril in the advent of dangerous events. These emotional capacities for liberalism would probably break if terrorists finally make use of nuclear weapons to wreck civic order, or if the global economic system collapses and destabilizes the security of the middle class.¹⁵³ What these show is that we could always slide back to fundamentalist religious belief or social intolerance when pressed on by difficult circumstances. Our democratic achievements can be easily wiped out. Hence, for Rorty, the literary culture can only come close to its ideal fruition if we work hard to sustain it, and if the odds are not against us. It is supported by the groundless hope that contingency will work in our favor, and that as an ideal, a perfectly secular utopia should be

¹⁵² Rorty, “Reply to Susan James” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 430.

¹⁵³ Rorty, “Reply to Susan James” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 430.

regarded as an important long-range goal.¹⁵⁴ Despite the vulnerability of this vision, Rorty persists in defending his radical hope for a world where personal visions are kept private, and solidarity and respect are a public mantra. In a nutshell, Rorty's literary culture is not the culmination of the Western narrative of redemption. Rather, it is the best imaginable situation that can accommodate our personal and collective spiritual aspirations.

What have we achieved so far in our reconstruction of Rorty's idea of redemption? In this chapter, I have raised the claim that we can interpret his philosophical project as undergirded by redemptive hope. Redemption, following Rorty's terms, means engaging with the life of persons and events and things that can draw out powerful experiences from us—experiences such as overpowering hope, love, and happiness. A redemptive relationship infuses our lives with meaning and significance, inspires risk and sacrifice, and inevitably leads to the enlargement and transformation of our old selves. This, for Rorty, is what constitutes moral and spiritual growth. Reconstructing the subject of redemption has led us to examine the two attitudes that inform the nature of Rorty's writings: first, that as a pragmatist, he is consistent in debunking essentialist claims that manifest reductive philosophizing, and second, that he is motivated by edification, or the active appropriation and remodeling of texts (as well as ideas, events, and things) for the expansion of his understanding and imagination. These postures reveal Rorty's dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy, and our interpretation of his method of philosophizing suggests that he cradles the hope of self-transformation in his work.

Rorty's modern concept of redemption is also shown as indebted to the original understanding of pre-philosophical religion. Salvation in pre-Platonized religion was fueled by man's relationship with a higher, divine being ideally unencumbered by truth-systems and the demand for philosophical proof. The consequent systematization of this relationship led to the conviction that we can be

¹⁵⁴ Rorty, "Reply to Jeffrey Stout" (Essay: "Rorty on Religion and Politics") in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 546.

saved by our specialized knowledge of redemptive truth. Possessing a set of universally correct beliefs—first, in the form of theological truths, and next, through the formulation of scientific principles—was then construed as the primary requirement for redemption. In Rorty's narrative, however, Western culture cannot pin its hopes on the idea of universal truth anymore. Institutional religion and materialist science have already served their time, and in a broader cultural point of view, they now fail to fulfill our redemptive purposes. Rorty believes that what can save us in this day and age is another kind of relationship—not an association with a higher, infinitely more powerful entity, but a renewed relationship with other human beings. Redemptive power pulses through encounters that enlarge our imaginative acquaintance and ultimately lead to moments of self-metamorphosis. The most appropriate framework to house these diverse redemptive relationships is what Rorty calls the literary culture. This culture, which we are now in the process of cultivating, acknowledges the plurality of spiritual resources necessary for personal redemption. Its full possibility is fueled by our respect for the values of liberal democracy. Rorty believes that we must do what we can to achieve the establishment of this literary vision.

This reconstruction also raises new questions. Rorty's modern polytheism is designed to make redemption available for all its inhabitants in the modern world. He recognizes the necessity for respect and tolerance of different sources of personal spiritual flourishing. But what exactly motivates Rorty to think that this pluralistic and finite redemptive arrangement is possible? Is there something new and unprecedented in modernity that makes the practice of worshipping our own gods plausible, or even more suitable today? Could it be that our self-understanding has changed to the point of enabling us to accommodate a new form of spiritual life? Assuming that the answer is yes, then how are we as citizens of Rorty's modernity supposed to think and act? What responsibilities and powers should we develop, and what spiritual habits should we forgo? Are there modern spiritual values that we should cultivate to approximate this culturally transformative end, and will they

suffice to guide and save us from whatever Rorty thinks we need redeeming from? In sum, what should be changed to make ourselves fit for Rorty's life of modern redemption?

But even after we reveal Rorty's answers to these questions, we cannot simply take him at face value. We must then proceed to investigate the appeal and contribution of his redemptive account, especially in relation to other similar projects. After reconstructing Rorty's project to disclose that redemption can be understood as a theoretical motivation in this chapter, my analysis in Chapter III will solidify the significance of Rortyan redemption in light of the spiritual demands of modernity. This will then allow us to subject its merits to a critical examination and comparison with other contemporary frameworks of redemption.

Chapter III: Redemption and the Problems of Modernity

In Chapter I, I have raised the claim that Rorty, together with Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, are concerned about understanding how existential fulfilment and spiritual power are best experienced in the modern world. All four thinkers are also interested about discovering the nature of the most potent and life-enriching sources of human meaning today. In Chapter II, I sought to reconstruct how Rorty's overlooked idea of redemption can be interpreted as a motivation behind his work. It energizes his pragmatism and utopian social hopes in a literary culture. This reading yields a new understanding of Rorty's philosophical project. My aim in Chapter III is to couple Rorty's project of redemption with the theme of modernity. I want to show how my reconstruction of Rorty can contribute to the ongoing discussion between Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly in relation to the contemporary philosophical issues about redemption and the sacred. I shall consider how the perspective presented by Rorty might advance these debates and help reinvigorate the way we think about experiencing meaning and spiritual fulfillment in the modern world.

To achieve this task, I first take a look at the general self-image of humanity that Rorty thinks we need to aim for progressive change. His view is that this self-image requires self-reliance, linguistic creativity, future-orientedness, and the abandonment of religious nostalgia. I then provide a recapitulation of the accounts of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly regarding nihilism as the overriding problem of modernity and their corresponding solutions to the problem. I then examine Rorty's choice of egotism as a malaise of the modern condition, which differs from the nihilism that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly investigate in their works. I argue that to address the problem of egotism, Rorty turns egotism against itself by promoting the antidote of self-enlargement through self-creation (private redemption) and solidarity (public redemption). Both ways entail losing the egotistic self in the process of self-enlargement to find meaning and spiritual fulfillment. I then seek to

reveal the link between egotism and nihilism: that before becoming nihilists, human beings first suffer from the egotism that Rorty's self-enlargement strategy tries to address. My argument is that Rorty teaches us how to mitigate nihilism before it even begins. This preventative strategy is something that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly have not considered in their accounts, and for this reason, my reconstruction of Rorty's project of redemption can take their discussion forward. My view is that in comparison to the other frameworks, Rorty issues a novel invitation to go beyond the Axial framework of religion in his modern reconceptualization of human redemption.

A New Self-Image

Rorty thinks that we ought to discard the belief that there is something absolute that could either collectively guide all human lives or guarantee the experience of spiritual satisfaction. His pragmatist dictum goes: "Look, there isn't any authority that we can appeal to settle the quarrels between us. We're going to have to deal with them ourselves."¹⁵⁵ We should learn to cultivate the modern world without any indebtedness to a higher being, and with a full trust in our own set of human capacities. This new sense of self-reliance, for him, is "the kind of change in self-description which could in the end make a difference."¹⁵⁶ Habermas observes that Rorty implores us to learn how "to see ourselves as the sons and daughters of a self-confident Modernity, if in our politically, economically, and socially torn global society Walt Whitman's *belief in a better future* is to have a chance at all."¹⁵⁷ This recognition of modern responsibility, for Rorty, would drive the lives of the inhabitants of his spiritually-rich, conscientious, pluralist, secular utopia—a space where "the democratic voice of hope for a brotherly and inclusive form of social life must not fall silent."¹⁵⁸ Rorty's position is that if we are to make a successful shift to a

¹⁵⁵ See Edward Ragg, "Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies" in *Philosophy and Literature* 26.2 (2002), 369-396. [Cf. Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 143].

¹⁵⁶ Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 143.

¹⁵⁷ Habermas, "'... And to define America, Her Athletic Democracy,'" 6.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

literary culture of redemption, we must then own up to the requirements of a new image for human beings in modernity.

But what constitutes this modern self-image for Rorty? While he does not offer a straightforward definition, clues are offered everywhere in his writings. Here, I condense Rorty's notion of modern maturity into linguistic creativity, self-reliance, and future-orientedness. The first refers to our ability to come to terms with the roles that imagination and language play in our lives. In "An Ethics for Today," Rorty argues in favor of the imagination over reason, avowing his agreement with Santayana that the only source of our moral ideals—ideals prized by religion or art or philosophy—is the human imagination. One of our greatest poems, according to Rorty, is the traditional vision of religion (and philosophy), which purports that our moral and spiritual ideals are grounded in something real. Its redemptive power is constituted by the belief that there is something out there that can corroborate our beliefs and principles—something like God, or human nature. As we have previously examined, Rorty wants to cast off what he takes to be our worship of this Platonic view, and suggests that we take heed of its rival ode. He argues that the other, equally significant human poem is utilitarianism. Utilitarians believe that society should constantly aim to enlarge the range of human needs and desires that it can accommodate, and endeavour to maximize happiness for all. Rorty notes in particular the attractiveness of Mill's pluralist, utilitarian elegy, which supports the rise of "a planetwide global commonwealth."¹⁵⁹ The Platonic quest for truth and the utilitarian quest for happiness, which are philosophical theories designed to orient the ways and ends of our lives, are already familiar to us at this stage of the thesis. However, it is crucial to note that in this particular lecture, Rorty emphasizes a fresh point: these two competing visions are poetic achievements of the "all too human" imagination.

Why does Rorty accord primacy to the imagination? We find an explanation in "Pragmatism and Romanticism," where Rorty re-examines the romantic idea—

¹⁵⁹ Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, 17.

beautifully averred in P.B. Shelley's manifesto "A Defence of Poetry"—that the imagination should take credit for opening the many worlds that reason has proceeded to inhabit. Rorty understands the power of the imagination as "the ability to come up with socially useful novelties,"¹⁶⁰ and that it uses language—the words of thinkers, philosophers, novelists, and poets alike—to execute this function. He subscribes to this formula: "No words, no reasoning. No imagination, no new word. No such words, no moral and intellectual progress."¹⁶¹ Thus, for Rorty, "the imagination creates the games that reason proceeds to play."¹⁶² In simple terms, the first game that we began playing centered on our estrangement from the Real. Our task was to get back in touch with that which stands over all existing things. Its aim was perfection. But this game, according to Rorty, can be replaced. The new game we should learn to play is how to successfully overcome the past in favor of a better future. The new aim is progress. For Rorty, escaping the magnetism of the old vocabulary of Plato obliges us to employ the alternative language game that utilitarians and pragmatists had concocted in the 19th century.

Rorty's sustained romanticist posture reveals his provocative hypothesis that *everything* mankind has experienced and achieved so far should be considered as a product of the human imagination's craft. Our longing to fall back into the arms of God, or to transgress our finitude, or to dominate the world, are designs of this imaginative capacity. The foundations and consequences of grand social and political projects—ranging from inexpressible religious hope and dread, the modern sense of existential anguish and alienation, and even the predatory technological hunger for power and control—spring from the responses of human creativity to its circumstances. For Rorty, our aspirations, dreams, and illusions, as well as the drives and effects they stimulate, can be understood as primarily self-induced. Furthermore, he thinks that what sparks change in our life projects is our innovative use of

¹⁶⁰ Rorty, "Pragmatism and Romanticism" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 115.

¹⁶¹ Rorty, "The Fire of Life" in *The Rorty Reader*, 520.

¹⁶² Rorty, "Pragmatism and Romanticism" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 115.

language. There are no permanent desires and outcomes; they bend and flex according to the vocabulary of human history. Language can help set aside inactive dreams, establish new expectations, and engage our rational capacities in original ways. Rorty even interpolates that what is traditionally considered as transcendental or sacred is connected to language-use. For example, he characterizes mystical experience not as a way toward the transcendent, but as “a way of leaping over the boundaries of the language one speaks,”¹⁶³ which in turn creates a new language to illuminate the “ordinary” consciousness. This is why, for their shared skill in generating moral and intellectual progress, prophets, poets, and mystics can be considered as creative geniuses. In Rorty’s view, the imagination goes all the way up and all the way down. His groundless hope does not seem so groundless after all, since the imagination—with its unmatched power of linguistic variation—is for him an infinite source of cognitive, practical, moral, and even spiritual possibilities.

To better understand why Rorty confers premium importance on language in his project, it is worth pointing out that his literary culture can be interpreted as the projected fulfillment of the linguistic turn that he had been calling out for since his early days. In the late sixties up to the eighties, the notion of a linguistic turn in philosophy was generally considered a good idea, but there were numerous disagreements about what it meant. In 1967, Rorty edited *The Linguistic Turn*, a famous collection of essays which eventually proved to be authoritative in the philosophy of language. Here he framed linguistic philosophy as operating upon the claim that “philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use,”¹⁶⁴ and coined it as the most recent philosophical revolution. But in the essay “Twenty-Five Years After” of the 1992 reprint of the book, Rorty modified his initial position. He explained that the linguistic turn’s real impact was not that it was

¹⁶³ Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, 18.

¹⁶⁴ Richard Rorty, “Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy” in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

able to provide a method or a procedure of inquiry by which problems in the field can be tackled.¹⁶⁵ Rather, its distinctive contribution was that it helped shift our preoccupation with experience to language as a medium of representation, and also made it easier for us to set aside the notion of representation itself. Rorty thought that our liberation from the scheme that language could accurately represent experience or extra-experiential reality has cleared the path for us to think of words “as strings of marks and noises used by human beings in the development and pursuit of social practices.”¹⁶⁶ The key importance of language-use lies not in its ability to mirror nature—which, for Rorty, is a misguided venture—but in assisting and broadening human experience. This evolutionary, pragmatic shift in stance is important, for it supports the Rortyan claim that a fecund vocabulary is crucial in ushering our redemptive, self-amplifying possibilities. He sums up the significance of this point this way: “Because I think of the enrichment of language as the only way to enrich experience, and because I think that language has no transcendental limits, I think of experience as potentially infinitely enrichable.”¹⁶⁷ In this sense, we can take that his idea of linguistic enrichment correlates with his hopes for redemption by self-enlargement.

Apart from charging the imagination and language with a tremendous amount of power, Rorty also highlights the importance of self-reliance in reinventing our self-conception. This is evident in his response when he was asked about the viability of adopting the framework of secular redemption in Ancient Greece to re-energize our spiritual lives in the modern age. It was pointed out to Rorty that Odysseus, prior to Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism, served as the archetype of heroic laicity. Instead of contemplative intelligence (*nous*), Odysseus confronted his

¹⁶⁵ Rorty concludes that this turn was “a rather desperate attempt to keep philosophy an armchair discipline,” designed “to mark off a space for a priori knowledge into which neither sociology nor history nor art nor natural science could intrude.” He judges that this preoccupation with language has become our new substitute for Kant’s transcendental standpoint. [Rorty, “Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 50].

¹⁶⁶ Rorty, “Twenty-Five Years Later” in *The Linguistic Turn*, 373.

¹⁶⁷ Rorty, “Response to Charles Hartshorne” (Essay: “Rorty’s Pragmatism and Farewell to the Age of Faith and Enlightenment”) in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 36.

tribulations by using operational intelligence (*metis*), without reference to God (*ut Deus non esset*).¹⁶⁸ The claim here is that Odysseus was redeemed from his problems by his own clever doing, and that he could serve as a hero of secular progress. Rorty, however, is skeptical of the prospect of reverting back to this framework. He argues that our modern consciousness is saddled by too many collective experiences, so that seeking re-enchantment from an old model is an ineffective strategy:

I don't think that we can go back at all, either to the secularism of Odysseus or to the days of Mohammed or to the days of Christ or the days of Abraham. We know much more than any of these prophets and heroes and visionaries knew. We have accumulated more experience than they had. We are not closer to any universal truth than they are. We are not closer to anything transcendent than they were. We are simply more experienced, more able to see what will cause harm and what might do good. So I don't think that it's a question of returning, it's a question of constantly attempting to make the future still more different from the past.¹⁶⁹

Rorty's argument is that the world we navigate now is radically different. In consequence, we cannot tailor previous redemptive practices to respond to modern problems about the orientation and ends of life. This also means that religions cannot usher the spiritual satisfaction they were previously able to offer if they operate in the traditional way. The task at hand, following Dewey, is to catch up with the level of social and moral intelligence required to close the gap with the increase of knowledge and our means of understanding in the modern, secular age.¹⁷⁰ In Rorty's view, part of this process includes cleansing ourselves of the outdated dictums of Odysseus, Mohammed, and Abraham, and formulating updated ones in their stead. He thinks that we should become self-reliant and turn into our own modern prophets. Part of this includes recognizing that unlike the previous orders, "the high

¹⁶⁸ Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, 22.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷⁰ See "The Human Abode of the Religious Function" in Dewey's *A Common Faith*.

culture of the modern times has become aware that the questions human beings have thought inescapable have changed over the centuries.”¹⁷¹ For Rorty, we can now work with the idea that perhaps there is no universal truth or anything transcendent to rely on. Society can now better accommodate a vocabulary that is more responsive to the ideas of contingency, progress, and human responsibility.

If we are to become self-reliant in the way Rorty imagines, then how can we encourage the pragmatic attitude of future-orientedness that he advocates? One answer is by dreaming of utopias. When faced with the test of deciding what virtues and vices should flourish and die in the modern world, he believes that envisaging model worlds can help. Describing utopias that are “greatly preferable to the socio-economic setup we have at present” and heeding “narratives that recount the fortunes of an ever greater variety of possible human societies”¹⁷² are good ways of refocusing our concerns to forming better communities. Imagining dystopias also illustrate the kind of future to avoid. Rorty for instance recommends reading what he considers as the best introduction to political philosophy: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931). He describes this book as presenting “what sort of human future would be produced by a naturalism untempered by historicist Romance, and by a politics aimed merely at alleviating mammalian pain.”¹⁷³ It issues an invitation to its readers to judge whether or not the combination of science and hedonism as our human future is a desirable end. What we see at work here is Rorty’s creative strategy at the helm, and his confident nod once again to the power of literature.

Rorty shares this future-oriented stance with Habermas, a noted theorist of modernity. Both of them find this orientation integral in realizing a habitable abode for humanity. The unfulfilled project of modernity, for Habermas, is geared toward “a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still

¹⁷¹ Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres” in *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 60.

¹⁷² Rorty, “Response to Matthew Festenstein” (Essay: “Pragmatism, Social Democracy, and Political Argument”) in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, 222.

¹⁷³ Rorty, “Response to Robert Brandom” in *Rorty and His Critics*, 189.

depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism."¹⁷⁴ We cannot keep rekindling a nostalgic relationship with antiquity for him if we are to live satisfactory lives today. Instead, we must adopt a critical consciousness of the achievements of the past and present, so that we may know what needs to be abandoned, preserved, and fortified. Rorty similarly maintains that we are "still plugging away at the familiar tasks set for us by the Enlightenment," and indicates that his work as an intellectual is to get "our fellow citizens to rely less on tradition, and to be more willing to experiment with new customs and traditions."¹⁷⁵ Following the words of Kant, the enlightenment from our self-incurred immaturity is, for Rorty, an active struggle of intelligently bettering the present.

To summarize: linguistic creativity, self-reliance, and future-orientedness describe Rorty's ideal of a new image for humanity. If these characteristics were the operational, or at least the aspirational ideals of today, then our culture would be better attuned to the redemption suited to the conditions of modernity (or at least Rorty's version of it). Before we examine Rortyan redemption in relation to the modern condition, as well as initiate a comparison with other frameworks, there is one other task that needs to be performed: we need to connect this new self-image with the quest for human meaning and spiritual flourishing to justify the new promise of this vision. The objective of the next section is to engage this issue, with the expectation that it will catapult us to a more dynamic engagement with other thinkers further on.

Religious Nostalgia

At present, Rorty observes that "human beings (in the richer and more powerful parts of the world) have shown an increasing ability to put aside the question What is the meaning of human life? and to substitute the question What

¹⁷⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," trans. Seyla Benhabib in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 2002), 13.

¹⁷⁵ Rorty, "Religion as Conversation Stopper" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 168.

meaning shall *we* give to *our* lives?"¹⁷⁶ These philosophical questions, which call for either an objective or subjective answer, both emphasize the existential issue of meaning. They gesture toward the notion that the meaningfulness of life is an important consideration for the redemption of persons and cultures in general. When we hope for redemption from ideas, events, and persons—e.g., from religious and philosophical truths, our relationships with other people, the causes we hold dear, or the life-roles we perform—we commit ourselves to the enriching and profoundly transformative meaning they give to our existence. For Rorty, the desire for meaning that is posed in both questions endures in human beings. However, he also thinks that the sources of this meaning are varied and dynamic. We have many candidates in answering the question of what makes life worth living.

This characterization empowers Rorty to criticize moral and spiritual desires and resolutions that for him have led mankind astray. It enables him to say that we would be better off if the redemptive importance we put on particular idols in the Western tradition is placed somewhere else. Aspirations for eternal bliss and the quest for certainty, for example, are not universal needs for Rorty, so that we shouldn't "wring our hands over the absence of the moral absolutes that our ancestors invoked."¹⁷⁷ Recall the classic formula for nihilism: when we give up on Plato and religion as paths for legitimating our epistemological and moral hopes, then nihilism, or some sort of emotional or spiritual crisis, is expected as the result. The loss of authority leads (for some, inevitably) to an atmosphere of meaninglessness and melancholy, as existentialist thinkers like Dostoyevsky, Camus, and Kierkegaard have imagined, or thinkers like Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly have hypothesized. Rorty even recognizes that he may have been guilty of supporting this assumption himself. However, he rejoins that this grand anxiety is not an automated response. Rorty suggests that "we can, for example, tell Zarathustra that the news

¹⁷⁶ Rorty, "Response to Richard Bernstein" (Essay: "American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives") in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 71.

¹⁷⁷ Rorty, "Reply to J. B. Schneewind" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 507.

that God is dead is not all that big a deal. We can tell Heidegger that one can be a perfectly good example of Dasein without even having been what he calls “authentic.”¹⁷⁸ He thinks that this nihilism can disappear in a world that finds ontology less important than other concerns. These stories and expectations can be divested of their metaphysical urgency without resulting in disenchantment or despair. For Rorty, losing faith in God or Science, is not such a bad thing.

Assuming that this claim—that there is no absolute meaning to human life—were true, how then does Rorty handle the question “what meaning shall *we* give to *our* lives?” in modernity? A good way of entertaining this problem is by approaching the task negatively. Asking what he thinks are the spiritual urges that we should dispose of can clarify Rorty’s conception of what self-reliant human beings are supposed to be. We already know that Rorty is opposed to anything that betrays Platonic hopes and broaches a secure path to truth and meaning. His writings against the priority of religion and scientism over politics and solidarity are numerous, and often display how allusions to unquestionable foundations serve as conversation-stoppers.¹⁷⁹ As we have examined in Chapter II, it is in the business of Rortyan pragmatism to show how the attachment to the Absolute—or to a notion of redemptive truth—can limit our ability to respect the plurality of human meaning. Interestingly, when these practical responses are read according to the purpose of redemption, Rorty’s view can be lumped as an assault against the persistence of a core idea: religious nostalgia.

Religious nostalgia, for Rorty, is manifested in the tendency of theorizing at the “spiritual level at which Plato and Nietzsche confront each other,” and divulging philosophical fondness for “ascending to heights or plumbing depths.”¹⁸⁰ Many thinkers who advocate a post-theological, post-metaphysical turn are vulnerable to this sin, and the list includes Heidegger and his version of modern redemption.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ See *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

¹⁸⁰ Rorty, “Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 79-80.

Rorty argues that the author of *Being and Time*, having abandoned the scientific model of philosophy, fell back to a desire for holiness in his later years.¹⁸¹ Rorty thinks that Heidegger transfers our ancestors' dependence on priests to a faith on the genius of philosophers and lyric poets, believing that these shining few can attune themselves to the voice of Being. Heidegger believes that these exemplary thinkers possess the skill to reveal how the horrors of our modern technological fate can be avoided. They are instrumental for our spiritual reconciliation with the modern world, so that it is through them that the destiny of the West can be deciphered. According to Rorty, for Heidegger other people exist for the sake of these great figures—"where is a Thinker or a Poet, there human life is justified, for there something Wholly Other touches and is touched. Where there is not, the wasteland spreads."¹⁸² Hence, in Heidegger's story, without the poetic nudging of great individuals like Hölderlin (or perhaps even himself) to enlighten our redemptive paths, then the modern age will be left in the dark.

But Rorty has no use for the supreme valorization of thinkers. For him, the spiritual battle for modern redemption is not what Heideggerians exaggerate as happening "on the scale of world and earth," and in which Hölderlin and Heidegger serve as saviors of linguistic illumination; rather, Rorty argues that the real battle is occurring "between two historically-situated groups of mortals."¹⁸³ Agreeing with Marx, Rorty contends that our role as philosophers is not to contemplate how to track our cultural destiny, but to help secure the possibility of a better future—a job parallel to professions designed to regulate and improve their areas of expertise. Like "the engineer or the lawyer," according to Rorty, "the philosopher is useful in solving particular problems that arise in particular situations—situations in which

¹⁸¹ Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 26.

¹⁸² Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 76.

¹⁸³ Rorty, "Reply to Edwards" (Essay: "Wishing Away the Truth: Thoreau, Emerson, Rorty") in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 675-676.

the language of the past is in conflict with the needs of the future.”¹⁸⁴ Rorty puts equal faith on different kinds of creative, progress-oriented citizens, emphasizing the shared importance of “the poets and the engineers, the people who produce startling new projects for achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”¹⁸⁵ This indicates once again his trust in language, imagination, and creativity—powers and abilities that we naturally possess, and which in his view need no necessary fuel from anything apart from ourselves.

Now that we have discussed what Rorty thinks is the primary spiritual hope we ought to forget, we are now in a good position to approach the relationship between human meaning and redemption positively. We can finally inquire as to how, if we follow Rorty’s assessment, meaning and spiritual fulfillment can be best achieved in the modern world. Since we are midway into the thesis, it would be opportune to once again rehearse the contemporary philosophical discussions around the modern themes of the sacred and human redemption. Doing so will remind us how Rorty’s version of secular spirituality engages the question of our redemptive potential in modernity. I will begin this task by re-invoking the picture of the modern situation that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly have in common. As I have already indicated in Chapter I, further qualification is necessary to give their respective positions an adequate and nuanced interpretation. While I also point out their major divergences here, it will suffice for our purposes to concentrate on significant overlaps between their views. This allows us to frame the Taylor/Dreyfus/Kelly model in a way that can serve as a useful contrast to Rorty’s idea of redemption.

The Philosophical Discussion

Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly share the conviction that in the modern age, one of the most salient threats to the flourishing of our spiritual lives involves the

¹⁸⁴ Rorty, “Philosophy and the Future” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 199.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

combination of a heightened anthropocentrism and the consequent mood of nihilism. The all-too-human outlook after the death of God makes meanings and values subjective and arbitrary, and human responsibility supreme and weighty. It supports the view that nothing matters as an end in itself: objective truth and moral principles are up for grabs. At its extreme, this perspective leads to the life-negating attitude that there is nothing truly important in the world at all. For this reason, they claim that the modern world can be described as a disenchanting one. It is lacking in spiritual value in comparison to either the crest of religious monotheism in the Axial age or the bygone polytheistic era of Ancient gods and heroes.

To combat such a nihilistic atmosphere of pointlessness and insignificance, these three thinkers propose projects of re-enchanting the human world. They suggest either a recovery of our sources of moral/spiritual meaning or a retrieval of sacred experience. Taylor believes that we are, simply put, not alone. Spiritual significance can be derived from recognizing that we are part of a larger order of existence. He thinks that we are in a dialogical relationship with the external world and are able to draw on a variety of non-human moral sources to enrich our lives. For example, Taylor, together with Dreyfus and Kelly, believe that meanings without any humanly projected value can be revealed by great art and classical literature. They follow the Romantic idea that the life of the spirit can be found in the work of poets and painters, whose powers express the Being of our age. Furthermore, Dreyfus and Kelly also emphasize that in the modern world, the sacred (or something like it) is revealed in heroic and awe-inspiring events. There is a force outside our skin that draws out this inexplicable greatness. It shines when magnificent skill or talent is displayed, or when mere mortals perform impossible feats. Hence, for these thinkers, our task is to learn how to heed sacred and spiritual experiences when they arise in the marginal interface between human beings and the universe. Our rendezvous with these events is supposed to save us from emptiness and despair. These moments provide glimpses of the kind of human lives worth living—the sort that are rich in meaning and are spiritually satisfying.

It is important to mention that Rorty, Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly use a broader notion of spirituality, and of the religious impulse, than is often meant by these terms. Rorty defines spiritual growth as something that is akin to edification, covering “any attempt to transform oneself into a better sort of person by changing one’s sense of what matters most,”¹⁸⁶ and the other three thinkers have similarly modified conceptions. The significant difference here is that for Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, the nature of whatever can redeem us in modernity is primarily *external* and most likely, and at its best, *non-human*. Following Rorty’s characterization, they belong to the pool of thinkers who regard spiritual development with special reference to the attempt of getting in touch with something divine. But as we have noted in Chapter II, Rorty challenges this thesis in a number of ways. While he encourages participating in the life of something larger and more important than the individual, he admonishes the idea that the most meaningful connection we can make is ultimately tied with something outside the borders of the human. Rorty is able to make this claim because he believes that the human imagination is the root source of all our malaises and accomplishments. This leads to the contention that the work that needs to be done lies not in retrieving something sacred from an external source, but in fixing an inbred fault within the Western tradition. This is important so that culture can go forward, and not back. For Rorty, we are responsible for detangling ourselves from how we are historically wired as human beings. He suggests that coming to pragmatic terms with our creative power lies in discarding unreachable visions of the transcendent and our philosophical metaphors of ascent and descent. This is necessary so that we can legitimize our deepest hopes and expectations in accordance to the humanistic modern turn.

