The Absence of Rhetorical Theory in Richard Rorty's Linguistic Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the "linguistic turn" in analytic philosophy had a deep and significant impact on the development of Richard Rorty's pragmatism. One of the central features of the "linguistic turn" was its attention to the role of language in mediating questions of philosophy, and, in Rorty's hands, the "linguistic turn" drew philosophy very close to rhetorical theory. However, I argue that Rorty failed to engage or embrace rhetorical theory in any substantive way. This meant that his pragmatism cleaved philosophy off from the social democratic project. Such a separation of philosophy from the problems of maintaining and cultivating democracy abandons an important strand of first generation pragmatism. This amounts to a missed opportunity. By complimenting the linguistic turn with a robust account of the role of rhetoric in socio-political affairs, Rorty could have tied philosophy to social democracy in just the manner that Dewey had hoped. But instead Rorty is constrained by the tradition of philosophy and unable to make the "linguistic turn" into any kind of rhetorical turn.

In 1967 Richard Rorty edited an anthology of philosophy papers called *The Linguistic Turn*. This book was supposed to "provide material for reflection on the most recent philosophical revolution, that of linguistic philosophy" (2). Rorty contends in the introduction that the "history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers" (1). Thus *The Linguistic Turn* tries to highlight the ways in which philosophical methods and problems were being rethought in terms of language throughout the middle portion of the twentieth century. In 1967 Rorty

was not yet the iconoclastic, star philosopher and champion of American pragmatism that he became after the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979. Nevertheless, *The Linguistic Turn* marks an important moment in the history of pragmatism because it provides an initiating point for Rorty's enduring preoccupation with the role of words, sentences, and language in philosophical debates. Later in his career, when Rorty began to celebrate John Dewey as one of the twentieth century's most important philosophers, he tried to tie a Deweyan version of American pragmatism to the results of the linguistic turn in philosophy. The outcome is a kind of "linguistic pragmatism" (Kloppenberg 1996; Hildebrand 2004).

On its surface, a linguistic pragmatism might seem to share a great deal with rhetorical theory. However, in this article, I argue that Rorty's linguistic pragmatism ignores rhetorical theory. Furthermore, I argue that by ignoring rhetorical theory Rorty's pragmatism is constrained in such a way that it is unable to engage a set of important questions about democratic life—mostly questions regarding the strategic acts necessary for producing changes to public culture and guiding public deliberation. In some instances, the linguistic turn resulted in scholarship within the pragmatist tradition that was strictly academic instead of political and practical and led to the advancement of work on a series of philosophical puzzles instead of political progress (see Robert Brandom and Donald Davidson for examples). Rorty's linguistic pragmatism, I argue, makes it more difficult to use pragmatism to improve American democracy. This is a heretical interpretation of a philosopher who has long been associated with the defense and advancement of democracy and a reversal of the intentions and hopes of the first generation of pragmatism.

In essays like "Keeping Philosophy Pure" and "Philosophy in America Today," Rorty critiques philosophy's overemphasis on professional puzzles at the expense of social democracy. Accordingly, I am not arguing that Rorty abandoned questions of democracy or that his pragmatism can be reduced to its emphasis on language. Instead, I am arguing that his failure to make an explicit, full rhetorical turn in his work significantly limits or constrains his approach to democracy. Nor am I suggesting that Rorty's version of neopragmatism is the only version available to us—other philosophers like Cornel West, Richard Bernstein, and Jeffrey Stout articulate versions that might embrace rhetorical theory more fully. But Rorty's voice remains central to contemporary pragmatism. I am targeting Rorty for analysis for three reasons. First, I am attempting to assess the extent to which his version of pragmatism does, and can, support social democratic

projects, in part because he embodies the spirit of that connection in neopragmatist scholarship. Much has been written about Rorty's conception of democracy (Festenstein 2001), but little of it assesses that connection in the light of rhetorical theory. Second, he is the first person to make the connection between pragmatism and linguistic philosophy and to flesh out some of the implications of that connection. For this reason, the few examples of scholarship that do attempt to link him to the rhetorical tradition (Horne 1995; Smith 1992) show how his work is compatible with rhetorical theory. I agree with such arguments, but I am interested in considering why Rorty did not himself see the importance of rhetorical theory, why his linguistic pragmatism fails to develop a robust rhetorical theory, and what is left for us to do given the absence of rhetorical theory in Rorty's work. Third, Rorty, coincidentally, did embrace rhetoric, just not rhetorical theory. By that I mean he was seriously interested in the ways in which language, and his own style of writing, could effect change. He was an astute practitioner of rhetoric, but he did not reflect on rhetorical theory—why?

For these reasons, this article emerges from, and relates to, more recent scholarship on the connection between rhetorical studies and pragmatism. Steven Mailloux (1998), for example, has long argued for the compatibility between pragmatism and the rhetorical tradition. Stanley Fish (1999) has gone so far as to suggest that rhetoric is another name for the kind of antifoundationalism promoted by pragmatism. More recent scholarship in rhetorical studies has attempted to develop the connections between pragmatism and the rhetorical tradition through comparisons with classical rhetoric (Danisch 2007; Crick 2010) or by articulating the importance of a Deweyan deliberative rhetoric for democratic life (Keith 2007). This article extends such scholarship by analyzing and assessing the ways that contemporary philosophy of language, filtered through Richard Rorty, has brought the pragmatist tradition close to rhetorical theory but ultimately has failed to embrace it in a full fashion. In the rhetorical tradition, the language arts are a vehicle for acts of citizenship, public deliberation, and the improvement of sociopolitical conditions. But the linguistic turn, despite its pragmatist impulses, never made that connection. This was a missed opportunity, and it sets a challenge for contemporary students of pragmatism and rhetoric. That challenge is to articulate how and why we ought to marry the insights of linguistic pragmatism to work in the rhetorical tradition. This article is a small beginning in that task.

