

CAN THERE BE PROGRESS IN PHILOSOPHY?

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I

Whether there is, or even can be, progress in philosophy is problematic. There is progress in intellectual history for it is evident enough that human conceptual resources have expanded and developed in the course of history and it is evident as well that these conceptual resources have in the course of time become material forces in the lives of human beings. However, these things do not entail, or indeed in any way establish, that philosophy has progressed.

'Philosophy' does not name a natural kind. It has denoted various things in the course of its history. In earlier periods philosophy was not clearly distinct from other activities including science. However, in the modern era in the West, philosophy became increasingly an epistemologically based activity, claiming a disciplinary matrix that would make it a cultural overseer or adjudicator and, with this self-image, it came to make claims to autonomy.

Philosophy, so conceived, has not been able to make good its claim to be a cultural overseer or referee. We do not — or so at least it appears — have anything that counts as philosophical knowledge. Neither in its epistemological phrasing nor in its successor logico-semantic phrasing, has philosophy been able to cash in on its foundationalist claims. Yet it is important to note that this is something which has been argued — if established is too strong — within philosophy itself so that philosophy conceived as a distinct foundational discipline with a distinct disciplinary technique has — or so it is not unnatural to argue — dug its own grave.

If this is so, we can reasonably see this as part of a development of intellectual history in which there is intellectual progress but no philosophical progress. (It is question-begging to tie the two together.) Philosophy, however, can be differently construed. 'Philosophy', in an older and looser sense, as an attempt to see things in a comprehensive way in the attempt to make sense of our lives, is as old as the hills, not wedded to a professional discipline and is not at all about to wither away. To show that in a somewhat more rigorous way a conception of a development of that could be teased out of a diverse set of activities would be to show that philosophy could progress. We could, that is, show progress in philosophy if we could show that something in accordance with that untechnical conception of philosophy, and firmly in its spirit, could be developed in a more argument-based and theoretically constrained way, yet still effectively serving the same ends with the

same rationale. I will examine whether anything like this can be plausibly shown.

II

I will assume here, what I have argued elsewhere, namely that Richard Rorty's application of Wittgenstein's dissolution of philosophy is very close to the mark indeed. (Rorty, 1979, 1982, 1983a; Nielsen 1984a, 1986a, 1986b, forthcoming c) More than Wittgenstein or Wittgenstein's more orthodox followers, say someone like Malcolm, Ambrose, or even Rhees, Rorty has an historical awareness and sensitivity with a crucial integration of that awareness in the way he does philosophy. (Rorty, 1984a, pp. 49–75) Rorty gives us, as an exemplary tale, an intriguing historical narrative, the correctness of whose details is less important than the plausibility of its overall picture. (Of course, if too many details are wrong, then its compelling force should, at least, be lost.) In the telling of this narrative, Rorty, following Wittgenstein, has shown how philosophy has so developed that any interesting formulation of foundationalism has been undermined. (Goldman, 1981, pp. 424–429; Hunter, 1983, pp. 621–645; Schwartz, 1983, pp. 51–67) The pragmatists and the positivists, if not Kant, had already undermined the traditional 'perennial philosophy' and later developments – Wittgenstein and the pragmatization of positivism we find in Quine and Sellars – have undermined the epistemological foundationalism of a broadly Cartesian-Kantian sort and its successors in programmatic analytical philosophy, to wit the programmes of such philosophers as Rudolf Carnap, Hans Reichenbach, Gustav Bergmann and C. I. Lewis. Attempts to respond to Rorty by Jaegwon Kim and Ian Hacking, to take some of the acutest of his critics, have not been noteworthy for their success, and, even if they had succeeded, given what they have freely conceded to Rorty, there is very little left of a programmatic sort in the tradition. So laundered it is, to mix my metaphors, very small potatoes. (Hacking, 1980; Kim, 1980; Nielsen, forthcoming c, forthcoming d)

I shall assume all of these very contentious and perhaps overstated, things here. If I am substantially mistaken in these claims and assumptions, then what would and would not constitute progress in philosophy would have to be looked at rather differently.

So standing, as I do, in essential agreement with the core of Rorty's claim about the-end-of-philosophy-as-a disciplinary matrix, I shall turn to an inspection of two at least initially promising directions that a successor subject of philosophy could take or, depending on how you want to conceive it, philosophy itself, more broadly conceived, could take. (Take, as John Wisdom might say, your pick here for nothing substantial turns on which characterization is adopted.) The first, to get a slogan for it, I shall call philosophy-as-critical-theory and the second I shall call, in the Deweyian tradition, philosophy-as-piecemeal-social-criticism focussing on what Dewey called

the problems of men.¹ I shall, after characterizing both views, argue that promising as it initially sounds the philosophy-as-the-problem-of-men-approach, unless embedded in a more comprehensive critical theory, comes, as philosophy, to naught and that critical theory, properly understood, offers us something of a plausible hope as a successor subject to philosophy and as a basis for believing that, even with the death of epistemology and traditional analytic philosophy, there can be progress in philosophy. (It should also be noted that critical theory can and should, I shall argue, incorporate the problems-of-men-approach within it as a proper part.) Whether or not there actually is progress in philosophy will, I shall be arguing, depend on whether the complicated and ramified research programme that is critical theory pans out.

III

Let us start this task by trying to put this in perspective. Where we are convinced of the end of philosophy, where philosophy is construed as either epistemology, metaphysics or conceptual analysis, we might then just close up shop. Maybe such laid off philosophers should go into computer science or linguistics or mathematics or law or the history of ideas or perhaps even religious studies. However, we might try instead to make something of philosophy, remembering, in trying to forge something different than the standard analytic fare, the unproblematic use of 'philosophy' as an attempt, in trying to make sense of our lives, to see how things hang together in the broadest sense of that term. Starting there, but wanting in some way to move to something more determinate, more argument and theory based than that popular and unproblematic conception of philosophy, it is natural to ask if there really is any task left for philosophy. Is there, that is, anything reasonable, beyond an imaginative trying to see how things hang together, left for philosophy to be? Is there anyway philosophy might reconstruct itself? I want, as I have just remarked, to pursue two distinct but not incompatible ways. Neither are new ways though both, until rather recently, at least in Anglo-American and Scandinavian philosophical circles, have been in a cultural limbo and both have some standard, as well as some not so standard, difficulties. I want to see what, if anything of much value, comes out on the other end when we have faced these difficulties.

The first reconstruction, I shall examine, comes from the pragmatist tradition and was articulated most forcefully by John Dewey. Dewey was,

¹ I do not like the sexist ring of 'the problems of men' but that phrase, coming from a time when we were even less sensitive about sexist language than we are now, is so much identified with a programmatic claim of Dewey's – a claim which is not at all sexist – that I cannot forebear from using it. That Dewey most certainly does not appear to have been a sexist makes me somewhat, but only somewhat, less uneasy about using a phrase which has a sexist ring.

as Rorty recognizes, as thorough an anti-foundationalist as any of the anti-foundationalists of a later vintage. He took a thoroughly naturalistic point of view and resolutely set aside epistemological and metaphysical investigations. (When he himself talked, as in *Experience and Nature*, of developing a metaphysical view, he did not mean what is normally meant.) He rejected the idea that there was any distinctively philosophical knowledge or philosophical way of knowing and he was thoroughly contextualist about justification.

Dewey believed that neither philosophers nor anyone else could provide any fundamental justificatory foundations for science, morality, politics, religion or anything else. All justification, it is necessary to recognize, is context-bound and inescapably involves reference to existing social practices. Still we, as human beings, stand barraged not by 'eternal philosophical problems' but by specific problems of life which are not exclusively or at all the special problems of any discipline. Moreover, though justification appeals to many different things in many different contexts and involves centrally an appeal to a myriad of social practices, it is the case that social practices not infrequently conflict and we want, if we can, to discriminate the better from the worse. The Deweyian belief is that, if properly reconstructed, philosophy can play a critically constructive role here. (Dewey, 1917, 1939, pp. 245–363, 1946, pp. 3–20, 169–170, 211–353, 1957, 1960). And this will, of course, come to trying to provide answers to what Dewey calls 'the problems of men'. This, for us, in our time, comes to examining the problems of abortion, euthanasia, privacy, pornography, the rights of children, animal rights, sexism, racism, nuclear warfare, the ideological uses of science and the media, exploitation, imperialism, questions about what democracy can come to in our industrial societies, moral questions about the workplace, questions about what education should be, at various levels in our societies, questions about inequality and autonomy, broad questions about the choice between socialism and capitalism, reform and revolution and questions about the ethics of terrorism. These do not, of course, exhaust the problems of men but they give us a sense of the type problems that Dewey believes it is the task of a reconstructed philosophy to confront. They are questions which, not infrequently, get treated ideologically, emotionally and sloppily. It is the task of philosophy, Dewey tells us, to give them a rational and penetrating treatment.