From Rorty’s point of view, the religious nostalgia linked to nihilism can be given up in favor of nominalism and historicism. If he were to entertain Taylor’s question in *A Secular Age*, which goes “why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not

¹⁸⁶ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 404.

only easy, but even inescapable?"¹⁸⁷ then his answer would have been because our self-conception has evolved substantially in the last couple of centuries. Our concerns have shifted to the humanistic, as opposed to the transcendental or supernatural sort. The modern mindset is more open to coping with the fact of human finitude and discovering the spiritual satisfactions offered by a temporal world. In addition, the rise of the literary culture has been gradually helping us acquiesce to the reality of contingency and secularism. Rorty adds that literature has given way to new aspirations distinct from a hope for "a union with God, with something sublime, mysterious, unconditioned, belonging to another world;" now, the maturation of a person's life narrative, or the "rounded completion and self-recognition"¹⁸⁸ is an equal competitor for human meaning. He specifically heeds Milan Kundera's suggestion that "the novel is the characteristic genre of democracy, the genre most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and equality,"¹⁸⁹ and believes that the rise of novel-reading has led to an increased public awareness of new sources of moral and spiritual growth. To recapitulate: Rorty's proposal is that our relationships with other people can best serve as our redemptive resource in modernity. They are responsible for the edifying experiences of self-enlargement and self-transformation in the modern world. A literary culture is the kind of context that allows such experiences to flourish. This culture values linguistic creativity, imaginative self-reliance, future-orientedness, and regards expanding one's imaginative acquaintance as its paramount "spiritual" activity.

Rorty evidently paints a more optimistic and secular version of modernity that is different to the kind Dreyfus, Kelly, and Taylor recognize. He also disregards their view that anthropocentrism/nihilism is the great modern problem. On the one hand, Rorty's cultural narrative then sounds like a step, if not a leap forward, from the original metaphysical woes of the other three thinkers. He diagnoses a world in

¹⁸⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

¹⁸⁸ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 405.

¹⁸⁹ Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" in *The Rorty Reader*, 309.

which the secular cause is already triumphant, or is at least a place that is happily curing itself of “the need to get beyond representationalism,” and hopes to be “an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other.”¹⁹⁰ He seems to bypass the persistent spiritual itch for the transcendent in his account. If Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly are correct in their observations, then Rorty in comparison seems to be out of touch with what the modern world really looks like. On the other hand, it also sounds like Rorty wants to address a situation that is more faithful to the Nietzschean logic of self-reliance. Instead of returning to tried and tested solutions in the past to cope with the secular turn, he deals with the fate of a new modern culture head-on. If we believe Nietzsche, then Rorty seems to be more attuned with the process of unmasking the real condition of modernity more than the others.

These are both equally defensible speculations, but I will not be taking either of them in this thesis. Instead, I want to take a step back and engage the blind spot that Rorty’s position in the discussion reveals clearly: that there is something amiss in clamoring for moments of divinity, as Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly do in their models, as a response to the problem of nihilism. Remember that while these thinkers do not adopt previous frameworks of re-enchantment completely, they still find something favorable about the view that there are either moral and spiritual sources to retrieve from the past (Taylor), or that there is something to emulate about it for the purposes of modern redemption (Dreyfus and Kelly). Their strategy not only risks reviving the false hopes that accompany these aspirations, but may entrench what Rorty thinks are the less admirable elements of traditional religion. What makes Rorty interesting is that unlike them, he entertains the question of what comes *afterwards* when we have successfully come to accept—presumably in a sound, mature way—that we are truly and magnificently alone in the world. There is something promising about pursuing Rorty’s way of revitalizing the modern spirit, if

¹⁹⁰ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 474.

only because it allows us to tackle the problem differently. I will show in the next sections of this chapter just how.

So to link Rorty's proposal back to the problem of human meaning and spirituality in modernity: if the case were truly that we are the imaginative creators of our spiritual problems and the generators of their solutions, what then stands as the greatest threat to human beings? What would stop us from creating a better moral and spiritual culture of romantic polytheism? If not nihilism, what do we need saving from? I think that Rorty's core issue relates to a fault that each human being is naturally inclined to harbor. This fault involves having a moral bearing that condescends to others, inhibits kindness, and promotes cruelty. It stultifies the opportunity of increasing moral flexibility, and blinds people from discovering the redeeming power of human relationships. This personal malaise is what Rorty calls "egotism." I contend that while at first egotism appears to be an ordinary and banal human vice, it in reality serves as the root of grievous human faults in different cultures and traditions. If we follow Rorty's cue, then we will see that the unwieldy sense of self-satisfaction with one's abilities and beliefs is actually the source of widespread and localized pain and suffering, and serves as an anathema to the spiritual hope of a self-enlarging, pluralistic, and polytheistic utopia. This is the danger that Rorty wants redemption from in the modern world, and my aim is to reinterpret and examine egotism as a primary malaise of modernity to stand against the traditional account of nihilism.

Next, I will present the two-prong therapy for egotism that we can excavate from Rorty's writings. The traditionally incompatible values of self-creation and solidarity, both introduced in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, have been engaged repeatedly in many philosophical debates in the last twenty years. I want to examine them anew in light of modern redemption. My claim is that these two values are the primary redemptive paths that Rorty offers in modernity. In this interpretation, cultivating these edifying ideals—which operate by virtue of losing one's sense of self, whether for the purposes of creating a new self or finding spiritual inspiration in

collective solidarity—will help us come closer to achieving redemption from egotism. Finally, I close this chapter by showing how Rorty's contribution may advance the contemporary debates on the spiritual condition of modernity. I argue that there is good reason to link egotism with anthropocentrism/nihilism, perhaps even more than Rorty himself is willing to allow. The egotism he combats has close ties with the nihilism that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly are concerned about, so that in consequence whatever cure Rorty proposes is worth examining if it can help salve the maladies of the modern times.

Egotism

In "Redemption from Egotism," Rorty describes the egotist as someone who is self-centered not so much in being selfish, but in being self-satisfied. An egotistic standpoint, in Rorty's sense, considers itself intellectually, morally, and spiritually whole and sufficient. The egotist is armed with an unshakeable core of beliefs and attitudes that provide a firm foundation for all kinds of judgment. She is resistant to anything that can change or expand her views, believing that her understanding—which she expresses using her "final vocabulary"—is fully informed. Rorty sees egotists as people who view others unlike themselves as "deprived of truth, of moral knowledge."¹⁹¹ In this light, the egotist is self-confident and secure, and sees herself as occupying a position of advantage—or as it is sometimes put, "privilege"—over the unenlightened.

We can recall that Rorty first raises the idea of a final vocabulary in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. He contends that all human beings—not just foundationalists—utilize a set of words that characterizes the operation, extent, and limits of a person's being. This personal language formulates and warrants dreams, beliefs, and actions. To clarify, Rorty appends the word *final* in his description not because he regards this personal vocabulary as inflexible. Rorty's ironist—a person who puts to doubt her inherited vocabularies and traditions—has a final vocabulary

¹⁹¹ Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality" in *The Rorty Reader*, 361.

too, albeit one that involves “the cultivation of a wilful linguistic infidelity.”¹⁹² Rather than signifying completeness or self-sufficiency, the idea of finality is meant to communicate the gravity of what a personal language means to a human being: “If doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only hapless passivity or a resort to force.”¹⁹³ Our final vocabularies, in short, justify our existence. As Rée puts it: “We cling to them when we are in intellectual or emotional trouble, but this is not because they are supremely useful to us, nor even because they are the most intimate expression of our inmost selves. It is because we are nothing apart from them.”¹⁹⁴

Rorty goes even further by saying that human beings and cultures are “incarnated vocabularies.”¹⁹⁵ Each is an organic, integrated, and complex system of words, ideas, and actions. Changing persons and cultures lies both in tweaking or correcting certain parts or principles of complex identities (e.g., making a Catholic even more Catholic through the graduated performance of sacramental rites) and by introducing new elements and belief-systems that can alter their constitution (e.g., convincing Catholics, Muslims, and atheists that each has an equal right to their version of redemption). Since the latter kind involves an intense, imaginative work of redescription, Rorty argues that the only equal challenge one can pose against persons and cultures are alternative persons and counter-cultures. Take an Indian ascetic-mystic and a Marxist: these two figures have conflicting values and scales of happiness and success, and belong to entirely different traditions of morality. In consequence, they also use massively opposing sets of terms to judge each other. Unless we posit a universal standard they both respect, it seems theoretically impossible for them to reach any compromise about their core views, or find

¹⁹² Jonathan Rée, “Timely Meditations” (Review Essay: Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 1989) in *Radical Philosophy* 55 (1990), 32.

¹⁹³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 73.

¹⁹⁴ Rée, “Timely Meditations,” 34.

¹⁹⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 80.

similarities in their desires. In short, it would be useless to make them argue. Rorty thinks that the only hope we have lies in the activity of imagining what it would be like to be the other person, which usually happens through conversation and storytelling. This process, for Rorty, is how a final vocabulary can be transformed. If these persons come to modify their regard for each other as a result, it would make sense to surmise that it is not because one of them “won” by rational argument; rather, it is probably because their linguistic repertoire has evolved to allow for an empathetic appreciation. As Rorty relays, “a turn of phrase in a conversation or a novel or a poem—a new way of putting things, a novel metaphor or simile—can make all the difference to the way we look at a whole range of phenomena.”¹⁹⁶

Furthermore, there is no objective way to assess these two standards of living anyway. In choosing which life is better for us, Rorty contends that our judgment will depend on our final vocabularies. We arbitrate between characters and cultures according to what we hold important. Are social welfare and a vibrant sense of collectivity indispensable to a fulfilling life? Or is private holiness more fundamental to an intense and meaningful existence? The response of one raised in a deeply religious culture will exhibit a notable difference from someone who aspires for an egalitarian one. This does not mean, however, that things are fated to end in a conversational deadlock. Rorty argues that self-transformations occur in the process of arbitration. The assessment and criticism of others involve imaginative reworking, and an integral part of this process involves risking our preconceptions and biases. Given that language is the principal force behind self- and world-making in Rorty’s view, the experience of meeting different people or encountering strange cultures can energize the redescriptive activity. Redescription is how one can end up “finding oneself transported, moved to a place from which a different prospect is available.”¹⁹⁷ Rorty insists that linguistic creativity is vital for us to view things in alternative ways, and this experience can eventually lead us to change ourselves. This promise of

¹⁹⁶ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 391.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

genuine transformation is important if our moral goal is to remold our final vocabularies into something better, more accommodating, and less cruel.

In light of this analysis, we can now comprehend the egotism problem more clearly. The egotist's final vocabulary is stubborn and usually intolerant of other voices. It betrays foundationalism, which the egotist employs either unconsciously or with full knowledge. Rorty's writings point to "common sense," "cant," and "ideology" as examples of languages that are marked by the egotistic strain, and presumably the people who employ them can be considered egotists.¹⁹⁸ The self-righteous egotist views herself as someone who has been redeemed from ignorance. She thrives in what Rorty poetically describes as knowingness: "a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm."¹⁹⁹ What

¹⁹⁸ In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty attacks the ubiquitous authority of common sense, which he defines as the vocabulary of those who live by the terms of their inherited intellectual and practical culture. Rorty characterizes the common sense of Western philosophy as driven by Platonic and Kantian epistemological assumptions like "All men by nature desire to know" and "Truth is independent of the human mind," and moral premises such as "Man is naturally good" and "All human beings have intrinsic dignity." Those who abide by the metaphysics of common sense tend to ossify old viewpoints and remain resistant to the lessons of contingency and historicism. In "Redemption from Egotism," Rorty similarly challenges our reliance on cant. Cant could be anything from "the untutored common sense (the so-called 'folk wisdom') of a peasant village, through the unthinking reiteration of quotations from the sacred scripture, to the equally unthinking reiteration of the best-known sentences in the works of Heidegger or of Bloom itself." [390]. Rorty argues that philosophical theories and religious maxims, which are argumentative texts by nature, usually compose life-reifying, habit-forming cant. Since they neither arouse interest nor suspicion, they are used quite often as a fallback when the coherence of our beliefs and desires are disrupted. Examples are the categorical imperative and the Seventh Commandment, which, given their explicit nature work as prescriptive moral demands. What Rorty finds disagreeable is that the meanings we derive from them are too culturally entrenched that they hegemonize the formation of our identities. In this sense, these ideas have already lost their inspirational glimmer and self-augmenting potential. In the same essay, ideology also gets a Rortyan beating. Following the claims of Harold Bloom's *How to Read and Why* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), Rorty defines ideology as "a set of general ideas which provide a context in which the reader places every book she reads" [390]. For both Rorty and Bloom, the recourse to ideology—in the form of Heideggerian-Derridean critiques of metaphysics, or Marxist-Foucauldian critiques of capitalism or power—diminishes the self-expanding potential of literature. This is because ideology privileges only one or two ways of reading literature. Its use as automated political or philosophical frameworks suppresses the point that there is a better reading habit that can be cultivated: one that is more inclined toward the liberation of the reader's previous ways of understanding. The vocabularies of common sense, cant, and ideology thus empower their users with the misguided authority to judge all other visions as inadequate. In Rorty's eyes, their employment betrays the aim for the mastery, coherence, and completeness—the impossible guarantees of the Enlightenment.

¹⁹⁹ Rorty, "The Inspirational Value of Great Works" in *Achieving Our Country*, 126.

this means is that instead of finding inspirational value in the utopic thinking that there is more to life than we have ever imagined, egotists are content in “taking refuge in self-protective knowingness about the present,”²⁰⁰ given that they are intellectually, morally, or spiritually superior than the rest.

Rorty points out that religious believers and philosophers are among those who are susceptible to the fault of egotism. They thrive in the assurance that they are noble and right, leading them to condescend against others. As he explains:

Egotists who are inclined to philosophize hope to short-circuit the need to find out what is on the mind of other people. They would like to go straight to the way things are (to the will of God, or the moral law, or the nature of human beings) without passing through other people’s self-descriptions. Religion and philosophy have often served as shields for fanaticism and intolerance because they suggest that this sort of short-circuiting has been accomplished.²⁰¹

What this means is that if her established set of beliefs is put into question, the egotist senses danger and is quick to attack or defend herself. Her dignity is at stake, and she knows that any redescription can put it at risk. Feuerbach’s characterization of the religious fundamentalist resonates well with Rorty’s problem with the egotist: “The religious man who binds together all things in one, does not lose himself in sensuality; but for that reason he is exposed to the danger of illiberality, of spiritual selfishness and greed.”²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 140. To clarify, this description of egotism does not preclude the existence of other underlying motivations such as insecurity, envy, or fear. These may pervade the vocabulary and the actions of the egotist, whether or not he or she is aware of their presence. But instead of undermining or invalidating the diagnosis of egotism, it can be argued that these fears and insecurities serve to confirm its strength. In these cases, an egotist bearing is being used as a shield against the threat of the ego being taken over; the priority remains guarding the “self-protective knowingness” of the self. This dynamic will be further problematized in Chapter IV.

²⁰¹ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 395.

²⁰² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Dover Publications, 2008), 54.

Since in Rorty's view, religion and philosophy have served as the guiding pillars of Western culture, it is reasonable to posit that the egotism instilled and reinforced by these centralizing genres is still widespread. In terms of leaders of ecclesiastical institutions, "Catholic bishops, the Mormon General Authorities, the televangelists, and all the other religious professionals who devote themselves not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economic and political clout"²⁰³ are all around, and their teachings command strict adherence from legions of followers. Members of the New Atheism, claiming the full, enlightened glory of empirical science and seeking the complete abolishment of religion, are not exactly edifying figures either. The contributions of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens in public debate seem to inspire more hate and intolerance rather than usher a dignified secularist revolution. Their brew of radical egotism serves as replacement for universal religious doctrine to some atheists in the present generation. In essence, these parties, along with their egotistic believers, derive satisfaction from the belief that they are, as buttressed by God or by Science, unmistakably right.

At this point, a religious or philosophical egotist now appears to be a highly unlikeable, obnoxious person, except perhaps to her peers and idolizers. But alongside a tyrant or a mass murderer, Rorty's egotist does not seem to be too bad. We see and live with egotists every day. While they often put us off, we can usually deal with them with tolerance rather than disgust. We can choose to ignore them rather than waste our time. But then again, egotists are not always high profile extremists. If we consider egotism as a vice or an affliction of character, we can recognize milder forms of egotistic behavior in everyone. Your landlord may have an unwavering belief that being white and Australian warrants him more privilege than you, or your parents may think your economic dependence makes you their property. Simply put, the default position of egotists is one of correctness and entitlement. In this sense, we could even be the egotists that Rorty dislikes without even realizing it.

²⁰³ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration" in *The Rorty Reader*, 456.

But even if we admit egotism is a problem, how could we possibly make sense of it as a significant existential problem in the modern world? How could it even come close to the darkness of nihilism that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly are troubled about, when egotism sounds so common and ordinary?

The view I take is that it is precisely egotism's ordinariness that makes it dangerous. It escapes us as a fault because it is so normalized, and as a behavioral trait it is even admired. Rorty's writings present egotism as something embedded in the lifestyle of modern human characters, and vexes even those with the best intentions. In this sense, it is alarming that this attitude is not afforded as much emphasis and correction as it should. The temper that follows this observation parallels the way Judith Shklar and Hannah Arendt problematize human relations. Familiar and everyday vices—like meanness, or unthinkingness, or lack of imagination—usually make ordinary situations uncomfortable and at times hostile. However, when these behaviors are left unchecked, or when they operate in a context where human lives are at stake, their consequences can balloon to destructive and murderous proportions. This is why Shklar, whose work Rorty uses in propounding his liberal views in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, suggests that liberalism should operate on the principle that cruelty is the worst thing we do. What liberal politics requires is “the possibility of making the evil of cruelty and fear the basic norm of its political practices and prescriptions.”²⁰⁴ This is because cruelty, with its close companions hypocrisy, snobbery, treachery, and at its worst, misanthropy, “flaw us so deeply, they are a common sight everywhere.”²⁰⁵ They permeate the private and public dimensions of our lives and organically breed negativity and distrust. They thereby damage the successes of our social and pluralistic hopes from the grassroots level, turning solidarity into a much more difficult enterprise. Arendt, on the other hand, offers the radical and infamous re-reading of the idea of evil in her

²⁰⁴ Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear” in *Political Liberalism: Variations on a Theme*, ed. Shaun Young (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 157.

²⁰⁵ Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2.

analysis of the Adolf Eichmann trial. She argues that rather than venomous hatred or ill-will against the Jews, the death of millions in Eichmann's hands during the Nazi Regime has more to do with the simple desire to rise up the bureaucratic ranks coupled with the failure of his moral imagination (which explains his inability to sympathize).²⁰⁶ In my view, it makes sense to entertain the idea that Rorty treats egotism in a similar manner. Egotism escapes us as a danger precisely because it is so widespread, ordinary, and banal.

Creeds and social groups everywhere tend to promote this egotistic attitude. A strong association with a particular community, for instance, requires a level of likeness from its members—e.g., correspondence in faith, race, or social purpose—in order for a person to *properly* belong. Outsiders who fail to meet this expectation are not attributed the same level of attention and importance, and at times they are perceived as unworthy of respect. In this way, exclusivity and inclusion in groups can breed egotism, for members are habituated to feel at best with people they perceive as their equals or as part of their kin. As a consequence, egotists have insufficient moral and spiritual impetus to change their perspectives and behavior, for they have no reason to hearken to the voices of those they are not familiar with. They can be decent, respectful, and even loveable to individuals they are in solidarity with, but they are unable to stretch these compassionate sentiments to those outside the margins of their circle. As Rorty reflects: "The problem is the gallant and honorable Serb who sees Muslims as circumcised dogs. It is the brave soldier and good comrade who loves and is loved by his mates, but who thinks of women as dangerous, malevolent whores and bitches."²⁰⁷ Following his view, we neither can easily blame people for their egotism, nor rank egotistic behavior according to which kind needs immediate correction the most. It is better to interpret Rorty's egotism as

²⁰⁶ See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964).

²⁰⁷ Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality" in *The Rorty Reader*, 359.

an attitude that can be found everywhere, is manifested in different, and mostly undesirable ways, and which requires a nuanced consideration on a cultural level.

To recapitulate: Rorty's diagnosis is that we have to be saved from the fault of egotism. While egotism remarkably brings to mind the capital sin of pride in Christianity, Rorty transforms it from an offense against God to an offense against other human beings. That a person should be concerned about what hurts other people, and that she should be simply *kind*, are goals that egotists believe can be forgone in favor of the higher interests of holiness and correctness. Rorty militates against this idea. He abhors our contemporary situation in which egotists would rather be redeemed from impiety (if religious), or from irrationality (if philosophical), instead of intolerance and insensitivity. Egotism is thus a culturally entrenched disposition that needs to be remedied. In this sense, Rorty *moralizes* the kind of redemption worth aspiring for by redirecting us to what we should be concerned the most in modernity. As we have rehearsed previously, instead of God or Science, we need the powers of the imagination to work for the welfare of human beings. And in Rorty's proposal of a literary culture, redemption from egotism lies in appropriating all human artifacts as media for enlarging our human acquaintance and as resources for imaginative recontextualization.

At this point, the story of Rorty's redemption and its validity in terms of addressing our spiritual aspirations in modernity remain incomplete. There is a balance that needs to be addressed. True enough, projects of redemption are geared toward discovering and cultivating what is "morally good," or at least what is morally edifying. If this is the only basis for judging Rorty's vision, then certainly his efforts toward combating egotism in favor of moral progress will suffice to meet this requirement. But just as importantly, the desire to be redeemed involves the aspiration to experience moments that could be designated as "spiritual" — occasions of inspiration, esteem, admiration and awe. These encounters provide an infusion of meaning and worth in a person's life; they also edify. Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly address these motivations in their accounts. Given this context, how does Rorty's

vision of redemption meet these two demands? How does the project of being saved from egotism encourage us toward becoming edifying human beings, and at the same time also serve as a bountiful source of spiritual inspiration in modernity?

I argue that Rorty's vision of redemption can be interpreted to meet these criteria. The key to unlocking this vision—one that cultivates the possibility of living both a morally considerate and a spiritually flourishing life—lies in fostering the ideal of *self-enlargement*. The interesting irony I want to highlight here is that Rorty's antidote entails using the self's motivational power against itself. Satisfying our redemptive needs can be best met not by reifying the self-satisfied ego, but by endorsing its endless transformation. Thus, redemption is not about keeping one's personal identity intact, but is a matter of its disavowal. Self-enlargement is Rorty's chosen therapy for egotism, and again, my contention is that in his writings we can investigate two ways of promoting it in the modern world: self-creation and solidarity. I will reconstruct them in the succeeding sections.

Private / Public

Self-creation and solidarity are familiar themes from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In the book, Rorty argues that it is culturally ingrained in the Western tradition to regard the unification of private and public interests as a worthy goal. More specifically, he says that this purpose “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.”²⁰⁸ Unification, in the cases of Platonism and Christianity, serves as the traditional requirement for moral and spiritual redemption. Rorty judges this position as a misguided one. He regards projects of unification as attempts to synthesize activities that are better left separated. While he admits that at many points individual projects and collective ends overlap, private bliss and social justice ultimately have different agendas. In Rorty's view, self-creation is “the effort of an individual thinker to free himself from

²⁰⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiii.

his tradition," while solidarity is about "the collective political enterprise of increasing freedom and equality."²⁰⁹ The former is prized by thinkers from Nietzsche to Oscar Wilde, and follows the belief that "aesthetic enhancement is the aim of human life;" the latter, meanwhile, is a concern held in common by Kant, Mill, Rawls, and Dewey, and proclaims that "our responsibility for other people comes first."²¹⁰ The modern context, according to this interpretation, is thus inclined to esteem these two values of human life. Rorty's proposal is that self-creation should be relegated to the private sphere, and solidarity to the public. This dichotomization is something that good liberal democracies should persevere to respect.

Rorty's controversial version of the private/public split has been hotly debated within philosophical circles since its inception. It is a tricky issue to handle as Rorty himself says conflicting things about it. Nancy Fraser, among the first to strongly attack the proposal, has raised the argument that Rorty does not fully realize that the personal is often conflated with the political,²¹¹ especially with respect to issues of race, gender, and identity politics. If our objective is to promote a more tolerant and emphatic social consciousness, it is imperative that issues like domestic affairs and matters relating to sexuality are discussed in the public domain. In the sixties and the seventies, for instance, she contends that the most important re-evaluations of feminist concepts—redescriptions of "sexism," "sexual harassment," "marital rape," "date rape," "the double shift"—were discussed in the public sphere. These concepts, which were responsible for instigating change in the private lives of women, were "products less of individual fashioning or poeticizing than of the collective practice of consciousness-raising."²¹² Rorty's rejoinder is that Fraser misreads his work. He clarifies that when he refers to the sense of the private, he means something like

²⁰⁹ Rorty, "Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy" in *Truth and Progress*, 308.

²¹⁰ Rorty, "Intellectual Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 20.

²¹¹ Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy" in *Unruly Practices, Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 93-110.

²¹² Nancy Fraser, "From Irony to Prophecy to Politics: A Reply to Richard Rorty" in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 30.2 (1991), 266. For more on this issue, see *Feminist Interpretations of Richard Rorty*, ed. Marianne Janack (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2010).

Whitehead's definition of religion: "what you do with your solitude."²¹³ This, for him, is not the same as thinking of interaction that occurs in the kitchen or the bedroom. He concurs with Fraser that in certain, important respects, domestic and personal life cannot be relegated to a domain outside the scope of social and political scrutiny. What is no one else's business, he contends, is roughly what a person does alone. But in "Feminism and Pragmatism,"²¹⁴ Fraser highlights that when grappling with feminist ideas (especially in terms of identity formation), Rorty actually abandons his ground. In his writings about feminism, the distinction between the private and the public is dissolved, so that we come to find "a discursive practice that involves far-reaching redescriptions of social life and thus has the marks of the sublime, the abnormal, and the poetic, yet is simultaneously tied to the collective political enterprise of overcoming oppression and reconstructing society."²¹⁵ In Fraser's interpretation, Rorty backs away from his previous endorsement of private self-creation and public cooperation. She also judges that he is better off without it.

But Rorty still insists that it would be culturally better to remain conscious of the distinction, even when the things he says to promote this vision is inconsistent or inadequate to meet his moral goals. For instance, in his reply to Clifford Geertz's 1985 Tanner lecture, where Geertz suggests that the contemporary world looks more like a "Kuwaiti bazaar" than an "English gentleman's club," Rorty imagines that a liberal democracy could function as both: it could be a "civil society of the bourgeois democratic sort." In this context, when you meet "irredeemably different" people, you exercise self-control in public before finding respite in the presence of the people you truly respect: "you smile a lot, make the best deals you can, and, after a hard day's haggling, retreat to your club. There you will be comforted by your moral

²¹³ Richard Rorty, Derek Nystrom and Kent Puckett, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 62.

²¹⁴ This work was presented as The Tanner Lecture at the University of Michigan, December 7, 1990 [see Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 330-350].

²¹⁵ Fraser, "From Irony to Prophecy to Politics," 262.

equals.”²¹⁶ Rorty’s illustration of a future of private narcissism combined with public pragmatism here does not exactly sound like an edifying vision. It, in fact, encourages hypocrisy, fragmentation, and group egotism, and works against the idea of egalitarianism. Again, if our concern is to quell obvious tensions that may arise between the private and the public, we need something more from Rorty to convince us that upholding the divide will lead to moral improvement.

Rorty can also be accused of failing to adequately spell out how we can apply self-creation and solidarity in the socio-political realm. What are their boundaries? Rorty retorts that he is not responsible for dictating them, arguing that his goal was never “to define limits on state power, but to say what, in the long run, states are good for.”²¹⁷ It then becomes more tempting to read his works as taking a tone that is more utopic, rather than pragmatic—inspiring, but nevertheless toothless. At some points, Rorty even *disavows* his characterization of the distinction instead of defending it. In his response to Schneewind’s essay “Rorty on Utopia and Moral Philosophy,” Rorty concedes that his previous attempts to vindicate the “liberal ironist” and dichotomize the private and public were faulty philosophical strategies. They were intended to placate the moral or emotional spiritual crises that would arise when we lose the shared legitimation behind religious and Platonic hopes. Rorty says that his mistake is that he made it sound as if a person “could not be an antifoundationalist and a romantic self-creator without becoming a Sartrean, ever conscious of the abyss.”²¹⁸ As we have mentioned previously, Rorty thinks that the realization that there are no ultimate foundations will not automatically lead human beings to a recurring state of anxiety and doubt. Another possibility is that people would not find a metaphysical void an issue to be worried about at all, so that the suggestion of private perfection would not be necessary.

²¹⁶ Richard Rorty, “On Ethnocentrism: A reply to Clifford Geertz” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 209.

²¹⁷ Rorty, “Intellectual Autobiography” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 20.

²¹⁸ Rorty, “Reply to J. B. Schneewind” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 506.

These instances indicate that Rorty's private/public distinction is theoretically shaky. It would not be a stretch to say that these inconsistencies serve to legitimize the validity of numerous criticisms hurled against Rorty.²¹⁹ Dismissing his original proposal now appears like a reasonable way to go. But is there something amiss about shelving this dichotomy? Note that up until his last works, Rorty has remained steadfast about the importance of keeping the private/public split. He contends that he has never made "the absurd claim that politics and art, the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of idiosyncratic bliss, have, or should have no effects upon one another," for his main argument is not "that there is a barrier, but that there is often irrelevance between the two dimensions."²²⁰ This makes it clear that it would be wrong to say that he has changed his position. But can we account for these ideals in a way that, instead of focusing on old and repeatedly contested issues, can actually take Rorty's private/public project forward? The answer is yes—the view I take is that when read in light of modern redemption, there is a valuable insight that can be gleaned in re-interpreting Rorty's values of self-creation and solidarity.

I now want to emphasize a significant point that other critical accounts on Rorty have failed to engage: that self-creation and solidarity share something in common in his philosophical project. This commonality is the process of self-enlargement. I argue that Rorty actually reinvents our traditional understanding of these two ideals. First, the creative enhancement of life, for Rorty, is best achieved when one *loses* the self to *create* the self. This means that a person comes closer to the modern dream of "autonomy" or "authenticity" when she is able to de-limit her

²¹⁹ Apart from Fraser's work on the private and public split, see also the following: Lauren Swayne Barthold, "Rorty, Religion and the Public-Private Distinction" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38 (2012), 861–78; Lior Erez, "Reconsidering Richard Rorty's Private-Public Distinction" in *Humanities* 2.2 (2013), 193–208; Charles Guignon, and David Hiley, "Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality" in *Reading Rorty*, 339–64; Stuart Lynch, "On Richard Rorty's Use of the Distinction between the Private and the Public in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15.1 (2007), 97–120; Thomas McCarthy, "Ironist Theory as a Vocation: A Response to Rorty's Reply" in *Critical Inquiry* 16.3 (1990), 644–55 and "Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism" in *Critical Inquiry* 16.2 (1990), 355–370; Andrew Wicks, "Divide and Conquer? Rorty's Distinction between The Public and The Private" in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 76.4 (1993), 551–569.