THE LIMITS OF THE LINGUISTIC TURN

Rorty explains the differences between first-generation pragmatism and contemporary pragmatism in this way: "The new pragmatism differs from the old in just two respects. . . . The first is that we new pragmatists talk about language instead of experience or mind, or consciousness as the old pragmatists did. The second respect is that we have all read Kuhn, Hanson, Toulmin, and Feyerabend, and have thereby become suspicious of the term scientific method" (1999, 95). The first point underscores the contribution that Rorty thinks analytic philosophy has made to the tradition of pragmatism. As he claims in *The Linguistic Turn*, by focusing on language rather than mind, experience, or some other phenomena, the analytic tradition was able to make a formal break with the larger philosophical tradition. The first point, in other words, suggests that first-generation pragmatism was limited because it had not experienced the revolution ushered in by the linguistic turn. His second point reinforces the first because it demonstrates that contemporary philosophy of science is an outcome of the concern with language. Rorty reads Thomas Kuhn as suggesting that the history of scientific progress rests on the development of vocabularies (see Gross 2008, 154–62). Rorty further claims in *Philosophy and Social Hope* that "pragmatism clears the underbrush and leaves it to others to plant the forest. I would add that the underbrush in question is mostly specifically philosophical underbrush. The 'new' pragmatism should, I think, be viewed merely as an effort to clear away some alder and sumac, which sprang up during the 30-year spell of wet philosophical weather—the period that we now look back on as 'positivistic analytic philosophy.' This clearance will restore the appearance of the terrain that Dewey landscaped, but it will not do more than that" (1999, 96). This insight nicely summarizes how constrained and thin Rorty's pragmatism turns out to be—it is a project of clearing not building.

These comments about the distinction between new and old pragmatists also reveal the importance Rorty assigns to the linguistic turn. In a very early essay, "Realism, Categories, and the Linguistic Turn," he articulates the "two routes by which one may reach a conception of philosophy as something that lives, moves and has its being within language" (1962, 312). According to one route, the argument that we cannot get beyond language to some nonlinguistic fact or essence is a new version of Kantian epistemology. From this perspective, Kant claimed that we cannot get beyond our categories of explanation to noumenal reality and so it follows that we also

cannot get beyond the limits of our language. The other route goes through Hegel. According to this second route we arrive at the thesis that language cannot be transcended because of a practical decision to avoid the circularity involved in trying to defend one's metaphysical views by appealing to neutral epistemological standards. From this perspective, the thesis that language cannot be transcended is "simply a purification of the Hegelian thesis that the progress of dialectical controversy cannot be judged from a standpoint outside the controversy itself" (1962, 313). In other words, vocabularies can only be evaluated in their own terms: "To propose a set of categories is not to offer a description of some non-linguistic fact, but to offer a tool for getting the job done" (313). Rorty generally follows the second path because it suggests a way of freeing language from the set of epistemological perplexities that have always haunted the philosophical tradition. This insight remains critical throughout his career.

The Kantian route to the linguistic turn gave rise to the belief that philosophy could become an autonomous discipline within which language substituted for "experience." Under this approach, the meaning of a sentence was understood to be an object of inquiry, but that meaning was often reduced to knowing what facts or sensations would confirm or disconfirm the sentence. Eventually, however, this neo-Kantian perspective began to seem less powerful. Instead, philosophers started to see language as something we do. This is one moment at which rhetorical theory could have become important to the project of philosophy. Rorty sees a "reunion in philosophy," but that reunion is not between rhetoric and philosophy. Rather, it is between pragmatism and positivism. In short, the philosophy of language began to offer social practice accounts of how words worked and began to see linguistic decisions as matters of how particular claims fit into the larger context of a form of life. Donald Davidson and Robert Brandom are the two philosophers whose work most clearly illustrates this development, and Rorty repeatedly refers favorably to them in his later work. Both Davidson and Brandom supposedly liberate the philosophy of language from the problems of epistemology. Rorty sums up the legacy of the linguistic turn by citing Davidson approvingly: "The upshot of linguistic philosophy is, I would suggest, Davidson's remark that 'there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what philosophers . . . have supposed. . . . We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language users master and then apply to cases'" (1991, 50).

Rorty suggests that the possibility of moving in and out of vocabularies shows how the problems that arise with one particular set of descriptions of

the world vanish when a new vocabulary takes over—this will later become a central feature of his cultural politics. This is the backdrop for Rorty's claim that if we give up on essentialism in all its forms, then we arrive at the position encapsulated by "the romantic sense that everything can be changed by talking in new terms" (1982, 149). When we stop thinking about epistemology as a question of getting something before the mind and start thinking of it as the ability to say something about something, then we can finally dismantle the Cartesian and Kantian tradition. Reason, from this perspective, is not a special faculty of getting an accurate representation of the world, but an ability to "utter sentences with the intention of justifying the utterance of other sentences" (1979, 182). This line of thinking brings us to the precipice of rhetorical theory (as Janet Horne has argued). Rorty, however, uses this insight to offer metaphilosophical commentary about truth. If, as language users, we only know the world under specific descriptions, then the epistemic authority of our beliefs comes from the language in which we describe our experiences. Here is Rorty's description of the implications of the philosophy of language for epistemology: "To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations" (1989, 201).

This take on epistemology together with the work of clearing the "underbrush," as Rorty describes it, can be seen as a method of clearing away the barriers between philosophy and rhetoric that emerged in the light of Plato's attack on the Sophists. Rorty moves in that direction but never gets there. My aim here is not just to criticize Rorty for failing to do something he never intended to do but to suggest that rhetorical theory might move Rorty's project forward substantially. In order to explain this line of reasoning further, I want to make a distinction between two different kinds of social practice approaches to language. The first I will call a rhetorical approach and the second I will call a philosophical approach. I admit that this distinction is overly general and reinscribes the traditional philosophy-rhetoric binary. My intention is to use this distinction as a heuristic tool and then to argue that pragmatism would benefit from collapsing it. In both ancient Athens and contemporary U.S. academe, rhetorical theorists understand language as a social practice. Gorgias, for example, in a speech called "On the Nonexistent," articulates a variation of Rorty's claim that "where there are no sentences there is no truth." Gorgias's speech refutes the existence of a world outside language *and* human experience by making three arguments: first, nothing exists; second, even if anything does

exist it is unknowable and incomprehensible to man; and third, even if we could know things that exist, we could not communicate that knowledge to others. These three arguments rest on his belief that language is the result of our perceptual encounters with the world. However, what is made in language can never fully and completely represent that world as it actually is outside of an individual's perception. Moreover, our perceptual encounters then become intersubjective and our conversations with others become the mechanisms by which we arrive at cultural and social forms of knowledge. Language mediates all such processes all the way through.