Philosophy's most urgent task, that is, is to deal with present conflicts and confusions and by this Dewey did not mean philosophical puzzles, say about other minds, but real confusions that someone might feel about human problems, say something about what democracy could come to in contemporary life where we seem at least to be in Max Weber's iron cage. Philosophy's task here is a critically normative task. It asks what should be said and what should be done about these things.

We have myriads of social practices with, not infrequently, very conflicting attitudes about their propriety. Think, for example, of the social practice of abortion or the viewing of pornography. There are other social

practices which are our solidly accepted social practices but are not shared by some other cultures – indeed they may have conflicting practices, but still they are practices which most of us are not conflicted about: say our rather passive acceptance of the propriety of capitalism or our strong prohibition of the practice of infanticide. But, as I have just remarked, other cultures have not gone that way. And this can lead us to ask whether our ways are the right ways here. We only, and then only some of us, after such reflections, sometimes become conflicted about such matters and then typically rather ambivalently. We generally continue to *feel* that our practices are right but wonder how we could be *justified* in feeling that way, given those cultural conflicts.

Dewey's pragmatism takes it to be philosophy's task to provide answers, or to crucially help in the providing of answers, to these problems about social practices, by showing which social practices ought to endure, which should be reconstructed and which should be abandoned. Dewey's pragmatism contrasts sharply here with Rorty's Dewey inspired neo-pragmatism. For Rorty there is no attaining such a critical vantage point (Rorty, 1983b, 1985, pp. 161–175). We will ask later whether that is a more rigorous carrying through of the central conceptions of pragmatism. Moreover, even if foundationalism is out and there are no 'timeless' answers, it does not follow that there cannot be sound historically determinate arguments for resolving at least some of these questions one way rather than another. That there are no ahistorical standards of rationality or objectivity providing us with ahistorical reasons for acting in a certain way, reasons that can be seen to be good reasons independently of time, place and circumstance, does not imply that there are no historically determinate reasons which, relative to a distinctive cultural and historical context, can be established to be good reasons for doing one thing rather than another. Moreover, we should also come to recognize that the issues raised by the problems of men cannot be resolved simply by appealing to existing social practices, context-dependent though justification may be, for the heart of the controversy is the genuine and serious conflict of competing social practices.

There are a series of difficulties concerning such a conception of philosophical activity to which I shall return after I have examined the other alternative I have in mind for a reconstructed conception of philosophy's role. For the nonce, I only want to consider one criticism of that Deweyian turn, a criticism that will lead to the other alternative I want to consider to 'perennial philosophy' and to traditional analytic philosophy. One of the things, it will be said, that is wrong with Deweyian philosophy as the-problems-of-men-approach is that it is too much like piecemeal social engineering or at least that it is too piecemeal. Philosophy, as we have already seen, has one perfectly determinate and unproblematic sense which need have nothing whatsoever to do with foundationalism, a claim to some special philosophical expertise or anything of the sort. But it is also a conception to which the Deweyian problems oriented turn is not very well attuned, namely to the attempt, to

“understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”. (This is actually a conception which Rorty takes from Wilfrid Sellars.) And this, of course, is our very most root sense of philosophy. We, almost by definition, as reflective human beings, want, even if we are firm nihilistic post-modernists, to see, as far as this is reasonably possible, how things hang together. Even if there is no epistemological or metaphysical way to do so and even *if* we have to move in a rather literary way or a moral-cum-political way or alternatively in a rather brutally empirical and historical way, we still want to see if we can in some way understand how things hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. That is an impulse which, if not possessed too compulsively, is just, in part, what it is to be rational and reflective and in that broad and untechnical sense philosophical. Such a conception will survive the death of epistemology and metaphysics and will remain perfectly intact even if it is clearly seen that there is no genuine profession to be professional about designated by the word ‘philosophy’. (There are, of course, techniques that people get taught in graduate school, at least in particular culturally determinate habitations, just as there are techniques theologians learn at least in certain environments. The interesting question is whether there is much point in learning either of these techniques. Those philosophers who feel quite firmly that for philosophy there is a not inconsiderable point ought to ask themselves how they feel about the case for theology. If they feel there is a genuine difference and that the difference here cuts in favor of philosophy, then they should ask whether they think that because they think philosophy has some access to the truth while theology does not. If they really do think that then they must confront Wittgenstein’s and Rorty’s probing about how anything like that could be possible.) But even if the Deweyian turn escapes professional deformation, it is still unclear how this piecemeal solving of the problems of men from the problematic situation is going to give us anything like a comprehensive vision so that we can see how things hang together. But that is the *Urkanton* of philosophy.

It is such dissatisfaction with the Deweyian approach, along with other dissatisfactions which I shall canvas later, that makes me turn to another approach which, as we have already noted, might, either be viewed as a reconstruction of philosophy or as a successor subject to philosophy. I speak here of philosophy-as-critical-theory.

So let us characterize and run a bit with philosophy-as-critical-theory, where what I have in mind is something more like a Habermasian, quasi-Habermasian or (perhaps) a pseudo-Habermasian enterprise than like the earlier Frankfurt School conception. (Bottomore, 1984) (Not being in the Habermas explication business, I am not much concerned with its pedigree, though I am vitally interested in what the structure of a sound critical theory would look like.) We want a holistic critical theory – a theory which sees, displays and explains how things hang together in a comprehensive way – which is in an integrated way a descriptive-explanatory social theory, an inter-

pretive theory and is, as well, a normative critique. Elements of philosophy, as more traditionally conceived, will be amalgamated with the human sciences with none of the elements claiming hegemony and with philosophy unequivocally giving up all pretensions to somehow autonomously being the 'guardian of reason'. Critical theory, including its philosophical elements, will, of course, share the fallibilist attitude of the sciences. Such a comprehensive holistic theory will provide a comprehensive critique of culture and society and of ideology. In this way it will not only have a descriptive-explanatory thrust, but, as well, and in an integral relation to its descriptive-explanatory and to its interpretive side, a critical-emancipatory thrust. It will help us not only to better see who we were, are and who we might become, it will, where there are alternatives, help us see who we might better become and what kind of a society would be a more just society and not only a more just society but a more truly human society or at least a more humane society. (Talk of justice does not exhaust the dimensions of a moral and normative appraisal of society.)

However, such a theory is not just a dramatic narrative or a word picture, if it is any of these things at all, but a genuinely empirical-cum-theoretical theory which, among other things, is a descriptive-explanatory theory showing us the structure of society, the range of its feasible transformations and the mechanics of its transformation. It will also provide, if any such thing is possible, a rational justification, if that isn't pleonastic, for saying, of its possible transformations, that one transformation is a better transformation than the others. It would in the course of such critical-theoretical articulation consider the comparative adequacy of ways of life that might claim our allegiance, including, of course, the various possible capitalisms, socialisms and technocratic, including authoritarian-technocratic, alternatives.

It is not exactly as if we did not have at least partial models for enterprises something like that. We are not starting completely *de novo*. In the past Hobbes, Smith, Condorcet, Hume and Hegel did something like that. And while in our time philosophers have given up doing that, the great sociological trinity, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, did it. And Habermas's work presently exemplifies it. (To say this is not, of course, to indicate agreement with its details or even with its basic structure.) It is a definite project of modernity growing out of the Enlightenment – a project presently under post-modernist attack.

However, given what we know now and where we stand, the proof is going to be in the eating and post-modernist scepticism such as Foucault's, Lyotard's or Rorty's is not unreasonable. How exactly we should put these elements together in constructing a holistic critical theory is not altogether clear. Before we can justifiably make a claim for progress here in philosophy we must be reasonably confident that such a research programme is going to pan out and that we will not get ideology or *Weltschmerz* parading as critical theory. Whether such a critical theory is anything more than a utopian dream which post-modernists can reject as just one more impossible meta-

narrative will depend on whether in the next few decades critical theory comes to anything.

It is, however, surely appropriate to ask: What do I mean by saying 'comes to anything'? I mean 1) it clearly helps solve some of what Dewey calls the problems of men, 2) develops a theoretical practice that has a clear emancipatory pay-off, 3) that its descriptive-explanatory structure actually provides some explanations which are true or approximately true and 4) that these explanations, together with the evaluative and normative claims contained in the theoretical practice, are set together into a well-matching, interlocking comprehensive framework which is perspicuously articulated.