²²⁰ Rorty, "Intellectual Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 20–21.

identity. The individual can flourish meaningfully and spiritually by encountering a great variety of human beings. Second, I argue that solidarity for Rorty takes the form of a self-enlarging civic religion akin to what he believes Whitman and Dewey have offered America—a secular view in which human beings “would break the traditional link between the religious impulse, the impulse to stand in awe of something greater than oneself, and the infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and chance.”²²¹ Discarding the latter, Rorty approves the redirection of the religious impulse from “God as the unconditional object of desire” to the struggle for social justice as “the country’s animating principle, the nation’s soul.”²²² This struggle necessitates our claiming an ever-expanding circle of people as part of us. This new spiritual orientation toward solidarity forms the basis of his liberal utopia.

Self-creation and solidarity, to repeat, are what I take to be Rorty’s primary redemptive paths from egotism in modernity. They are the ideals that centralize our efforts toward becoming less self-satisfied and more other-orientated. In his literary culture, these two liberal values exist for the sake of each and buoy the strength of

²²¹ Rorty, “American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey” in *Achieving Our Country*, 17-18.

²²² *Ibid.*, 18.

the other. He claims that Wilde's dictum "socialism for the sake of individualism"²²³ stands as the rationale behind their companionship. Following Wilde's romanticism, Rorty argues that human beings are worth caring about because "we all have, given sufficient security, wealth, education, and leisure, the capacity to be the artists of our own lives."²²⁴ Hence, we should participate in cooperative social projects designed to create a kinder, better world in which the meliorist agenda is to allow as many forms of human flourishing as possible. In this way, Rorty's vision tries to achieve the balance between the aims of moral progress and spiritual development. The literary culture, for him, best houses the harmonization of these two humanistic ends to suit the conditions of modernity.

Self-Creation

What is the general idea behind self-creation, and how does Rorty fashion it as a modern spiritual hope? Self-creation for Rorty conveys the power of a person to go

²²³ See Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (UK: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1998). While Rorty endorses its catchy phraseology and its endorsement of an equitable world of individual flourishing, Wilde's essay does not reflect Rorty's politics of democratic socialism. Wilde believes that individuals such as Byron, Shelley, Browning, Hugo, and Baudelaire have had the immense advantage of possessing sufficient private resources to nurture their talents. He contends that for everyone else to reach their levels of artistic achievement, we must create a world where all are born into fair and suitable conditions—the kind conducive for growth, productivity, and genius. Tapping the best of human potential, for Wilde, is then conditional upon changing the economic system. Eliminating inequality is conditional upon the abolishment of private property. Rorty deviates from Wilde in two ways. First, Rorty is not interested in supporting Marxism. He does not characterize the problem of social politics as primarily economic-driven, and has little support for the idea that capitalist hegemony is the source of our modern malaise. He even points out the failures of revolutionary Marxism and likens it to institutional religion—bad stuff that needs cleaning. He thinks that the cause of social justice "would have been better served if Marx's polemics against "bourgeois democracy" and "mere reformism" had gone unheard." [Rorty, "Reply to Jeffrey Stout" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 547]. Second, he does not think that his liberal utopia is designed for elitist flourishing. As Rorty relays, "certain passages in Wilde will not bear repeating, as when he speaks of "the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture—in a word, the real men, the men who have realized themselves, and in whom all humanity gains a partial realization."" [Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1966), 1080. (Cf. Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 488)]. Rorty criticizes Wilde for tempting us into thinking that "non-intellectuals" have failed to actualize themselves as human beings. He argues that people who do not look for artistic redemption deserve no attack, and that they should be equally free to live the way they like within the context of just laws and institutions.

²²⁴ Rorty, "Intellectual Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 20.

beyond the social expectations of her cultural milieu. It involves asserting her freedom by using novel and creative ways of *redescribing* her character and the environment. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and in his other essays, Nietzsche, Proust, Heidegger, and Derrida serve as exemplary models of self-creation. For them, according to Rorty, constructing an identity that is freed from the constraints of an inherited intellectual tradition is of utmost importance. They represent his claim that “one of the many ways in which human life has improved in recent centuries is that it left more room for the people who get a kick out of the production of originality.”²²⁵ This hope involves becoming “one’s own person rather than merely the creation of one’s education or one’s environment”²²⁶—a feat which Rorty considers as achievable either through the reinterpretation of the past to nurture one’s present ends, or through the awareness of a great number of alternative purposes that one can choose from to fashion an autonomous self.

Rorty argues that this desire typically befalls persons who have a taste for philosophy, which means that they wish to articulate a complete picture of their existence—that is, “if one’s vocation, one’s private pursuit of perfection, entails constructing models of such entities as “the self,” “knowledge,” “language,” “nature,” “God,” or “history,” and then tinkering with them until they mesh with one another.”²²⁷ Following Freud, Rorty sees this personal journey as “the search for a character, the attempt of individuals to be reconciled with themselves (and, in the case of some exceptional individuals, to make their lives works of art).”²²⁸ In Rorty’s view, this process of reconciliation can be manifested in two ways: either it involves the search for purity through self-knowledge, or the desire for enlargement through self-creation. Plato and Kant evoke this puritanical completion of the self, which involves the actualization of a common humanity. Rorty coins this as asceticism: “the

²²⁵ Rorty, “Response to Kate Soper” (Essay: “Richard Rorty: Humanist and/or Anti-humanist?”) in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, 131.

²²⁶ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 476.

²²⁷ Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” in *The Rorty Reader*, 255.

²²⁸ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection” in *The Rorty Reader*, 269.

desire to purify oneself is the desire to slim down, to peel away everything that is accidental, to will one thing, to intensify, to become a simpler and more transparent being.”²²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Rorty advocates the aesthetic form of self-creation. He narrates that since Nietzsche’s time, this process has been performed by those “who are interested in their own autonomy and individuality rather than in their social usefulness and whose excursions into politics are incidental to their principal motives.”²³⁰ They are driven by the wish “to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and of the future.”²³¹ Rorty cites the likes of William Blake and Charles Baudelaire for sharing with Nietzsche and Heidegger this desire for self-invention through their transformative, limit-transgressing art and poetry.²³² The actual content and techniques for aesthetic self-enlargement vary: for Marquis de Sade, it is through sexual experimentation; for Lord Byron, through political engagement, and for Hegel, through the enrichment of one’s vocabulary.²³³ But what is noticeable here is that the element that ties all the self-creators that Rorty admires is their ingenious use of language. They perform their vocations typically by way of poetic achievements—Rorty gives the examples of Heideggerian litanies and Derridean puns—so that their self-image can escape the theoretical constraints of their vocabulary, tradition, or style. Self-creation is thus a process of getting rid of the final vocabulary of the old ego in order to reinvent a personal identity.

At this stage, self-creation appears to be available only for self-styled, artistic geniuses with a penchant for linguistic gymnastics. It addresses the redemption of a specific demographic: well-read intellectuals who like feeding their natural hunger for knowledge and experience. My view is that it would be a mistake to assess self-creation this way. I argue that Rorty’s project promotes the redemptive strategy of

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Rorty, “Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy” in *Truth and Progress*, 308.

²³¹ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection” in *The Rorty Reader*, 269.

²³² Rorty, “Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 193.

²³³ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection” in *The Rorty Reader*, 269.

self-creation as something that is becoming an available option to more and more people in modernity. For example, Rorty points out that Sigmund Freud—whom he calls as “an apostle of the aesthetic life, of unending curiosity”—has been integral in democratizing the appeal of self-exploration. The theory of the unconscious and the creative power of interpretation have paved the way for his readers to weave original, self-enriching narratives. By showing how we can see ourselves as “centerless, as random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs,” he has helped make palatable the moral value of becoming “increasingly ironic, playful, free, and inventive in our choice of self-descriptions.”²³⁴ The result of this, for Rorty, is that we no longer need to rely on a vocabulary of moral reflection that is exclusively based on religion and philosophy. Rather, the Freudian ploy shows us how rich and complex our own lives already are. Reconstructing a personal story from the resources available in a person’s lifetime has now become a viable path to modern self-integration.

Rorty insists that today, the best way of achieving a sense of “Heideggerian authenticity—the best way, as Nietzsche said, to “become who you are”—is not to ask “what is the truth?” but rather to inquire “what sorts of people are there in the world, and how do they fare?”²³⁵ Rorty characterizes the self-creator as someone who yearns for autonomy through a kind of comparative literary morality. She is someone who, to understand her surroundings, “passes rapidly from Hemingway to Proust to Hitler to Marx to Foucault to Mary Douglas to the present situation in Southeast Asia to Gandhi to Sophocles.”²³⁶ Rorty also adds that she is usually also someone who, in search of what purposes to have, is “lucky enough to have the money and leisure to do something about it: to visit different churches or gurus, go to different theatres or museums, and, above all, to read a lot of different books.”²³⁷ She takes this cosmopolitan, interdisciplinary route for good reason. To answer the

²³⁴ Ibid., 270.

²³⁵ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 390.

²³⁶ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xl.

²³⁷ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 476.

question of what kind of person she wants to be, a self-creator has to become acquainted with as many human vocabularies, as many forms of life, and as many ideas and arguments as possible. She needs them as material for constructing her authentic, idiosyncratic self-image. Thus, for Rorty, one creates the self in the process of losing one's ego. This is one way by which a person can be redeemed in modernity without succumbing to transcendent ambitions.

This personal ideal of self-creation, however, is not the only value that Rorty prizes highly in modernity. His public and egalitarian vision of redemption lies in another: solidarity. As Habermas relays, "private edification is, of course, only half of the business of philosophical communication. Public commitment is the other, even more important task of philosophy."²³⁸ As we have discussed in Chapter II, Rorty argues that the Western liberal tradition stands for the protection of our democratic achievements, the highest goal of which is to promote freer, happier, and richer lives. Whitman's hymn about America—that "we are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God: our essence is our existence, and our existence is in the future"²³⁹—is something that he extends the scope of in order to cover a larger sense of belongingness. In Rortyan solidarity, the theme of self-enlargement continues—but this time around, this modern form of redemption is addressed to collective humanity.

Solidarity

My argument is that self-enlarging solidarity is Rorty's redemptive antidote to egotism on a collective level. I begin by showing how Rorty thinks solidarity is exhibited in society. In a 1997 interview, he provides an interesting description about how it operates:

I see it as people thinking of themselves first and foremost as members of a trade union or citizens of a country, or

²³⁸ Habermas, "'... And to define America, Her Athletic Democracy',"9.

²³⁹ Rorty, "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey" in *Achieving Our Country*, 22.

members of an army, people engaged in a common effort, so that if the effort fails, identity is in trouble. If the revolution doesn't succeed, if the union can't be organized, if the country doesn't survive, if the war isn't won, then the individual is crushed. Solidarity is just what exists in these movements. It is accepting reciprocal responsibility to other members of the group for the sake of a common purpose. In the sense the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had solidarity, the Nazis had solidarity, Mao's cultural revolutionaries had solidarity. The bad guys can have solidarity too. [*Laughter.*] Solidarity is morally neutral, so to speak. It's like self-respect. It's for groups what self-respect is for individuals.²⁴⁰

What we can deduce from this quote is that first, when human beings are in a strong sense of solidarity with *any* cause, they are expected and are often willing to stand up for the claims and objectives of the collective—no matter how irrational or evil they seem to be to an outsider—as their membership is considered the core of their honor or dignity. To illustrate: Jacqueline Kegley's Roycean view is that bad communities are easy to identify and be judged as undeserving of anyone's loyalty. Rorty responds by inquiring: "But what criterion should somebody raised in the bosom of the Mafia use when deciding whether to rat out her friends and relatives? How does she figure out whether the community in which she has been raised is "ultimately anti-community"?"²⁴¹ Based on this description, we can regard solidarity as something driven by the sentiment of inclusivity in a particular society or culture.

Second, this belongingness also rouses people to sacrifice and die for their beliefs and ideals, and to consider those who turn their backs on them as weak or untrustworthy. Recognition of the importance of solidarity leads us to idolize martyrs and heroes, as well as condemn traitors and deserters. For this reason, the loss, collapse, or betrayal of something we are in solidarity with can result into a

²⁴⁰ Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 61.

²⁴¹ Rorty, "Reply to Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley" (Essay: "False Dichotomies and Missed Metaphors: Genuine Individuals Need Genuine Communities") in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 136-137.

personal or moral crisis. The abandonment of one's faith and religious community, for example, can lead a former Christian or Muslim to feelings of alienation, lack of purpose, and disillusionment in life. However, at its best form, solidarity can act as a rich motivational source for personal development. Members aspire to represent themselves in the best possible light—as model citizens, good comrades, or compassionate workers—to show that they are in spirit with something that they take pride in. Solidarity, in short, is a feeling of intimate allegiance shared by a community of individuals with overlapping beliefs, kindred desires, and a common moral vocabulary.

Third, Rorty believes that solidarity is not something that is exclusively tendered by religion. Secular causes can be motivated by the same kind of spiritual zeal and intensity of social commitment as religious faith—for instance, if we consider how Marxism was able to approximate the might of Roman Catholicism in the 20th century.²⁴² In this sense, what is involved in solidarity is not something allied with the transcendent; rather, its spiritual energy is engineered by human sentiment in Rorty's story. For him, our sense of belonging, dedication, and loyalty to a particular group, effort, or ideal can be regarded as a way of enjoining this form of spiritual participation in the modern world. Solidarity is the project of self-creation in a collective light, if by this we mean achieving a sense of integration in the large and vibrant life of a community. Being in alliance with something significant helps a person feel larger than who she is, for she treats her community as an extension of herself. She acknowledges her membership as a source of personal worth, edification, and meaning. A strong sense of solidarity, in Rorty's terms, can then respond to the religious impulse of participating in a spiritual romance with the life of a community.

While it is clear that solidarity can serve as a basis of personal, social, and even spiritual significance, how exactly can it fulfill the role of a saving possibility in modernity? How can it redeem us from the moral malaise of egotism? Rorty argues that the existence of different solidarities is the source of numerous moral conflicts.

²⁴² Rorty, "The Eclipse of the Reformist Left" in *Achieving Our Country*, 39.

Since we are inclined to protect causes and communities we feel in solidarity with, how we deal with our moral and practical issues is highly dependent on the loyalties we uphold the most. Determining our thoughts, dispositions, and actions, these loyalties can be treated as manifestations of egotism on the social level. The challenge, in this case, is how to expand these loyalties to include more and more people as part of our moral kin. Rorty believes that we need to learn to see other people as “one of us” in order to combat divisive social and institutional egotism. This perspective puts us in a better position to feel passionate about the welfare of a wider range of people and cases. For Rorty, the more the overlap, the greater the chances for regarding each other as “the sort of people one can live with—and eventually, perhaps, the sort one can be friends with, intermarry with, and so on.”²⁴³ In Rorty’s view, the kind of solidarity that does this inclusive work is democratic solidarity.

Democratic solidarity is inspired by the vision of a free and egalitarian utopia. It aspires to let each person live in collective freedom, respect, and opportunity, as inscribed by Rorty in his allusions to the American dream in *Achieving Our Country*:

We were supposed to love our country because it showed promise of being kinder and more generous than other countries. As the blacks and the gays, among others, were well aware, this was a counsel of perfection rather than description of fact. But you cannot urge national political renewal on the basis of descriptions of fact. You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become as well as in terms of what you know it be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.²⁴⁴

But how exactly can we be inspired to endorse this redemptive force of democratic solidarity? Rorty argues, following Dorothy Allison, Harold Bloom, and Matthew

²⁴³ Rorty, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 53.

²⁴⁴ Rorty, “A Cultural Left” in *Achieving Our Country*, 101.

Arnold, that in the modern world we should heed “the hope for a religion of literature, in which works of the secular imagination replace Scripture as the principal source of inspiration and hope for each new generation.”²⁴⁵ He believes that reading literature can steer the power of solidarity toward a non-egotistic, imaginative, and self-enlarging direction. This egalitarianism is articulated by the likes of Whitman, Wordsworth, Blake and Dewey—poets and thinkers whose words have inspired people like Jean Jaures, Eugene Debs, Vaclav Havel, and Bill Bradley to engineer politics toward the direction of democracy and social justice.²⁴⁶ Thus, solidarity in favor of a robust social democracy is Rorty’s spiritual dream. He urges us to tap the democratic energy of public spiritual symbols of concern, believing that if they are fully set ablaze they can serve as the spiritual and moral orientation of human beings.

This does not mean, of course, that we should confine ourselves to literature that endorses only democratic ideals. That would miss the point. The alleviation of cruelty and suffering is an important goal of Rorty’s democratic utopia, and to promote this we should be conscious of what hurts other people. The value of literature, for Rorty, also lies in its ability to expose these pains and experiences. Self-enlargement comes to play in the literary culture when readers engage in redescriptive activities that can lead to empathy and sentimental re-education. Moral philosophers, historians, biographers, novelists, and often those who are involved in artistic expression widen our understanding of human beings. They reveal the unfamiliar and the excluded, as successfully depicted by works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Friedrich Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In his oeuvre, Rorty prizes the novel as the principal literary form that shows us how to relate with other people in a way that is unmediated by questions of truth, and helps us to better grasp “the variety of human life and the

²⁴⁵ Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works” in *Achieving Our Country*, 136.

²⁴⁶ Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works” in *Achieving Our Country*, 139.

contingency of our own moral vocabulary."²⁴⁷ As Christopher Voparil correctly puts it, the value of Rorty's conception of the power of the novel "resides in the epistemological egalitarianism it embodies and its orientation toward social change."²⁴⁸ Moving narratives of lives previously unimagined can change old ways and prejudices, for they:

Help us imagine what it is like to be a cradle Catholic losing his faith, a redneck fundamentalist adopting hers, a victim of Pinochet coping with the disappearance of her children, a kamikaze pilot of the Second World War living with the fact of Japan's defeat, a bomber of Hiroshima coping with the price of America's victory, or an idealistic politician coping with the pressures that multinational corporations bring to bear on the political process.²⁴⁹

Through these works, people learn to behave differently because they are invited to care. They learn to imagine other lives, and to listen to familiarizing justifications such as "because this is what it is like to be in her situation-to be far from home, among strangers," or "because she might become your daughter-in-law," or "because her mother would grieve for her."²⁵⁰ For Rorty, the exposure to a variety of life-experiences is an effective way of moralizing humanity toward a solidarity of common-feeling. A sentiment-based literary culture, for him, creates a morally inspiring community.

Empathy, furthermore, has the potential to keep increasing its limits. Cultivating a compassionate loyalty to the entirety of the human species is a goal worth pursuing, and Rorty even suggests that we should consider extending this "to all those who, like yourself, can experience pain—even the cows and the

²⁴⁷ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 393.

²⁴⁸ Christopher Voparil, "Rorty and the Democratic Power of the Novel" in *Kritika & Kontext* 44 (2011), 126.

²⁴⁹ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 394.

²⁵⁰ Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality" in *The Rorty Reader*, 365.

kangaroos—or perhaps even to all living things, even the trees.”²⁵¹ At its ideal, this commitment would produce a kind of being “envisaged by Christian and Buddhist accounts of sainthood—an ideal self to whom the hunger and suffering of *any* human being (and even, perhaps, that of any other animal) is intensely painful.”²⁵² Rorty’s ambition for solidarity, hence, is not too far off from the ideals and archetypes of some familiar religions; he only tries to achieve universal brotherhood through a different path. To summarize, solidarity for Rorty is a way of combating social egotism that also serves as alternative source of public redemptive energy. It is an invitation to find pride and loyalty in the cause of creating a kinder and more pluralistic world.

Nihilism and Egotism

So far I have reconstructed Rorty’s redemption model in a way that discloses its responses to two demands in modernity. The first is related to how we can combat the moral malaise of egotism, and the second is how, in the course of remedying our egotistic ways, we can live spiritually fulfilling lives. The redemptive paths that Rorty offers to meet these tasks are self-creation and solidarity, which are both oriented toward self-enlargement. Rorty’s non-traditional view of self-creation is that “being authentic, being faithful to ourselves, is being faithful to something which was produced in collaboration with a lot of other people.”²⁵³ The exemplars of self-creation—Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida—are indebted to the raw material supplied by human history, experience, and relationships for fashioning their personal projects. Solidarity, on the other hand, is about being inspired by the ideal of humanistic belongingness. Rorty follows the civic religion of Whitman and Dewey that regards social justice as its guiding light. My interpretation of Rorty’s project

²⁵¹ Rorty, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 45.

²⁵² Rorty, “Ethics without Principles” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 79.

²⁵³ Rorty, “In a Flattened World,” 3.

shows that these ideals can cultivate human meaning and spiritual enthusiasm suited to the conditions of his view of modernity.

To successfully crystallize the agenda of this chapter, Rorty's role in the contemporary philosophical exchange about the sacred needs to be fleshed out. I need to present how Rorty's vision of redemption connects with the projects of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, and also reveal how his position not only bears comparison with their accounts, but in fact promises to advance beyond them. My claim is that establishing the link between egotism and nihilism is an innovative way of engaging the question of modern redemption. We can recall that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly regard nihilism as one of the most significant malaises in modernity. Nihilism, for them, pervades a modern context that suffers from godlessness. The consequence of this view is the loss of confidence in our own significance, and this spiritual deficiency is what we need a cure for. But instead of calling nihilism the abyss of modernity, Rorty believes that egotism is what we need saving from. He characterizes the egotist's desire as a dream that haunts both religion and philosophy: "the dream of completeness, of the imperturbability attributed by the wise, of the mastery supposedly possessed by those who have, once and for all, achieved completion by achieving enlightenment."²⁵⁴ While an exaggerated philosophical rendition of the nature of egotism, Rorty's assessment above exposes the underlying motivation of human beings who are, so to speak, "self-satisfied."

At first glance, the egotist seems to be as far removed from the nihilist as possible. An egotist does not feel deprived; she is firm and secure about the holiness or correctness of her dispositions. But consider this: egotists derive their self-assurance from the deep and fundamental certainty of the religious or scientific authority they believe in—whether this supposedly "omnipotent" and "all-encompassing" authority wears the face of God or Nature or the Rational Self. Once this authority is put to doubt, and when it eventually collapses, then it can break open feelings of existential angst, powerlessness, and disillusionment in human lives.

²⁵⁴ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 392.

Human beings thereafter lose direction and purpose. I think that we can interpret this as the point when egotists lose their claim to privilege, and fall into the nihilistic wretchedness that is said to prevail as a dominant mood in modernity. In short, egotism *precedes* nihilism. In the picture that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly paint, the figure of the nihilist appears after the egotist has been found out—after the egotist realizes that her self-satisfaction is either a farce, or is the only thing she can pursue to will herself to significance in a pluralistic, godless world. There are two general reactions to this dilemma: either the egotist transforms into a nihilist, or the egotist becomes even more violently attached to her egotism. Both responses, if we mine the accounts of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, end in tragedy.

The first reaction is one where we find the egotist feeling fully deprived of the self-confidence and security upon which she pins her sense of dignity. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor mentions the phenomena of “individualism,” “anthropocentrism,” and “egoism,” which can all be interpreted as allusions to egotism that can help describe this situation. Taylor characterizes individualism as a moral ideal. It is often regarded as one of the finest achievements of modern civilization, as individualism celebrates the freedom of the person to choose her path to self-fulfillment. It has a dark side, however. Taylor says that making the self our primary concern also narrows our moral and social horizons, and causes us to be less concerned with others and with society. This cuts us from our contact with other rich sources of meaning, and can thereby impoverish our lives. This sense of impoverishment is most palpable when we take an anthropocentric view. Anthropocentrism, as we have mentioned in Chapter I, refers to the modern belief that the most significant task human beings can aspire to accomplish involves the journey toward self-determination. This view holds that all other concerns are subordinate to this project. Taylor points this out as the greatest danger related to the rise of self-centered forms of identity in the modern world, since again, it ultimately

threatens to undermine all possible horizons of significance.²⁵⁵ Egoism, meanwhile, can be understood as a manifestation of egotistic behavior in a social or practical setting at its worst. Taylor describes it as “a phenomenon of breakdown, where the loss of a traditional horizon leaves mere anomie in its wake, and every body fends for themselves e.g., in some demoralized, crime-ridden slums formed by newly urbanized peasants in the Third World (or in nineteenth-century Manchester).”²⁵⁶ Taylor follows Tocqueville when he distinguishes moral individualism from egoism, the latter being an amoral phenomenon.

If we interpret Taylor’s view, we can see that once egotism as a moral ideal reaches its most radical stage—that is, when “the notion of self-determining freedom, pushed to its limit, doesn’t recognize any boundaries, anything given that I have to respect in my exercise of self-determining choice”²⁵⁷—then eventually the egotist will find herself living in a world that features a total barrenness of non humanly-projected significance. This experience intensifies the idea that every human being is a competitor for self-serving meaning, so that each person is perpetually in danger of being treated instrumentally by others. For Taylor, this means that living then takes on a degraded, absurd, or trivialized form in the modern world. Furthermore, the effect of portraying self-will as an imperative of every individual also heightens the consciousness of isolation and responsibility. Each life is at great risk of failing to meet the modern demands of self-autonomy and authenticity. As Dreyfus and Kelly note, the burden of defining one’s life has produced a distressing atmosphere of confusion, lostness, and spiritual failure. In the early twentieth century, for instance, works such as T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* and Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* testify to the

²⁵⁵ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 68.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

gloomy fate of modern lives.²⁵⁸ The view propagated in these works is that meaning in the modern world is a worthless pursuit. This realization is compounded further by the disbelief in the existence of anything (apart from our will to power) that can console in times of defeat. Looking up or beyond the means of our human agency for aid is judged as weakness or escapism. Thus, in this narrative, we see how the Rortyan egotist metamorphoses into the forsaken nihilist that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly desire to treat in their own accounts.

Aside from falling into despair, the second consequence of the collapse of religious or scientific authority is that, as a form of resistance to the nihilistic turn, the egotist may hold on even more belligerently to her beliefs. Since egotists are tormented by anything that could dislodge them from the security of their identities, they could challenge these threats with an even more ruthless kind of self-assertion. In *All Things Shining*, Dreyfus and Kelly refer to this condition of existential militancy as the “now egotistical sky” of modernity—an assessment they bring to life using the language of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). These two thinkers regard Melville as our generation’s Hölderlin. In his time, Hölderlin’s poetry prophetically envisioned the danger of “the flight of the gods” in the age of Enlightenment. As an antidote to this condition, Hölderlin embraces Homeric polytheism as “offering a non-nihilistic sort of enlightenment radically different from that of Kant and his

²⁵⁸ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 28-29. Robert Pippin’s observations support the diagnosis of loss and de-spiritualization with regard to the rise of a modern culture that centers on autonomy. He notes that in the late 18th to the 20th century, the phenomenon of modernization was dominated by a mood of spiritual decline. The Western high culture was permeated by a mood of “melancholy, profound skepticism and intense self-criticism,” as notably exemplified by “Faust’s failed bargain (or the “failure of science” and especially scientific power and knowledge, “for life”), Hölderlin’s elegiac sense of modernity’s profound loss, Hegel’s claim in *Glauben und Wissen* that the religion of modern times is: “God is dead,” Balzac’s, Stendhal’s, Flaubert’s pictures of our new but not at all better bourgeois, competitive, low-minded world, constant prey to romantic fantasies of recovery and restoration, Henry James’s international theme and its ever fading (dying) traditional Europe, its acquisitive, money-obsessed, new-age Americans, Proust on the passing of (and exposure of) the Guermantes’s world for the Verdurin’s, Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor speculations, Joyce’s and Eliot’s ironic use of ancient myth, Rilke’s elegiac metaphysics of absence, Husserl on the “crisis” of the European sciences, Heidegger on the forgetting of Being, and the nightmare worlds of Beckett and Kafka, dominated by mere pretensions to presence and authority.” [Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), xi-xii].

contemporaries,” and suggests that poets can ““wrap up god’s thunderbolts and deliver them to the people.””²⁵⁹ Today, Dreyfus and Kelly regard Melville our poet-guide for revealing the plural manifestations of the sacred. His novel breathes life to the “monomaniacal” atmosphere of modernity and suggests a new framework to admit a happy polytheism in our age.

In *Moby Dick*, the great “wickedness” of egotism comes to life in the character of Ahab, the captain of the hunting expedition whose goal is to harpoon the great white whale. Sifting through the biblical and literary allusions in this classic, Dreyfus and Kelly argue that Ahab’s pursuit can be understood as a story of a misguided passion for monotheism. Ahab, whom Dreyfus and Kelly portray as having “the strongest identity possible,” most abhors the idea that “the universe might be inscrutable to the last; that ultimately there might be “naught beyond.””²⁶⁰ This propels him to chase after Moby Dick, the king of the “kings of the boundless sea,” for the white beast stands for that which is the greatest and most God-like, in the sense of the whale being *absolutely mysterious*. Simply put, Ahab’s goal is to solve the puzzle of “whether there is a God against whom to rebel”²⁶¹; and if there is, he desires to come face to face with Him as an equal. Ahab, for Dreyfus and Kelly, is a mix of “Kant’s theory of human beings as autonomous selves and Dante’s religious hope for eternal bliss,” whose world is the kind in which “the universe is a set of deep meanings we can strike through to with the strength of our autonomous will.”²⁶² They add that Melville also identifies this as the same will that permeates our scientific way of life. This calculating and domineering attitude has left our hills “unhaunted,”²⁶³ so that citizens of the modern world hold every non-human mystery and wonder in suspicion automatically. Now we can see that like Rorty, Dreyfus and Kelly recognize that what is wrong with the modern human condition is that it is

²⁵⁹ Dreyfus and Kelly, “Saving the Sacred from the Axial Revolution,” 197.

²⁶⁰ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 181; 161.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁶³ Dreyfus and Kelly, “Saving the Sacred from the Axial Revolution,” 197.

steeped with the religious and philosophical egotism that underlies monotheism and scientism. This egotistic attitude takes away our ability to perceive the world in any other way—in short, it removes any kind of redemptive power that can be found from any other source apart from God the Father, Science, or Self-Will. And when this redemptive truth fails—which Melville’s prose evokes inevitably will, given that in the novel Ahab dies without any resolution to his crisis—then we are left without any other source of meaning. Egotism, in this case as Ahab’s determined monotheism, “covers up the very real and polytheistic joys that are already to be found right here on earth”²⁶⁴ and results to belligerence or nihilism.