Gorgias's point is one Rorty is fond of making again and again: that all philosophical propositions (even those ontological ones about existence) *and* all mundane, everyday, utilitarian propositions are matters of language, not referents to concepts, reality, or any other extralinguistic entity one could dream up. Here we have the same basic theoretical insight, but what are the consequences of this insight? For the Sophists, such an insight led to the development of a robust pedagogy, on the one hand, and a political theory, on the other. That pedagogy was a pedagogy of practice, by which I mean that the Sophists offered students training in the strategic art of public speaking so as to equip people with the capacity to shape perceptions. As Protagoras, another Sophist, claimed, rhetorical practices give shape to the historical moment within which we live and the kinds of truth claims that are possible within that historical moment (Schiappa 2003). Cynthia Farrar has claimed that this take on rhetoric made Protagoras "the first democratic political theorist in the history of the world" (1989, 77). His theory suggests that the very process that allows citizens to be citizens requires positive participation through rhetorical practice for the purpose of furthering the aims of the polis by contributing as best one can to the process of socialization.

This is one of several possible routes to a rhetorical approach to social practice theories of language. I could have outlined an Aristotelean approach, an Isocratean approach, or a more contemporary approach based on Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, or Chaïm Perelman. In any case, however, certain general characteristics of a rhetorical approach emerge (despite the fact that different rhetorical theorists develop these lines of thinking in different ways). First, a rhetorical approach to social practice theories of language always recommends techniques, methods, or modes of performing that can improve an individual's capacity for using language. I could stop here because this might be all one needs to see how deeply committed to the rhetorical approach first-generation pragmatism was. Second, a rhetorical approach offers an analysis of the context within which rhetorical

practice operates with an eye toward the alteration of that context. Context informs practice and is itself an outcome of long-standing practices. Third, building from this insight into context, the question of producing changes in belief and action is always at the center of rhetorical approaches to language. Not only do rhetorical theorists look for explanations of why and how change happens through language (and in such cases they find people like Thomas Kuhn useful) but they also look for ways in which political and social change can be created by rhetorical practice. Instead of a Rorty shrug accompanied by a neutral, armchair observation of how disembodied historical forces might go this way or that, those who approach language via rhetorical theory look for those avenues through which change can be made. Rhetoric is a strategic art of guiding public deliberation and judgment. One must observe and then deploy the available means of persuasion to make things happen.

Rorty describes the beginning of a philosophical approach to social practice theories of language in his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn* and then develops that approach in several other later essays on Robert Brandom, Donald Davidson, and Wittgenstein. In the introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*, Rorty claims that the arguments made by several philosophers of language are "*practical* arguments based on theoretical considerations about the nature of language or the nature of philosophy. They amount to saying to traditional philosophers: try doing it this way, and see if you don't achieve your purposes more efficiently" (1967, 9). This is a narrow view of the meaning of "practical." It only entails a method of doing philosophy and nothing more. This means it recommends a set of practices for resolving problems within the discipline of philosophy. This makes philosophy of language a critical enterprise: "The critical thrust of the linguistic movement in contemporary philosophy is against philosophy as a pseudo-science," and if philosophers were to drop their traditional conception of the nature of their discipline, then "linguistic philosophers would have nothing left to criticize" (23). This is a clear indication of the limits of the scope of the linguistic turn, as Rorty first understood it.

What are the consequences of a philosophy of language as social practice? And what are the consequences of reading this view as a development of pragmatism? Unlike the rhetorical perspective I have briefly outlined, the major consequences of Brandom and Davidson's work are epistemological. To the extent that they recommend methods, the methods concern ways of doing philosophy by changing how we talk about truth. Brandom spends a great deal of time trying to rehabilitate the notion

of "fact" from within the context of a social practice theory of language. What they do not offer is any kind of rhetorical pedagogy, political theory, or account of how to pursue change through linguistic agency. I do not doubt that one can offer good reasons to believe that Robert Brandom and Donald Davidson are important inheritors of the pragmatist tradition. My argument, however, is that this is just one view, one path, one way of developing and extending first-generation pragmatism. The linguistic turn construed as the development of a social practice philosophy of language has three major consequences. First, it offers the distinct advantage of giving a series of interesting responses to traditional philosophical questions and problems. Most interesting, perhaps, is that Rorty, Brandom, and Davidson have a theory of truth that is not burdened by representationalism, neo-Kantianism, or the legacy of Descartes. Second, because this view of pragmatism has been able to provide interesting answers to the traditional problems of philosophy, it has aided in the professionalization of the field of philosophy. By this I mean that instead of bringing philosophy to an end (as Rorty warned was possible in his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*), it has shown how one can proceed with the professional tasks of philosophy even when one abandons some of the traditional distinctions held on to by Kant, Descartes, logical positivists, and others. Third, it severs the relationship between philosophy and social democracy (a relationship that mattered a great deal to first-generation pragmatism). A philosophical account of language as social practice has no political ramifications, avoids having to offer justifications for democracy as a mode of life, and, in general, does not need to take meliorism seriously. This is because it holds onto the distinction between theory and practice by offering an abstract account of social practices without consideration for how we might change those very same practices. This, of course, is the point for Rorty and for someone like Stanley Fish, but it was not the goal for Dewey, nor is it the aim of other contemporary neopragmatists like Cornel West or Richard Bernstein. These three consequences provide the backdrop for the argument that the linguistic turn is a cautionary tale because it takes a constrained view of what pragmatism can and can't do. The linguistic turn à la Rorty and the philosophy of language that he champions pretend that rhetorical theory does not exist. Thus someone like Kenneth Burke, who I would argue is an important part of the pragmatist tradition, is not part of the linguistic turn because he does not travel the Kantian or the Hegelian route—he travels a rhetorical route instead. In the end, philosophy constrains Rorty's vision of social practice

accounts of language. This, I argue, is not a desirable or deeply pragmatist consequence of the linguistic turn. The difficulty of reconciling the linguistic turn with a public, democratic project became even more clearly apparent in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