It is, of course, possible, as post-modernists actually are, to be very skeptical indeed about the very possibility of such an enterprise. However, as far as I can see, there are no conceptual or *a priori* roadblocks to carrying out such a programme, though there are indeed empirical ones. The obvious thing here is the scope. It is, to put it mildly, daunting. Faced with it, it is not unnatural to respond, that such a project is larger than life. To carry it through we need the talents, the drive and the vast knowledge of a Max Weber or Karl Marx. With the contemporary explosion of knowledge, it is surely an understandable scruple to worry if any intellectual or group of intellectuals, who could fruitfully work together, could play that role again. But then again there may be a lot of things that we can just cut through. The intellectual – to reason by analogy – who best understands the politics of his time is not necessarily the person who most scrupulously reads a good newspaper every morning. So I think the proof will be in the self-critical carrying out of something like this programme of a critical theory. (I say 'something like' and 'a self-critical carrying out' because it surely will be necessary to repair the ship at sea. To take the programme as something written in stone is to utterly abandon the spirit of fallibilism.)

IV

So we have two models for how philosophy might progress or, if you will, its successor subject might progress after the death of traditional epistemologically oriented philosophy and a programmatic analytical philosophy. The models are plainly compatible. The more modest Deweyian one would be subsumed under the critical theory model and a Deweyian, understandably skeptical about anything as comprehensive as critical theory, need not, in focussing on the problems of men, deny the very possibility of a critical theory. She can just bracket such considerations. So, even if we think the Deweyian thing *sans* critical theory can come to something, we do not have to choose between them. Yet, in setting out to do philosophical work under the new philosophical dispensations, how we shall actually proceed will be rather different if, on the one hand, we, in a Deweyian manner, are skeptical about the feasibility of critical theory or any holistic theory than if, on the

other hand, we think we very much stand in need of a comprehensive critical theory and, as well, have a good chance of constructing and then developing a feasible one.

Where should we go here? Do we need a critical theory if we can get one? Rorty does not think so. (Rorty, 1983a, 1983b, pp. 161–175) He thinks it is a matter of scratching where it doesn't itch. Someone, like Habermas, claiming there is a real itch, will maintain that without a comprehensive critical theory we will not be able to distinguish theory from ideology. We will not be able to know whether unmaskers like Marx and Freud are not unwittingly wearing a few masks themselves. Without a firm distinction between theory and ideology, we can have no basis for the great hope of the Enlightenment, namely the making of rational criticisms of our social institutions. (Habermas, 1985, pp. 192–198) There can be no genuine solutions to the problems of men if we do not have such universal rational standards of criticism and validation. If we can, Habermas argues, find nothing like an Archimedean point in virtue of which we can speak of sound arguments or better arguments *sans phrase*, as distinct from just having persuasive arguments which convince a given audience at a given time, then we can only have a very relativistic context-dependent social criticism which, if we reflect on the conditions of its warrant, can hardly count as genuine criticism and is not clearly distinct from ideology. Indeed, if that is the pickle we are in, we seem no longer to have a distinction between theory and ideology. To become unpickled here, we need, Habermas argues, a rational consensus as distinct from a purely historically and culturally fortuitous consensus. We need to have such a standard to carry out progressive social criticism and to make a critique of institutions and ideology. Otherwise we are mired, he claims, in a relativistic morass in which only the weakest *ad hoc* sort of negative criticism is possible.

Wittgenstein and Rorty — Rorty doing his Wittgensteinian-cum-neo-pragmatist tricks — as well as French post-modernists such as Lyotard and Foucault, will argue that we have no need for such an Archimedean point or indeed any Archimedean point. We can't have one anyway, but, Rorty argues, even if we could have one we should not need it. This search for a grand metanarrative is just more, and by now rather late in the day, nostalgia for the Absolute. Criteria for validity and rationality are in the first-order discourse of our distinct language-games which in turn are embedded in our forms of life. What is given there are a complex cluster of social practices. It is these practices and the first-order discourses which are a part of these practices which set our functioning criteria for validity and rationality. There can, Rorty argues, be no context-independent criteria of rationality and validity. A search for a more foundational legitimacy is a search for the color of heat. But even with this new sobriety there is no loss in our not having such criteria for we can, Rorty argues, solve the problems of men even though our criteria of validity and rationality are implicit in and determined by our diverse language-games. We do not need any such Habermasian

Archimedean point. Rational argumentation can only be conducted in accordance with the most reflective and knowledgeable application of the social practices of a given community at a given time. There can be no getting back of these practices with their sets of conventions to nature's own language which will tell us what it really is rational to believe for some supra-cultural agents with a God's eye view. (Rorty, 1982, pp. 191–208) To think there can be something like this is just to let the old philosophical superstitions come in by the back door. There is no determining what is rational by some extra-historical, universalistic set of criteria. There is and can be no such ahistorical legitimation.

It is usual, at least among philosophers and not a few social theorists as well, to think we have lost something in losing such an Archimedean point. Rorty thinks that is misguided. (Rorty, 1982, pp. 191–208, 1983a, pp. 583–589) We, he believes, are just frightening ourselves, perhaps unconsciously pushed by old religious needs, into thinking that we need something more universalistic. That is quite unnecessary, Rorty tells us, for we can simply rely on the relatively theoretically unramified political speech that is used in defense of the liberal vision of Western democracies. It would be better, he tells us, to be frankly ethnocentric here. We should in solving the problems of men just work carefully and reflectively with the criteria built into our actual practices. There aren't any universal ahistorical criteria anyway, but, even if there were, we wouldn't need them. We can live perfectly well, and reasonably, without the kind of comprehensive unification asked for by critical theory, where we have a unified critical account of norms and facts and of science and society. We need not lose our nerve; we need not be spooked, as Hegel and Habermas are, by the loss of religion in the Enlightenment. Keeping our nerve and avoiding high levels of abstraction, where no one is quite sure what they are talking about, we should just concretely and specifically in determinate problematic situations, continue to use, in a concrete and philosophically unramified way, our creative intelligence *ambulando* to solve our social problems as they come along in the various struggles of life. We do not need anything like a critical theory to realize the hopes, or to make reasonable the hopes, formulated by the Enlightenment. (Rorty, 1985, pp. 169–171)

A dialectic putting in question this Rortyan good cheer could start like this: no matter how much we may be attracted to end-of-philosophy-theses, Habermas is surely right in stressing with Hegel that our historical experience is such that we can no longer accept a naive consensus. (Habermas, 1985, pp. 192–195) We – that is we who are part of the ever expanding culture of modernity – are aware of too many different ways of life, points of view, universes of discourse, conflicting ideologies, to possibly just naively accept the doing of the thing done in our society.

This 'experience of reflection', as Hegel calls it, quite naturally inclines us to what Lyotard calls metanarratives, namely to "theories of rationality that are supposed to account for why and in what sense we can still connect

our convictions and our descriptive, normative and evaluative statements, with a transcending validity claim that goes beyond merely local contexts".² (Rorty, 1983a, p. 196) Must or should a critical theory be a metanarrative or rely on a metanarrative? Habermas, interestingly enough, denies that his critical theory is or contains such a narrative, though, without providing a metanarrative, he believes that his account "preserves the possibility of speaking of rationality in the singular." (Habermas, 1985, p. 196)

But he is not, he maintains, even attempting to provide any 'foundational ultimate groundings' for society or a 'totalizing philosophy of history'. People who do things like this are people who write, metanarratives, though note this is doing something wilder, or at least far more ambitious, than what is licensed by the above initial characterization as a metanarrative. Given the structure of his account, there is no place in it for metanarrative in the sense, as we find in Hegel or Spengler, of giving some totalizing philosophy of history. (Habermas, 1985) His critical theory, as a theory of communicative action, is in part philosophical and in part empirical involving a non-exclusive division of labor between philosophy and the human sciences. "It has the aim of clarifying the presuppositions of the rationality of processes of reaching understanding which may be presumed to be universal because they are unavoidable." (Habermas, 1985) This whole critical account, like any scientific theory, has empirical testing constraints. It can be confirmed or infirmed. (Habermas, 1985)

He also believes that he is not committed to any form of absolutism or 'pure transcendentalism'. Habermas thinks that, if one has a good understanding of the modern world, one can neither accept absolutism, on the one hand, nor relativism or pure historicism, on the other. The latter two, he believes, carry "the burden of self-referential, pragmatic contradictions and paradoxes that violate our need for consistency" and the former is "burdened with a foundationalism that conflicts with our consciousness of the fallibility of human knowledge". (Habermas, 1985; p. 193) He remarks, it seems to me rightly enough, that no "one who gives this situation much thought would want to be left in this bind". (Habermas, 1985; p. 193)