We can further appreciate the significance of Rorty’s contribution to the egotism-nihilism issue by drawing the contrast between his view and what we can interpret to be Dreyfus’s and Kelly’s perspective on egotistic self-creation that flows from Nietzsche to Wallace. As we have reiterated, the premise of *All Things Shining* is that in modernity, the totalizing power of a monotheistic, universal, and transcendent spiritual motivation does not any more hold. One result of this is the acceptance of the nihilistic logic that once the modern world has finally made its full secular transformation, then “the lone source of meaning in human existence would be the strong individual’s force of will.”²⁶⁵ Expressed in the language of self-creation, this means that the self-creator believes that she can choose the way she encounters everything. She sees herself as a completely singular agent who can shape the world and the lives of others according to her needs and desires. Dreyfus and Kelly interprets Wallace’s view of the imperial egotist as someone with “a freedom of will so complete that by its force one can experience searing pain as overwhelming joy; crushing, crushing boredom as instant bliss; hell itself as the sacred, mystical oneness of all things deep down.”²⁶⁶ The self-creator believes that whatever is meaningful and sacred can be *imposed* upon experience, heeding the radical Nietzschean spirit that

²⁶⁴ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 168.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

we can become gods ourselves. I think Dreyfus and Kelly are correct in their appraisal that this kind of saving possibility is unsustainable. The failure is due to an enduring monotheistic dream from which neither Nietzsche nor Wallace could escape. In thinking that the self-creator can *unceasingly* experience the world in a sacred way throughout her lifetime—literally, live a life of heavenly bliss on earth—they desire to illuminate a divine state of experience that is impossible for any human being to achieve.

I think Rorty would agree with Dreyfus and Kelly's point about the unsustainability of the Nietzsche/Wallace framework. His version of redemption, after all, is against the externalization of eternal hope or bliss in any form. But I think that the criticism that Dreyfus and Kelly raise about self-creation is not enough to dismiss its redemptive possibilities altogether, which is something that they seem to commit to in advocating a return to Homeric Polytheism. As we have seen previously, Rorty shows us a way by which self-creation can operate differently. Rorty's self-creator does not aim to conquer the world; rather, it suffices for her to reign over her evolving self-description. She does not aspire for the otherworldly sacred; instead, she pins her hopes on enriching her mortal life with significance and meaning. Unlike the tyrannical Nietzschean-Wallacean egotist, she recognizes her indebtedness to human vocabularies and traditions, which she uses to enlarge her personal repertoire and mold an authentic self. Rorty's self-creator knows that the attainment of perfection is unachievable—for no one can ever be totally new or free from tradition—and recognizes that what matters for private redemption is the voyage taken toward personalization. The merit of this view of modern redemption, thus, is that it *seeks* to be concretely realizable.

Renouncing the ego for self-creation, for Rorty, responds to the modern task of spiritual enhancement without seeking non-human re-enchantment. In his version, we persistently shake our self-satisfaction to take the redemptive journey of self-perfection. By following this route, the fate of egotism-nihilism is avoided by his ideal self-creator. More needs to be said about Rorty's redemptive strategy—in order

to maximize what we can get out of it, I now close this chapter by offering an evaluation of this idea in relation to the solutions offered by Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly to the problem of modern nihilism.

Post-Metaphysical Redemption

We have now shown that Rorty, Taylor, Dreyfus and Kelly actually share a similar insight about the moral/spiritual crisis that troubles modernity. If our purpose is to redeem ourselves from this potent combination of egotism-nihilism, we have to go back to the question of whether or not we are on the right track—that is, we have to inquire if we have entertained the best options available to grapple with the problem. We should note once more that the accounts of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly look for redemption elsewhere to re-spiritualize the modern world. Taylor looks toward non-human moral sources and a modernized understanding of the transcendent. He thinks that it is necessary to re-establish a new kind of relationship with nature and with God to experience a renewed horizon of significance for human beings. Dreyfus and Kelly, if we follow their reading of *Moby Dick*, are resolute in their view that the universe is alive. If the cosmos were not a host to a wide array of spiritual forces, then we would not have encountered so many great and terrifying and diverse experiences in the history of human civilization. Polytheism, for them, means that apart from a god indifferent to us, “there are other gods as well—malicious and vindictive and joyous and divine—and the universe is all of these by turns. Which is to say that ultimately it is no one of them. A whole pantheon of gods is really there.”²⁶⁷ Simply put, our task now is to lure back the presence of these gods and invite their multifaceted truths to shine on our lives.

So how does Rorty make a difference in this discussion? My view is that what is admirable with Rorty’s project is that unlike the accounts of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, he tries to find a way to nip egotism in the bud. Rorty rears the horns of egotism against itself. He attempts to treat it at its core by transforming self-will from

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 185.

self-completion to *self-enlargement*. He shows us a way of honouring our Enlightenment liberation from “our self-incurred immaturity” and re-orienting us toward modern sources of spiritual motivation in his literary culture. By trying to stop egotism at its tracks, Rorty invites us to see the possibility of undercutting the drama of nihilism before it manifests in the lives of individuals and cultures. Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly do not entertain this strategy of self-enlargement in their respective works. In thinking that the best way to re-spiritualize the world is by going back to the non-human and the marginal, we can then posit that they have made a jump in concluding that the only way to be saved spiritually is by moving away from what needs to be immediately fixed from our modern culture. In this process, they have neglected to see that there are paths for spiritual rejuvenation that have not been exhausted yet that deserve a second look. There is something wrong in the way human beings behave that needs repair, and according to Rorty, we have the resources to address this issue without going too far or too otherworldly.

I also want to point out that the position shared by Taylor, Dreyfus and Kelly has its own risks too. I will quickly rehearse these issues here, beginning with the assumption that lurks behind their redemption models. They jointly assume that our abilities to make spiritually rich, life-fulfilling commitments in modernity are weakened without the force reminiscent of the transcendent or the marginally sacred. This, for them, is the source of our spiritual deterioration. I want to show that this position can be challenged. First, following Rorty, we can defend the notion that we are able to make strong commitments to people or to ideals even without any non-human buttress. Second, I want to entertain the thought that accounts of retrieval or recovery, which measure themselves according to the language of the transcendent or the marginal sacred, can prevent us from coming to terms with the self-sufficient, secular modernity that Rorty desires to achieve. If we take these criticisms into account, then we can see how going back to theism (Taylor) and polytheism (Dreyfus and Kelly) can prevent us from welcoming a change of self-image that approximates Rorty’s hope for modern maturity.

The Rortyan point about human commitment I am making here questions the conditions required for the possibility of experiencing strong and stable existential meaning. This argument can be analyzed on two levels: the transcendental and the empirical. We can make sense of what Rorty makes of the transcendental conditions of commitment in his review of *The Ethics of Authenticity*. As we have mentioned before, Taylor's diagnosis in the book is that the rise of anthropocentrism (or for our purposes, egotism) has led us to delimit our moral and spiritual horizons of significance. He then suggests that the best motivation for recognizing and caring for the people, things, and events that are truly important is best sourced from a *real* moral ground, and that the possibilities for such should be articulated. Rorty challenges this assumption, arguing that in the first place:

You cannot think without having a horizon of significance—for to have such a horizon is just to see the relevance of some things to your concerns and the irrelevance of others, to see the point of some projects and not of others. The most a philosopher (or a poet, or a lover, or a political revolutionary, or anyone else) can do is to alter your sense of relevance and point, thereby moving you from one horizon of significance to a slightly different one. The only way somebody could arrange for you to have no horizon of significance would be to lobotomise you or enslave you.²⁶⁸

Rorty's contention is that each of us already holds a perspective or framework that illuminates what is truly significant in our lives. This horizon can change depending on the ideas, things, people and events that enlarge and transform us. These redemptive transformations, however, do not necessarily have to be based on any objective moral ground, supporting the thought that deep attachments are not irreducibly metaphysical in nature.

To continue engaging this point: in his response to Daniel Conway's essay—which Rorty interprets as displaying the tendency to make the “metaphysical”

²⁶⁸ Rorty, “In a Flattened World,” 3.

coextensive with the idea of a “deep” commitment—Rorty explains that for him, “the depth of an attachment (to a person, a polis, an ideal, a god, or whatever)” should be regarded as “a matter of the inextricability of the object of attachment from one’s most cherished self-descriptions.”²⁶⁹ Again, what this definition suggests is that Rorty thinks there is no intrinsic link between metaphysics and human obligation; the best connection we can identify is that which occurs between the person’s final vocabulary and his or her sense of moral commitment. A lover or a socialist, for example, will not require the guarantee of any transcendent support to care for a specific human being or to painstakingly work for a political utopia. They will sacrifice and die for their prized causes, because their goals articulate the meaning of their existence. Hence, for Rorty, the lack of the factor of transcendence in human experience will not lessen our capacity for making commitments we are willing to die for, or from having strong and meaningful encounters that can lead to our self-transformation. The point here is that the force of metaphysics or the transcendent does not ground deep attachments; rather, they are profoundly conditioned by the nature of the culture one belongs in. In short, in Rorty’s view we will continue experiencing these commitments even in a godless modern world.

We can also make sense of the conditions of human commitment in an empirical way for Rorty. When confronted with John Horton’s question of whether or not a nominalist and historicist utopia is actually possible—as having deep moral (and for our own purposes, *spiritually redemptive*) commitments in a metaphysically unhinged world can still be put to doubt—Rorty answers: “let’s experiment and find out.”²⁷⁰ Many, at present, still believe that a true cause has to be absolute in order to be legitimate. For this reason, Rorty argues that we cannot infer that a post-metaphysical culture is impossible to create. The traditional state of mind has to be changed first before we can judge if enduring moral and political commitments are

²⁶⁹ Rorty, “Response to Daniel Conway” (Essay: “Irony, State and Utopia: Rorty’s ‘We’ and the Problem of Transitional *Praxis*”) in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, 89.

²⁷⁰ Rorty, “Response to John Horton” (Essay: “Irony and Commitment: An Irreconcilable Dualism of Modernity”) in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, 31.

possible even without non-human anchorage. In short, for Rorty, it is risking the cultivation of a responsible perspective of secularism, historicism, and nominalism, and not a turn to theism or polytheism, which can save our culture. But inching closer to this maturity means that we should prevent ourselves from getting caught up with non-human redemption models. We need to engage and modify the nature of our present convictions first. Rorty thinks that when our deep attachments are re-directed toward the full appreciation of the redemptive role of human beings, the better the world will be for the future citizens of his literary culture.

Dreyfus and Kelly's reading of Wallace, however, poses a good rejoinder to Rorty's point. In modernity, the issue is not simply about our ability to make commitments that give our lives value and significance; the real problem is how to sustain them. Today, our personal commitments, as well as the roles we play in society, are too plural and malleable in form. They appear to not hold as much gravity compared to, for example, the commitment of an errant Christian who risks excommunication and death in the 16th century, or an adulterer who lives in fear of the fires of hell. The modern world saturates us with all sorts of possible life choices; it is far easier for us to switch careers, convert religions, and select our causes and obligations than ever before. Dreyfus and Kelly highlight Wallace's observation that when it comes to our commitments in modernity, we now have the power "to qualify them, change them, and take them back."²⁷¹ We feel more accountable to our choices more than anything else. This situation has led to the trivialization of the depth and substance of obligations in people's lives for Dreyfus and Kelly. Passions and interests are more easily regarded as passing and temporary, so that they are neither seen as absolutely necessary nor definitive of human identities. In short, unlike before, we can choose and unchoose our horizons of significance in the modern world. One of the effects of nihilistic modernity, therefore, is the moral and spiritual buoyancy of our meanings and commitments. What we hold as significant

²⁷¹ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 24.

in modernity does not really hold as much weight as we like to think they do on the basis of this perspective.

I want to point out that Wallace's view of human freedom verges on the extreme. As we have seen in our reconstruction of Rorty's modern redemption, self-enlargement and redemptive transformations are rarely a matter of choice. We neither choose the people we hopelessly fall in love with, nor dictate which books to read or places to visit that can guarantee our spiritual transformation into new human beings. These relationships usually come by unexpectedly, and we cherish them because there is something inexplicable and compelling and mysterious in the way they transfigure our personal vision. In Rorty's redemptive story, commitments derive their power not in their ability to pin our identities to the ground, but in their capacity to renew and inspire us. This also means that there is nothing inherently wrong if our redemptive relationships and experiences change in content or object—if, for example, we fall out of love, change political advocacies, or regret our past choices. Their changeability does not trivialize their redemptive value; rather, they participate even more in enriching our self-creative projects. To be fair, of course, deep inspirations that merit our commitment are truly difficult to come by, and redemptive sources are not easy to replace. It is not so easy an act to swap an old flame for a brighter one, or to overhaul one's life after coming to terms with a traumatic past, without suffering great costs and repercussions. But we should note that at least the redemption being offered by Rorty's account is characterized by its openness. In the face of the loss of inspiration, Rorty's redemption preserves, and even inspires, the hope for transformation. It is the hope that one can be saved anew, and over and over, despite the mortal tragedy of it all.

A way to look at this situation is to consider that the reason why we think commitments are regarded as more trivial in the modern world is because we still measure them according to the expectations of a foundationalist framework. Rorty thinks that it does not have to be this way, as we have discussed in this chapter. Dreyfus and Kelly, in their own account of modern polytheism, advocate a similar

position. To move away from the hegemony of mono-religion and mono-reason, they argue that we must treat moments of sacred experience in a non-absolutist sense. These redemptive moments already permeate the present culture. They are felt in the experience of listening to great political speeches, of getting caught up in the excitement of play in sport, or in witnessing feats of human excellence. A person who beholds or participates in the power of these communally energized activities merges with something that transcends what he or she can contribute to it.²⁷² For Dreyfus and Kelly, these astonishing, albeit fleeting experiences of “whooshing up,” serve to energize the human spirit in modernity. This phenomenon is not something unfamiliar to Rorty. In his memorial lecture for Rorty, Dreyfus actually attributes the invention of this English term to him:

Whooshing up is Dick’s translation of German word [anwesen] which Heidegger uses to translate of *Physis* [physis]. It is usually translated welling-up and describes the way of heroes, gods, moods, and so forth rise up suddenly, linger for a while, and then fade away. Welling up is too tame so, in his account of Heidegger on the PreSocratics, Dick replaced it with w[h]ooshing up. Dick had an incredibly good ear for finding the right word that would resonate within the philosophic community and beyond. Even more remarkable, Dick used this ability generously to enhance everyone’s understanding of everyone else. W[h]ooshing is his contribution to Heidegger.²⁷³

To make the connection even closer, we can even posit that this notion of whooshing up, of being taken over by a greater force, is quite akin to Rorty’s modified idea of the religious impulse which, as we have described in Chapter II, aspires to engage in a spiritual romance with the life of something larger than the self.

Taylor, however, identifies a problem about this apparently flexible and temporary setup of redemption and the sacred. He states specifically that the modern

²⁷² Ibid., 205.

²⁷³ Dreyfus, “Memorial for Richard Rorty.” Corrections in brackets mine.

polytheistic view that Dreyfus and Kelly advocate tries to balance two concerns: it democratizes our contingent and ever-changing sources of redemption, and also makes sure that the consequences of our redemptive encounters adhere to what we deem as morally good—such as, for example, human flourishing and secular ethics. The latter concern, according to Taylor, responds to the need to respect the post-Axial notion of the “higher” good as codified in the modern world. Taylor argues specifically that the polytheism of Dreyfus and Kelly have internalized this standpoint of this higher good, so that they are pulled toward different directions: they support both the recognition of “the human meanings which arise for us, whooshing up through *physis* in common celebrations, or finely discerned through the exercise of skill in *poesis*” as well as “the demands of universal human rights and welfare.”²⁷⁴ This means that, for instance, while Dreyfus and Kelly would agree that movements like Nazism and Islamic fundamentalism have a great spiritual dimension on a communal level, it is imperative that we refuse to go along with them “because of the sacrificial cost imposed on scapegoats and outsiders.”²⁷⁵ Dreyfus and Kelly contend that we need to develop what they call *meta-poesis*—a higher order skill that can re-appropriate good and morally uplifting sacred moments (so we can resist nihilism), and resist them when they assume an “abhorrent, fanatical form” (to avoid evil).²⁷⁶ In short, we need to train our capability to resist being completely overtaken by the amoral spiritual lure of events and institutions that could cause harm to other people and important social causes. So unlike in ancient Homeric polytheism, where human beings allow their actions to be drawn out by the moods set by both cruel and noble gods, in the modern world, we need to know when to disengage, walk away, and suppress destructive spiritual exhilaration. The question of *how* to resolve this conflict and develop this skill is a weak spot in *All Things Shining*. For what standard or order of morality do we appeal

²⁷⁴ Taylor, “Recovering the Sacred,” 124.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁷⁶ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 205.

to, or what centralizing ideal can we aspire for, if we are to judge whether to join or contain these spiritual events? Taylor, in view of this issue, concludes that we cannot then hope for the happy polytheism that Dreyfus and Kelly propose in modernity. Instead, he leans toward the idea that any spiritual experience that aspires for that which is good and also “seems freest from illusion” will always necessitate “some kind of anchored sacred”²⁷⁷—a basis of objectivity and permanence. This anchorage is needed for us to stabilize our modern sense of the moral. This view justifies Taylor’s invitation to go back to theism.

I think, however, that polytheism and theism are not the only ways to deal with the dilemma of fostering redemptive commitments/experiences and advocating a higher sense of moral progress. Rorty’s project of redemption gives us a way to entertain both the spiritual richness that we can find from multiple redemptive sources, as well as respond to the demands of universal flourishing in the Axial age, without endorsing the divisive character of their goals. Self-enlargement, again, is the key here. The ideal of self-creation, as we can remember, pays heed to the importance of a pluralism of redemptive sources. The process of self-enlargement requires us to cultivate and expose ourselves to these sources of transformation, if we are to find fulfillment from this ideal. Solidarity, meanwhile, hosts a magnificent amount of spiritual power that has been tapped throughout history. To achieve its most utopic form, our moral sentiments should be expanded to accommodate all human beings as kin. Both self-creation and solidarity then operate on the basis of expanding the individual and collective consciousness. Rorty suggests that we can democratize/pluralize our redemptive sources in our private lives, but at the same time be committed to the post-Axial goal of universal human welfare through solidarity. If we consider these two values in Rorty’s redemption story, we can surmise that his vision is an experiment of putting together the power of polytheism and theism without routing us back to the need to depend on the “anchored” or “interstitial”—which, to repeat, are meanings that arise from “the anchored-in-reality-

²⁷⁷ Taylor, “Recovering the Sacred,” 123.

beyond-us” and “the interface between Dasein and the world.”²⁷⁸ His project helps sever us from the framework that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly find operational in the modern world. But this returns us once again to the question we have been engaging with constantly in this thesis: why is this refusal to go back to non-human sources of the sacred or of redemption so important?

The leads us to the second idea, which makes Rorty’s proposal more appealing than that of Taylor’s, Dreyfus’s, and Kelly’s: that if we are to achieve moral and spiritual maturity, then we should uphold the conviction of avoiding any way of life that reflects religious nostalgia. We have seen in this thesis that this argument plays an important part in Rorty’s philosophical project. I think that the accounts of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly can potentially re-entwine us to religious dependency and also prevent us from achieving the full maturation required to be functional modern citizens in Rorty’s view. While there is not enough space to subject the positions of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly to a more detailed criticism, it would suffice to engage the view that one possible fault behind recommending the strategy of retrieval or recovery is that this perspective limits our philosophical imaginations from understanding modernity and its demands afresh. We can remember that Rorty recommends that we discard the religious and philosophical baggage of the old self, so that we can live with the new, empowered, and responsible self in the best way possible. Any ambitious connection with something non-human commits us back to this trap, as echoed in Rorty’s critique of the Heideggerian view that we have analyzed in the previous sections. This distrust of religious nostalgia also resonates in Peter Gordon’s reading of Taylor’s work.

Gordon construes Taylor as dependent on a language inherited from the Axial revolution: the vocabulary of transcendence and immanence. He argues that Taylor persuades us to regard spiritual experiences derived from a purely immanent worldview—such as listening to music, or viewing works of art—as only “substitutes to eternity.” These alternatives are naturally impoverished in comparison to the

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 119.

glory of transcendence, which some of us continue to believe actually exists. We have set such high aspirations for ourselves (an inheritance from our religious past) but have poorer ways and resources of dealing with them in a secular worldview. Taylor, for Gordon, thus takes “the Axial definition of transcendent religion as the authoritative criterion by which to evaluate modern experience overall.”²⁷⁹ But is this the right way to go when it comes to evaluating spiritual experiences? Gordon surmises that maybe not, and uses Beethoven’s music as an example. While the great composer labels the third movement of Beethoven’s Quartet in A Minor (Opus 132) as “a song of gratitude for the Godhead”—in this sense, as something oriented toward the transcendent—this does not necessarily mean that the object of its art is something otherworldly. What it only indicates is that his linguistic expression was limited by nature of the foundational vocabulary of the past. In the present world, Beethoven’s music still retains its spiritual power to inspire awe even without abiding by the composer’s religious intentions. Our modern understanding, for Gordon, makes it possible for us to interpret moments of the marginal sacred in a language that is free from onto-theological inheritances. The point here is that perhaps becoming attuned to modernity means welcoming a new language to describe our experiences; it means that for a change, we should learn “to think of modernity as a completely new stage that may permit us truly to cast off the language of the Axial revolution itself.”²⁸⁰ As Gordon suggests: “To embrace modernity on its *own* terms... would mean finally coming into an understanding of the world for which the very distinction between transcendence and immanence no longer retained its validity.”²⁸¹ This is how we can overcome our desires for the eternal sacred and re-align our modern expectations. Taylor, of course, won’t be persuaded by this argument, given that his philosophy is designed to accommodate the transcendent-immanent vocabulary. He may suggest that we ought to stop at

²⁷⁹ Peter Gordon, “Must the Sacred be Transcendent?” in *Inquiry*, 54.2 (2011), 136.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

challenging this point. In my view, however, this is where Rorty's position on linguistic creativity breaks new ground.

Rorty agrees with Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly that instead of listening to priests and philosophers, maybe we should hearken to poets and novelists instead. They are the most qualified to provide the new vocabulary that transcends our present one: "Maybe Wordsworth and Rilke can help us find a horizon of significance which is no more anthropocentric than it is theocentric, no more subjectivist than it is metaphysical" but avoids what Dewey regards as "'the essentially irreligious attitude . . . which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows.'"²⁸² But while Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly routinely listen to these voices in their philosophical works, Rorty's problem is that they continue to employ the vocabulary of the non-human and the human—as they have done so from their debates about the natural and human sciences in the 1980s that we have examined in Chapter II, to their contemporary views about re-spiritualizing the secular age that we have discussed here. Their polytheistic and theistic frameworks can still be argued as belonging to the transcendent-immanent vocabulary of the Axial world. Rorty's project, however, can be interpreted as an invitation to engage redemption using a renewed vocabulary that aspires to escape from this framework. He sticks to a fully humanistic and secularist view, and this seems to be the only and the most crucial difference between him and the others regarding the power of the literary imagination. Rorty tries to generate a project that can save us from egotism-nihilism without attracting the danger of falling back onto their transcendental underpinnings. This is because he notes that perhaps the reason why we keep falling back onto our foundationalist hopes—hopes dependent on the language and expectations of the transcendent—is because we are listening to the wrong people or interpreting their views in a religious and absolutist way. The idea here is that a new language, which the great collective human imagination can fire up to being, is necessary to articulate

²⁸² Rorty, "In a Flattened World," 3.

the creative, redemptive, and altogether secular hope that Rorty doggedly aims for in his literary culture. For him, only when we have become comfortable with such vision—one unshackled by dreams of eternal hopes or magical powers—can we finally become “the sons and daughters of a self-confident Modernity.”²⁸³

A New Redemption

My view is that Rorty’s project can be construed as issuing a new invitation to engage redemption afresh. This is a significant point to consider if the goal behind rehabilitating the power of religion and formulating projects of redemption is to deliver a new interpretation of spirituality that would appeal to a greater and more diverse set of people in the modern world—even those who see themselves as secular and “religiously unmusical.” What is admirable in Rorty’s vision is that it makes a notable attempt to emancipate “the religious from religion” by trying to *overcome* the Axial tradition. His project aspires to escape from the transcendent-immanent framework by denying the transcendent altogether, and all the expectations of universal goodness, truth, and salvation that comes with the package. This makes it possible for him to imagine a world where a larger moral and existential order that traditional religion provides does not govern the dreams and aspirations of human beings—a situation which, in Rorty’s view, has a good chance of happening given the phenomenon of modern secularization.

While like him, Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly also modify redemption to fit modernity, the Axial language remains ensconced in their theistic and polytheistic frameworks, for reasons I shall now summarize. In Taylor’s case, he maintains that since human beings have varying and unfulfilled aspirations for self-integration and realization, it is not too easy to “draw a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable ways of transcending.”²⁸⁴ Iain Thomson sees this as a way of justifying Taylor’s theistic commitment to “leave room in his theoretical account for an onto-

²⁸³ Habermas, “‘... And to define America, Her Athletic Democracy,’” 6.

²⁸⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 630.

theological creator God who stands outside the world and ultimately unifies its meaning."²⁸⁵ But it never becomes clear what kind of *renewed* theism we can possibly re-integrate in the modern world that can serve as the amalgamating locus of meaning for all human beings, especially given the phenomena of pluralism and secularization of redemptive sources. The question that needs to be answered here is if we can collectively go back to theism without the epistemological absolutism and moral foundationalism that accompany it, and which Rorty finds detestable in religious tradition. It is not clear that we cannot: religious fundamentalists certainly don't think so; moderate believers struggle to reconcile their faith with the pluralism of the modern age; and many others, like Rorty, are unmoved by theism. Rejecting this route, however, leads us back to the problem of spiritual impoverishment; remember that Taylor's "substitutes to eternity" never make the cut for redemption, because they are always being assessed in comparison to the magnificence of a Supreme Being. What this shows is that Taylor's conceptual vocabulary remains stuck within the traditional Axial bind, with no convincing path toward resolution.

Dreyfus and Kelly, meanwhile, remain at pains to reconcile the fanatic "bads" and the glorious "goods" of the plural, marginal sources of the sacred in their polytheistic paradigm. They have drawn up spiritual redemption as ultimately amoral, and this is problematic in a modern world that aspires for spiritual values that lead us closer to the good, rather than remaining distant and ambivalent to it. Their attempt to meet this task requires more articulation than they are able to provide. At this stage, their suggestion of training *meta-poeisis*—the skill of distinguishing good and evil spiritual experiences—still requires more clarification than they are able to give in the last chapter of *All Things Shining*. What is the nature and power of this skill? How can we train it better? Can we always rely on it? These are all big questions, and are burdens that Rorty's project is able to dodge. Instead of vacillating between the oppositions of the moral and immoral, Rorty posits his

²⁸⁵ Iain Thomson, "Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism: Taylor, Heidegger, Nietzsche" in *Inquiry* 54:2 (2011), 140.

democratic solidarity as the public moral and spiritual ideal that deserves common veneration. Solidarity, in his view, supersedes singular and idiosyncratic projects of redemption if they interfere with the lives of others. In this sense, he escapes the transcendence-immanence language by adopting the secular language of his pragmatic, liberal framework. Dreyfus and Kelly, unfortunately, are unable to project this kind of fully secular ideal in their own account. In short, since Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly remain entangled in the vocabulary of the transcendent or the immanent in their accounts, they are unable to escape evaluating the modern experience in an alternative way. Although in a different sense from Rorty's, we can then say that their linguistic and conceptual structure also works against them in ushering new models of redemption.

To conclude: my major claim in this thesis is that Rorty's project of redemption issues a new encouragement for spiritual exploration that we have not seen before. In endorsing the enlargement and transformation of one's consciousness in order to achieve self-authenticity and empower social loyalties, Rorty traces a path that can treat both our modern moral callousness as well as release us from our fears of spiritual deprivation. Since his project is consistent with modern secularization and pluralism, he therefore shows us a way—imperfect and underdeveloped as it is now—to move on from the shadows of our religious and philosophical past. He makes us more comfortable with the achievements of a self-reliant, secular world. Now that I have presented some reasons for embracing the view of redemption reconstructed from Rorty's work, at least insofar as it has attractive features relative to those of Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly, I think that there are also significant assumptions and weaknesses that need to be put into question. The aim of the next chapter is to expose these shortcomings and subject them to a proper examination.

Chapter IV: Tensions and Vulnerabilities

I offer a full account of my criticism of Rorty's project of redemption in this chapter. In the first part, I raise three important issues about Rorty's account of redemption in relation to religion. First, I engage how his philosophical vocabulary deals with the conditions that modern redemption requires. My contention is that Rorty's brand of pragmatism is conceptually inadequate to meet the ambition of replacing religion. Second, I appraise his modification of the religious impulse. While Rorty's interpretation responds to the utilitarian aspirations of religion, my view is that it falls short of answering existential ones. I also address the impression that Rorty's redemption is based on benefit rather than the rectification of human fault. Third, I explore Rorty's efforts to privatize religion. Privatization, in my reading, hives off the spiritual power tendered by religion to support democracy and egalitarianism. In the second part of this critical chapter, I interrogate Rorty's replacement for traditional religion: the literary culture. I explore two issues to assess how the redemption it offers would fare as our modern source of existential meaning and spiritual enthusiasm. My first criticism is that Rorty overstates his rendition of redemptive truth. In doing so, he fails to sufficiently consider how beliefs play an integral role in social practice. Second, I problematize Rorty's division of redemption as "cognitive" (truth-based) and "non-cognitive" (relation-based). My view is that the distinction is misleading, as both truth and relation are integral in sustaining even his version of redemptive hope.

In the third and final part of my critique, I evaluate Rorty's diagnosis of the malaise of egotism. I complicate this idea using two points. First, I argue that his definition of egotism as self-satisfaction loses stability when we scrutinize the nature of modern religious fundamentalism. Second, I present problems behind substantiating its conceptual counterpart of non-egotism. Finally, I close the chapter by examining Rorty's redemptive paths from egotism: self-creation and solidarity. I

focus on three themes in my critique of self-creation. First, I underscore how his proposal endorses an instrumentalizing attitude toward human beings; second, I raise concerns about the irreconcilability of self-creation and morality; third, I talk about the predicaments that surface when we combine the limits of private linguistic creativity and the excessive demands of self-invention. My analysis of solidarity is also divided into three interconnected points. First, I show problems behind the depiction of Rortyan democratic solidarity as homogenous in relation to the ideal of self-enlargement; second, I entertain how the life of “comfortable togetherness” endorsed by Rorty matches against the solidarity in support of transcendent religious causes; third, I tackle the complexity behind the challenge of extending human sympathies to build solidarity.