CONTINGENCY, IRONY, AND SOLIDARITY WITHOUT RHETORIC

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity represents Rorty's attempt to understand the relationship between three of his own idiosyncratic intellectual preoccupations. The first is the insight from the philosophy of language I have laid out. The second is his commitment to social democratic projects of the American liberal left. And the third is his lifelong love of novels and poetry. The book opens with a cogent summary of "the contingency of language." The first chapter demonstrates what Rorty thinks we can and ought to take from the linguistic turn. The first thing that philosophy of language teaches us is that "truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. . . . Only descriptions of the world can be true or false" (1989, 5). This is a reiteration of the basic sophistic position advanced most clearly by Gorgias. Rorty develops this insight by claiming that "the world does not speak. Only we do" (1989, 6). What do we do with this insight? Rorty uses it to link the linguistic turn to poetry, narrative, and novels:

> But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary, . . . then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences. . . . What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change. (1989, 7)

This means that philosophers are "auxiliary to the poet rather than the physicist" and that even changes in science can be described as changes in vocabularies brought about by imaginative new uses of language. If this is

to amount to a method of philosophy, that method is best described as an attempt "to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it" (1989, 9). Rorty argues that this means that *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* does not have to "offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace" but instead must "try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics" (1989, 9). It seems fair to say that Rorty spent a great deal of the rest of his career trying to urge people that it was better to talk in one way instead of another, better to adopt one vocabulary and drop another—a distinctly rhetorical task, no doubt. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is such an important book because this notion of "redescription" sets the stage for a "philosophy as cultural politics" that defines the last twenty years of Rorty's career. But Rorty offers no account of how to make one vocabulary seem more attractive or how to "tempt the rising generation." His explanation of how change happens precludes him from developing a rhetorical theory that could do just that.

Much of the rest of the chapter from which the preceding quotes are drawn is taken up with a reading of Donald Davidson. A couple of key distinctions govern that reading. The first is between imagination and argument. What he calls "the talent for speaking differently" is *not* related to the talent for "arguing well." Looked at from the perspective of the rhetorical tradition, this claim cleaves off the canon of invention from the rest of the rhetorical enterprise and then understands the process of invention as a strictly poetic process (or as unrelated to the invention of new arguments). It's as if the process of argumentation does not require imagination and that imagination does not require argument. It is also as if poetry has no proper relationship with rhetoric. To get at Rorty's account of how language changes, one might ask about the available resources for change: "The gradual trial-and-error creation of a new, third vocabulary . . . is not a discovery about how old vocabularies fit together. That is why it cannot be reached by an inferential process— by starting with premises formulated in the old vocabularies. . . . To come up with such a vocabulary is more like discarding the lever and the chock because one has envisaged the pully" (1989, 12). One can read this sentence as a refutation of Aristotelean rhetorical theory or even a refutation of the contemporary theory of argument advanced by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. Aristotle understood rhetoric as a strategic art and developed a theory of topics from which one could

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always generate new arguments. In addition, the rhetor in possession of prudence had the capacity to use experience (presumably experience with previous vocabularies) to respond in inventive and useful ways to new circumstances. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca outline a theory of argument based on "association" in which a rhetor makes connections between an audience's already existing vocabulary and some new claim that the rhetor wants the audience to accept. I'm not even sure an engineer working on the development of tools would accept Rorty's account of change. It is hard to imagine creating digital technologies without using analog technologies first. Perhaps open-source software engineering is the best example of a dynamic process of invention that relies explicitly on the resources of an already existing language for change and innovation. But for Rorty, invention is a matter of "the attempt to make something that has never been dreamed of before," and the epistemology of the linguistic turn conditions his understanding of this possibility. He must pit this kind of invention over against "attempts to represent or express something that was already there" (1989, 13). But this seems like a false choice. Rhetorical theory has long understood the poetic power of metaphors and tropes to alter our understanding of the world *and* the usefulness of already existing metaphors to help us in our projects of invention. But still, how does one make something that has never been dreamed of before?

Rorty suggests that we think about creativity, invention, and novelty along somewhat Darwinian lines: "Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids" (1989, 16). This leaves very little room for human agency. The motor of natural selection, after all, is random mutation, and that idea is not far from Rorty's thought:

> Think of novelty as the sort of thing which happens when, for example, a cosmic ray scrambles the atoms in a DNA molecule, thus sending things off in the direction of the orchids and anthropoids. The orchids, when their time came, were no less novel or marvelous for the sheer contingency of this necessary condition of their existence. Analogously, for all we know, or should care, Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agape*, and Newton's metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial

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neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy—some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata. It hardly matters now how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. There had never been such things before. (1989, 17)

This is precisely what I mean by a "thin" account of change. Some random act is responsible for the invention of novelty, and we should not really concern ourselves with explaining these things anyway. One could very easily offer alternative explanations of the metaphors that Rorty picks out by stipulating the ways in which Aristotle's, Saint Paul's, and Newton's vocabularies were developed strategically in relationship to (and with the use of) other circulating vocabularies and ideas. Even Darwin's theory, as John Angus Campbell (1997) has clearly shown, is the result of strategic rhetorical work. For Rorty to ignore the role of rhetoric in the invention of new vocabularies is to ignore the very mechanisms of change that are, and have been, available to humans and that are not available to orchids. We are not orchids because we have language. Because we have language we are capable of changing vocabularies through rhetorical practice and do not need to wait around for a cosmic ray to alter our consciousness or a child-hood trauma in order to gain poetic insight. Great poems are achievements of work and skill. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is just as much a rhetorical response to all of the other literature that he had read as it is the result of cosmic rays or childhood trauma. To reduce invention, novelty, and creativity to a kind of random mutation is to ignore the role of human agency in changing the historical contingencies with which we are faced. This is taking Darwinism too far.