Critical theory provides a third way. What is this third way? Let me come at this initially indirectly. We are participants in arguments, there are problems of life which are *our* problems, where we are not just, or sometimes even at all, ethnographic, neutral observers of the actual and predictors of the probably possible, but participants. As participants we need to maintain, as

² This is Habermas's characterisation of Lyotard's term of art not Lyotard's own. Rorty adds the following elements to this characterisation. Metanarratives are "narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self of the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat. These metanarratives are stories which purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with, certain contemporary communities, but which are neither historical narratives about what these other communities have done in the past nor scenarios about what they might do in the future." (Rorty, 1983a)

Habermas puts it, the distinction Rorty wants to retract, namely the distinction “between valid and socially accepted views, between good arguments and those which are merely successful for a certain audience at a certain time”. (Habermas, 1985; p. 194) It is, of course, a Philosophy I point that there is a difference between winning an argument, at least in the sense of getting your opponent to go along with you, and making a sound argument, that is, making a valid argument with true premisses. Moreover, there are views which are soundly reasoned and such views need not be identical with views, on the same matter, which are currently accepted. Someone, for example, might argue that lesbian couples should have the same access as anyone else to sperm donor programmes and that view might be soundly argued even though it was fiercely resisted in the community in which it was argued. Indeed presently in North America that is exactly what one would expect.

Rorty is, of course, perfectly aware of these elementary, if for all that, not unimportant, points. His view is that when we push deep for our canons of validity and for what it is rational to believe we will find that they are rooted in our use of language which in turn is given in our various language-games rooted in our forms of life. Critical theory, at least on Habermas’s reading and probably on any plausible reading, cannot rest content with saying just that. Critical theory, as Habermas puts it, is aware, that there are in the modern world a not inconsiderable number of competing convictions, some of them running very deep. We are people who have some of these convictions and a not inconsiderable number of us are aware of alternatives to these convictions. We are not, as I remarked, just neutral observers of the actual. We have an interest, as Habermas puts it, “to see social practices of justification as more than just such practices”. (Habermas, 1985; p. 195) To establish that they are more has been philosophy’s traditional interest in reason and it explains, or at least partially explains, the “stubbornness with which philosophy clings to the role of the ‘guardian of reason’” (Habermas, 1985; p. 195)

Critical theory tries in a more realistic and empirically oriented way to carry on this guardian role. It preserves philosophy’s interest in reason and tries, *pace* Wittgenstein, Winch and Rorty, to preserve “the possibility of speaking of rationality in the singular”. (Habermas, 1985; p. 196) In transforming philosophy into critical theory with its amalgam of aspects of traditionally oriented philosophy – most particularly analytical philosophy – and the human sciences, critical theory seeks, in a systematic but fallibilistic and non-transcendental way, “to cope with the entire spectrum of aspects of rationality’” (Habermas, 1985; p. 197)

There are at least two principal types of difficulty that face such a grand holistic theory. One is a quite persistent, and indeed insistent, post-modernist Rortyan scepticism, though in one sense it is a rather ‘unskeptical scepticism’. It argues that however natural it may be to want such rational standards – to want to show and to believe that social practices of justification are more than just such practices – that none the less it is the case that no such stan-

dards are available. (Rorty, 1984b) (Salt could be poured on these wounds through the argument that the very idea that there could be such standards is incoherent.) The other difficulty — a difficulty we have already gestured at — is quite different and quite un-Rortyan. It is not, it argues, that such a daunting project is in principle impossible, i.e., conceptually incoherent. Rather the real concern is, the claim goes, that in fact there is not much chance that such a programme is going to be carried out. It is, after all, just too daunting. Where there is this doubt it is not unreasonable to form the considered judgement that belief in critical theory can come to little more than a pious wish and this being so it is better to stick to piecemeal social criticism and to an intelligent coping, rather *seriatim*, with the problems of men. This need not be reformist naivete, as it was not with Bertrand Russell and is not with Noam Chomsky, but instead a realistic recognition of the limits of human capacities in the domain of the social. (Chomsky, 1972, 1979, 1982, 1984).

V

So let us return to the Deweyian problems-of-men conception of philosophy and to difficulties that will reasonably be felt about it beyond the one I stated that led us into our discussion of philosophy-as-critical-theory. Dewey wants us, *as philosophers*, concretely to face actual problematic situations and in facing them somehow to use our philosophical abilities to solve or substantially help solve the actual stressing problems of human beings, e.g. problems of abortion, sexism, racism, questions about the justification of socialism and the like. It is possible to care very much about those problems indeed and still to feel *as a philosopher* quite helpless here. How can philosophy, or can philosophy, contribute anything here? We talk, from this Deweyian perspective, of giving these social problems a rational and penetrating treatment. But that may be little more than chatter. Remember we have given up the claim that philosophy can do anything foundational: that philosophy can somehow know the truth about these matters because it knows what knowledge or what warranted belief really is or because, with its understanding of meaning, it can command a clear view of the essence of the concepts of abortion, sexism, racism, socialism and the like. Philosophy, we are now granting, cannot play such a role as a cultural overseer. But what then can our talk of giving these problems a rational and penetrating treatment come to? With the death of epistemology and with the abandonment of the claims of programmatic analytical philosophy, or for that matter 'perennial philosophy', we have abandoned the idea that philosophers have some special expertise, such as logical analysis, conceptual analysis or linguistic analysis or what not, such that they can resolve these questions, or provide the basis for the resolution of these questions, in a way tolerably educated, concerned and thoughtful people cannot.

We might try saying that, like Rawls, Dworkin or Nozick, the philosopher

can in a clearheaded way do critical normative theory and this is what a rational and penetrating treatment would come to here. But what is behind the nice phrase 'critical normative work'? If there is no epistemology there certainly is no moral epistemology? If there can be no foundational work in epistemology, talk of the foundations of morals or the foundations of politics will come to nothing. We should recall Rorty's remark about talk of conceptual foundations getting us nowhere. At best it is a pedantic and sometimes arcane re-description, perhaps in the formal mode, perhaps in some bizarre meta-talk or quasi-meta-talk, of what we already know. We learn from Rawls and Dworkin about matters such as social justice because they are informed, reflective human beings who know the history of social thought (the history of moral philosophy being a part of it), the relevant legal, factual and social science considerations surrounding the issues they discuss and because they have thought for years, and deeply, about these social issues. But there is nothing in the way of philosophical expertise, technique, knowledge or bright new analytical tools which they trot out or which are available to the philosopher which will enable her to get a purchase on these problems in the way that a political scientist, a literary critic, a novelist, a lawyer, a sociologist, a political economist or a historian cannot or can only with a kind of difficulty from which the properly equipped philosopher is free. With the death of foundationalism such a claim on the philosopher's part is pure *hubris*. Both the capacities and character traits that I attributed to Rawls and Dworkin and the type of knowledge I attributed to them are vital. Part of this knowledge is a knowledge of the history of moral and social philosophy but there is little, if anything, in this historiographical knowledge that is technically philosophical that is not fairly readily open to a whole range of academics and, beyond them, to persons who have a reasonably good education, a not inconsiderable amount of leisure and the inclination to have a go at these texts. There are no analytical techniques needed or available here comparable to something we would have to learn in studying physics, micro-economics, linguistics, modal logic or computer science that must be mastered to understand what is going on here or to make the arguments or essential points that Rawls and Dworkin make.

The Deweyian will not be disturbed that there is no 'philosophical way of knowing' or logical technique that will give a philosopher much purchase here in tackling these problems. But then, if the problems of men become the problems of philosophers, how do these persons, working *as philosophers*, aid in their solution? Apart from the fact that not a few people in the past who were called philosophers intelligently talked about them, what, *as philosophers*, do we now contribute? And was it really very different in the past? Spinoza, for example, says some powerful things about our fate. Are those powerful things or at least their import really tied in any way to the technical aspects of his philosophy so that such remarks about our fate would lack that power if they were not tied to that machinery? And could not similar things be said about Plato and Schopenhauer?

That there does not appear to be anything for *philosophy* to do here with the problems of men is perhaps what is behind the inclination of both traditional philosophers of the old days – philosophers of the Genteel Tradition – and analytic philosophers of a more or less orthodox sort to say there is very little philosophy in Dewey. He, for the most part, either talks grandiloquently about the unfolding of the history of human thought or rolls up his sleeves and goes at certain concrete social problems, sometimes in a rather peculiar vocabulary, a vocabulary that probably does more harm than good. (The sensible things that Dewey often says seem to come through in spite of that vocabulary.)