With the outline of this chapter set out, I now want to open my discussion by noting a certain ambivalence in Rorty’s relationship with theism. Contrary to the impression he often gives in his writings, Rorty does not completely dismiss monotheism in modernity. Notwithstanding his opposition against traditional religion—from his misgivings about the use of conversation-stopping religious arguments in politics, his vehement opinions against fundamentalism and hierarchical clericalism, his preference for the Western narrative of religion/philosophy/literature, to his insistence upon the full secularization of culture—it is worth mentioning that there is a radical vision of monotheist religion that Rorty restates as hospitable to his philosophical concerns. This view involves Gianni Vattimo’s revisionist account of Christianity, which surmises that the process of secularization acquires an “extraordinary meaning” in the contemporary age when linked to the longstanding and figurative story of Christian redemption. Vattimo argues that:

Secularization is, more fundamentally, an essential aspect of the history of salvation, as other modern philosophers saw, and long before them too, Joachim of Fiore. If the Bible speaks of being as an event, and of God

as the one who abandons his own transcendence, first by creating the world, and then by redeeming it through the Incarnation and the Cross—through *kenosis*—then the desacralizing phenomena characteristic of modernity are the authentic aspects of the history of salvation.²⁸⁶

While Rorty has his deep disagreements with Vattimo's religious views, he at least favors this reading of modernized theism. Secularization, in this particular sense, is *constitutive* of the genuine historical experience of religion. It is the proper endpoint of religious salvation. Rorty interprets Vattimo as sharing a stance akin to his ideal of private redemption, averring that "Vattimo seems to be aiming at such a privatized religion when he describes the secularization of European culture as the fulfillment of the promise of the Incarnation, considered as *kenosis*, God's turning everything over to us."²⁸⁷

Rorty continues this line of argument by saying that this view opens us to the understanding that "God's self-emptying" and "man's attempt to think of love as the only law" are one and the same, and that this point licenses Vattimo to regard "all the great unmaskers of the West, from Copernicus and Newton to Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud, as carrying out works of love."²⁸⁸ Rorty's analysis is that theistic religion is at its most progressive when it follows the secular road towards spiritual maturity. The ideal result is that human beings, no longer subservient to the laws and commandments of an angry and tyrannical Father, are able to take charge of their lives as responsible and mature adults. Furthermore, the phenomenon of secularization also enables people to fathom their relationship with God as outside the arena of truth. This intimate connection swings free of the need for universal justification in order to find legitimacy or salvation; redemption here is *existential*, rather than *epistemic* in nature. Vattimo's interpretation of the essence of Christianity, according to Rorty, permits theists to regard God not anymore as a master but as a

²⁸⁶ Gianni Vattimo, "After Onto-theology: Philosophy between Science and Religion" in *Religion After Metaphysics*, ed. Mark Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.

²⁸⁷ Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism" in *The Future of Religion*, 38.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

friend. And while Rorty of course resists universalizing this view, he looks more kindly at this religious friendship as the sort that suits one's activity in solitude. As a method of redemption, theism should thus be lived as a thoroughly private spiritual affair.

This, obviously, comprises a big amendment to the way institutional monotheist religions function in the modern world. World religions share a commitment to a basic set of non-negotiable beliefs, and thrive in a robust and interactive sense of community. Rorty is asking these religions to give up these two requirements that keep them alive and meaningful. He also seems to be saying that human beings deserve a *better* sense of spirituality than the traditional sort. But is this a believable claim? Will the doggedly "human, all too human" perspective he proposes help sober us up from the dreams and illusions of metaphysics and infinity, as well as reorient our wants and desires? Moreover, in endorsing secularization and privatization, Rorty is also making a lot of changes about what the "religious" and the "spiritual" mean. This makes it difficult for people to come to terms with the kind of concessions he is asking for from the contemporary point of view. Is his suggestion to liberate us from old religious fantasies enough to meet genuine human needs and desires, or is this strategy going to work against us? What other perspectives is he neglecting in his account?

I will tackle objections analogous to these ones in a more organized fashion later on. The reason I am raising them early is because I believe that they are indicative of the overall weakness that can be found in Rorty's account. I think that despite its promises, his project can be interpreted as incapable of meeting the spiritual and cultural demands that are raised, and for the most part satisfied by traditional religion. Thinkers like Dewey, Smith, and Stout have broached criticisms against Rorty's trust in the ability of pragmatism to substitute for religion, and I will be using their observations to buttress my analysis. My aim in the next part is to examine Rorty's account of redemption in relation to religion. This discussion is divided into three parts: first, I concentrate on his proposal to secularize the sacred,

which engages how Rorty's philosophical vocabulary grapples with the conditions of redemption; second, I examine his modification of the religious impulse, which relates to the nature of the need and desire for modern spiritual redemption; and third, in order to close this critical circle, I go back to his efforts to privatize religion in favor of secular democracy. I draw attention to the flaws and vulnerabilities of these areas of Rorty's project that simply cannot be ignored.

Secularizing the Sacred

Dews finds Rorty's style of philosophizing problematic. He accuses Rorty of writing "as though there were nothing significant behind the longevity of certain patterns of thought and discourse, no dimensions of human experience to which they once gave expression, and which any new dispensation would still need to recognize and accommodate—albeit in different, and presumably more adequate, ways."²⁸⁹ This is a strong, but to some extent, fair charge. As a pragmatist, Rorty often presents very convincing illustrations about how certain ideas and values have changed and lost significance over time. This is true especially when it comes to his view of religious roles and sources of meaning. For instance, when he says something like "the gradual movement within Christianity in recent centuries in the direction of the social ideals of the Enlightenment is a sign of the gradual weakening of the worship of God as power and its gradual replacement with the worship of God as love,"²⁹⁰ Rorty effectively describes the evolved moral conception of God that he finds laudable for his project of modern redemption. This alteration of our traditional cultural practices, for him, enables us to raise questions about human existence in a more potentially transformative manner. Rorty helps us confront the challenge of finding human meaning in a way that regards religion as optional, empowering us to ask: "do we want to weave one or more of the various religious traditions (with their

²⁸⁹ Dews, "'The Infinite is Losing its Charm': Richard Rorty's Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 636.

²⁹⁰ Rorty, "Dialogue: What is Religion's Future After Metaphysics?" in *The Future of Religion*, 56.

accompanying pantheons) together with our deliberation over moral dilemmas, our deepest hopes, and our need to be rescued from despair?"²⁹¹

The problem here is that, armed with his critical observations about the developments in secular modernity, Rorty also tends to dismiss or malign religious sources as having little or no justifiable space in the present social consciousness. Among Rorty's pragmatic claims range from concluding that theistic urges are ultimately mistaken, or that privatization is the "natural and proper" implication of the epistemological demise of traditional religion,²⁹² or that the notion of God "should be dropped because it impedes the search for human happiness."²⁹³ That there are spiritual and moral authorities to rely on which are not generated solely by our private or collective human effort are completely erased in Rorty's picture. We have seen in this thesis that he treats these elements and behaviors as impediments to modern maturity. Ousting these religious and philosophical fixations from his liberal, secular utopia is the most desirable way to go. I think that Rorty's impatience to deal with these issues, as well as his negligence to entertain other solutions apart from complete secularization, can be linked to two reasons.

First, Rorty is concerned with pragmatic anti-essentialism and edification, as we have examined in Chapter II. Undoing the spell of traditional philosophical presuppositions should be accompanied by the effort of speaking in alternative ways to tilt the emphasis of the philosophical conversation. Transformative intellectual and moral enlargement thus depends on discarding burdensome ideas such as "original sin" or "transcendental conditions of possibility" in favor of highlighting other, more relevant topics. The logic here is that if old notions cease to be of theoretical and linguistic interest, then there is a greater chance that we can be liberated from them with minimum struggle. Second, while Rorty's pragmatism is

²⁹¹ Rorty, "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 21.

²⁹² Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism" in *The Future of Religion*, 39.

²⁹³ Rorty, "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 4.

encouraging a shift in intellectual practice, his overall vision assumes a more futuristic role. Building a secular, literary utopia is the long-term, practical project. He agrees with Stout, for example, that pursuing a completely “secularist political agenda” is infeasible in the status quo, and that he respects the fact that theists and nonbelievers can live side by side as good citizens of functioning liberal democracies (the real problem, anyway, are the egotistic fundamentalists). However, he regards this only as a short-term political compromise, which consists of life “for the next couple of centuries, at least.” Rorty reminds us that there is something to be won in pursuing “a long-term, militantly secularist, *philosophical* agenda.” This is the real goal of utopia, and we need to be able to track down “what human life might be like a thousand years down the road.”²⁹⁴ Part of his job as a thinker is to visualize the secular human paradise that awaits at the imagined finish line.

While these two justifications can buffer Rorty from many of the criticisms laid out against him, I think it does not absolve him from taking responsibility for the resources he provides to address the issues he finds important. I want to consider the problem with the first justification. Again, in Rorty’s pragmatism, religious and philosophical fixations should be shelved in favor of better and more significant hopes. The immediate problem that arises here is that to say that there exist “ill-fitting,” “incorrect,” or “unfruitful” needs *assumes* that there is a criteria of “correct” interpretations or “true” human needs that should be met. Rorty, of course, denies that providing genuine criteria is possible at all. Instead, he sticks to his tactic of illuminating alternative descriptions that could be taken as more appealing than previous ones. The most concrete endorsement he provides is that we should support whatever political setup that can best guarantee the utilitarian maxim of increasing human happiness in an egalitarian way. Thus, he construes the problem of happiness and existential meaning as dependent on the democratization of redemptive sources, which is a situation that fares best in a liberal democracy. But there is a compelling issue here that needs to be justified. If our aim is to find

²⁹⁴ Rorty, “Reply to Jeffrey Stout” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 549.

reconciliation about what human beings truly require to live a flourishing life, then we need a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of our ever-changing needs and desires. These needs and desires are often conveyed by the religious and philosophical anchors that Rorty is all but too willing to loosen. The problem, as Dews points out elegantly, is that it is not so easy to give up what we have inherited without first coming into proper terms with them: “we cannot escape from under the weight of fixations unless we also come to apprehend what gave them their hold over us in the first place—unless we learn to understand how they provided a false, constricting channel for genuine needs and legitimate aspirations.”²⁹⁵ We can claim that Rorty does offer us something like this in his narrative of cultural transformation from religion to philosophy to literature. He does become very persuasive when he talks about pursuing better moral and practical goals such as “love,” “kindness,” or “egalitarianism,” over, say, our fanaticism over truth and certainty, or our uncritical worship of science. However, things get more complicated when we ask if the goals and aspirations held dear by his pragmatism could be esteemed as more “genuine” and “legitimate” than others, or if the full secularization of their conceptions is at all possible in theory and practice.

If the aim is to eclipse the legacy of our intellectual and moral inheritance, how do then we arrive at an understanding that comes into proper terms with it? This is a very difficult philosophical question to ponder, and one that we cannot answer now. For our present purposes, at least, we can pinpoint how Rorty fails in meeting this reconciliatory mandate. Rorty’s pragmatism entails the wholesale abandonment of non-negotiable religious and philosophical elements in the battle against essentialism and universalism. His conditions include the rejection of anything having an “essence” or any “deep sense.” He relinquishes the epistemological notions of “implicitness” and “potentiality,” or “transcendental” and “externality” in his vocabulary. He takes apart the talk of the “natural,” the “pre-

²⁹⁵ Dews, “‘The Infinite is Losing its Charm’: Richard Rorty’s Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 636.

linguistic," and the "pre-philosophical." In sum, he dislikes any terminology that accommodates the shadows of God, the *noumenon* and the "Real." Instead, he replaces these terms with the "nominal" and the "historical," and fully welcomes the "contingent" and the "accidental" into his fold. The hope he holds is something that he characterizes as "groundless," "radical," and "unjustifiable;" it is also a hope for the future that cannot be guaranteed by the redemptive vision that he fashions—otherwise, how can it be hope? Rorty's linguistic and conceptual framework is thus colored by the mood of uncertainty and chance. Moreover, his anti-metaphysical language disables him from delineating between real and apparent needs. What needs to be pointed out here is that this instability has nasty conceptual repercussions that impact on the credibility of his literary, secular utopia.

Why is this so? I agree with Dews when he says that Rorty's philosophical vocabulary is filled with tensions and inconsistencies that thwart him from defending particular ideas with urgency and stability. The very fact that Rorty, for example, rejects the notion of "potentiality" prevents him from claiming that his Enlightenment utopia is "better matched to the potential of human beings, more in line with the direction of human becoming—were it not for blockages and obstacles—than any other moral-political vision."²⁹⁶ It lessens the integrity of his whole vision of redemption, if only because Rorty fails to give adequate support to the notion that if humanity were to reach the "ideal" level of moral and spiritual maturity, then the natural end *is* a secular utopia. This is because the "natural" and "ideal" cannot be averred in Rorty's framework in the first place! Neither can Rorty legitimize the notion that we have genuine needs and aspirations as human beings, given that in his view, all of these are dependent on the vocabulary of the day that is being used. In this case, any need that lacks proper substantiation or expression ceases to be true. This is problematic if we think of dreams and ambitions that are still left unarticulated, or are perhaps neglected in hindsight. Furthermore, when we start talking about human rights, freedoms, and social hopes, we reach another

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 648.

roadblock in terms of finding concrete justification. If our goal is to redirect the course of human action, then our linguistic and social constructs in favor of utopia should be powerful and stable enough to bestow coherence to its possibility. But Rorty regards our notions of rights, freedoms, and opportunities as malleable. They are constantly changing and are subject to luck and chance. If such is the case, philosophically speaking, then how can Rorty's hope, as Dews puts it, have "any meaningful sense at all?—let alone a hope which could inherit what were formerly religious aspirations?"²⁹⁷

This objection puts us in tow with how we can deal with the second point. Recall that Rorty invokes a necessary split between the short-term (a century or more) and the long-term (a millennium) when he talks about political and social action and his ambition to secularize the sacred. While pragmatic compromises with religious groups are acceptable in the first timeframe, the second one demands utopian dreaming. He contrasts the mindsets of these two frameworks. Despite theists and non-believers being able to live together in the present, Rorty declares that

... the inhabitants of my perfect secularist utopia will nevertheless be puzzled about how democracy managed to survive in a time when a majority of citizens still professed to believe that the wrong political choices might doom them to the fires of hell and the right ones entitle them to the joys of paradise. They will be as glad not to have been born in those dangerous times as we are not to have lived in under the Inquisition.²⁹⁸

Granted that this rhetoric has its deep secularist appeal, its real status in Rorty's vision is a source of confusion given the limitations of his philosophical vocabulary. Is Rorty imagining this secular utopia as a *hope* (a wish for the future)? Or is he considering it as a *prophecy* (a prediction about the future)? Or is it more a practical *project* (a plan for the future) in both the short-term and the long-term, so that each

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 650.

²⁹⁸ Rorty, "Reply to Jeffrey Stout" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 549.

step requires calculated social and political maneuvering? It is important to figure out their distinctions and overlaps, for Rorty often speaks in different registers about his vision so that it has become unclear what kind of expectations we can set for it. Remember his holy dream of solidarity: a global, secular civilization where love is the only law. As we have seen in Chapter II, in this utopia “communication would be domination-free, class and caste would be unknown, hierarchy would be a matter of temporary pragmatic convenience, and power would be entirely at the disposal of the free agreement of a literate and well-educated electorate.”²⁹⁹ This life, for Rorty, is possible only in a flourishing democracy. He, of course, neither regards this as our cultural destiny nor offers the steps to achieve it; he only portrays it as his own radical hope of a mortal, secular nirvana. But if we peruse his writings, we discover an inclination on his part to prophesize its achievability over other visions.

This is unmistakable when he defends the provocative view that the idea of a socially just and democratic utopia resonates universally,³⁰⁰ making it a strong candidate to replace religion and philosophy as our new cultural order. He even manages to find a way to interpret contemporary anti-egalitarianism as an important step toward democratic moral progress. He surmises that a culture that is conscious of “its capacity for murderous intolerance,”—i.e., the recent West that is “racist, sexist, and imperialist,” as well as “Eurocentric, parochial, and intellectually intolerant”—perhaps has greater chances of “becoming more wary of intolerance, more sensitive to the desirability of diversity, than any other of which we have record.”³⁰¹ But at the same time, Rorty also says discouraging things about establishing a long-term project for a liberal, secular utopia. He sometimes speaks as though this vision is too impossible to plan for, let alone achieve, given the current state of affairs. For example, he admits his pessimism about the political future, acknowledging that democracy only works if wealth is evenly spread and if the gulf

²⁹⁹ Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism” in *The Future of Religion*, 40.

³⁰⁰ Rorty, “Philosophy and the Future” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 204.

³⁰¹ Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 81.

between the rich and the poor are eliminated. But social inequality continues to plague democratic and non-democratic, secular and religious societies around the world, which in this case is a situation that makes his Western liberal vision infeasible. The point here is that it is vital to settle where Rorty's ideal vision of secular democracy truly belongs: is it only a political dream, or is it on its way to becoming real? Remember that what is at stake in favor of supporting the utopia that Rorty desires is the suppression and even elimination of particular religious, scientific, and political traditions which—despite their dangers and inadequacies—today still serve as sources of meaning, trust, certainty, and even redemption for a vast majority of people. If we are wagering on a democratic vision that only one or a few people are even confident about, and are betting on a hope or prophecy or plan that can be rendered illegitimate, then Rorty's project may be as impracticable and impossible as all other conceived utopias in history: a οὐ (“not”) and τόπος (“place”), or a “no place.”

This is a serious limitation. The burden that needs to be met here is to formulate where authority and confidence (of the non-essentialist, non-universalist kind) can be sought from, since they seem to be the only conceptual pillars that can protect Rorty's vision against the threat of destructive contingencies in the future. In the case of liberal secular hope, for instance: how can we placate its possible erosion in the face of theoretical and practical problems related to the rise of anti-democratic, anti-liberalist sentiments? Where will our deep sense of trust and commitment come from—the sort that will inspire risk and sacrifice from secular devotees of a liberal utopia? In line with the act of “properly coming to terms” with our inherited tradition, I think that it will not hurt to go back and question how the cultures of religion and philosophy, despite their apparent failures, were able or are still able to serve as redemptive systems. Were and are they able to fulfill their roles primarily because of the epistemological certainty they provide, as Rorty often emphasizes? Or do the many ways they frame and enrich our daily and practical affairs matter even more than the certainty of belief they offer? If such is the case, shouldn't their

cultural replacement deliver the same function of providing organization and structure to human life?

Religion and science share an intimately entwined history, and despite Rorty's insistence that we are now entering a literary culture, their legacies remain palpable in the modern world. Religious and scientific cultures are not merely surviving, but in some areas even thriving, because of their shared and continued relevance in everyday practices. Our world is replete with both active and inactive symbols and rites, which even non-believers and anti-clericalists treat with respect. Secular governments are still observing religious elements in their states—from acknowledging traditional customs to places of worship to public holidays—in order to preserve order in the lives of citizens. Religious leaders are still considered as moral authorities, and scientists as ideal representatives of human intelligence. Held on a pedestal, their inability to meet the standards expected of them causes public outcry and disbelief. Many post-religious societies are still confused about how to deal with human suffering and mortality. Take for example the event of facing death's arrival: if there is no God or afterlife to aspire for, should one hope and pray, or express gratitude to anyone, or anything? Also, honoring and grieving for the dead are actions that are best ritualized by religion; we still seem to have no widely acceptable secular replacements for some old and noble practices. These examples show how terribly difficult it is to modify religious or spiritual needs and desires in the present context. We cannot eliminate "certain patterns of thought and discourse," redescribe "dimensions of human experience," or successfully abscond "the weight of fixations" if we are constantly surrounded by events and symbols that perpetuate them, or if we do not have alternatives or substitutes that are sturdy enough to counter their presence. They will persist to color and influence our apparently "genuine" needs and aspirations, even if we regard these activities with doubt and resistance. For our redemptive purposes, what this means is that Rorty's ambition of replacing this deeply embedded culture is *very high*—perhaps even higher than the current level of transformation that he envisages in his writings.

My view is that for Rorty's vision of redemption to gain legitimacy, for it to appear more of a strong project than an impossible hope or a weak prophecy, and for self-creation and solidarity to have lasting power and serve as redeeming projects, discourses and activities that are designed to concretize these values need to be substantially developed. Granted, Rorty recognizes the potential of the literary culture to accomplish this task. He has made this point repeatedly as we have discussed in Chapter II. It is clear that he lauds the novel as "one of the elements of our culture that is not structured around transcultural notions of validity," and that luckily, "we live in a culture that has been nurtured not just on "the Bible, on Socrates and Plato, on the Enlightenment," but on, for example, Rabelais, Montaigne, Sterne, Hogarth, and Mark Twain.""³⁰² But classifying plural redemptive sources into particular genres is not enough. Relying on luck and contingency to work in favor of our democratic aspirations is not sufficient, either. The spiritual dreams that can be generated by a literary culture, and the values of individualism and solidarity which Rorty purports literature stands for, have to *triumph* over other sources. This is the only way of elevating the cultural conversation to a stage that truly diminishes the relevance of their competition.

In a nutshell, literature not only has to downplay religion and science, it actually has to defeat them as the main redemptive fount of human beings. To fulfill this task, its contributions should replace previous religious and philosophical works and practices, or at least display enough potential to do so. What is required is a Copernican revolution that can dislodge the linguistic and conceptual remnants of our previous tradition's vocabulary. This means that the hope for novelty cannot simply project Mill and Dewey's "familiar and banal social democratic utopia," which Rorty endorses in parts of his philosophical oeuvre. The level of change needed is something that can only be approximated by the spiritual romance in Rorty's work on "liberal utopian hope," the point of which, for Smith, is *world-*

³⁰² Richard Rorty, "Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy" in *Critical Inquiry* 16.3 (1990), 637-638.

transformation: a hope for “a state of affairs which we are at present incapable of imagining, and which escapes the reach of our current conceptual resources.”³⁰³ Otherwise, the picture holding us captive now will retain its enchantment and influence. Again, the point here is that unless the democratizing and liberalizing strength of the literary legacy can overpower the stranglehold of religion and science, the complete secularization that Rorty aspires for will be a literal impossibility. We need to render theistic religiousness and universalist philosophizing impotent, as well as supplant our vocabulary and practices, in order to complete the real turn toward a literary culture.

Rorty’s experimental pragmatism, of course, would resist arguing that this situation is unachievable prior to its actualization. However, it would not be unreasonable to posit that the philosophical vocabulary that Rorty currently endorses—one of contingency, nominalism, irony, historicity, and even just plain old luck—may not be as transformative or as internally coherent to buttress this level of ambition. We are led back to searching for a criteria for genuine needs and aspirations which Rorty cannot gestate, since for him there is no other *new* measure that can be generated apart from a widespread “respect for such particularity and idiosyncrasy,” and an attitude close to Isaiah Berlin’s idea of “negative liberty”—that people should be left alone.³⁰⁴ In addition, it is not even clear in Rorty’s case if the world he truly desires is a fully secularized one as has been previously rendered, or if he acquiesces into a pluralist compromise. For example, he concludes that in terms of its population, “the kinds of people to whom a utopian society would give the resources to will include Kantian strivers as well as self-involved aesthetes, people who cannot live without religion and people who despise it, nature’s metaphysicians as well as nature’s pragmatists.”³⁰⁵ This is the pluralist concession we find in the last pages of the essay “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” which, by the looks of it,

³⁰³ Smith, “Rorty on Religion and Hope,” 94.

³⁰⁴ Rorty, “Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy” in *Truth and Progress*, 322.

³⁰⁵ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 487.

does not really inspire a broader sense of confidence in the democratic life of his secular utopia, but is instead more willing to *renegotiate* its utopian dimension. It also serves as another proof of Rortyan inconsistency, which can only make his account less edifying than he desires it to be. Rorty's pragmatist vocabulary, in sum, appears to be an unstable tool for revolutionary world-making.

Modernizing the Religious Impulse

Borrowing a phrase from Dewey, Rorty's pragmatism as romantic polytheism aims for "the emancipation of the religious from religion."³⁰⁶ Rorty eliminates the element of the transcendent in religion and broadens the distinctive moral content of what should be considered as spiritual. While at present, there are many who still perceive that spiritual experiences have exclusive reference to a belief in a Supreme Deity, this general conception has changed in modernity. Many disciplines, in particular literature, aesthetics, and poetry, and whether they come with religious expression or not, are regarded as legitimate sources of spiritual power. Rorty highlights, for instance, that "what counts as religious may then be as different from what we call religious as Proust is from Dante or Warhol from Fra Angelico."³⁰⁷ These experiences no longer belong to the God-monolith in a secular world. Rorty's thesis, as we examined in Chapter II, is that spiritual growth should be regarded as something that "covers any attempt to transform oneself into a better sort of person by changing one's sense of what matters most."³⁰⁸ He argues that there are many forms of spiritual life possible in modernity, and that each should be accorded the space for personal redemption to take place.

Rorty, in short, effectively revises the traditional notion of the religious impulse. While he encourages the significance of participating in the life of something larger and more important than our own, he denounces the idea that the

³⁰⁶ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 27.

³⁰⁷ Rorty, "Reply to Jeffrey Stout" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 547.

³⁰⁸ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism" in *The Rorty Reader*, 404.

most important connection we can make is ultimately tied with something supernatural and non-human. Smith raises an obvious and important objection to this modification. He states that “a religion that doesn’t satisfy the need for security, or that doesn’t posit some transcendence of time and chance in the provision of that need, will be difficult to recognise as religion at all.”³⁰⁹ This observation is pertinent in terms of modern redemption, because religion in the Axial age is made alive by the language of transcendence and immanence. Religion, granted, can serve a variety of different purposes in the contemporary world: it can be a vehicle for theology, or a focal point of belief, or a social and hierarchical institution, or a historical artifact, or a recipient, or transmitter, or generator of culture, or a community of people with shared spiritual dreams and interests. At its most potent form, a religion would be a combination of all these different elements. But what we should note here is that the genuine power behind religion lies in the trust and commitment that there is something great that the transcendent brings to the world that nothing else can, or will. This is something that any immanent spiritual power, conceptually speaking, will never be able to approximate. Rorty’s redescription of the religious impulse, in this case, is hence “so radical that it is hard to see what remains of its specifically religious content,”³¹⁰ insofar as it refers to the way religion delivers redemption in the modern world.

The problem with speaking at a different register is that Rorty’s romantic polytheism will always fall behind the high standard we have set for the role of traditional religion. Rorty, of course, has no problem with this, as he finds the ambitions of Axial religions misguided. In his view, we need to fix our human expectations. We have to reorient our spiritual hopes to make them more fitting to authentic human needs and aspirations. This leads us back to the problem of setting the criteria for the “genuine,” which we have argued previously that Rorty’s vocabulary cannot establish in an adequate way. But I do not want to critique Rorty

³⁰⁹ Smith, “Rorty on Religion and Hope,” 89-90.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

in the same manner in this section. Instead, I want to make general comments about what we can glean from Rorty's exclusively humanist strategy, in which there is much to be desired with the way he handles the goals of redemption and the nature of our religious impulses. Remember that he keeps using religious tropes to communicate the spiritual potential and energy of certain causes and hopes. But perhaps the reason why a great spiritual force exists in the employment of these terms is because truth, sustainability, and permanence are postulated in their assertion—qualities affiliated with the nature of the transcendent. Defining and setting conditions for their secularization can necessarily divest them of this original power, and hence run the risk of being deficient to meet their goals. Smith shows this risk at play in his response to Rorty's vision of religious redemption. Rorty demands that we privatize, democratize, and secularize what it means for a person to be saved to gain fulfillment in the modern world. But in doing so, it is not anymore certain if "the happiness of individuals is all that is really at stake here, or that the religious impulse can so readily be compartmentalized into self- and other-regarding elements."³¹¹

To go into what this objection means more closely, we can call to mind that Rorty's vision of redemption esteems to meet both the desire for human flourishing (a *utilitarian* goal) and the search for meaning (an *existential* goal) by way of self-transformative relationships. These, of course, are two different ends, and at many times Rorty either conflates the two, or forsakes the latter to emphasize his pragmatist, utilitarian roots. What is problematic here is that while the utilitarian standard for human flourishing—as the maximization of happiness and the minimization of suffering—can stand without the transcendent, the existential standard for finding meaning is harder to liberate from the grasp of traditional religion. This is because the quest for meaning is often linked to the grand-scale project of making sense not only of the great and the worthy, e.g., good, heroism,

³¹¹ Nicholas Smith, "Is Pluralism Compatible with Monotheism?" in *Frontiers of Diversity: Explorations in Contemporary Pluralism*, ed. Avery Plaw (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2005), 29.

truth, and love, but also of the horrifying and the senseless, e.g., cruelty, barbarism, injustice, and evil. What this means is that weaving these conflicting elements into a compelling narrative often requires that their interaction be understood as part of a larger moral order. In the sphere of religion, this kind of order is richly contextualized by grand narratives and traditions, and is supplemented by many stories, poems, parables, and novels. Human experiences are made sense of in relation to these paradigmatic persons, myths, and events. This is performed in order to generate a deeper meaning, purpose, and connection to the task of answering the question of what it means to exist in the world.

While stories and novels in Rorty's literary culture can also perform this moral and spiritual task—taking into account that this practice would be lacking in scale but more impressive in terms of diversity—there is still an important element missing in the picture. The account of a larger moral order that *intensifies* existential meaning is absent in Rorty's romantic polytheism, precisely because it has too close an association with the transcendent. Religion taken in a utilitarian and pragmatic sense aims more concretely to promote happiness and eliminate suffering. And so Smith argues that "Rorty's rehabilitated religion would do something that unreconstructed religions already do only badly (promote human happiness); but it does so by being abstracted from the distinctive semantic content of religion, which situates human happiness and unhappiness in a larger, meaning-giving context."³¹² Even if we argue that a literary culture can train us to weave human suffering, sacrifice, and the experience of injustice into a narrative without the transcendent, it is not quite clear if it can replace the comfort and solace that a religious tradition—buffered by both its mythology and community—can bring. This further lends credibility to the hunch that perhaps compartmentalizing redemption is not as promising as Rorty holds it to be. Focusing on "self- and other-regarding elements," or for our purposes, on self-creation and solidarity, seems to narrow down the spectrum of one's meaning-giving system instead of enlarging a person's repertoire

³¹² Smith, "Rorty on Religion and Hope," 87.

of redemptive sources. This makes the process of composing a narrative of one's life project sound impoverished if we follow Rorty's proposal.