The contingency thesis, therefore, leads Rorty to ignore questions about rhetorical theory just when those questions seem most important. Contingency, of course, has always been a central preoccupation of rhetorical theory. Uncertainty and contingency drive rhetoric, or, as Dilip Gaonkar puts it, "the contingent is the unproblematic scene of rhetoric" (2001, 151). This claim has its origins in Aristotle. Gaonkar argues that the contingency thesis stands behind a "cluster of concepts and propositions" concerning rhetoric: "Rhetoric is a method for inquiring into and communicating about the realm of the contingent. . . . [I]nquiry into the contingent yields opinions of variable validity and utility, but no certain knowledge. Hence, opinion is the material with which rhetoric must work, [and] . . . the proper mode of working with opinion is deliberation (involving dialogue

and debate) that relies primarily on probable reasoning to make decisions and to form judgments" (2001, 158). For Rorty contingency does not serve as the "unproblematic scene of rhetoric" but instead serves to justify the importance of poetry and imaginative works of genius for which no explanation is possible. Moreover, the contingency of language thesis leads to the claim that the self and the community are contingent creations. To explain the contingency of the self, Rorty offers an interpretation of Freud and Nietzsche and extends his emphasis on novelty and originality. He claims that "the important philosophers of our century are those who have tried to follow through on the Romantic points by breaking with Plato and seeing freedom as the recognition of contingency. . . . They accept Nietzsche's identification of the strong poet, the maker, as humanity's hero" (1989, 25–26). It is Nietzsche who was the first to drop "the whole idea of 'knowing the truth'" and instead suggested that we ought to engage in the task of self-creation. This is tied to the philosophy of language that Rorty espouses: "To create one's own mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind" (1989, 27). The upshot of this view is that only poets "can truly appreciate contingency" because "strong poets" are "capable of telling the story of their own production in words never used before" (1989, 28).

Freud, according to Rorty's interpretation, democratized this emphasis on telling one's own story by showing how all of us have a creative unconscious. The only important distinction, in the light of Freud's work, is between fantasy and poetry. "Fantasies" are just private, contingent metaphors that "don't catch on with other people" but that, nonetheless, are "crucial elements in the individual's sense of who she is." Poetic genius, conversely, is merely another way of saying that a "private obsession produces a metaphor which we *can* find a use for" (1989, 37). The difference, therefore, between genius and fantasy is the "difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people—happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time" (1989, 37). Here again, we see contingency without rhetoric and a thin account of persuasion. Rorty offers no real substantive take on why one metaphor or poem may prove "successful" and another may not. He abandons the explanatory task just when it becomes most interesting and just at the moment when rhetorical theory could offer an account of why some particular metaphors would catch on and others not. The emphasis is, again, on the accidental nature of change: "To sum up, poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress

results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need" (1989, 37). An awareness of the contingency of the self is nothing other than a recommendation to engage in the "playfulness" of redescription or "the power of language to make new and different things possible and important" (1989, 39). But nowhere does Rorty offer an account of a set of practices by which one could engage in such a project.

The other implication of the contingency of language thesis is that we cannot find, nor should we seek, foundations for liberal society and that the collective achievements of a community are not the results of the discovery of some foundations but outcomes of contingent uses of vocabularies. This means that—and here Rorty comes closest to the heart of the rhetorical tradition)—"a liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices. But this is to say that an ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome" (1989, 60). What is missing here is the recommendation that liberal society also include a kind of rhetorical education that would equip citizens with the practices necessary to participate in the encounters that Rorty describes and that would encourage them to engage in the task of persuasion instead of the use of force. Citizens, in Rorty's liberal utopia, have a sense of the contingency of their language and thus would be committed to the process of persuasion through which one contingent vocabulary becomes preferable to others. In other words, the contingency thesis "suits one for citizenship" in a liberal state because that one would begin to acknowledge the extent to which the vocabularies that govern life in a state are poetic inventions and not foundational logics (1989, 60). This turns truth into "the outcome of undistorted communication" or "whatever view wins in a free and open encounter" (1989, 67). Of course the problem is that Rorty has no resources for recommending how one might craft a poetic invention that could win in such encounters. Devising such a strategy has been the governing preoccupation of much of rhetorical theory since its inception in ancient Greece. To see persuasion as the necessary task in maintaining a liberal democratic state is to suggest that political theory ought to be a matter of rhetorical theory, but Rorty stops short of this claim.

What was unique about the democratic project in classical Athens was the extent to which Greek intellectuals sought to theorize, explain, and understand the importance of rhetoric in doing just the things that Rorty

describes. However, what is unique in Rorty's liberal utopia is the argument that we should give up "the attempt to unite one's private ways of dealing with one's finitude and one's sense of obligation to other human beings" (1989, 68). In other words, Rorty uses the contingency thesis not for the articulation of a robust rhetorical theory but to push for a clean separation between the private and the public—his utopia turns on this separation. At the center of the separation between the public and the private is Rorty's idea of irony. An ironist, on his account, is someone that has "radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she uses," someone that realizes that these doubts can never be dissolved by evidence or knowledge, and someone who "does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others" (1989, 73). Rorty imagines the ironist as the opposite of the metaphysician who searches for a final vocabulary that represents some aspect of the world as it is. The ironist thinks of vocabularies as "poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria" (1989, 77). This account of the ironist has three important consequences. First, the ironist is always a skeptic or, at the least, someone disinterested in truth claims. Because vocabularies are just vocabularies and not reflections of the world as it is, the ironist always remains skeptical of the vocabulary that she inhabits. Second, ironists specialize in "redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon" (1989, 78). This entails the belief that literary critics are moral exemplars for the ironist because of their ability to "play off vocabularies against one another" (1989, 78). Third, "the social glue holding together the ideal liberal society" is, for the ironist, the belief that "the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities" (1989, 84). Private self-creation, the act of inventing one's own final vocabulary, is the goal of the ironist, and this means that the "ideal society" would consist of equalizing "opportunities for self-creation" and then leaving "people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities" (1989, 85).