There is, of course, both in Dewey and his followers, a lot of talk of scientific method. It is easy for us now, standing where we stand, to dismiss this, saying it comes to little more than instrumental common sense receipts that any sensible person would follow. But this misses the fact that it was directed at philosophy as a kind of uncontrolled speculation à la Whitehead, Royce, Bergson or Tillich, to take once influential examples. That not many philosophers go on like that today we may thank to the kind of stress on such receipts that we got from the pragmatists and their positivist allies. Such talk of scientific method is valuable in the face of such indiscipline. This, as Habermas stresses, is an important thing to do but we hardly have here anything that should be inflated into the methodological foundations of philosophical or scientific inquiry or even of critical theory.

There is a natural response that should be made at this point. Why, keeping the same problems of men approach, cannot contemporary Deweyians say what philosophers *qua* philosophers can legitimately do, if they have this Deweyian concern, is the traditional analytical philosophical job of helping people, troubled by these problems of men, command a clearer view of the key concepts involved, display the relevant considerations in a more perspicuous manner and seek to state the relevant arguments in valid patterns of argument and in a clear and compelling way. Issues such as abortion, sexism, racism and questions about the viability of socialism, as much public discussion reveals, typically get discussed in a wild, undisciplined and propagandistic manner. A philosopher, aware of the relevant factual and moral issues and aware of the underlying ideological forces at play, can, utilizing the above virtues, bring clarity and discipline to these problems and by so approaching them in a modest underlaborer's way contribute to their resolution. Here is something distinctively philosophical that a philosopher can contribute even after the demise of epistemology and programmatic analytical philosophy.

I think these are virtues and that they are good things for people to have and I hope philosophers in their day to day activities in the classroom, on forums, in writing articles and the like display them and continue to do so. That notwithstanding, I still think Rorty is right in arguing, as it comes out with particular force in his "Philosophy in America", that, when properly separated from the trumpeting philosophers make about such virtues, they will 1) be seen not to be as distinctively philosophical as philosophers

are wont to think and 2) though indeed valuable, these virtues accomplish far less than most philosophers flatter themselves into believing. (Rorty, 1982)

In arguing the first point Rorty argues that there is no distinctive mode of argumentation possessed by philosophers which others (say economists or lawyers) do not have. Moreover, it has become increasingly clear, since the breakdown of programmatic analytical philosophy, à la Reichenbach, Carnap or C. I. Lewis, that there is no distinct philosophical methodology or analytical tools that can be appealed to that give a philosopher's often clear and to the point argumentation its distinctive force. Philosophers frequently – indeed almost invariably – cloak their arguments in some currently fashionable philosophical jargon but that jargon quickly goes out of fashion – the whirligig, as Rorty points out, goes more rapidly nowadays – and it is not essential to the, theoretically speaking, rather low level arguments for taking a certain position about these human problems. (That theoretically speaking they are rather low level arguments does not even suggest that there is anything wrong with them.) The soundness of the arguments need not be effected by their level of abstraction or by a dropping of the jargon. Indeed in dealing with these common human problems the reasonable expectation would be that the level of abstraction would, and should, be rather low. (Suspicion of technocratisation is not the same as love of obscurity. Quite to the contrary, it is concern with clarity and the closure of argument, where that is reasonable, that fuels that suspicion.) The important thing to see is that these arguments about the problems of men could have been formulated by any clearheaded, well-informed person with a sense of relevance. Philosopher's concepts are no more essential here than lawyer's, economist's or anthropologist's concepts, though in certain contexts any of these concepts may turn out to be useful shorthands. In other circumstances, they block understanding – block the road to inquiry. Talk of powerful analytical tools that a philosopher can lay his hands on here to bring to the problems of men is just armwaving.

It is like an appeal to magic. There is no reason to believe that philosophers have some special expertise with concepts such that they command, or can come to command, a clearer view of the terrain surrounding these problems so that they then have a deeper grasp of the issues than do others. People who think clearly – and that virtue is not the private preserve of philosophers – and have a good knowledge of the relevant factual issues and are morally sensitive are very likely going to have more reasonable views about the human problems at issue than others. But these things are not the private property of philosophers and there is no distinctive philosophical expertise that is required here. Philosophers neither have some distinctive concepts to deploy in the service of strengthening arguments nor, as Rorty puts it, some “special, privileged knowledge about concepts” which puts them in a privileged position to assess the problems of life or in some privileged position in the assessment of culture. They at most have a similar argumentative style, though even here there is a world of difference between Rudolf Carnap

and Ludwig Wittgenstein, between W. V. Quine and John Austin, between David Lewis and Stanley Cavell.

The false but still flattering philosophical image – an image which is very consoling to many contemporary philosophers – is that philosophers have some mastery of ‘conceptual questions’ which others lack or that they have, up their sleeves, some super concepts which gives them in some way or ways some special expertise in the articulation and critique of the forms of life and assessment of culture. The reality is that philosophers neither have some special skill nor something distinctive they can be skillful at. Philosophers cannot tell us what makes our ideas really clear, what we really mean or what we are really justified in believing.

The Deweyian approach that a reconstructed philosophy should concern itself with the problems of men seems at least to flounder on the fact that there is nothing distinctive that a philosopher *qua* philosopher can do to resolve, or even help resolve, such human problems once she recognizes that the orthodox conception of philosophy comes a cropper as a discipline with a special understanding of what warranted belief or coherent discourse consists in or as a discipline with a special methodology. She can, of course, pitch in like any other concerned citizen or any other activist or any other intellectual and help with their resolution. But any non-arm waving appeal to philosophy drops out.

We wanted to use philosophy, if we took the Deweyian turn, to come to establish which social practices ought to endure, which should be reconstructed and which should be abandoned. The Deweyian way, just as much as traditional analytic philosophy, seems quite incapable of showing how philosophy has anything distinctive to contribute here. If we could, a la John Rawls, Alan Gewirth or perhaps even Alasdair MacIntyre, construct a systematic substantive ethical theory that would give us an Archamaedian point with the intellectual resources to help, in some non-ideological, non-ethnocentric way, make such cultural assessments, then philosophy would have a new lease on life. (Nielsen, 1984b, 1985; Nielsen, 1984c) But it should be clear from the history of the critical examinations of their work that none of these philosophers succeeded in giving us such an Archamaedian point and that Rawls, whose account is by far and away the most impressive, concedes that in writings subsequent to *A Theory of Justice*. (Rawls, 1980) Their efforts are the latest in a long history of failures some of which have been very impressive indeed. Previous great failures – the high point of such failures – (to which Rawls’s work is comparable) have as their peaks the great systematic ethical theories of J. S. Mill, Kant and Sidgwick. Pragmatic analytical philosophy of a generally positivist sort, say Hågerström, Ayer or Stevenson, warned us against the very possibility of such attempts, as did, in a quite different way, cultural criticism of a broadly Hegelian sort. It should be evident by now, if we neither have our heads in the clouds nor in the sand, that others are not going to succeed in constructing systematic ethical theories yielding an Archamaedian point where Sidgwick and Rawls

have failed. We should no more be trying to construct foundational ethical theories than we should be trying to construct foundational epistemological theories.

VI

The Deweyian programme, where it cannot be effectively supplemented with either critical social theory, perennial philosophy or analytical philosophy, cannot deliver the goods about philosophy reconstructing itself by dealing with the vital existential problems of human beings. It cannot, if my arguments are in the main sound, give any clear sense to how *philosophy* can deal with these problems. But, it is also true, if my previous criticisms are near to the mark, that perennial philosophy has been undermined in both its Cartesian-Kantian type epistemological turn and in its (generally speaking) Thomist type metaphysical turn. Critical theory, a fallibilistic systematic theoretical-cum-empirical social theory, as a successor to philosophy, traditionally conceived, seems to be the most plausible candidate for the kind of turn that would make philosophy as a theory and practice of social criticism viable. Linked with critical theory, it would no longer be piecemeal. Moreover, it would insure that social criticism so inspired is not slapdash, for with social science techniques linked with analytic philosophy's traditional concern for analysis and clarity and with philosophy's traditional concern to be self-consciously reflective about what one is doing, there would be some disciplinary expertise deployed (albeit principally – perhaps entirely – from a cluster of the social sciences). It would have some theoretical purchase in virtue of which it could criticize culture, provide a rationale for criticizing culture and help us render some tolerably objective judgements about which social practices ought to endure, which should be reconstructed and which should be abandoned. It would not, of course, give us 'timeless answers' which would put answers or responses to vital issues beyond serious question. There is no room for appeals to self-evidence or to absoluteness in such a fallibilistic perspective. Truth may in some trivial sense, a la Tarski and Carnap, be eternal but our judgements as to what is or is not true, let alone what is 'the truth' (if that has any sense at all), are not. But the acceptance of fallibilism and the recognition of such truisms does not mean that sound historically determinate answers could not be given to questions we have about abortion or the desirability of capitalism and the like. Also, in a way a piecemeal approach could not answer to, we would have with the articulation of a critical theory, a comprehensive theory capable of distinguishing between theory and ideology and with such a distinction we would have found conceptual space for the core Enlightenment notion of a rational criticism of existing institutions and, if such an account is well grounded, we are no longer subject to the nihilistic challenges of post-modernity.