Another way of criticizing Rorty's modification of the religious impulse is by assessing the motivating force behind his vision of redemption. Christian redemption posits that there is a grave fault that we need to be saved from, i.e., original sin, or sins committed against God or other people, in order to be "good" human beings or to feel "worthy" of divine love. The awareness of this fault induces feelings of guilt, contrition, and responsibility. It encourages the moral and spiritual transformation of believers. The way that Rorty frames the need for modern redemption, however, deviates from this formula. Rorty, of course, thinks that we should only be answerable to other people. He argues that we ought to recognize our duties to ourselves and others. But apart from a sense of human responsibility, Rorty more so emphasizes that being redeemed is significant for the purposes of self-creation and solidarity-building. The anti-egotism project sketched in this thesis shows that there is a greater chance of encountering human meaning and achieving spiritual fulfillment if we follow the journey of self-enlargement. However, we can also derive the idea that this kind of redemption is unabashedly utilitarian based on this interpretation. It gives the impression that it is based on *benefit*—we gain something in return for correcting our egotism—rather than *rectification*—that egotistic behavior is something we have to be ashamed of. I think that the consciousness of something wrong can serve as a condition of moral growth, perhaps even more compellingly than the possibility of gaining an existential advantage. My suggestion is that shame should play a greater role in the discourse of Rortyan redemption. This is loosely based on Voparil's suggestion that when it comes to solidarity and nation-building, shame should be considered as "a prerequisite of democratic self-renewal" rather than pride.³¹³ His view is that, contra Rorty's self-confidence and affirmation about self-reliance, *chastisement* could also be the basis of political and social improvement.

³¹³ Christopher Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 168.

Voparil derives this idea from James Baldwin's model of social criticism, which purports that "one needs to embrace one's culture as it is now, warts and all, in order to transform it."³¹⁴ Applying this to redemption, I think that Rorty's project could be made stronger if it articulates how egotism is fundamentally and morally reprehensible in a non-religious, non-philosophical liberal utopia. This perspective, I think, is worth engaging as a philosophical theme in future discussions.

Privatizing God

Rorty's entanglement with the politics of religion is a complex topic, so I only want to mention a few things here that I think are relevant to the question of redemption. The modification of our religious impulses and expectations in modernity, as we have seen, is a bold philosophical gesture from Rorty. In relation to theism, there are notable difficulties especially in terms of plausibility. It is not apparent, for instance, that the inhabitants of the modern age are equipped to deal with the changes that he is asking for. Most theists would find the Jeffersonian proposal of religious privatization, combined with Rorty's redemptive pluralism, too difficult to swallow. This position basically entails asking believers to dilute the significance of religion in their lives, and to prevent a primary part of their final vocabulary from coloring their social and political choices. It makes it appear as if *any* faith is as good as any other, and that at its best and most sincere, religion should be practiced in silence instead of being proudly celebrated. This strikes a fundamental discord in a believer's coherence of belief.

But the coherence of belief is not something that Rorty is really concerned about. For him, in a secular, pluralistic age, social and political progress in the name of equality takes precedence over favoring the harmonious implementation and adherence to the doctrines of religious traditions. Smith reminds that "if monotheism entails commitment to an overarching moral order by reference to which the worth of all human lives can be objectively ranked, then by definition it is incompatible

³¹⁴ Ibid., 162.

with philosophical pluralism,"³¹⁵ and Rorty is aware that to prioritize the latter value requires that the former be stripped of its original power. But what political issue exactly is Rorty addressing that necessitates religious privatization? One of the problems with monotheism that I would like to highlight here is that it sets unreasonable and conversation-stopping conditions that prevent what Rorty thinks are adequate responses to the non-transcendent needs and desires of life on earth. For example, Rorty dislikes the fact that the "belief in post-mortem rewards and punishments meted out by a non-human person" plays a substantial role in the moral or political deliberation of believers, and that most of the time the transcendent serves as the most significant "basis of conduct in this mortal life."³¹⁶ This makes respecting the rights and desires of those who, while members of the same democratic state but fall outside a religious community's norm (for instance, homosexuals or atheists in some societies), a little bit harder to achieve. This arrangement is further complicated by the fact that the clerical hierarchy often authorizes the "good" or "godly" courses of action that religious followers ought to support. In a sense, believers are intimidated to compliance in their fear of being condemned as morally wrong, or of being ostracized by their religious community. Rorty thinks that if the goal of the state is to make decisions for the good of a greater number of citizens, and with consideration for a greater range of hopes and interests, then theism and its transcendent conditions need "to opt out of this game."³¹⁷ The compromise of privatizing religious views when it comes to politics serves as his recommended step.

Given the case that Rorty makes, can we say then that all theists—from fanatic fundamentalists to faithful, peaceful intellectuals—are barred from his redemptive vision? He certainly dislikes the former, but interestingly, he makes room for the latter in his perfect secular utopia: "There would be room for the sort of God

³¹⁵ Smith, "Is Pluralism Compatible with Monotheism?," 24.

³¹⁶ Rorty, "Reply to Jeffrey Stout" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 547.

³¹⁷ Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism" in *The Future of Religion*, 37.

worshipped by James, Whitehead, Tillich, and West (and, I suspect, by Rauschenbush, Gutierrez, and King), but none for the sort worshipped by St. Paul, Wojtila, Ratzinger, Falwell, and Khomeini.”³¹⁸ What is clear in this distinction is Rorty’s disgust for any religion that displays militant egotism, as well as his opposition against destructive and intolerant practices in the name of an unchallengeable authority. In short, he abhors the *bad* kind of theism. However, he singles out the *good* kind of theism because its nature is aligned with his aim of increasing equality, freedom, and human flourishing in the modern world. Pragmatic theism and liberation theology have been tremendously important in ushering the hope for a more compassionate and egalitarian social order. The catch here, I think, is that while Rorty says that good theism is worth preserving, it is not evident how the spiritual power of these theist religions—the same power that made these progressive faiths indispensable to the moral improvement of human culture—can survive in the political utopia he espouses. Remember that Rorty promotes “a long-term, militantly secularist, *philosophical* agenda” in his ideal world, and would prefer that politics be performed in secular terms. Silencing religion in the public sphere means that we stand to lose the good that comes from its practice. There would be no elevated podiums for the likes of Martin Luther King, Pope Francis, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu to enrich, captivate, and enlarge the self-awareness of the people who follow and admire them. Theist believers, in turn, would also be disempowered from mobilizing the spiritual strength and inspiration from their faith to promote love, freedom, and community-building. From a utilitarian perspective, surely this loss of motivation for compassion and solidarity, notwithstanding that it is sourced from something religious, cannot be a desirable thing.

Belief and Practice

I now want to turn my gaze toward Rorty’s replacement for traditional redemption: the literary culture. My goal is to interrogate how his suggestion would

³¹⁸ Rorty, “Reply to Jeffrey Stout” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 547.

fare as our modern source of existential meaning and spiritual enthusiasm. Recall that for Rorty, redemption can consist in either a *belief* in a truth-system (institutional religion and science) or a *relationship* (with God in pre-Platonized religion, or with other people). In his secular, pluralist utopia, Rorty sticks with the latter and insists that we discard the former kind. In his perspective, what can signal our successful turn to a literary culture is the widespread cultural recognition that we can disjoin truth from redemption, i.e., that we can achieve redemption solely through our relationships with people. I begin my analysis of this position by restating Rorty's views about redemptive truth. My criticism is that Rorty *overstates* his rendition of this truth and places excessive demands on the redemption it offers. In consequence, he fails to take into account how truths as beliefs play an integral role in social practice. I support this claim by invoking the general temper of Nancy Frankenberg's critique of Rorty's return to religion in modernity. Specifically, I follow the problem she raises about how "philosophy's attention to religion typically focuses on the category of belief and omits any study of practice, sometimes even treating it as a category independent of belief."³¹⁹ I then proceed to illustrate what I take as Rorty's flawed treatments of truth, belief, and practice in his project.

Let us begin by recollecting what Rorty says about redemptive truth. In "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre," he maps out the hegemonic character of this truth, describing it as a "set of beliefs that would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves."³²⁰ He argues that it answers "yes" to the reformulated and modernized Socratic question "Do you think that there is a single set of beliefs which can serve a redemptive role in the lives of all human beings, which can be rationally justified to all human beings under optimal communicative conditions, and which will thus form the natural terminus of inquiry?"³²¹ For Rorty,

³¹⁹ Nancy K. Frankenberg, "Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental" in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montréal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 283.

³²⁰ Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" in *The Rorty Reader*, 475.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 478.

anyone who believes in redemption via truth acknowledges that the life must be governed by a totalizing set of beliefs and purposes in order to be worth living. This person also assumes that redemptive truth is already present at hand, or is at least discoverable through rational investigation. In “Redemption from Egotism,” Rorty justifies the effect of living in accordance to the claims of this overarching truth. He declares that this truth saves because of its explicit content. By providing the ground upon which all natural and human actions and events can be understood and judged, it eliminates obscurity in the mind of the believer. The force of redemptive truth untangles paradoxes, produces maximal clarity and coherence, and illumines how everything imaginable can seamlessly hang together. Completeness, imperturbability, mastery, and completion are esteemed as its ideal marks.³²²

In both essays, Rorty treats philosophy as the enemy. He thinks that the tendency to philosophize—which for him broadly means the tendency to justify and argue for one universal truth about the nature and end of all things—is to blame for our skewed notion of how to live, assuming that our idea of living involves enforcing a final blueprint for mankind. As we have discussed in this thesis, this general view serves as the foundation of the Rortyan critique of Western redemption. The belief in redemptive truth fuels the cultures of religion and science, and stands for humanity’s reliance on the non-human Other. Thankfully, according to Rorty, the trust in this kind of redemption has been gradually waning. We are now welcoming the literary culture, an epoch in which the appeal to universal “Truth” is giving way to the multifarious private “truths” of romantic polytheism. He adds that in this culture, religion and philosophy are considered simply as literary genres, and that they can continue to serve as glorious *options* for a self-enlarging and life-fulfilling personal redemption in modernity.

We can immediately detect something amiss about this ambitious staging of redemptive truth. For one thing, the only answer that can fulfill the extravagant demand of Rorty’s epistemological redemption is a comprehensive and unassailable

³²² Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 392.

system of metaphysics. But can we name any religious or philosophical theory that has satisfied this requirement, or any thinker that has not come under fire for thinking that it exists? There is no form of religion or philosophy that has not been questioned or put to doubt in history. Even when their core ideas dominate the theoretical climate, metanarratives are inevitably challenged by the presence of other competing systems. Even Plato and Hegel had to contend with their critics in order to justify their philosophical thought, which would have been uncalled for if the redemptive truths they proposed were as truly convincing as Rorty has painted them out to be. It would be wrong to insinuate then that the cultures of religion and philosophy were able to successfully offer an ultimate and singlehanded truth. Instead of going so far as saying that religious or philosophical truth actually *possesses* universal redemptive content, it would have been less misleading if Rorty simply worked with the idea that what should be faulted is the *temptation* to pursue the illusions of redemptive truth—an intention that already underlies his philosophizing, but is outshone by the grandiosity of his definition of cognitive redemption.

My point here is that the claim that we are being held hostage by redemptive truth, at least in the aggrandized and cognitively purist way that Rorty describes it, does not accurately depict how human beings engage with the redemption that religion and philosophy offer. If our redemptive beliefs in religion and science save us by providing absolute and systematic justification about human life, as Rorty is convinced they actually do, then there would be little need to keep discoursing about them. We would just take these truths as they are without question or hesitation, because their explicit content should suffice to deliver maximal illumination about thought and action. If we follow Rorty's definition, redemptive truths are successful only if nothing can threaten or demand their defense and justification. This, of course, is not what happens when we look at how society works when it collides with controversial truth-claims. Instead of redeeming believers by contemplative elucidation, truths come alive precisely from exposition and debate. We might even

say that redemptive truths derive their power from the conflict generated by their confrontation with other competing beliefs. To understand what this means, let us examine the question of redemptive truth at the level of culture. *Pace* Rorty's insistence that religion and science are declining in function, the opposite appears to be the case. Carrying what largely appear to be mismatched world-views, the two are in fact heralded as competing sources of legitimate redemptive beliefs in the modern world. Interestingly, there is also evidence to show that their irreconcilability sustains and even empowers their cultural influence in the West.

When we talk of religious culture, for example, the secularization thesis that Rorty supports can be countered by the reality of the strong resurgence of religious life in the post-Enlightenment era. In philosophy, Dreyfus and Kelly remark that Taylor "sees the radical proliferation of religions and spirituality—a veritable explosion of religious lives—as the central feature of the modern age,"³²³ and that this claim serves as the premise behind his important work, *A Secular Age*. In the political scene, Stout points out that "Western European secularization looks like an exception to the rule, rather than like the future toward which all modern societies are tending."³²⁴ He notes how public religiosity is alive from countries as diverse as Africa, Lebanon, and Poland, and how religions wield great political force in India and the United States, the world's biggest democracies. Frankenberry further supports this contra-secularization thesis by showing how America vibrantly serves as "the most glaring example of the easy compatibility of modernity and religiosity."³²⁵ Assuming that we could trust polls conducted in the last decade, in the United States, 84% of adults call themselves Christian, 82% regard Jesus as the Son of God, and 79% believe in the Virgin Birth. Around 50% maintain the belief that

³²³ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 21.

³²⁴ Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 526.

³²⁵ Frankenberry, "Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental" in *Weakening Philosophy*, 282.

human life was created about ten thousand years ago, 1/3 are biblical literalists, and 81% think that God truly exists.³²⁶

These facts exist alongside the rise of scientific and atheistic cultures, which either deny the prevalence of religious beliefs or regard them as convictions that need to be outgrown. We are reminded once again of the thinkers behind the New Atheism, and the many pro-life feminist and civic movements that fight to keep religion and its biases out of politics and women's bodies. These secular groups desire to enfeeble the redemptive truths offered by their religious counterparts, in favor of what can be construed as more humanitarian and socially inclusive goals and purposes. Rorty, without qualm, would feel more at ease belonging to this side of the wall. To consider here is the thought that perhaps it is *redemptive competition* between religion and science that is responsible for impassioning human beings from each camp to fight for their respective causes. Instead of weakening their cognitive strength, conflict and contradiction actually reinforce the spirit of redemptive truths. As rival genres compete with each other as viable sources of meaning in modernity, what is highlighted is the vibrant complexity of the redemption issue that needs a far deeper consideration than what we are able to derive from Rorty's account. Another observation is that the cultural importance of religion and science in the present day has no strong indication of diminishing. This puts to doubt Rorty's Western narrative of religion/philosophy/literature, and also his suggestion that we can treat these beliefs as "options" or "genres" that can eventually wither away in his literary culture.

To examine redemptive truth on the level of individual experience: if most of us felt that our lives were substantiated to our redemptive satisfaction, then we would, in consequence, also lose the inclination to put the point of our existence into question. Yet this is something that we often do. Like Rorty's ironist, we cannot help

³²⁶ See Nicholas D. Kristof, "Believe It, Or Not," in *New York Times*, 15 (August 2003) and Gallup Poll (November 2004). [Cf. Frankenberry, "Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental" in *Weakening Philosophy*, 295].

but intimately reflect and reconsider our personal gospels. Religious believers put their faiths to the test in the face of doctrinal weakness or in the event of a great calamity—the persistent question “if God is good, then why do we suffer?” is proof of this. Articulation of belief is required for faith to remain robust and defensible, and religious institutions design their communities to facilitate this reflective activity. Scientists often regard science as an experimental discipline rather than treat the field as absolute. The present culture welcomes surprising discoveries that displace old intuitions and usher new Kuhnian revolutions. Even extreme fanatics of religion and scientism get caught up in their truth-system’s limits and paradoxes. Try asking a fundamentalist Catholic how God can be human and divine at the same time, or a hard-nosed scientist to explain all the mysteries of the universe! There is a great chance that they would place themselves in a theoretical bind. Simply put, the redemptive truth that Rorty characterizes is too extravagant and inflexible that we cannot imagine any person or paradigm to be representative of it. Instead of overdramatizing the concept of truth, it would have been better if he stuck with critiquing the primacy of religious or scientific languages in justifying human ends, which is something he was already doing in his earlier remarks on the conversation of mankind. To summarize my criticism: if we want to be fair with the way we deal with religious or philosophical belief, we should agree that Rorty’s characterization of redemptive truth as based on explicit content is an erroneous standard. We misunderstand its nature if we limit redemption to its cognitive content as Rorty does in his writings on the theme. Redemption by belief is much more than contemplative salvific illumination. It is realized in the daily struggle to transform its redemptive content into action.

For the sake of pursuing the argument, however, we can tackle Rorty’s concerns via a different route. We can consider the urgency behind his exaggerated presentation of redemptive truth as underpinned by its practical bearing; otherwise, it would not have been worth attacking if it did not propel people to behave in a particular way. The assumption that Rorty makes is that belief in redemptive truth is

directly linked to the fault of egotism, as we have explored in Chapter III. His logic is that when truth is rendered incidental to an individual's relation to God or to others, then the desire to "universalize" one's version of redemption, or to "convert" others toward adopting the same stance, is also rooted out of the picture. Our task, then, is to purge truth from our redemptive aspirations. Once this threat is removed, Rorty thinks that we gain better chances of inching closer to his ideal culture, where "there will be no need for people to agree on the point of human existence, the good life for man, or any other topic of similar generality."³²⁷ In utopia, truths lose their public status. Varying symbols of concern or idiosyncratic versions of human happiness are treated as private matters. Should religion and philosophy continue to exist in this future world, believing in the redemptive truths they offer would, as we have mentioned previously, only be perceived as matters of personal taste. While this strategy minimizes their scope and power in the literary culture, Rorty is firm that this is worth risking in favor of a less egotistic world.

Is this a realistic endeavor? In reducing the role that redemptive truths (as religious or philosophical *beliefs*) play in a person's life, one wonders if what Rorty is asking is possible to do at all. To put it bluntly, if we compartmentalize the way we practice our religious and philosophical aspirations, is redemption—of the life-enriching, self-enlarging sort that Rorty endorses—still to be had? The obvious problem here is that Rorty's redescription dilutes redemption of its potency. Privatization risks removing the primary redemptive component altogether—that is, following Rorty's vision of self-enlargement, the element that transforms and intensifies human experience, as well as passionately motivates people to action. When Christians and Muslims are dissuaded from using religious language in political debates, or are held in suspicion or ridicule when they invite other people to join their flock, or are told that their faith is "as good as any other," we can reasonably posit that the identities from which they derive existential purpose and spiritual meaning are either rendered trivial or are hastily judged. The problem that I

³²⁷ Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" in *The Rorty Reader*, 487.

find with Rorty's proposal when we look at these cases is that redemption loses its very point in the lives of so many people. Divorcing redemptive truth (and/or "Truth") from actual practice, in short, is not as simple or as convincing as Rorty paints it out to be. We need to look at this vision more closely before judging his literary culture as a viable framework for modern redemption.

Thus I raise questions about what Rorty means by "cognitive" (truth-based) and "non-cognitive" (relation-based) redemption. My view is that the distinction is not as accurate or as sharp as Rorty makes it out to be. It is, in fact, misleading to cut redemption in half. Sources of spiritual redemption, even the kind Rorty argues as uncontaminated by philosophy, usually derive their power from the potent combination of truth and relation. It is hard to see the latter as wholly sufficient to generate spiritual power without being backed up by what we have come to understand as belief or certainty. In this sense, Rorty's endorsement of a modern kind of redemption in a literary culture—redemption derived from "non-cognitive" and "pre-philosophical" relationships between human beings—needs more reinforcement to become convincing.

Redemptive Relationships

As we have mentioned previously, Frankenberry finds something worrying about the fact that Rorty separates belief and practice in his pragmatic philosophy of religion. This is certainly the case when we talk about how Rorty divides redemption by way of truth (cognitive) or by relation (non-cognitive). In making this opposition, he raises these components as *independent* categories. Rorty's distinction makes it appear as if there is no important correlation between knowledge and experience. This view, however, obscures the likelihood that the strength of beliefs and the power of relationships are intricately enmeshed with one another. We can begin to problematize this issue by looking at the primary examples that Rorty refers to as non-cognitive religious relationships, and see how the contrast he sets fails to defend the divide.

For Rorty, to say that redemption is non-cognitive means that it is unmediated by truth. The most important difference this makes is that this relationship can cause us “to act differently without necessarily having given us reasons for doing so.”³²⁸ Pre-Platonized or non-theologized religion, in his assessment, offers us good illustrations of this kind of relationship. While Rorty takes his examples from religious culture as one homogenous set, in reality he assembles two substantially different religious groups to illustrate the nature of non-cognitive religious redemption. The first set is what we can call the “pre-philosophical” kind. This includes relations “between a pious but uneducated Athenian of the fifth century and an Olympian deity,” between an “illiterate Christian and Christ,”³²⁹ and between the Israelites and the Old Testament God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and could be based on “adoring obedience, or ecstatic communion, or quiet confidence, or some combination of these.”³³⁰ What we can surmise from these models is that for Rorty, these believers have not gone through any sophisticated process of rational engagement when it comes to their faith. The divine beings they commune with are simply taken to be real and in possession of transformative power, and this is the basis from which their allegiance solidifies. Pre-philosophical religion does not require any specialized knowledge of God or gods for redemption; on the part of the follower, the sincerity or worthiness of devotion is the most important. For example, an uneducated Athenian or an illiterate Christian would not prioritize questioning if their version of polytheism or monotheism is, conceptually, the universal religious framework. The real question that would matter to him or her would be whether or not his or her god is stronger or more powerful than other ones—that is, functionally speaking, if the god *works*. As we have mentioned briefly in Chapter II, it is strange that Rorty uses *illiterate* devotion as a model of a functional redemptive relationship, given that his substitute for religion points to redemption through a *literary* culture.

³²⁸ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 392.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 393.

³³⁰ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 477.

The second set is what we can call “post-philosophical.” Rorty also highlights the non-cognitive redemptive relationships that religious intellectuals like Martin Luther, Søren Kierkegaard, Saint Paul, and Karl Barth have come to represent in religious history. What these figures generally hold in common is the position that religious faith is outside the realm of argument. They arrive at this conclusion after much deliberation about their own religious beliefs, usually through the paths of poetry, prose, or philosophy. Some even come to realize the complete futility of their efforts to rationalize God. As Rorty argues, “as soon as we begin to want to understand the gods, or to make Christianity and Buddhism reasonable, religion begins to fade away and be replaced by philosophy. Martin Luther described such attempts at reasonableness as diabolical temptations, and why Kierkegaard described them as occasions of sin.”³³¹ This realization of being unable to theologize the ineffable gives these religious intellectuals the justification to act or think differently. In Rorty’s view, what is admirable about these redemptive relationships is that they work from a deeply subjective and intimate level—in which case, it would be easier to construe their importance as private redemptive truths, rather than redemptive beliefs that can dominate the answer of what makes every life on earth worth living.

The problem with these two sets is that, following Frankenberg, they conflate two different kinds of religious relationships. First, there exists “the devotion of ‘illiterate believers’ for whom the element of belief is not only highly relevant but also very literal and non-metaphorical,” and second, “the case of sophisticated theological apologists who go noncognitive rather than cope with the exactions of providing plausibility conditions.”³³² I am inclined to follow Frankenberg’s description. While believers in the former group do not have a specialized understanding of the faith they profess, they take their redemptive beliefs and their

³³¹ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 393.

³³² Frankenberg, “Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental” in *Weakening Philosophy*, 281.

deities as cognitively real, and they adhere to the creeds, rituals, and practices of their religions based on this knowledge. What this means, then, is that their theoretically naive relation with their gods is still based on redemptive belief. It is what the believer *knows* about what her god can do that makes the difference. An Ancient Greek woman worships Aphrodite with the understanding that her divine presence draws out the power of love, and a Christian trusts with full confidence that Jesus is truly the son of God. Without these basic truth-claims and actions that illiterate believers regard as indubitable verities, their redemptive relations can suffer, perhaps lose meaning, and even become unrecognizable. My view is that Rorty's second group better represents what non-cognitive redemptive relationships are like in terms of practice. Certainly, the existence of this group of people supports Rorty's argument that truth and belief can be separated. But if we make a list of the people who embody the religious and spiritual maturity that Rorty esteems in his description, then it would only include the likes of learned intellectuals, theologians, saints, and holy men: a radiant few out of billions. I doubt if this kind of post-philosophical religious relationship is plausible for ordinary members of religious institutions who rely on redemptive belief. It is also highly unlikely that they will be able to follow prophets, poets, and mystics in their efforts of "leaping over the boundaries of the language one speaks"³³³ to illuminate their non-rational connection with the gods they worship.

What we can surmise, then, is that for a vast majority of religious followers, the viability of redemption is supported by the potent combination of truth/belief and relation. Religion would be difficult to understand if we regard belief and relation as independent categories. As Frankenberry would corroborate, "without the element of belief it is impossible for interpreters to go about identifying anything *as* religious."³³⁴ Furthermore, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, these two

³³³ Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, 18.

³³⁴ Frankenberry, "Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental" in *Weakening Philosophy*, 281.

elements are strongly interdependent on each other. While human beings do not necessarily require a comprehensive and impregnable understanding of their professed faith for their relationships to function, the common formula is that the more faith is engaged conceptually and in practice, the stronger relationships become (if not with God, at least with other members of the sect). I would even venture to say that a relationship based on non-sophisticated religious belief, as we have described above, is something that strikes us as fully common and operational today. Christians and Muslims, for example, believe that their God exists, and that this Supreme Deity will continue to provide for them if they keep their faith and adhere to the rules of their religion. Given this analysis, we now face an important dilemma: what implications can this criticism of religious redemption possibly have for Rorty's hopes of a literary culture?

Let us go back to what Rorty says explicitly about it. Remember that he thinks that modern redemption ultimately lies in cultivating a new form of relationship between human beings. Unlike our previous metaphysical commitments, this relationship drops the idea that the greatest connection we can possibly establish is with the non-human—for instance, that our faith in “God,” or our trust in “Truth” is what we should hold as the most essential. In Rorty's view, human beings should take center stage. The proposal to accord the weight of religious seriousness to human relationships in modernity is nothing new. Feuerbach's main claim in *The Essence of Christianity* is that man, when regarded objectively, is God, and that they are therefore essentially the same. Since modernity marks our liberation from the religious phase of primitive self-consciousness, it is important to take the next step toward spiritual growth and treat human relations as sacred. He argues that “the relations of child and parent, of husband and wife, of brother and friend—in general, of man to man—in short, all the moral relations are per se religious. Life as a whole is, in its essential, substantial relations, throughout of a divine nature.”³³⁵ More recently, Albert Borgmann affirms the idea that persons are regarded as rightfully sacred in

³³⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 222.

contemporary culture, even without the support of the conception of a divine being. He even recruits atheists/agnostics like Daniel Dennett and John Rawls in making this argument, since they agree that persons are “the source of rights and demands that we meet our obligations,” and their existence “requires us to work for social justice and environmental stewardship.”³³⁶ Naturally, Rorty does not make the mistake of calling human relations sacred, since the metaphysically laden nature of the concept would invite critique. He does, however, argue that human relationships can be *redemptive*—if we mean that encounters with human beings are charged with self-enlarging potential. This redemptive relationship that Rorty endorses is “non-cognitive” and “pre-philosophical” in nature. Books, poems, films, and music are taken as paths of getting in touch with more and more human beings, but in a wholly imaginative and non-argumentative way. Our task is to make these new connections flourish, and that this can happen best in a literary culture.

But how do non-cognitive and pre-philosophical redemptive relationships with human beings work? Rorty thinks that the answer lies in the trait of being cognitively irreducible. He invokes our inability to articulate the change that takes place when we encounter novel or surprising experiences. For example, when a father holds his first child and feels great devotion, or when a boy witnesses the death of his family and suffers unimaginable pain, or when a lonely soul encounters the radiant poetry of Octavio Paz and experiences solace, a profound transformation in that person’s being occurs that is not easy to make sense of. This kind of event can spark an overhaul of dreams and habits, and miraculously alter one’s way of looking and experiencing the world, without providing a universally understandable rationale to justify the effect. Like the relations we may have when it comes “to Iago or Dostoevsky, to our parents, or to our first love,”³³⁷ these experiences engage and rework our sense of significance in an unprecedented and non-cognitive way. According to Rorty, these relationships offer redemption, not truth, in the same way

³³⁶ Albert Borgmann, “The Sacred and the Person” in *Inquiry* 54:2 (2011), 187.

³³⁷ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 392.

that “the lover’s love redeems the lover, but does not add to her knowledge.”³³⁸ In this sense, he thinks that these new relationships can liberate us from the totalizing truth-based cultures of the West. They offer us a new prospect for existential meaning and spiritual life in modernity that, for Rorty, we have not yet allowed to shine before.

At first glance, Rorty’s suggestion seems convincing: human beings, and how poems, novels, and films render their innumerable experiences, can transform us profoundly. Through them, we can experience fuzzy overlaps of faith, hope, and love in the modern world. Surely, there is nothing objectionable about raising the argument that esteeming a concrete, living being standing right in front of us is a better redemptive objective than being responsible to an abstract God or science. My first criticism here is that this kind of non-cognitive metamorphic effect that Rorty describes is not exclusive to human relationships. The awe we feel when we are arrested by nature’s magnificence, and the respect we come to accord to animals as living beings, could also elicit a change in our respective world-making processes and make us act differently without giving us clear reasons to do so. Stout suggests that even theism, at least the pragmatic kind, can fit into Rorty’s picture. If relations with persons can redeem, then we can reconcile religion with Rorty’s modern redemption by relating to God *as* a person. Regarding these practices, “a theistic pragmatist could argue that they include the very activities that the Bible represents as involving human beings and God in partnership, such as promise making, promise keeping, agreeing to enter a covenant, or holding one another responsible in terms of a covenant.”³³⁹ The recognition of these cases, of course, is not available in Rorty’s account of redemption. He fervently believes that anything that connotes externality should be mistrusted, so we can thus imagine that the supply of redemptive resources in Rorty’s picture may not really be so bountiful at all.

³³⁸ Ibid., 397.

³³⁹ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*,” 541.