Rorty wants to discard the metaphysical idea that "liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs" and replace that with the idea that "common vocabularies and common hopes" bind societies together (1989, 86). This seems to me to be an admirable proclamation, and from the perspective of rhetorical theory it is obviously true. The challenge is to forge a "public rhetoric" that is ironic, even though "irony seems inherently a private matter" (1989, 87). This "public rhetoric" amounts to the claim that liberals, because of their awareness of the contingency of final

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vocabularies, think that we should try to reduce suffering, humiliation, and cruelty in the world. We should have this wish because people should be free to pursue the creation of their own final vocabulary, and suffering, humiliation, and cruelty occur when we treat one person's final vocabulary as trash. People, according to Rorty, "want to be described in their own terms," and we humiliate people when we do not allow them this freedom (1989, 91). The liberal ironist, therefore, "wants our *chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription. She thinks that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the *only* social bond that is needed" (1989, 91).

Reading books, for Rorty, is one of the best ways to learn how to become kind. That is because books allow us to become familiar with a host of other alternative vocabularies and make us sensitive to cruelty and suffering through a process of identification. Here Rorty is advancing a slight twist on a standard liberal line of reasoning: "We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people—people whom we still instinctively think of as 'they' rather than 'us.' We should try to notice our similarities with them" (1989, 196). This recommendation is built on the philosophical claim that "we try *not* to want something which stands beyond history and institutions. The fundamental premise of the book is that belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstances" (1989, 189). Taken together these two statements link up nicely with firs- generation pragmatism—the second is a veiled reference to a famous quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes. But when one compares *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* to Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* or Jane Addams's *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, it is easy to see the gap between the recommendations for the realization of solidarity. Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* contains a theoretical account of how communicative action can produce the kinds of solidarity that Rorty seeks, and that account has a lot more to recommend than simply reading more books. Dewey argues that solidarity is found in social inquiry, carried out by face-to-face dialogue. This is quite different from sticking your nose into *Remembrance of Things Past*. Addams provides a sociological description of the kinds of actions necessary to generate solidarity within a multi-ethnic city marked by the constant influx of new immigrants. No pragmatist has confronted the problem of solidarity more squarely than Addams. Her attempts to, for example, get new Greek immigrants in Chicago to work with (and no doubt

identify with and empathize with) new Italian immigrants was just one of a myriad of problems of creating solidarity that she faced. Art even played some role in her attempts to create solidarity, but it was hardly the only factor.

It seems clear that Rorty has nothing as thick or as substantive to offer as what Dewey and Addams offered in response to the question of how one goes about creating solidarity. One of the reasons that Rorty prefers imagination to argument is that "the sort of truth that is the product of successful argument . . . cannot improve our moral condition" (2007, 101). Rorty's focus on imaginative literature may be useful for improving our moral condition but it does not do the same work that strategic acts of public communication and argumentation do in transforming public policy and guiding public deliberation. A stronger correlation exists between, for example, Thomas Farrell's notion of practical reason and Jane Addams's achievements, because they both value transforming political circumstances over altering moral imaginations.

REDESCRIPTION AND PHILOSOPHY AS CULTURAL POLITICS

What Rorty does offer instead is "philosophy as cultural politics" or, more generally, the practice of "redescription." Much of his work in the two decades that followed *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* was devoted to developing an account of how beliefs change and to "projects for getting rid of whole topics of discourse" (2007, 3). Arguments about what words to use became, on Rorty's view, a crucial element in campaigns for social progress. This is because "rather than . . . an attempt to grasp intrinsic features of the real . . . redescription . . . [is] a tool for social and individual change" (1999, 220). This is the basis for Rorty's suggestion that certain novels—*Lolita*, for example—can serve as sources of acute moral learning. It is also the basis for his suggestion that young people should be encouraged to read the New Testament and the *Communist Manifesto* because they "will be morally better for having done so" (1999, 203). Literature and poetry, according to Rorty, aid in the process of popularizing alternative descriptions, a process that is the driving force both for private projects of self-creation and a moral humane public culture. Popularizing alternative descriptions in accordance with long-term cultural and political hopes is what "cultural politics" is all about. Does this mean that "cultural politics," practiced by way of "redescription," is rhetorical theory by another name?

In the conclusion of this article I try to show that if it is rhetorical theory, then it's relatively thin and remains too constrained by philosophy.

In the preface to *Philosophy and Social Hope* Rorty claims that "James's and Dewey's main accomplishments were negative, in that they explain how to slough off a lot of intellectual baggage which we inherited from the Platonic tradition" (1999, xiii). This kind of negative characterization is developed further in several essays. Rorty consistently claims that pragmatism is "anti-essentialist" and consistently advances a kind of anti-epistemology. The claim that correspondence theories of truth are not possible or desirable remained a central part of his later work. Rorty brings this anti-epistemology in line with rhetorical theory in books like *Philosophy and Social Hope* but contains it as a response to philosophical questions. For example, he argues that instead of truth, "the purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring about consensus on the ends to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends" (1999, xxv). But nowhere does he offer a constructive project for the creation and maintenance of such agreement because in his view that is beyond the scope of *philosophy* as cultural politics. Rorty justifies this position by claiming that Dewey's positive projects are "fuzzy." When Dewey recommends that we drop the appearance-reality distinction in favor of a search for useful descriptions of the world that can create a better future, he does not have a clear answer to the question "better by what criteria?" Instead of a detailed answer, Dewey gives a "fuzzy" answer: such a future is "better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad" (1999, 28). Rorty suggests that Dewey and other pragmatists are at their best when answering technical questions about the search for truth, not when giving "fuzzy" answers to difficult questions. Along these lines, pragmatism suggests that we exchange the search for truth for an account of "justification" (1999, 32). But there is no constructive, general theory of justification that pragmatism can offer: "Pragmatists think that there are a lot of detailed things to be said about justification to any given audience, but nothing to be said about justification in general" (1999, 38). A rhetorical theorist might wonder why one would need to choose between the two options, especially after reading Aristotle's *Rhetoric* or Thomas Farrell's *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. If we can't have a general account of justification, if we can't talk in robust fashion about practical reason, then the best we can do is link up this anti-epistemology with imagination, poetry, and self-creation. If we "stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded," then we can "start worrying about whether