I have already noted a series of problems such an account faces and I have,

as well, given my reasons for thinking that the difficulties in such an account are perhaps not crippling and that critical theory, as a successor subject to philosophy, is our best hope for answering to some of the traditional concerns, human and explanatory, of philosophy after the end of philosophy.

Here there is both important agreement and important divergence with Rorty. Rorty wants to see a world in which there ceased to be a distinct discipline called 'philosophy'. (Rorty, 1984b) Philosophy indeed would, on his account, become a kind of learned and witty kibitzing, the playing of a gadfly role in the conversations of humankind. Alternatively, and in contrast, I either want 'philosophy', except in the colloquial sense of reflectively taking a comprehensive look at things, to cease to have a use and for critical theory to become its successor subject or (what is substantially the same thing) for its denotation and connotation to extensively change so that 'philosophy' comes to refer to and to connote critical social theory, where critical social theory, with its emancipatory thrust, would be, among other things, vitally concerned with the problems of men, though in a more holistic way, than were the Deweyians.

The type activity I am recommending would not be philosophy as usually understood for it would be, through and through empirical, but it would not be just pure social science either, as traditionally understood, for it would have a critically normative and emancipatory thrust. It would not just be descriptive-explanatory and interpretive but would also say something about what is to be done and about what sort of world we should try to bring into being. It would, of course, not try to say 'just one big thing' (whatever that means) but in a Deweyian spirit say a lot of little things which it would try to connect together along with some reasonably high level generalizations and other remarks about these generalizations and the relation of these generalizations to what they are generalizations about. It would not have a single disciplinary matrix but an amalgam of disciplinary matrixes which, as the critical theory developed, would become more unified. In that way it is very different indeed than Rorty's advocacy of learned and witty kibitzing. Perhaps critical theory is a research programme that will not pan out. If it remains too vague and does not, even as it is developed, provide any critical guidance, is politically impotent and with that impotence without emancipatory thrust and, if (what is probably much the same thing) it does not help solve the problems of men, then it will turn out to be, what not a few fear, a vapid utopia. The next four or five decades will put it to the test.

VII

I want to bring this essay to a close by doing two things. I want to show, in the light of all this, what should be said about my title topic 'Can there be progress in philosophy?' and I want, in doing this, to point to what seems

to be the bankruptcy of Rorty's avowedly post-modernist 'pragmatism without method', a pragmatism which seems to me a very unpragmatic pragmatism. I will turn to the second topic first.

Rorty's avowedly post-modernist stance, comes out most clearly in his "Habermas and Lyotard on post-modernity" and his "Post-modernist Bourgeois Liberalism". (Rorty, 1983b, 1985) If what Rorty maintains in these two articles is approximately right, it is not just philosophy that is threatened but something rather more important, namely, it is perhaps the case that the core ideals and expectations of the Enlightenment have been undermined or at least effectively threatened. Rorty, I would guess, would think this dramatic exaggeration and might very well respond that all he was doing was realistically cutting them down to size and freeing them from metanarratives. Let us see if we can sort this out.

In "Habermas and Lyotard on Post-modernity", Rorty develops an owl of Minerva theme. Our 'emancipatory consciousness' always arrives too late on the scene after the social change has taken place. Intellectuals, including, of course, critical theorists, even if they are in attune with a substantial working class movement, cannot form a revolutionary vanguard. (Rorty, 1983b) If they try to play such a role, they will just end up writing groundless metanarratives (a pleonasm) which they will unwittingly inflate into critical theories. We can reasonably give genuine historical narratives which will, include "scenarios about what is likely to happen in certain future contingencies", presumably of a rather short range. What we should avoid, like the plague, Rorty follows Lyotard in claiming, are genuine metanarratives, i.e. "narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat." (Rorty, 1983b) They are grand scale just-so-stories rather than genuine historical narratives. They "purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with certain contemporary communities". (Rorty, 1983b; p. 585) But they do not succeed in this. They neither succeed in telling us "about what these or other communities have done in the past" nor in giving us "scenarios about what they might do in the future". (Rorty, 1983b) They are bits of ideological myth-making that distort our knowledge of ourselves and the societies in which we live. Attempts to give ourselves some picture of some substantive non-instrumental rationality – the dream of a Horkheimer – which will tell us what a rational emancipated community would look like will produce a picture for that rational community of undistorted communication which accords with the desires that presently obtain in the society toward which the putatively emancipatory activity is directed. If we start with bourgeois ideals we will end with bourgeois ideals; if we start with communist ideals we will end with communist ideals; if we start with Fascist ideals we will end with Fascist ideals. We, Rorty remarks, referring to his own community, have the good luck to live in liberal bourgeois democracies. (He might even regard 'liberal bourgeois' as pleonastic.) It is better, he tells us, to be "frankly ethnocentric" and stick with and evince loyalty to "those untheoretical sorts of narrative

discourse which make up the political speech of the Western democracies". (Rorty, 1985) The bourgeoisie have developed a number of social practices which reveal "the social virtues of the bourgeoisie". (Rorty, 1985; p. 166) We intellectuals can show how such practices link up with other practices of the same group or other groups. We can engage in a kind of impressionistic piecemeal criticism here with our contrasts and linkages, though this 'criticism' sounds to me more like ethnographical description. But we cannot go beyond this to the critical theory thing and criticize the whole shebang.

Our reasoning about what should be done, Rorty argues, should always be with reference to a certain historically determinate community with a certain historically determinate set of values. There is no super-community such as humanity itself with whom we can identify. We cannot reasonably break or transcend our particular loyalties by invoking a conflicting loyalty to humanity as such. Against universalists of a Kantian stripe, such as John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin, Rorty takes humanity to be "a biological rather than a moral notion"; there is, he claims, "no human dignity that is not derivative from the dignity of some specific community, and no appeal beyond the relative merits of various actual or proposed communities to impartial criteria which will help us weigh those merits." (Rorty, 1985; p. 166) It is an illusion, Rorty tells us, to think that we can abstract "from any historical community and adjudicate the rights of communities vis-a-vis those of individuals". (Rorty, 1983b; p. 584) He accepts Michael Wazler's view that a "given society is just if its substantive life is lived in a way faithful to the shared understanding of the members". (Rorty, 1983b; p. 584) Liberal society, under the influence of the groundless theories of Kantians, tried to ground liberal institutions on something "more than mere solidarity" but that is a myth. The only genuine basis is solidarity with one's tribe, in their case — that is in Rorty's own case — the actual liberal community. (Rorty, 1983b; p. 584) Kantians, such as Rawls and Dworkin, along with their Continental counterparts, Habermas and Wellmer, as well as their Marxist critics, Gilbert and Nielsen, think that one can give an account of 'rationality' and 'morality' in transcultural and ahistorical terms but that is an illusion. (Nielsen, 1979; Gilbert, 1978)

The thing to do, Rorty tells us, is "to disentangle bourgeois liberal institutions from the vocabulary that these institutions inherited from the Enlightenment — e.g. the eighteenth-century vocabulary of natural rights. . . ." (Rorty, 1983b; p. 585) We should come to recognize in our society, Rorty stresses, "that loyalty to itself is morality" enough. We need no such rational grounding as Kantian or Millian liberals tried to provide. We need, as he puts it, to be responsible only to our "own traditions and not to the moral law as well". (Rorty, 1983b; p. 585)

I do not want to argue with this historicized relativism here, though on some other occasion I will, as well as argue with the extensive elaboration of a similar view in Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Rather

I wish only to argue 1) that, Rorty's explicit denial to the contrary notwithstanding, it is a form of historicized relativism and 2) that, if Rorty's account here really is a telling like it is, it is not nearly as benign as Rorty cheerily takes it to be. It would not protect liberalism or a humane individualism, for it would undermine the hopes that not only fuels what I take to be one of liberalism's legitimate heirs, Marxism, but it would also undermine the hopes of liberalism itself, including the progressive social democratic versions we find in Deweyian pragmatism.