The second and more important criticism is related to the nature of Rorty's central goal: he believes that in a literary culture, modern, secular, non-cognitive redemptive relationships can fulfill the same task performed by redemptive truth. What this means is that they can approximate the same level of power and inspiration as familiar religious and philosophical sources, while discounting the familiar elements of certainty and eternity that we associate with traditional redemption. My understanding is that it is not quite obvious that these objectives can be met given how Rorty has framed the character of these relationships. While redemptive religious truths offer the promise of the infinite and the absolute, redemptive relationships are finite and limited. Rorty, of course, desires that we come to terms with our mortality and would therefore see nothing unfortunate about transitioning to the latter mindset. But this also means that these forms of redemptions are not easy to align. To explain this point, let us interrogate what Rorty says about hope and its relation to what it means to be redeemed. He thinks that if you have hope, it would not matter "whether you believe that Christ was the Son of God, or that there are universal human rights. The essential thing is to dream of a better world. Hope doesn't require justification, cognitive status, foundations, or anything else."³⁴⁰ But is Rorty's view not counterintuitive to the general idea that it matters greatly what belief you have and what kind of world you envisage when you hope? The hope offered by monotheist religion illustrates the importance of the nature of redemptive content.

Non-believers find it bewildering that despite hundreds of years of peddling contradictory doctrinal beliefs, as well as having less than edifying histories of scandal and persecution, religious institutions still maintain a great following in modernity. Their devotees persist in declaring that a loving and benevolent God exists. They believe that professing a religious faith is important to live a meaningful life. The point here is that while the idea of God has let people down countless times, the appeal of monotheism lives on. So let us examine: why does the loyalty to a

³⁴⁰ Rorty, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies*, 58.

tarnished faith continue to exist? An answer is that perhaps human beings who think that redemption lies beyond are more equipped to bear with the challenges of contingency and meaninglessness. This brings to mind the *Book of Job*, which can be interpreted to stand for the notion that believers of divine redemption are more resilient to moments of failure and disillusionment precisely because their redemptive goal eclipses their present lifetime. They recognize that the “better world” is unachievable while they are alive. For them, the abstract promise of blissful eternity can overshadow terrible human experiences, reminding us of the ineffable dignity of martyrs and saints. They wager a radical hope in God’s plan. This is not to say, of course, that a resilient temperament is not at all present in believers of a non-cognitive and mortal redemption. There is no lack of fighters for social justice; i.e., when we think of activist groups and the secular causes they uphold. But take note that the issue here is the *hardiness* of mortal hope. Believers of the latter, mortal kind are stuck with a more fragile arrangement compared to monotheists. Since their version of redemption is sourced from their encounters with an equally vulnerable set of human beings, there remains room for disappointment and despair. As Taylor muses: “it is clear that modern humanism is full of potential for such disconcerting reversals: from dedication to others to self-indulgent, feel-good responses, from a lofty sense of human dignity to control powered by contempt and hatred, from absolute freedom to absolute despotism, from a flaming desire to help the oppressed to an incandescent hatred for all those who stand in the way. And the higher the flight, the farther the potential fall.”³⁴¹

Questioning Egotism

After assessing Rorty’s brand of pragmatism and his encouragement of a cultural turn to literature, I now want to offer a critique of his vision of modern redemption that we have reconstructed in Chapter III. My aim is to raise important issues behind the diagnosis of egotism as a problem of modernity, as well as evaluate

³⁴¹ Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity*, 34.

his endorsement of self-creation and solidarity as our best redemptive paths. To repeat: our restatement of Rorty's view shows that renouncing the ego best responds to the modern task of moral and spiritual enhancement. Since egotism is fueled by a person's sense of religious, intellectual, or ethical superiority over others, from which springs feelings of disrespect, intolerance, and hate, curbing this fault sounds convincing and urgent. But even if Rorty's descriptions of egotistic behavior are vivid and persuasive, and despite our best efforts to reconstruct the problem, the notion of egotism is still difficult to pin down. As we shall see, employing the idea as a philosophical and political concept is problematic.

Rorty, of course, should not be blamed for this deficiency. His discussion of egotism as a human fault surfaced late in his career—recall from Chapter I that while the essay “Redemption from Egotism” was written in 2001, it came to popular circulation in English only nine years later and posthumously in *The Rorty Reader*.³⁴² If things were otherwise, there is a chance that he would have explored it more deeply. Since this is not the case, it should be emphasized that further work needs to be done to make egotism a more functional concept. To prove this claim, I now proceed to complicate Rorty's idea of egotism by raising two points in this section. I argue that first, the definition of egotism as self-satisfaction loses stability when we scrutinize the nature of what, in Rorty's list, would be classified as one of the most spirited egotist movements of all: modern religious fundamentalism. Instead of banking on an unshakeable belief in their superiority, it can be contested that their hostility is instead driven by feelings of inferiority and resentment. This, in effect, is contrary to Rorty's at first compelling characterization. Second, I present how substantiating the idea of non-egotism is a more difficult chore than has been initially presented. It needs more clarification as a conceptual counterpart to egotism. I highlight the absence of powerful secular heroes of non-egotism, whom I think are necessary to inspire the moral and spiritual imagination of the public. I also show how Rorty's promotion of a secular utopia is at risk of being branded as an egotistic

³⁴² Voparil and Bernstein, *The Rorty Reader*, 302.

endeavor, as ironic as this claim may sound.

Rorty's basic assessment is that religious and philosophical egotists regard their views as supreme. Anyone who proactively challenges their dogmas is treated as a threat that requires reeducation, conversion, or elimination. This stance of aggression is a tricky one to deal with. Similar to our criticism of redemptive truth, it is strange to realize the fragility of what is deemed as unquestionable and foundational authority. If the egotist's beliefs were truly as self-fulfilling and superior as Rorty paints them out to be, then why would divergent and more inferior values have any impact on them? If egotists were wholly content with their views, how come opposing ideas provoke them to take a defensive stance? In a counterintuitive sense, don't violent and uncompromising responses undertaken in the name of egotistic belief display vulnerability? To illustrate this point, I invoke Slavoj Žižek's recent criticism of Islamic fundamentalism in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings in France. Žižek puts to doubt if these terrorists engaging in "racist, religious, sexist fanaticism"—and whom Rorty would no doubt agree to be religious egotists of the most dangerous kind—are truly convinced of the legitimacy of the transcendent cause they are campaigning, or if there is something lurking underneath their culture that can better explain their antagonism. Žižek's view is that all *authentic* fundamentalists, from Tibetan Buddhists to the Amish in the United States, betray no resentment or envy against people who do not share their orientation. They are in fact often indifferent to other ways of life. He states that a Tibetan Buddhist, for example, would be content to regard a hedonist's pursuit of happiness as self-defeating, rather than use this observation as a basis for condemnation or hatred. These individuals thus seem to fit Rorty's description of egotism as self-satisfaction the best. They represent people who are truly content with their final vocabularies. Because their belief fully gratifies, we can imagine that they could also easily flick away any curiosity or attraction that meeting other worldviews might elicit.

As a contrast, Žižek thinks that *inauthentic* fundamentalists are "deeply

bothered, intrigued, fascinated, by the sinful life of the non-believers.”³⁴³ His controversial hypothesis is that:

The fundamentalist Islamic terror is *not* grounded in the terrorists’ conviction of their superiority and in their desire to safeguard their cultural-religious identity from the onslaught of global consumerist civilization. The problem with fundamentalists is not that we consider them inferior to us, but, rather, that *they themselves* secretly consider themselves inferior. This is why our condescending politically correct assurances that we feel no superiority towards them only makes them more furious and feeds their resentment. The problem is not cultural difference (their effort to preserve their identity), but the opposite fact that the fundamentalists are already like us, that, secretly, they have already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them. Paradoxically, what the fundamentalists really lack is precisely a dose of that true ‘racist’ conviction of their own superiority.³⁴⁴

How does Žižek’s alternative perspective on modern religious fundamentalism impact our discussion of Rorty’s views on egotism? First, it puts into question how Rorty understands the motivation behind modern fundamentalism. Žižek argues that religious terrorists are provoked to violence by their inferiority—a position contrary to Rorty’s egotism hypothesis. Second, it also raises reservations about how to deal with religious egotism as a political issue. While Rorty’s idea of imaginative self-enlargement remains a potentially good strategy to develop, it is not so clear how it can battle against fundamentalist cultures that are too volatile, angry, and bitter. If we follow Žižek’s cue, the societies in which these cultures seem to be flourishing are already experiencing a conflict that is both internal (in terms of shielding themselves from the temptations of Western modern life) and external (in

³⁴³ Slavoj Žižek, “Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?” in the *New Statesman* (10 January 2015). [<http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/01/slavoj-i-ek-charlie-hebdo-massacre-are-worst-really-full-passionate-intensity>].

³⁴⁴ Žižek, “Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?”

terms of defending their religious and cultural dignity against others). Their general feeling is that their convictions are always being put to the test. Recognizing their humiliation and ostracism in the scenario, they are more likely to take on the perspective that it is the other camp whose beliefs and imaginations need to be reeducated, and not their own.

Self-enlargement in a Rortyan sense, hence, does not appear to be a goal that Žižek's inauthentic fundamentalists can attune to or identify with. It is not a value that fits into their kind of egotist framework. The risk of meaninglessness is not a problem for these defenders of the faith. The real issue is that they are privy to a civilizational conflict in which they see themselves as the subordinate and aggrieved party. They are saddled by an envious and resentful egotism that provides insufficient motivation to make the expansion of the self a worthy and attractive goal. The activity of inventing selves is far from their mind. Their notion of solidarity is also so exclusive that the suggestion that it should be modeled on Western liberalism would be offensive. In short, what we have appears to be a situation where the modern values of private self-creation and democratic solidarity would fall on deaf ears, or would take considerable effort to be appealing. Of course, it is important not to forget that we are dealing with Islamic extremists here, and that this analysis would probably not hold true for members with a moderate religious stance. This, however, highlights the urgency of the problem, given that it is the actions of religious fundamentalists like the *Al-Qaeda* and *ISIS* that produce the most harm and destruction at present. Unfortunately, Rorty's strategy is ill-suited when it comes to transforming this cause. We thus see how his anti-egotist tactic misses in reaching one of its primary targets in the modern world.

After problematizing egotism, the second issue I want to deal with is the perplexing task of substantiating what the ideal of non-egotism actually is. Rorty does not give a definition, and the closest he gets to characterizing it is outlined in his description of Marcel Proust's literary contribution to combating egotism. Proust's significance lies in his ability to expose the dangers of self-involvement, which, for

Rorty, also serves as part of the substance of his literary genius: “by portraying dozens and dozens of self-centered people, and himself as the most self-centered of all, he helped his readers understand what they needed to watch out for, what they need to be afraid of, as well as what they might hope for. He used self-centeredness against itself, and thus accomplished the sort of creative self-overcoming that Nietzsche praised.”³⁴⁵ The approach Rorty takes, therefore, is *via negativa*: he shows us that non-egotism means not becoming so wholly consumed by one’s personal affairs. However, he never really tells us what non-egotism actually looks like in the flesh. This is a serious shortcoming. While it would be unreasonable to demand a transparent, clear-cut definition of the non-egotist ideal from Rorty, we should at least have something to work with in order to understand how being other-orientated and self-creative at the same time can be redemptively viable.

We can argue that one way of illuminating non-egotism is by identifying non-egotists in history and literature that we can use as exemplars. As we have examined in Chapter II, Rorty believes that story-telling has the power to profoundly affect and transform our imaginations. Hearing narratives about human beings we can respect and emulate (Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela), or criticize and disdain (Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot), or ponder about esteeming or opposing (Barack Obama), for instance, can increase the chances of forming readers and listeners who are more sensitive and conscientious. Having concrete examples to live by, in this case, should help Rorty’s cause of transforming a Western egotistic culture to a non-egotistic one. True enough, there are models of non-egotism that vibrantly illustrate what it is like to be selfless. Famous characters like Jesus Christ and Gautama Buddha serve as paradigmatic historical figures of love and compassion. They represent beings worthy of general admiration despite the skepticism behind the veracity of historical anecdotes about them. The interesting thing to notice here is that the most popular exemplars for selflessness are religious characters. While there are secular heroes and admirable persons who rally for political, racial, and sexual equality, e.g., Rosa Parks, Mahatma

³⁴⁵ Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” in *The Rorty Reader*, 405.

Gandhi, and while fiction supplies powerfully memorable models too, e.g., Alyosha in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (still arguably religious!), their reach is not quite as far-ranging as, say, the spiritual appeal of Christ and the Buddha, or the cultural influence of Confucius (if we treat Confucianism as a religion). Religion remains the chief institution that is most relatable to a large number of people. Even Proust, the prime literary example for Rorty of non-egotism, sounds like an anomaly in the set. While we can surmise that reading Proustian literature stimulates a new redemptive experience that is worth exploring, the model is too exclusive. In comparison to the millions of religious devotees who venerate the non-egotism of Jesus and the Buddha, how many readers does Proust have? And from this set, how many of them would interpret the lesson behind *Remembrance of Things Past* in the same moral-spiritual way as Rorty does? In sum, in order to realize the literary culture that Rorty aspires for, having more secular heroes—whether historical or fictional—to serve as lives to emulate will help tremendously. Their stories also need to appeal to a larger public, perhaps to the same extent as their religious counterparts do. But until that happens, the idea of secular non-egotism remains difficult to envisage as a concrete lived practice.

Moreover, when we finally approach the issue of battling egotism in a secular utopia, Rorty's proposal is at risk of finding itself in a bind. Remember that for Rorty, a literary culture stands for our best chance to esteem democratic values. Presumably this is the kind of space that would cultivate a non-egotistic attitude as well. But before this happens, the cruelty and injustice of egotism need to rise to the surface. Rorty supports the struggle against egotism completely, viewing it as the means to moral progress, illuminated by a passage we have previously cited:

It may seem strange to attribute this sort of willingness to the recent West — a culture often said, with excellent reason, to be racist, sexist, and imperialist. But it is of course also a culture which is very worried about being racist, sexist, and imperialist, as well as about being Eurocentric, parochial, and intellectually intolerant. It is a

culture which has become very conscious of its capacity for murderous intolerance and thereby perhaps more wary of intolerance, more sensitive to the desirability of diversity, than any other of which we have record.³⁴⁶

The fact that such moral progress arises through struggle may seem to imply that some form of egotism is involved: the egotism of fighting for one's own true cause. That would leave us with the paradox that acting egotistically to promote the egalitarian social effort is the inescapable offshoot of the strategy of endorsing non-egotism. Rorty's ideal citizens in a literary culture could thus be branded as egotists when they come to defend their prized democratic and egalitarian principles. To illustrate: when there is something wrong or terrible in a particular situation, there always has to be someone to call the shots. A person or a group first denounces others of discrimination, chauvinism, or bigotry, and this accusation often leads to judgment, and even humiliation, in the public arena. Someone, therefore, always bears the flag of the just and the righteous, and someone else suffers it. While these uncomfortable ordeals could be described as an expression of egotism, as well-directed struggles for the realization of a liberal utopia they are better described as militant expressions of non-egotism. Militancy is not the same thing as egotism; one can be militantly non-egotist and indeed this is what Rorty enjoins us all to be. He explicitly addresses the hazard of succumbing to dreamy social idealism, arguing that "fellow-feeling degenerates into self-indulgent cant and political frivolity when we forget that some cultures, like some people, are no damn good: they cause too much pain, and so have to be resisted (perhaps eradicated) rather than respected. This so-called 'politics of difference' pretends that both morality and politics can be reduced to niceness; it evades the thought that moral choice is sometimes a matter of deciding who is going to get hurt."³⁴⁷ The militant non-egotist would not shirk such

³⁴⁶ Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 81.

³⁴⁷ Rorty, "In a Flattened World," 3.

decisions. But the risk remains that in combating social egotism, the militant non-egotist is in danger of sliding into an egotistic moral righteousness as well.

In sum, egotism needs more refinement to serve as a workable theoretical and practical concept. But let us suppose that the idea of egotism can be sufficiently clarified, and follow Rorty in treating it as a modern moral fault. Are the paths of self-creation and solidarity satisfactory methods for our generation's redemption from egotism? Can our present culture accommodate the spiritual potential of these self-enlarging values? Can we use them to effectively draw meaning and enhance our lives in modernity? I will engage these questions and their respective difficulties in the two succeeding parts.

Self-Creation and its Anxieties

I focus on three themes in my critique of Rortyan self-creation, which I have arranged to be discussed in an overlapping manner. First, I underscore how Rorty's proposal endorses an instrumentalizing attitude toward human beings; second, I raise concerns about the irreconcilability of self-creation and morality; third, I talk about several predicaments that surface when we combine the limits of private linguistic creativity and the excessive demands of Rorty's version of self-invention. As a reminder, self-creation for Rorty is based on developing relations with other human beings for the private redemptive purpose of self-transformation. The self-creator is indebted to history, language, tradition and other people for providing the materials to re-define her identity. Inspired by the idea of romantic polytheism, Rorty's models for self-creation are poets, artists, and edifying philosophers: imaginative, well-read, and expressive intellectuals. This categorization, however, does not mean that the redemptive path is exclusive to this select group. With the rise of liberal democracy, the spread of knowledge and wealth, and the presence of multiple vocabularies to articulate hopes and imagine new desires, this track is becoming increasingly available to a greater number and variety of people today.

Self-enlargement is integral to the success of this modern ideal. The self-creator needs to accumulate as many meaningful experiences and encounter as many sorts of human beings as possible to substantiate her project. In Rorty's view, having a bountiful repertoire of resources is crucial for the unique formulation of a person's purpose and self-image. One problem here is that it is questionable whether the attitude of *using* people as a means to an end in such a way can be countenanced. By saying that we should creatively redescribe people, events and circumstances in order to prevail over our inherited selves, Rorty encourages the conception that in our private realm, we may exercise unlimited control over others. This reminds us of how Derrida toyed around with droll, sexualized versions of Plato and Socrates in *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (1980) to comically surmount their philosophical legacy, or how Sade played with *Justine* (1791) and *Juliette* (1797-1801) in order to bring out the ironies of virtuous morality. But even if imaginative manipulation is being done in bad taste or in a way that shocks or offends, Rorty seems to find it acceptable as long as it meets the private goal of self-overcoming. Self-creation stands for one's personal liberation from the forces of social domination. It uses the idea of control against itself. It is this creative freedom that allows the self to achieve Bloomian autonomy or Heideggerian authenticity—that is, it helps an individual inch closer to the radical hope of becoming “one's own person rather than merely a creation of one's education or one's environment.”³⁴⁸ For Rorty, trying to creatively overcome the past despite its impossibility is what matters if one is to achieve self-creation.

That self-creation can serve as a moral and spiritual ideal in modernity is based on the notion that the imaginative skill and the large acquaintance of self-creators make them more connected to the different ways of being human. The chances of empathizing and becoming more conscientious about other people are increased in the course of executing these individual projects. This is the claim about Rortyan self-enlargement that we have constructed in the previous chapter to show

³⁴⁸ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 476.

how egotism can be surmounted. However, we can also raise the counterargument that becoming more other-oriented, and so kinder and more considerate human beings, are not guaranteed by self-creation. They are, at best, incidental results of the process. This is because the main aim of self-creation is novelty for its own sake, and not in treating other human beings as ends in the traditional Kantian sense. In this process, upholding Mill's harm principle, promoting the non-cruelty of the Shklarian liberal, and developing the sentimental imagination may have to take a back seat in favor of the successful execution of the ends of self-creation. There is something intrinsically troubling about this goal. Fraser recognizes a dark side to this romantic impulse: "behind the strong poet's love for the original and wholly new lurks a secret contempt for what is familiar and widely shared."³⁴⁹ While Fraser takes it a bit too far by saying that self-creators have great aversion to the ordinary, we can at least accept that they would not appreciate being identified as such. That is why when the goal is novelty, one would necessarily move away from whatever rests in the middle of the spectrum.

This leads nicely to the second point: that self-creation and morality are incompatible ends, and that endorsing the idea that they are goals to be pursued separately does little to alleviate the tensions that arise from their conflict. Recall that regarding social justice and idiosyncratic bliss, Rorty's view is not that a real barrier exists between them to allow for a clear delineation of their respective projects; rather, he believes that there is often irrelevance between their concerns.³⁵⁰ This is the reason why he thinks that the private/public split is a useful conceptual tool. He believes that we can make use of it to gain a clearer understanding of the diversity of human goals. By making people more conscious about the nature of their actions, it can also temper the tendency of personal and public projects from irresponsibly spilling over each other. However, I argue that there is more to the issue of irreconcilability than

³⁴⁹ Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy" in *Unruly Practices, Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, 99.

³⁵⁰ Rorty, "Intellectual Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 20-21.

Rorty entertains in his writings, and that it is justified to question if promoting the self-creation ideal can be disastrous for achieving the goals of public morality, even if it follows the method of self-enlargement.

Taylor can help us reconsider the issue of the irreconcilability of self-creation and morality from a different angle. He classifies people like Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida—intellectuals who belong to Rorty’s class of brilliant, visionary, and linguistically-skilled self-creators—as immanent counter-Enlightenment thinkers. They join the ranks of artists, poets, and philosophers like Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot in challenging the stifling view of the primacy of ordinary life in modernity, “in the name of the great, the exceptional, the heroic.”³⁵¹ What makes them fascinating is that they articulate novel ideas—some of them uncomfortable, forbidden, and even violent—that go against the traditional grain of public virtue and common good. The issue here is that the immanent counter-Enlightenment movement *rejects* morality in the name of the ideal of self-creation and vitality. If this movement is right (a big if), this means that public morality must be overcome in order to reach the higher goals of aesthetic life, or at least if one would like to obtain personal redemption. Hence, according to this account the ideals of self-creation and morality cannot subsist side by side, and neither can they be neatly relegated to private and public spheres. Their primary goal is to cancel each other out. Taylor’s claim about the immanent counter-Enlightenment highlights not only the incompatibility of the two ideals, but more so reveals their natural antagonism.

But can the method of self-enlargement that Rorty suggests possibly ease their opposition? Remember that this approach is shared by the type of projects of self-creation and solidarity that he endorses in his narrative of redemption. But from what we have seen in the first argument about the instrumentalization of human beings, self-creators are mostly concerned about being in touch with human experiences because they need them as materials to redescribe and defy. Other

³⁵¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 373.

people are expenditure to make use of in order to meet the goal of novelty. Self-enlargement can thus be seen only as a first step toward rebelling against ordinariness. If we tie it up with Taylor's view of the immanent counter-Enlightenment, this means that people, and the common morality they share and uphold, serve as the basis of what self-creators aspire *not* to be like. Self-creators would most likely aim to transcend the morality of the herd to achieve fulfillment. In this interpretation, self-creation actually discourages the development of human commonwealth—a position that is quite contrary to Rortyan solidarity. What this means for our purposes is that even if self-creation uses the strategy of self-enlargement, we cannot convincingly stretch its value to say that it better encourages personal benevolence or inclines toward the social justice that Rorty seeks to uphold.

To emphasize even more the incompatibility of self-creation and morality, let us examine the ruckus stirred by the posthumous publication of Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte* (*Black Notebooks*, 1931-1941) in 2014. This development threatens to officially marry Heidegger's dark politics to his philosophy. Another of Rorty's esteemed self-creators, Heidegger reveals his perturbing anti-Semitic views more clandestinely in these works than ever before. In one of his entries, Heidegger makes the allegation that "the Jews are the agents of modernity and have disseminated modernity's evils," responsible for besmirching the spirit of the West; in another he claims that the Shoah plays "a decisive role in the history of Being because it coincides with the "supreme fulfilment of technology", which consumes itself after devouring everything else."³⁵² Rorty reads Heidegger's philosophical oeuvre as integral to his project of self-creation, and recognizes that in terms of redemption, "Heidegger's quest for authenticity was mixed in with a lot of vulgar ambition."³⁵³ If Rorty were to comment on the recent Heidegger event, we can imagine that he would once again caution against reading the situation with outrage. His view is that

³⁵² Donatella di Cesare, "Heidegger—Jews Self-destructed" in *Corriere della Sera* (9 February 2015) [http://www.corriere.it/english/15_febbraio_09/heidegger-jews-self-destructed-47cd3930-b03b-11e4-8615-d0fd07eabd28_print.html]. The *Schwarze Hefte* have not yet been translated into English.

³⁵³ Richard Rorty, "Diary" in the *London Review of Books* 12.3 (8 February 1990), 21.

we should not evaluate Heidegger's philosophical work in relation to his dubious moral character. He would probably also reintroduce the value of the private and public split, and show how Heidegger's writings are best left untranslated to public policy. This is a view he has expressed before, which I now quote at length:

Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, did a good job of showing how passages in Plato, Hegel, and Marx could be taken to justify Hitlerian or Leninist takeovers, but to make his case he had to leave out 90 percent of each man's thought. Such attempts to reduce a philosopher's thought to his possible moral or political influence are as pointless as the attempt to view Socrates as an apologist for Critias, or Jesus as just one more charismatic kook. Jesus was indeed among other things, a charismatic kook, and Heidegger was, among other things, an egomaniacal, anti-Semitic redneck. But we have gotten a lot out of the Gospels, and I suspect that philosophers for centuries to come will be getting a lot out of Heidegger's original and powerful narrative of the movement of Western thought from Plato to Nietzsche.

He further adds that:

If there is something anti-democratic in Christianity, or Islam, or Platonism, or Marxism, or Heideggerianism, or "deconstruction," it is not any particular doctrine about the nature of Man or Reason or History, but simply the tendency to take either religion or philosophy too seriously. This is the tendency toward fundamentalism, the assumption that anybody who disagrees with some given religious or philosophical doctrine is a danger to democratic society. No specific doctrine is much of a danger, but the idea that democracy depends on adherence to some such doctrine is.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, "Taking Philosophy Seriously," Review of *Heidegger et le Nazisme* by Victor Farias in *The New Republic* (11 April 1988), 33.

For Rorty, the danger hence lies in treating religion or philosophy as the core of a thinker's identity. He contends that even Heidegger took his project too seriously in aspiring to become "the official philosopher, the intellectual leader, of the National Socialist Movement," and in implying that in relation to the spiritual task of education and the German people, "only Heideggerian philosophy can bring the universities into the service of this destiny."³⁵⁵ While Rorty finds Heidegger a truly awful human being, he believes that this should not convince people to stop reading Heidegger's books on the grounds of being a Nazi philosopher, since there is no way "to correlate moral virtue with philosophical importance or philosophical doctrine."³⁵⁶ Despite himself, it is undeniable that Heidegger contributed gloriously to Western thought, and for this reason we should continue engaging his ideas.

But let us throw Rorty's question back to him: how does one not take religion, or philosophy, or self-creation too seriously? Asking this is important, especially if we take it that projects of self-creation, which serve to replace religion and philosophy as modern ideals, are being performed for personal redemption. Our goal in this analysis is not to sully Heidegger's importance as an original thinker, or to measure how much his anti-Semitism infects his history of Being. Rather, the objective is to inquire if Heidegger's tale of salvation divulges the undesirable aspects of self-creation as a redemptive path. Recall in Chapter II that redemption is all about achieving "a self-developing, self-transforming, and in a manner of speaking "self-completing" encounter with something larger than oneself." ³⁵⁷ Redemptive self-creation is an endeavor designed to be awe-inspiring, life-changing, and commitment-worthy. This makes it difficult to see how a passionate self-creator can treat her project—a project that can encompass life's private and public dimensions, as we have seen in the case of Heidegger—in a less or non-serious way. In the same breath, it would be unjust for inheritors of a philosophical legacy to

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 31.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 32.

³⁵⁷ Smith, "Rorty on Religion and Hope," 82.

contemplate ideas of their defamed intellectual heroes independently of their other, more disreputable work. As responsible readers, instead of seeking comfort in the private and public divide, or in the distinction between “philosophical talent and moral character,” the Heidegger model should all the more push us to question whether or not the projects of self-creation of some of the greatest modern thinkers are worth admiring and following. We should also inquire if they harm our democratic and egalitarian successes. In addition, assuming that they are truly dangerous, we should ask if we can contain these ideas within the private sphere as Rorty thinks we can learn to do.

This takes us to the third and final point: that a struggle arises when we combine the limits of private linguistic creativity and the excessive demands of Rorty’s version of self-invention. Rorty controls the dangers of self-creation not only by relegating it to the private sphere, but also by emphasizing that the best expression of this modern ideal is through language. Unlike solidarity, which can be manifested and celebrated in a shared way, the performance of self-creative acts is limited. These projects are an individual’s personal concern, and they should not negatively impact the public space. Ironically, Rorty acknowledges that private projects not only have socially useful offshoots, but that they are also *necessary* for transforming culture and society. Platonism and Paulinian Christianity, according to Rorty, were not wholly collective enterprises. They began as private, originary utopic fantasies of Plato and St. Paul: two historical individuals whose ideas were able to infiltrate and redirect the course of Western religion and philosophy.³⁵⁸ This shows how much the ingenuity of self-creators is integral in initiating social progress. Mentioning the likes of Pico della Mirandola, Charles Fourier and Jean-Paul Sartre, Rorty also states that “lots of the experiments in individual and social living that these self-creators carried out were, to be sure, disastrous failures. But such failures

³⁵⁸ Rorty, “Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 121.

are part of the price we pay for progress.”³⁵⁹ In short, without the revolutionary power of private imaginations, human civilization would be at risk of finding itself in a state of stagnation. So is it not incoherent for Rorty to valorize the private and public divide, when he recognizes that their interaction is critical for cultural development? Furthermore, does it not seem wrong to tie self-creation primarily to the innovation of linguistic expression, when we recognize that the social and political application of these projects is what notably tests their success?

Another way of looking at this issue is to examine how self-satisfaction is achieved and sustained when people “invent” themselves. With Rorty’s exemplars being famous poets and philosophers, we get the impression that public recognition is needed to realize these personal projects. Surely, without an audience to read and adore the incomparable brilliance behind the works of Proust and Derrida, then self-creation as an ideal loses much of its appeal. Part of its attractiveness, after all, lies in showing off the ability to interrogate conventional wisdom and morality, and in effect offer possibilities of transcending the ordinary. But even more than privatizing the range of expressing one’s genius, Rorty also wants to eliminate the elitism that is manifest in projects of self-invention. He argues that in his literary culture, self-creators will have no choice but to lose their airs, for there would be no distinctions between high and low cultures when it comes to redemption. This means that nonintellectuals will view literary intellectuals “in the same relaxed, tolerant, and uncomprehending way that we presently regard our neighbor’s obsession with bird watching, or collecting hubcaps, or discovering the secrets of the great pyramids.”³⁶⁰ Despite how nice it sounds, I think this setup is an unstable compromise. As Dews points out, “If asked why the individual should humble himself before liberal-democratic norms whose force—he insists—can never be more than “sociological,” it is not clear what cogent reply Rorty could have when offered. Why would such

³⁵⁹ Rorty, “Reply to Raymond D. Boisvert” (Essay: “Richard Rorty: Philosopher of the Common Man, Almost”) in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 572.