one has been imaginative enough to think up alternatives to one's present beliefs" (1999, 34).

This last point suggests one of two possible ways in which pragmatism can be thought of as something more substantive than an anti-epistemology. For Rorty, pragmatism's connection to romanticism and polytheism are the closest we come to constructive, positive projects. The relationship between pragmatism and romanticism turns on the importance of imagination:

> At the heart of pragmatism is the refusal to accept the correspondence theory of truth and the idea that true beliefs are accurate representations of reality. At the heart of romanticism is the thesis of the priority of imagination over reason—the claim that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken. These two movements are both reaction against the idea that there is something non-human out there with which human beings need to get in touch. (2007, 105)

If on these grounds we think of reason "as a social practice" instead of as "a truth-tracking faculty," then we ought to believe in "the use of persuasion rather than force" (2007, 107). Persuasion is the best mechanism that we have for getting people to cooperate with us. But this does not lead Rorty to develop a rhetorical theory centered on persuasion. Instead, it leads him to view the invention of new vocabularies with a kind of reverence. Persuasion happens when an innovative use of language is taken up by a community (this is an entailment of his romanticism), but he has nothing to say about why such a language would be taken up. Instead, he focuses on the "various geniuses" that have given rise to new vocabularies (2007, 108). This is what connects Quine, Sellars, the later Wittgenstein, Davidson and Brandom with Nietzsche, Schiller, Shelley, Emerson, and Whitman. Imagination is the "ability to come up with socially useful novelties" (2007, 115). This is bound up with language and persuasion: "The more an organism can get what it wants by persuasion rather than force, the more rational it is" (2007, 115). And persuasion is dependent on imagination: "You cannot use persuasion if you cannot talk. No imagination, no language. No linguistic change, no moral or intellectual progress. Rationality is a matter of making allowed moves within language games. Imagination creates the games that reason proceeds to play" (2007, 115). This is why Rorty reveres the poets and sees the project of romanticism as deeply tied to the project of pragmatism. But for Rorty the imaginative-poetic project has no deep connection to the history

of rhetoric. To say that persuasion is a matter of imagination is not to offer a very substantive account of persuasion. As a positive move, therefore, this account of pragmatism does not go very far. But it is not supposed to go very far.

This romantic emphasis on imagination amounts to a relatively private affair, and in that way it is connected to the claim that pragmatism should also be tied to polytheism. Rorty, in fact, uses the phrase "romantic polytheism" to suggest that poetry should be substituted for religion as a source of ideals. A polytheist is someone who thinks that "there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs" (2007, 30). This means that "human perfection becomes a private concern, and our responsibility to others becomes a matter of permitting them as much space to pursue these private concerns" (2007, 30). If one accepts this belief in polytheism, then one has to "give up on the idea that philosophy can help you choose among the various deities and the various forms of life offered" (2007, 32). This means that pragmatism cannot offer a solid argument as to why you should prefer democracy to fascism because that choice amounts to a choice between two different poems. In addition, we must make a distinction between "projects of social cooperation" and "projects of self-development" (2007, 35). The latter do not require intersubjective agreement, and the two do not necessarily have to hang together. If anything, Rorty offers a more substantive account of self-development and a thin account of how to generate intersubjective agreement. But that is because the link to romanticism is the constructive move of his pragmatism. Rorty's pragmatism recommends the private, romantic pursuit of new, imaginative vocabularies as a precondition for persuasion. What matters most are the consequences of this view for philosophy, and Rorty is always concerned with what's next in the history of his discipline.

As an edifying philosopher, Rorty has a clear sense of the path that should not be followed: "I do not think that philosophy is ever going to be put on the secure path of a science, nor that it is a good idea to try to put it there" (2007, 124). Instead, he thinks that philosophy professors ought to be seen as "practicing cultural politics." One can practice cultural politics "by suggesting changes in the uses of words and by putting new words in circulation—hoping thereby to break through impasses and to make conversation more fruitful. I am quite willing to give up the goal of getting things right, and to substitute that of enlarging our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions. . . . The maturation

of our concepts, and the increasing richness of our conceptual repertoire, constitute cultural progress" (2007, 124). This is conversational philosophy. It sounds, however, like a stripped down, simplified version of rhetorical practice. Although knowing some rhetorical theory would surely help one to engage in this kind of linguistic wordplay, Rorty seems to suggest that knowing literature, poetry, and pragmatist epistemology is more important.

The word "persuasion" appears repeatedly in Rorty's corpus. An interview with him from 1998, conducted by Wolfgang Ulrich and Helmut Mayert, is actually titled "Persuasion Is a Good Thing." The title obviously implies a traditional philosophical disdain for rhetoric and assumes that the reader would be surprised by the declaration being made. Oddly enough the interview has virtually nothing to do with persuasion, except in one brief, passing place: "Some philosophers see an important difference between logic and rhetoric, or between 'convincing' and 'persuading.' I do not. There is of course a difference between good and bad arguments, but this is a matter of the audience to which the argument is directed. An argument is good only for a public that accepts its premises. . . . We do not need an additional distinction between logic and rhetoric" (2006, 70). It would have been nice if the interviewers had pressed Rorty on this matter and asked whether this implied that there was little need for a distinction between philosophy and rhetoric. However, they drop this line of questioning and turn to poetry immediately afterward. This small, passing reference to rhetoric and persuasion does not carry with it any profound consequences, nor does it offer any explanation as to why persuasion should be viewed as a good thing or what kind of good it is. This is fairly typical of Rorty's references to persuasion elsewhere. He never dwells long enough on the concept to offer an account of how persuasion takes place, what the conditions for persuasion might be. These have been traditional questions within rhetorical studies for at least the last two thousand years. Rorty's restatement of how argument functions may summarize basic insights into rhetorical theory, but it does not seek to advance those insights. This view merely deflates the traditional philosophical reverence for logic.