Let us turn to the issue of relativism first. Rorty in the closing passage of his "Post-modernist Bourgeois Liberalism" denies that he is a relativist or that his views commit him to relativism. This seems to me to be another example of the backing and shifting that philosophers not infrequently engage in that is so well characterized by John Austin as, 'First you say it and then you take it all back'.

Rorty's closing passage, where — or so at least I shall claim — he does just this should be quoted in full.

The second objection is that what I have been calling "post-modernism" is better named "relativism," and that relativism is self-refuting. Relativism certainly is self-refuting, but there is a difference between saying that every community is as good as every other and saying that we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify. Post-modernism is no more relativistic than Hilary Putnam's suggestion that we stop trying for a "God's-eye view" and realize that "We can only hope to produce a more rational conception of rationality or a better conception of morality if we operate from within our tradition". The view that every tradition is as rational or as moral as every other could be held only by a god, someone who had no need to use (but only to mention) the terms 'rational' or 'moral', because she had no need to inquire or deliberate. Such a being would have escaped from history and conversation into contemplation and metanarrative. To accuse postmodernism of relativism is to try to put a metanarrative in the postmodernist's mouth. One will do this if one identifies "holding a philosophical position" with having a metanarrative available. If we insist on such a definition of "philosophy", then post-modernism is post-philosophical. But it would be better to change the definition. (Rorty, 1983b; p. 585)

To accuse Rorty, a postmodernist, of relativism, as I would, need not be to accuse Rorty of being committed, however unwittingly, to a metanarrative, even if now what is intended is something rather more humble than "narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat". (Rorty, 1983b; p. 585) In attributing relativism to Rorty we need not attribute to him anything very grandiose or theoretical that should be dressed up by a label such as 'having a metanarrative'.

That Rorty is engaging in the backing and shifting that comes to first

saying it and then taking it all back comes out in the first part of the long quotation given above. When what he says in the main body of his text is compared with that first part of the quotation, it will be evident that just such a backing and shifting is taking place. Of course to say, as he does in the passage quoted, "we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify" is not to commit oneself to relativism for the first word need not be the last word. We might very well work out, as did Bayers Naude, from the community with which we presently identify to a wider community perhaps even to humanity at large. To say we must work out from the networks we are says something very reasonable about the points from which we start, and perhaps even about the points from which we *must* start, but it says nothing about being contained within or constrained to remain within the parameters of that starting point or about the possibility, or lack thereof, of getting our beliefs in wide reflective equilibrium and the like. It does not even suggest that we are caught within the perspective of our tribe. There is indeed nothing supportive of relativism in *that* claim of Rorty's.

However, his statements in the main body of the text are much stronger than that and they are recognizably relativist. (Rorty, in trying to avoid the charge of relativism, does a very similar thing to what Peter Winch did in trying to avoid the same charge, namely he takes one rather vulnerable formulation of relativism and just insists that that is just what it is to be a relativist and then denies, correctly enough, given that characterization, that he is such a relativist. But that is just playing with words.) (Winch, 1979) The remarks in the main body of his text, as well as in his article on Habermas and Lyotard, that show that in a perfectly recognizable and uncontroversial sense he is a relativist are as follows:

1. Rorty says that there is no supercommunity such as humanity itself with whom we can identify. What we should do is to be frankly ethnocentric and take the standards of our community as the standards to be accepted because there can be no more objective set of moral values to which our loyalties can be directed. There just are no supercultural standards to be appealed to nor can there be.
2. There is in morality "no appeal beyond the relative merits of various actual or proposed communities to impartial criteria which help us weight those merits". (Rorty, 1983b; p. 198)
3. A "given society is just if its substantive life is lived in a way faithful to the shared understanding of the members." (Rorty, 1983b; p. 584) This clearly entails that, for any society X, X is just if its substantive life is so lived no matter what the content of that life is. Thus many different societies even with conflicting practices and principles of justice must all be said to be just if they meet that condition.
4. Solidarity with one's tribe in a sufficient basis for solidarity and indeed it is the only basis for solidarity.

These are all recognizably relativist views. (Dworkin, as Rorty recognizes, calls the third view relativism.) None of them are skeptical views. They all, without any vacillation, tell us what we ought to do. They say what is just or right or good or what we ought to do. There is no suggestion at all with any of them that we cannot know what we ought to do or what is good. It just tells us that what is right, desirable or what we ought to do is relative to the standards extant in different communities and that there is no standard beyond the community which we can appeal to correct any of those views. This is as recognizably a relativistic view as is the form of relativism Rorty says he is *not* committed to, namely the “self-refuting view that every community is as good as every other”. They are both recognizable versions of relativism having some family resemblance to each other, though the first view is a less plainly vulnerable view than the second. Rorty, like most critics of relativism, takes an absurd form of relativism and says that he is not that. (Refuting this absurd form of relativism is a standard classroom exercise which I doubt ever satisfies any bright student worried about relativism.) But there are other forms of relativism that are more plausible, including the one I just attributed to Rorty, and they all are plainly relativistic. So, if that attribution is correct, Rorty cannot rightly deny that he is a relativist.

Since Rorty is a relativist and, particularly where solidarity is taken, as it is by Rorty, to have a not inconsiderable value, and one’s relativism takes the form, as it does with Rorty, of maintaining that solidarity with one’s tribe is a sufficient basis for solidarity and indeed where it is also taken to be the only basis for solidarity, then that view, at the very least, seems to have some rather worrisome implications. Some of them run like this: if one is an Africaner then one should stick to that solidarity, if one is a Zulu one should also stick to that solidarity and if one is a North American liberal one should also stick to that solidarity. Whomever one is one should remain in solidarity with one’s tribe. Without that, one is a rootless individual without solidarity. Sticking with that solidarity will bring the liberal into conflict with the Africaner though it will give him no rational basis with which to criticize the Africaner. The Africaner, the Zulu or the North American liberal can only just pit their solidarities against each other and, if anyone prevails over the other, power and a willingness to stick it out will not only be the deciding factor, but will, if Rorty’s account is right, be a rationally uncriticizable deciding factor. Similar things obtain for the other three formulations of relativism I elicited from Rorty. They raise old well canvassed difficulties with relativism.

Perhaps relativism is, after all, unassailable – though Rorty does not show this. Perhaps the standards of our tribe are the only possible standards for us and that our own standards for what is sound moral belief are given, in a way ideology obscures from us, in the network of our social practices, social practices beyond which we cannot coherently make a moral or rational appeal. Perhaps it is not even really a matter that we *should* be frankly ethnocentric but that we *cannot* but be ethnocentric: we have no other alternative, our conceptual imprisonment here is too deep.

Perhaps in reality we can only have loyalties to our own tribe and stand in solidarity with our tribe. Impartial cross-cultural moral criteria may be a Homesless Watson or worse still an incoherency. There may be no coherent way of speaking of the just society or of even saying that contemporary Sweden is a more just society than contemporary Saudi Arabia so long as the substantive life lived in Saudi Arabia is lived in as faithful a way to the shared understanding of its members as is the case in Sweden. Indeed, *by that criterion*, Saudi Arabia is probably a more just society than Sweden.

Solidarity may be an essential thing in the moral life and it may be that, *pace* Kantian or Utilitarian universalists, that the only basis for solidarity is solidarity with one's tribe. No matter that the Africaners are brutalizing and exploiting Blacks one should, given the importance of solidarity, stand in solidarity with them if one is an Africaner and one can, if that is where one starts, have no reasonable ground for ceasing to be an Africaner. No matter that Hitler is murdering millions of Jews, one should stand in solidarity with him if one is a Nazi and, again, one can, if that is where one starts, have no reasonable ground for ceasing to be a Nazi. Rorty, as a good conservative liberal, cannot mean, and surely does not mean, to assert any of that, yet such views seem plainly to be entailed by what he says about morality. Whether he likes it or not, he is, with such views, in that iron cage.

What made liberalism attractive in the first place is that it seemed at least to leave a place for humanistic values that could take one beyond ethnocentrism and tribalism. This is one of the attractive features of Dewey's pragmatism which was a part of the humanistic, Enlightenment tradition of modernism. It is the same underlying commitment that set, in their controversy, Habermas apart from Rorty. Rorty's post-modernist neo-pragmatism gives us very different hopes and commitments than we find embedded in Dewey's pragmatism or in what Habermas endorses in that pragmatism. (Habermas, 1985; p. 198) Rorty's type liberalism, at least as characterized by him, does not rest on a rational moral understanding or on a rational assessment of our social condition and historical possibilities, but on an accident of cultural history. These views, Rorty is in effect saying, just happen to be the views that got socialized into him as he grew up in moderately comfortable and protected circumstances in North America rather than in the significantly different circumstances of Saudi Arabia, Nazi Germany or in the Orange Free State. It is only a rationalist ideology, Rorty in effect gives to understand, that makes us think that there is such a thing as a cross-cultural rational moral understanding. There just are these cultural differences with their different social practices with their different standards of validity and rationality embedded in distinct and indeed often quite different forms of life. Like good ethnographers we can note them but there is no non-question begging way of assessing them. This, whatever we want to say about its truth, is light years away from Dewey's expectations and that of progressive liberalism generally. This is, at best, liberalism in retreat.