³⁶⁰ Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 488.

obedience not be simply one more version of that kow-towing to the world which he deplored? If we are trying to emancipate ourselves from the “masochistic urge to submit to the non-human,” why is submission to the local consensus of human beings (as the alternative to being labeled as crazy) any better?”³⁶¹

These problems are exacerbated by the excessive demands of self-creation, which are most strongly felt by ordinary human beings who want to practice this modern ideal. Again, this is integral to our critique, as our point is to show that self-creation is an aspiration that people in modernity can attune with in order to attain private spiritual satisfaction. To repeat, the examples of self-creators that Rorty uses are rare, shining individuals. But what about the arguably less lackluster, less authentic, and less autonomous projects of self-creation by other people? These are people who, no matter how many books they read, how hard they imagine, how many countries they visit, or how many sessions of psychoanalysis they undergo, will never be as equipped as Heidegger and Nietzsche to overcome their pasts or reign over their self-descriptions. They will neither reach the same level of exceptionality of other self-creators, nor enjoy the significant experience of self-validation that can only be derived from public acclaim. Even if Rorty argues that the self-creators in his secular utopia would recognize that self-perfection is unattainable, and “would have taken fully to heart the maxim that it is the journey that matters,”³⁶² the less gifted ones will be aware that their own journeys will never be as good enough as other ones. In these cases, these people will become more vulnerable to feelings of insufficiency and disillusionment, or even prone to moments of delusion. If they cannot ignore their inadequacies, how then can they practice fashioning new self-identities in a fulfilling way in modernity?

I want to end this section by quoting Smith, whose questions summarize and further illuminate my own concerns about self-creation:

³⁶¹ Dews, “‘The Infinite is Losing its Charm’: Richard Rorty’s Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique” in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 645.

³⁶² Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *The Rorty Reader*, 488.

But isn't it a lot to ask of individuals that they interpret the source of their "saving experiences" as applying to themselves alone? And if they are interpreted that way, won't that dilute the experience and weaken its "saving power"? Can I have an authentic experience of salvation if I experience it as a thoroughly private and subjective affair, of no relevance or significance to anyone else? There is an issue, in other words, about the satisfactoriness of fulfilled religious desire once it is divided into self-regarding and other regarding components. A related issue concerns the location of a flourishing religious life, the conditions for which Rorty's pragmatism is meant to capture. Is the locus nothing more than the sum of individual lives, or might it also stretch ineluctably beyond that, to a collective way of life that can't properly be characterised as an aggregate of individual projects?³⁶³

Rorty's endorsement of solidarity meets the challenge posed by Smith's final question. Building solidarity is something he elevates as a religious public concern, as we have analyzed in the third chapter. I will now end Chapter IV by offering a critique of Rorty's proposal.

Shaky Solidarities

Similar to my critique of self-creation, I divide my analysis of solidarity into three interconnected points. First, following up on a suggestion initially put by Fraser, I consider whether Rorty's depiction of democratic solidarity is problematically homogeneous. The challenge behind identifying with Rorty's all-embracing view of human solidarity is that it is described in general, abstract, and at times unclear language. Second, I examine whether the life of "comfortable togetherness" endorsed by Rorty is a spiritual match to the solidarity in support of transcendent religious causes. I once more invoke Žižek's discussion of modern fundamentalism, but this time with emphasis on his rendition of Nietzsche's

³⁶³ Smith, "Rorty on Religion and Hope," 91.

prediction of the West turning into a civilization of “pale atheists.” I contend that Rorty’s characterization of liberal democracy is at risk of endorsing this cultural destiny, and that this contravenes against his effort of nourishing lives with meaning and spiritual fulfillment. Finally, I tackle the complexity behind the challenge of extending human sympathies to build solidarity in a literary culture. I follow Rée’s lead in exploring how Rorty’s religion of democracy needs more support to effectively mobilize this imaginative capacity.

Fraser takes the line of interpreting Rorty’s vision of solidarity as homogenous. In an early criticism, she argues that Rorty proposes “a quasi-Durkheimian view according to which society is integrated by way of a single monolithic and all-encompassing solidarity;” that by going straight from objectivity to solidarity, Rorty “homogenizes social space, assuming tendentially that there are no deep social cleavages capable of generating conflicting solidarities and opposing “we’s”;” and last, that there exists “no place in Rorty’s framework for genuine radical political discourses rooted in *oppositional* solidarities.”³⁶⁴ This is an extreme interpretation, and it misses the point behind Rorty’s politics. It is clear that he does not idealize solidarity to the point of believing that conflicting identities and ideals can cease to exist in a community, and neither is he aiming for a homogenous solidarity in his secular utopia. Rorty supports liberal democracy because of his respect for pluralism. He believes that the democratic setup is the best arrangement we have come up so far to uphold this value, and that through the contributions of Rawls and Dewey, we can now see better in theory how “the liberal state can ignore the difference between the moral identities of Glaucon and of Thrasymachus, just as it ignores the difference between the religious identities of a Catholic archbishop and a Mormon prophet.”³⁶⁵

But at the same time, we have to remember that Rorty wants his liberal politics to be based on something great and aspirational. Despite their varied points

³⁶⁴ Fraser, “Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy” in *Unruly Practices, Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, 98; 104; 105.

³⁶⁵ Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” in *The Rorty Reader*, 255.

of differences, he wants citizens to feel that they are in solidarity with the democratic cause. Remember that solidarity for him is about extending our range of loyalties to the point that we treat each individual as “one of us,” so that the joy and suffering that other people experience become our personal concern, too. Rorty raises the example of how we can convince others to care for young blacks living in poverty in the United States: “Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human beings? We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow *Americans*—to insist that it is outrageous that a fellow *American* should live without hope.”³⁶⁶ The most effective way of eliciting this intimate connection for Rorty is not by focusing on an abstract, general idea such as universal humanity. Rather, it is by cultivating a powerful sense of kinship and developing a concrete identity we can share with others. Reading stories, imagining alternative futures, and conversing with people are some of the ways we can widen our sentimental imagination to achieve these goals.

In short, Rorty here is not only trying to find ways of living based on tolerance and respect, but more so he desires that we become passionate about our love for freedom and social justice. He wants us to affiliate ourselves with some form of national (possibly even—one day—global) spirit that can serve as our source of democratic self-pride. At this point, I think that Fraser’s criticism should be revisited when we talk of treating solidarity as a spiritual ideal that everyone in Rorty’s liberal utopia should enjoin. As a redemptive path, I argue that Rortyan solidarity may be charged as guilty of operating in a misleading way. My analysis of this issue is very similar to my earlier critique about redemptive truth, where I contend that people’s faith in religion and science are strengthened by the articulation of belief and the presence of competition. I think that solidarity is like that as well. In Chapter III, we have entertained the notion that solidarities are not entirely based on the simple fact of skin color, gender, or religion. Group identity is generated and reinforced precisely when it measures itself against other standards. It finds its intensification in

³⁶⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 191.

the process of being challenged by other systems (e.g., East/West, Black/White, Male/Female). The defense of a particular identity is thus what serves as meaningful and even redemptive in the lives of members. It is also the source of the group egotism that Rorty detests and hopes to cure with self-enlargement.

Solidarities usually thrive when they have something to compare themselves against, and more so when they have clear opponents. For instance, when the populace desires liberation from a dictator or colonizer (as we have seen in the historical cases of Latin American and Southeast Asian countries), or fights against a political belief-system (as manifested by the divide between the Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War), solidarity is obvious because the goals of particular revolutions and ideologies are well-defined. But this is not something we find in Rorty's conception of a general redeeming solidarity in a liberal democracy. The aims are not clear. In his case, there is no common identity or goal to share (global utopian democratic socialism?), no obvious rivals to compete against (unkindness? humiliation? pain?), and no clear limit to self-enlargement to pursue (universal brotherhood?). The objectives of Rortyan solidarity are wanting in this sense. This ambiguity is perhaps connected to the general and abstract way in which Rorty depicts his own adversaries. He often constructs his opposition against certain ideas using universalizing and abstract terms, e.g., "Platonism," "essentialism," "egotism," and the like. My claim here is that this abstractness also rubs off onto his alternatives to them, which is to say that it also makes them suffer the same lack of concretization and vividness. In consequence, this hinders ideas like "utopian solidarity" or "kindness" from becoming a source of real enthusiasm, if only because what they entail are unclear, despite Rorty's use of many examples to illustrate their substance. Thus, brandishing a vague solidarity may be encouraging less inspiration than what Rorty hopes it could, given his method of philosophizing.

But let us assume for a moment that we can achieve a kind of life where existing side by side others in the name of respect and charity is possible. This means that democratic life need not be as highly and as constantly aspirational as Rorty

pictures it to be. What really matters is that everyone would eventually see the value behind minimizing public interference and maximizing personal happiness, and would just get on with living. Rorty would no doubt accept this more moderate alternative, because it would be enough to create a positive and sympathetic take on Western culture: “When tolerance and comfortable togetherness become the watchwords of a society, one should no longer hope for world-historical greatness. If such greatness — radical difference from the past, a dazzlingly unimaginable future — is what one wants, ascetic priests like Plato, Heidegger, and Suslov will fill the bill. But if it is not, novelists like Cervantes, Dickens, and Kundera may suffice.”³⁶⁷ Recall that for Rorty, we have resources in our developing literary culture to make this tempered ambition come true. He argues that at present, novels have done much more for the imagination when it comes to raising awareness and sensitivity about the particularities of human life and suffering than religion and philosophy. He contends that when we are able to give up the ambitions of the latter cultures, then we may end up having a kinder world in the end. But being willing to forgo the determination for greatness raises another challenging question about solidarity. Can Rortyan solidarity wield an adequate amount of spiritual force—that is, a power grounded on the protection of human freedoms and a compromise of “live and let live”—to make the lives of its citizens flourish? To put it differently, will the values of “tolerance” and “comfortable togetherness” breed enough utopian energy for people to keep aiming for a richer and more meaningful existence?

This peaceable, convenient pace of living looks tame compared to the life of passionate solidarity inspired by great transcendent causes. Žižek, in the same essay about modern Islamic fundamentalism cited earlier, states that:

It effectively may appear that the split between the permissive First World and the fundamentalist reaction to it runs more and more along the lines of the opposition between leading a long satisfying life full of

³⁶⁷ Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 81.

material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one's life to some transcendent Cause. Is this antagonism not the one between what Nietzsche called "passive" and "active" nihilism? We in the West are the Nietzschean Last Men, immersed in stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the struggle up to their self-destruction. William Butler Yeats' "Second Coming" seems perfectly to render our present predicament: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." This is an excellent description of the current split between anemic liberals and impassioned fundamentalists. "The best" are no longer able fully to engage, while "the worst" engage in racist, religious, sexist fanaticism.³⁶⁸

As we have seen in our previous critique of egotism, Žižek argues that this fundamentalism is inauthentic and does not deserve an idealized portrayal. Rather than trusting in the legitimacy of their cause, he alleges that its members are more threatened by their attraction to Western culture, which arouses their resentment and envy. But this observation does not negate the possibility of examining whether or not Rorty's solidarity is at risk of endorsing what is described here as a passive, passionless cultural destiny, and of aiding Nietzsche's prediction of pale atheism to come to fruition. Rorty, of course, is not a bland liberal. His romantic pragmatism is designed to justify the democratic liberalization of the sources of redemption, as I have reconstructed in Chapter II. He validates that we can all have various personal and public symbols of ultimate concern. He also supports creative experimentation in living, and endorses the cultivation of a vibrant literary culture.

But while Rorty's picture of a wealthy, culturally and spiritually meaningful West is appealing, I think there is more to the Nietzschean threat of a "passive" nihilism that needs to be considered here. A life of individual ease and entitlement is also in danger of slipping to complacency and forgetfulness of shared and hard-won ideals. Comfort and privilege can also lapse to a culture of boredom and apathy, or

³⁶⁸ Žižek, "Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?"

one of selfishness and recklessness—as Lord Henry provocatively advises the vain protagonist, “The only horrible thing in the world is ennui, Dorian. That is the one sin for which there is no forgiveness.”³⁶⁹ This is the existential issue that runs in the writings of Nietzsche, Baudelaire, and Wilde. They reveal the superficial ambitions and trivial concerns of many citizens of the affluent modern West. Even when these individuals have the best resources and opportunities to make the most out of their lives, they seem to find a way to idly or irresponsibly waste these occasions away. What I mean to imply here is that the nihilism problem—the idea that there is nothing that *really* matters—can resurface in a space where even living is at its most comfortable and privileged.

Western life can thus also be a source of discontent, so that a life of “active” religious fundamentalism appears more enriched and meaningful in comparison to it. Analyzing some recent examples can support this idea. It is curious, for instance, why Muslim youth—some as young as fifteen!—from progressive democratic countries like Britain, Australia, and Austria were enthralled by fundamentalist rhetoric, and have even risked traveling to Syria to join *ISIS*.³⁷⁰ While the situation is a very complex one, it is not too far off to hypothesize that a significant part of the campaign’s success may have something to do with social dissatisfactions with the Western way of life, side by side the powerful impression that the alternative of a radical God-centered crusade offers. These converts are being promised both a lifetime and an afterlife of spiritual and moral righteousness in their rejection of other cultures—conditions that the post-Enlightenment modern era are not tendering anymore. This is the kind of greatness that fundamentalism has in its tow, which other available solidarities perhaps lack. In addition, global and political calamities in the past years—such as environmental activism, the Ferguson shooting, and the

³⁶⁹ Wilde, “The Picture of Dorian Gray” in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, 141.

³⁷⁰ “Syria girls: CCTV shows UK teenagers at Istanbul bus station” in *BBC News*, 1 Mar 2015 [<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-31679798>]; Francesca Trianni and Andrew Katz, “Why Westerners Are Fighting for ISIS” in *Time Magazine*, 5 September 2014 [<http://time.com/3270896/isis-iraq-syria-western-fighters/>].

Sydney Siege—have no doubt inspired an overwhelming level of empathy from many. These are good examples of solidarities that have breached national and cultural borders in their effect of evoking sympathy from people all over the world. However, the power of the solidarity that these incidents stir does not usually last. These perturbing incidents are often eclipsed by other catastrophes that come along. Furthermore, while these events can shock, they do not fully disturb the rhythm of most people's comfortable lives. As Žižek puts it, the "stupid daily pleasures" of people's mundane lives occupy a much bigger role than other concerns—perhaps even bigger than they really ought to. In short, while secular, democratic, and cross-cultural forms of solidarity exist, they seem to fall short when compared to the vibrant quality of modern religious fundamentalism.

Now, we come to the last point. Assuming that the world can take a fully secular turn, can democratic solidarity serve as its unifying ideal in the modern world? If it can, what then are its potential areas for failure? I think that the most pressing weakness behind the proposal relates specifically to Rorty's trust in the capacity to enlarge human sympathy through the imagination, which functions as the moral backbone of his literary culture. His argument is that increased familiarity beckons a greater chance of emotional connectivity. The more exposed we are to images and narratives about other people's lives, the stronger the chances of extending our range of care and sentiment to include their experiences. However, illustrating a couple of relevant examples can easily place the sentimental solidarity hypothesis in doubt. The picture of gaunt children in Africa, for instance, can be persuasive enough to convince the American middle class to donate a portion of their salary to the World Health Organization or UNICEF. But at the same time, this very same set of people may also find the ubiquitous sight of blacks living in the poorer areas of Brooklyn and Chicago, or underprivileged Latin American and Asian immigrants in Los Angeles, something to sneer at and be ashamed of. They might even support movements to segregate or even eliminate these groups. But why does the familiar breed contempt and ill-will, instead of evoking understanding and

sympathy? Another case is that a person need not be well-read and exposed to many of the world's pains in order to care. Cannot a poor, uneducated Filipino be more compassionate than a rich, educated man in the First World? This is obviously a real possibility. The example significantly questions whether or not *linguistically expressed* sentiments are the bonds that truly matter, as Rorty seems to emphasize in his language-centered paradigm. But don't actual feelings of pain and suffering—even unarticulated ones—evoke a stronger sense of connection over imagined ties? Don't they need to be given more credit and emphasis as a basis for solidarity? Also, even the biggest consumers of books, history, and media may turn out to be the persons least concerned about the humiliation and grief of others. Their enthusiasm to discover the experiences of people and cultures may be based on their own curiosity and entertainment. Again, if the motivation of the reader for self-enlargement is self-perfection or self-satisfaction, then an increased fraternal sentimentality is only a bonus, but not a guarantee. This, evidently, is not enough to generate a feeling of brotherly solidarity.

These observations can either weaken the argument that there is a significant value in exploring the moral power of a literary culture, or strengthen the idea that the nature of the sentimental imagination may be more complicated than Rorty has painted it out to be. Rée correctly raises an argument that supports the latter, and contra Rorty, even suggests that philosophizing the human essence has an integral role to play in fostering solidarity:

Why assume, for instance, that we can feel solidarity only with those whom we take to be similar to us? Surely we are all susceptible to sympathies that jump straight over our neighbours and peers and equals and familiars to people we take to be totally unkind and unkin? Otherness can be a motive for love and passion as well as hatred or indifference, and distance is often a positive aid to identification. Weeping children whose language you cannot even understand, and whose haircuts and clothing you cannot decipher, may be far more affecting

than the ungrateful snivelling kids in expensive trainers who jostle on your street corner smoking cigarettes and asking for money, shouting insults at you, and trashing cars. If you are to summon up some sympathy for these co-nationals, and stop hating them as the spiteful violent racists you immediately know them to be, you will have to make an effort to see them hazily and indefinitely, as if through bobbly glass: to apprehend them metaphysically, in short, and purely as abstract human beings.³⁷¹

Rorty, naturally, does not endorse the imaginative enlargement of sympathy as the only way toward moral progress. He recognizes that there are other concrete ways of actively advocating political and social justice. However, Rée's criticism has bearing in the sense of rethinking our treatment of the imagination. If it is indeed more complex than we take it to be, then imaginative education must be taken more seriously. Should we continue endorsing self-enlargement and then expect good ethical behavior as a possible offshoot, as Rorty's project implies? Or should we instead support the effort to skew the public imagination toward a more explicit, secular, and liberal moral direction? These are interesting questions that a literary culture, should it come to fruition, must be able to deal with.

³⁷¹ Jonathan Rée, "Rorty's Nation" in *Radical Philosophy* 87 (1998), 20.

Chapter V: Conclusion

I conclude this thesis in a two-fold manner. First, I offer a reiteration of how Rorty's project of modern redemption addresses the phenomenon of spiritual disjointedness in a novel way. I also crystallize its contribution toward advancing the contemporary debates around the spiritual milieu of modernity. Second, I provide a summation of the risks and challenges that have arisen based on our exploration of Rorty's work. This framework should serve well in rendering the main strengths and weaknesses of our reconstruction of Rortyan redemption. It should also guide us in discovering other research directions that this study can lead to.

Taylor's idea of being "spiritually out of joint" is the phenomenon we have raised in the introductory chapter. We have interpreted it as the general description of the condition that contemporary accounts of redemption and the sacred endeavor to remedy. To recall, Taylor states that apart from the physical, mental, and emotional frustrations of daily life, a person could also feel deeply out of sync with his or her self and community. The experience differs in every cultural epoch, and is expressed conceptually in a variety of ways. Some of the common descriptions include "being lost, or condemned, or exiled, or unintegrated, or without meaning, or insubstantial, or empty."³⁷² Taylor surmises that in every context, there would also correspond some general approach to overcome this negative condition. There exists a way for a person to become "full," or to be "found," or to be integrated, justified, or completed, whether in this life or the next. This means that while existential disconnection can happen to any human being and at any point in time, the redemptive responses to the problem can also take on different forms. The range varies from "communion with the cosmic order, or identity with Brahman, or unity with God, or harmony with nature, or the attainment of rational insight, or finding the strength to say "yes" to everything one is, or hearing the voice of nature within,

³⁷² Taylor, "The Moral Topography of the Self" in *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory*, 300.

or coming to accept finitude,"³⁷³ and the like. What can be gleaned from this observation is that there is no unifying sense of what salvation or redemption ultimately is. The condition of eternity or absoluteness is not a universally fitting solution for spiritual disjointedness. What truly matters is that the inhabitants of a particular context are responsive to, or in Heideggerian terms, *attuned* to whatever Being, truth, person, event, or relationship the power of redemption makes itself felt. In this thesis, we have shown that in order to be saved from the contemporary version of spiritual disjointedness, we should find out where the moral or spiritual strength truly lies in modern culture, and work on making its redeeming power come alive.

The consensus between Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly is that the most salient manifestation of being "spiritually out of joint" in modernity is condensed in the mood of nihilism. Nihilism is the climate of moral and spiritual disempowerment that has resulted from the death of God and the rise of an impoverished world of Science. Now that universal religious and scientific answers are losing their grip on human beings, questions about how to live a meaningful and spiritually enriched existence have come to fore. This explains the philosophical interest in the contemporary debates on modern spiritual life, with Taylor proposing a new return to theism, and Dreyfus and Kelly advocating a modernized version of Homeric polytheism. In our analysis of Rorty's view of redemption, we have arrived at the conclusion that his contribution does not lie in overcoming the effects of modern nihilism that the other three thinkers are so worried about. This is not his main concern at all. He does not raise or broaden the stakes of redemptive re-spiritualization the way Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly do, if by this we mean finding a path to repair nihilistic lives or cure a pervasive climate of meaninglessness.

This admission, at first, may lead a reader to think that Rorty is completely irrelevant to the debates about the spiritual condition of modernity. However, we have discovered from a more extensive treatment of Rorty's project that he can help

³⁷³ Ibid.

us rethink the way we understand the relationship between nihilism and modernity. My thesis shows that Rorty's real input is in finding a way to undercut the nihilism problem by treating the malaise of egotism, which can be construed as the underlying source of nihilism in the first place. I have done this by revealing the inextricable link between egotism and nihilism: that prior to becoming nihilists, human beings first suffer from the religious or philosophical egotism that Rorty's self-enlargement strategy tries to address. This is a merit that is exclusive to his account of redemption—a previously unconsidered perspective to advance the current debates about how we can experience meaning and spiritual fulfillment in the modern world.

On the one hand, this makes Rorty's view modest compared to the original motives of other accounts, as it does not target human lives that are already infected by the feelings of lostness, emptiness, and despair that escort modern nihilism. We cannot deny this fact. But since this is not Rorty's focus, it would be unjust to ask how his story of redemption can solve the nihilism problem. This is also why on the other hand, we should appreciate the philosophical ambition coming into play in Rorty's vision that we have not seen in other narratives before. Given the way we have fashioned Rorty's issue in this thesis, egotism merits being seen as a moral and spiritual malaise. Religious fundamentalists, dogmatic atheists, racists, sexists, bigots—possibly all who are militantly unwilling to welcome other opinions, and who feel justified in ostracizing groups of people they deem unworthy of respect—are living, breathing examples of the egotists Rorty idealizes his literary culture to be free of. Through Rorty, we have hypothesized that their predisposition for group egotism can be linked to our inheritance of the metaphysical frameworks of religion and science. These systems are responsible for endorsing the principle that sources of absolute and incorrigible authority can support their egotistic views. The collapse of these bulwarks of belief is also the cause of nihilism in the lives of these people.

Rorty's pragmatism breathes a new perspective to this issue. It repudiates the philosophical idea that ultimate foundations exist in the first place, and argues that

we only have ourselves to be responsible for. The possibility of a better, kinder future rests purely on human hands alone. If we are to live in a better world, we should learn to treat egotism as a curable fault and cultivate modern strategies of self-enlargement. In suggesting this, Rorty engages how the egotistic-nihilistic destiny of the Western philosophical narrative can be circumvented and maneuvered toward a secularist utopia. He thinks that Religion and Philosophy are only cultural phases that can and should be overcome, especially because their version of unattainable redemption *promotes* egotism. Literature, in contrast, can help alleviate us from this fault. In a culture of literature, people will seek redemption from egotism not only because they can become potential victims of nihilism. More importantly, they will realize that redemptive relationships are the best resource for experiencing meaningful and spiritually fulfilled lives, and that their egotism could be preventing them from achieving this end. For this reason, they will be motivated to expand their sense of self to heal this moral fault.

While we have seen that Rorty makes an original contribution to the contemporary debate about nihilism and redemption, we have also identified a number of problems with his proposal. The first set of objections I have raised in the critical chapter relates to Rorty's pragmatism. As a meta-philosophical approach, his pragmatism aspires to save the spiritual content and ambition of religion in a post-religious, post-philosophical world. Unfortunately, this framework does not possess the conceptual and practical strength required to perform this function adequately. The burden that his anti-metaphysical, non-essentialist, and non-universalist view needs to fulfill is to formulate where a renewed and collective sense of authority and conviction can be derived. But it is not evident that the language of contingency, nominalism, irony, historicity, luck, and imagination that he endorses is powerful or consistent enough to support this radical hope. Rorty also modifies the religious impulse for human redemption in his work. In his account, redemption takes on a completely different character as romantic polytheism. It is altered to become finite, secular, but still spiritual uplifting on both an individualistic and collective level. I

have emphasized two reservations behind this revision. First, while his interpretation responds to the utilitarian aspirations of religion, my view is that it falls short of answering existential ones—that is, aspirations that can only be made sense of by invoking a richer and larger moral order of truth, justice, good, evil, love, etc. Since the resources for weaving this existential narrative is still deficient in Rorty's finite polytheism, it may not be able to supply the depth of human meaning and experience that other systems, i.e., faiths and cultures that believe in the transcendent, can offer. Second, Rorty's argumentation also gives us the impression that the religious impulse for redemption is based on benefit, and not the rectification of human fault. Instead of claiming explicitly that self-enlargement should be regarded as our moral duty, he banks more on the suggestion that we should pursue self-enlargement to enrich the content of our projects of self-creation and solidarity. While Rorty of course argues that our responsibilities to ourselves and to other people should come first, I still think that the misplaced emphasis on existential advantage as the motivation for redemption makes his position appear less compelling than it should be. I also have issues with Rorty's political suggestion to privatize religion. Privatization, in my reading, hives off the spiritual power tendered by religion to support democracy and egalitarianism. Pragmatic theism and liberation theology, for instance, have been indispensable in transforming the world. The problem here is that it is not evident how the spiritual power of these movements can survive in a secular utopia that demands practicing faiths in a restricted way.

The second set of criticisms focuses on Rorty's literary culture, which functions as his cultural replacement for religion in his later works. He hypothesizes the literary culture as the future context that can house our sources of existential meaning and spiritual enthusiasm in the modern world. My general critique here is that Rorty displays the tendency to disregard the significance of certain operational concepts in religion and social practice. The consequence of this dismissiveness is that his alternatives do not quite fit the roles he expects them to fulfill. For instance,

Rorty overstates the role that redemptive truth plays in religion and science. He believes that redemptive truths provide a complete, unchanging, and self-satisfying system of belief. In doing so, he fails to sufficiently consider how the activity of defending challenged beliefs can actually amplify their redemptive role in human lives. My view, in short, is that conflict can reinforce the spirit of redemptive truths. Also, in dividing redemption as “cognitive” (truth-based) and “non-cognitive” (relation-based), Rorty makes it appear that the function of truth can be let go of altogether, and that relationships are enough for redemptive power to come alive. My view is that this distinction is misleading. As we have seen, both truth and relation are important in sustaining hope, especially for religious followers.

Even Rorty’s innovative diagnosis of modernity as suffering from the malaise of egotism carries its own set of complications, and this forms my final group of objections to Rorty’s project. When we scrutinize the nature of modern religious fundamentalism, we discover that his definition of egotism as self-satisfaction loses its stability. Contrary to Rorty’s understanding, the hostility of fundamentalists can perhaps be better interpreted as driven by the inferiority and resentment they feel about their less privileged position, instead of their egotistic superiority. Defining egotism’s conceptual counterpart of non-egotism is also a problematic task. This substantiation is required in order for the new ideal to become defensible. Sadly, we do not have a wealth of sources to draw from, e.g., powerful secular heroes of non-egotism, or descriptions of non-religious conditions of selflessness, to concretize what non-egotism means. Our analysis of self-creation and solidarity, Rorty’s self-enlarging therapies for egotism, also reveals that these ideas need more philosophical fine-tuning. While both are good candidates for modern spiritual values, they are also riddled with theoretical and practical problems that make strategizing their roles in modern life difficult. When we talk about self-creation, we find that Rorty’s proposal endorses an instrumentalizing attitude toward human beings. This is not a morally viable perspective to endorse. Treating persons as tools to play with—even in private!—is a strategy that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. It also does little to

endorse the moral sensitivity or kindness that the self-enlargement process is supposed to encourage. Furthermore, the nature of some self-creative endeavors is not only irrelevant to public morals, but more so, they are completely antithetical to them. This is especially true when we talk about Nietzschean projects of self-creation. In principle, these are designed to *reject* public morality, which strengthens the idea that self-creation, even when it uses a self-enlargement strategy, remains irreconcilable to efforts directed toward the common good. Also, Rorty's tactic of privatizing self-invention seems self-defeating upon further exploration. Self-creation loses its appeal when the elements required to successfully affirm its novelty and success, e.g., having an audience to shock, or experiencing public acclaim as a result, are restricted. These limiting conditions weaken the radical force that private projects generate.

Similar issues also abound when we tackle solidarity. Rorty's democratic solidarity is guilty of appearing as homogenous and abstract because of the philosophical language that he employs. Ideas like "utopian solidarity" or "kindness" cannot become a source of real enthusiasm unless they are sufficiently clarified and expressed in more concrete terms. More so, the challenge of extending human sympathies is also more complex than Rorty has painted it out to be. The paradoxes of the sentimental imagination—such as how a person can pity suffering animals, but feel no sympathy for starving immigrants in their neighborhood—are found everywhere. My view is that the ethical function of the moral imagination requires more complicated philosophical work before it can be solidly defended as a basis for building solidarity.

To close: in this thesis, we have mentioned that the benchmark of assessing the redemptive power of an ideal depends on whether or not its seekers have a good chance of being in sync with its spiritual potential. This attunement is required to fulfill the goal of self-integration, or at least to find "meaningfulness" in life. The problems with Rorty's pragmatism and the literary culture, as well as the weaknesses of self-creation and solidarity, lead us to question if Rorty has already

given us the best vocabulary, framework, and values for redemption in modernity, or if we can come up with better and more sustainable standards. If our inclination leans toward the latter, then the creative space is open to consider other Axial and post-Axial redemptive possibilities to the call for human meaning and spirituality.

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