Oddly enough, the bulk of the interview concerns *Achieving Our Country*—Rorty's polemical take on American leftist politics in the twentieth century. The final comment that he makes about this book is that it "doesn't deal with philosophy at all. It's just a political polemic. The book's only connection to pragmatism is that John Dewey was one of the leaders of the older left" (2006, 88). I find this to be an ironic ending to an

interview titled "Persuasion Is a Good Thing." In the first place, Rorty does not acknowledge or explain the role that persuasion might play in achieving a left political agenda or how the new left–old left distinction he draws rests on a difference between rhetorical practices. The analysis of persuasion is confined to questions about the task of philosophy. Additionally, this is another clear instance of the extent to which Rorty's political vision is dissociated from his pragmatism. If pragmatism is the philosophy that teaches us to drop the rhetoric/logic binary, then it might seem like a useful resource for making sense of the role of rhetoric in the kinds of sociopolitical arguments that Rorty assesses in *Achieving Our Country*. But that is not a consequence of his view of persuasion. Philosophy is not connected to politics in any substantive way.

How, if not by virtue of philosophical arguments, does one achieve one's country? According to Rorty, "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 to 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" (1998b, 101). The implication here is that the new left does not possess that kind of patriotism. But another implication is that one needs rhetorical resources by which to engage in such descriptions. One possible way to read Rorty's attack on the new left is that it is an attack on the modes of rhetorical practice used by that left. Rorty prefers the old left's modes of rhetorical practice because he thinks that it is better at producing the kinds of consequences that he seeks. The final section of *Achieving Our Country* is called "The Inspirational Value of Great Works." As an ending to a political polemic, this section does not offer suggestions for rhetorical practices that might aid in the process of achieving our country. Instead, he justifies work in literature and humanities departments. This is just another way of maintaining the difference between the private pursuit of self-knowledge, best achieved by reading great books, and the public pursuit of a better future, best achieved through constructing imaginative utopias. For all of his complaints and criticisms of the new left, Rorty seems to maintain hope that these two projects will continue to produce wonderful results, that students will continue to read the great books and imagine future utopias and write beautiful poems. But what are the mechanisms or practices by which we turn hope into achievement? This is not a question Rorty, the philosopher or the political polemicist, is willing to answer.

The main difference between first-generation pragmatism and Rorty's work is the role of practice and the emphasis on communication, not the philosophy of language (as Rorty contends). Rorty's vision of a liberal utopia are certainly central characteristics of both early and neopragmatism. However, the concern for first-generation pragmatism was to find methods and practices by which these utopias could be made real. Is "redescription" or "cultural politics" enough for such a project? The critique of the philosophical tradition carried out by Dewey is largely a critique of the idea that theory and practice should be thought of as distinct and that theoretical knowledge ought to be privileged over practical knowledge. In attempting to overcome this legacy, Dewey and others sought the engine by which democracy could be improved. If there is any engine driving Rorty's project it is the desire, on the one hand, to become an edifying philosopher with a knack for redescribing things and, on the other, a love of great books and poems. His suggestion is that by keeping the conversation going and reading great, imaginative works of art we are in a better position to achieve that which we seek. In comparison to the emphasis on practice in first-generation pragmatism, this seems like a relatively thin account of how we can achieve what we seek. Rhetorical theory can provide insight into what that engine might look like and how it might work better. But "linguistic pragmatism" can only gesture toward persuasion and rhetoric, can only bring us to the precipice of rhetorical theory, before it recoils to its preoccupation with professional epistemology. This makes philosophy a constraint on what pragmatism can become. Rorty claimed that his philosophy, and Dewey's, cleared the way before us. The work of clearing the way is admirable, but it is not the only possibility for pragmatism. What one finds in the open landscape that is left is rhetoric. And what can be developed, built, grown on this ground is a rhetorical pragmatism capable of forging (without foundationalism or representationalism) the kind of hope Rorty and Dewey sought. Once we see that as one of the implications of linguistic pragmatism, then we may be able to complete that turn by transforming social practice accounts of language into necessary and useful instruments for democratic culture. This is a project Rorty makes possible but never delivers.

"Redescription" may certainly be part of that project. But rhetorical pragmatism must also include accounts of practical reason that can explain how and why one redescription gets adopted over another. This involves less attention to the private, idiosyncratic side of our nature and more attention

to strategic uses of language within public deliberation. Rorty ends up committed to a different set of social democratic projects than Dewey and other first-generation pragmatists did because his preoccupation with private self-creation never evolved into a public-oriented, strategic, and instrumental art. Rorty was certainly good at the practice of redescription and, as such, practiced a distinctive kind of rhetoric. I do not think that he ought to have stood back from his practice of rhetoric to develop a theoretical account of why and how such a practice is useful. Instead, I point to his limitations to suggest a way forward for the larger tradition of pragmatism. Rorty's rhetorical practice is not enough for pragmatism. The strong poet has limitations, and grafting a rhetorical theory onto pragmatism can help push past some of those limitations. This is what neopragmatists like Steven Mailloux and Jeffrey Stout are up to. Rhetorical theory holds the potential to explain how and why one imaginative work strategically succeeds while another fails and, along the way, can make recommendations for communication practices capable of guiding and improving public deliberation. This would help us weave together a better public culture and not just a better contingent self.

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