Perhaps, Rorty is right, and this is really telling it like it is. Perhaps this is indeed the tough-minded view. But, all that notwithstanding, Rorty's pragmatism is an eviscerated *pragmatism* rejecting the very deeply embedded Enlightenment hopes of pragmatism that made it so attractive in the first place. If one really is to be a post-modernist – if this view of things is on the mark – then it seems to me that it would be less evasive to say with another post-modernist, Michel Foucault, that for “modern thought, no morality is possible” than to accept Rorty's cheery ‘liberal’ tribal moralism.

VIII

Let me return by this circuitous route to the question ‘Can There Be Progress in Philosophy?’ I have sought to give a reading to this question and if that reading is allowed to stand I can answer the question conditionally in the affirmative: if the research programme that is critical theory pans out, that is, if critical theory gets progressively refined and better defined and with that a body of intellectual practices develop which yield empirical and normative results which will confirm their central claims and disconfirming evidence does not mount that cannot be plausibly accounted for, then philosophy, construed in the very broad way I chose to construe it, will have strikingly progressed. This is, however, a very chancey claim for such a very ambitious holistic research programme may very well come to nought. If this is so, if critical theory comes to nought, it seems to me that the prospects for progress in philosophy are bleak. I believe – and I have elsewhere argued for this belief – that Rorty is essentially right in maintaining that in Wittgenstein and in pragmatism, when those intellectual orientations are thought through, as well, as in the pragmatization of positivism that is in much of Quine and Sellars, we have, when we consider the force of these contemporary developments taken together, an account which thoroughly undermines foundationalism in its traditional forms in Cartesian-Kantian epistemological moves, in metaphysical ‘perennial philosophy’ or in programmatic analytic philosophy and that there is nothing significant in the tradition that has come along to replace these things with accounts which still make the strong claims these various programmatic accounts made for philosophy.³

With the end of philosophy, where ‘philosophy’ is construed in the traditional professional ways, A Deweyian-problems-of-men-approach with a resolute rejection of any disciplinary matrix for philosophy seemed initially promising. I argued, in some detail, however, that it could not make good on its promise that *philosophy* could provide a rational and penetrating treat-

³ Sometimes ‘Foundationalism’ is used in such a broad way that any argued claim that there are objective warranted beliefs counts as ‘foundationalism.’ But that is wildly to stretch the meaning of that term so as to include accounts as foundationalist which are not philosophical as well as Quinean or Deweyian coherentist accounts as foundationalist. But that, surely, is to eviscerate its claim.

ment of the problems of men. Shorn from the tradition, and particularly from analytic philosophy and its differently vulnerable claims, it does not even give any clear sense to what philosophy's giving the problems of men a rational and penetrating treatment could come to. This, together with its piecemeal quality, destroys its initial attractiveness. We are pushed back, to some form of critical theory, if we are to have anything of a theoretical sort, to refurbish the hopes and aspirations of the Enlightenment.

Suppose we go back, as Rorty argues we should, to an old untechnical sense of 'philosophy' in which 'philosophy' does not name a distinct discipline but refers instead to the endeavour to see things in a comprehensive way in an attempt to make sense of our lives. 'Philosophy', on that reading, simply refers to the endeavour to so see things in this way for such a purpose. This endeavour may or may not involve the employment of a discipline or a cluster of disciplines. If we so view philosophy, and I believe we should, then we can see critical theory as an attempt, now in a rationally disciplined way, to do just that, i.e. to be philosophy in just that way. It, of course, in doing that, develops a cluster, and hopefully it will someday develop a set, of disciplinary matrices to carry out, if that is possible, in a more disciplined way, the very conception of what philosophy is about built into philosophy in that ancient, unproblematic and non-disciplinary sense.

Perhaps, as Rorty believes, nothing like this can be done and critical theory will no more be an effective instrument in the realization of the endeavour to see things in a comprehensive way and, in so seeing things, to make sense of our lives, than was the various ways, given to us in the tradition, of doing philosophy and of so seeing things. This is very possible, perhaps even likely. Critical theory is indeed a Pascalian wager. But it does not seem to me much of an exaggeration to say that vital human hopes turn on the outcome of that wager. And with this wager, or so it seems to me, go the prospects for progress in philosophy. If the wager works out we have progress if not, not.

I would like, however, to add a further thing, as perhaps a bit of an anticlimax. I have for the most part described critical theory in such a way as to make it sound as if it were something springing fresh from the forehead of Zeus. That impression is misleading. I think critical theory, as I have characterized it, is a new thing, but it has forerunners in the work — to take prominent examples — of Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, J. S. Mill and, though rather differently, in the work of Frederick Hegel. And we get closest of all to something like it in the work of Karl Marx and in the Marxist tradition, on the one hand, and in the work of Max Weber, on the other. Critical theorists, as I remarked initially, in working out a critical theory do not have to start, and indeed should not try to start, *de novo*. Indeed it seems to me that the best place to start is with the careful rational reconstructions one gets of Marx by such analytical thinkers as G. A. Cohen, Allen Wood, Alan Gilbert, Richard Miller, Jon Elster and Robert Paul Wolff and in the developments of Marxist theory found in Andrew Levine, Erick Olin Wright, Alison Jaggar,

Harry Braverman, Herbert Gintis, Richard Edwards, Goran Therborn and Claus Offe, to name a few. These rational reconstructions of Marx, and these developments of Marxist theory, may, when taken together, give us the kind of critical theory we need – something we can develop, refine and apply. Alternatively, we may need instead a far more thorough synthesizing of Weber and Marx to get the beginnings of a more adequate critical theory? Perhaps Habermas's still greater departure from Marx with his melding of many different traditions in philosophy and social theory, as we find it in his mammoth and monumental, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, is what we need? Perhaps instead what we need is something closer to the approach of Anthony Giddens or perhaps, alternatively, it should be something linked more closely with the work of Durkheim or Pareto or perhaps it will be something that takes a strikingly more original line. Still we have, all the same, plenty of models here – models which have family resemblances.

I have my own Marxist hunches here but they are little more than hunches. What I have been concerned to do in this essay is to delineate the outlines, in a very general way, of what a critical theory could be and to defend it as a coherent and plausible possibility of what the successor subject of philosophy should be after the end of philosophy.

Let me conclude – adding a still further thing – with just one more twist of the dialectic. Bertrand Russell and Noam Chomsky have done some superb social criticism with a progressive, emancipatory thrust and Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers have recently followed brilliantly in their footsteps and in their tradition with their little book *On Democracy*. Many who are not even in Russell's or Chomsky's intellectual ballpark have made sport of the untheoretical and non-systematic side of their social criticism. And indeed their work has been rather brutally empirical and normative with little theoretical baggage invoked and it has not made systematic claims. Indeed, Chomsky makes it clear that he does not think that social theory is in a position to attain such a systematic scientific status. (Chomsky, 1979) Yet, their social criticism has been very acute and very probing indeed. Many of us would like it to have a more determinate theoretical underpinning but *perhaps* it is in the very nature of social criticism that it cannot have such a determinate theoretical underpinning? When we try to impose it, it is not unreasonable to believe, we get, what we do not want, namely a metanarrative. *If* that is so, then a good critical theory would be far less theoretically ramified then I have characterized it as being, but it still would be subject to empirical constraints and would be fallibilistic and it still would have an emancipatory thrust and with these various features, it would remain a good successor subject to philosophy. However this Russellian-Chomskyian thing would have at least some of the problems of the Deweyian problems-of-men-approach. Principally, it is natural to ask, just what is *philosophical* about what they do? *Perhaps* what should be said is that this critical theory just is what is to count as philosophy here. But then this answer is available to the Deweyian problems-of-men-approach too.

If along any of these rather various lines, we can get a sound critical theory, we can then say that philosophy, construed as critical theory, has progressed. If critical theory, along all these lines, comes to nought, then the prognosis is very bleak for progress in philosophy, given the power of the end of philosophy theses that Rorty, linking Wittgenstein with a historical narrative about the evolution of modern philosophy, has powerfully thrust on our reflective consciousness.

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