

# Emancipation from Rationality

Richard Rorty's attempt to enlighten the Enlightenment  
from the spirit of Romantic Hermeneutics

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**ABSTRACT:** This article shows, firstly, why Rorty thinks that after the Kantian Enlightenment, which had fought for emancipation in the name of reason, we are now in need of a second Enlightenment that liberates us from rationality; it shows, secondly, the inner contradictions Rorty blunders into by (seemingly) detaching his critique of objectivity in his works after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* from the subsequent necessary critique of subjectivity; it offers, thirdly, to explain these contradictions by reference to Rorty's ties to the tradition of Romanticism, on which he greatly depends, albeit without adopting its major concepts, which are a dialogical theory of subjectivity, and ironic ways of writing. A second level of investigation addresses the question of Rorty's rhetoric and how he thinks the emancipation from rationality should be accomplished, showing that his insistence on subjectivity and tradition serves his emancipatory program: Part of Rorty's strategy is selling his emancipatory maxim as reform instead of as revolution against dualistic and representational concepts of rationality. Therewith, Rorty is insisting on dialog with supposedly incommensurable positions and he is doing so because he thinks — from a pragmatic and utilitarian perspective — that this approach is more likely to have success.

**KEYWORDS:** Schlegel, Subjectivity, Irony, Rhetoric, Scientific and Political Communication Strategy.

During his career, Rorty has told different stories in his attempt to identify the major culprit of the dualistic schism in philosophy and the rise of rationality to power as well as where the antidote might come from. The version I am offering here is just one of many. Along with Kant Rorty invoked Plato and Descartes, amongst others, as subjectors; Rorty listed, as emancipators, Romanticism and non-reductive Empiricism<sup>1</sup>. His reasoning, however,

1. What connects the two is processual infinitude together with self-impeachment. Rorty himself connects the two calling one the empiricist's "post-Darwin" version and the other the romantic "post-Nietzsche" version (Rorty 1996: xx). William James, whom Rorty sees in the post-Darwin-tradition, defines his own position as "radical empiricism": Empiricism "because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'radical', because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis" (James 1897a: vii-viii). This translates to Romantic "irony" as will be seen further on.

summarized in the title of the following section, always follows a similar path. The version presented here can, therefore, be seen as paradigmatic for Rorty's analysis as a whole, although the names and concepts may vary.

### 1. Against Dichotomy!

Rorty has often been put in the romantic tradition and he himself emphasized the connection on more than one occasion<sup>2</sup>. Over the last 40 years research on Romanticism has underlined the continuity and radicalization of concepts of the Enlightenment in Romantic thought: Herbert Schnädelbach, for instance, speaks about "Aufklärung der Aufklärung" (SCHNÄDELBACH 1987: 25)<sup>3</sup>. It is widely believed that Romantics took the lessons of Enlightenment to heart and turned its methods and concepts against Enlightenment itself. Following this argumentation, the Enlightenment was not able to cut the connection to metaphysics: Rationality, which came to liberate us, was just another mistress, under whose yoke we had to serve, and "die Annahme, es bedürfe zum moralischen Handeln notwendig einer universale Reichweite garantierenden Autorität [blieb] [...] unberührt" (DIEWALD-RODRIGUEZ 2014: 226).

Rorty, working with the vocabulary (concepts, methods, utopia) of the Enlightenment,<sup>4</sup> attacks Kant's concept of rationality from two directions. He first dissolves objectivity: there is no certainty for truth, not even in the delimited form defined by Kant's "Verstandeskategorien"; there is no moral based on pure rationality ("reine praktische Vernunft")! The linchpin for both is Kant's transcendental subject, which Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* also deconstructs.

Rorty considers the distinction between body and mind to be a voluntary one which is actually a Kantian invention serving a specific task. "[T]he purportedly metaphysical 'problem of consciousness' is no more and no less than the epistemological 'problem of privileged access'" (RORTY 1979: 69). We first assume an authority that is able to give us certainty regarding truth-questions and then we use this authority to 'prove' our truth-claims. What is propagated is rationality as an ability that replaces the lost God's eye point of view. The concept of 'the more rational, the more likely to be true' is, therefore, a tautology as is, "[f]rom the antiessentialist's point of view, the Kantian lament [...] that something we define as being beyond

2. See e.g. FRASER 1990; MÜLLER 2014; WAAS 2003; ZIMMERMANN 2001, especially: 31–59.

3. See also STOCKINGER 2003.

4. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty states analytical philosophy is just another "Kantianism" that must be replaced by hermeneutics. However, he himself uses analytical methods to show the contradictions in analytical philosophy (RORTY 1979: 18).

our knowledge is, alas, beyond our knowledge” (RORTY 1994b: 58). Rorty very wisely writes “from the antiessentialist’s point of view” because from Kant’s and from a dualistic point of view there is no tautology here, given that A and B are distinct, “scheme and content” (Davidson). It is Rorty’s assumption that you cannot distinguish rigorously between A and B that creates the tautology.

In Kant’s view, there is a difference between subject and object, between the world itself and our reflections on it, as well as between the knowledge of the world, the knowledge of our knowledge of the world, and the knowledge of ourselves insofar as we are “reine Vernunftwesen”. Rorty rejects all of these distinctions together with the correspondence theory of truth. However, rejecting these distinctions does not mean to negate our being in “touch with reality” and “that our language, like our bodies, has been shaped by the environment we live in. Indeed, he or she [the antirepresentationalist] insists on this point [...]” (RORTY 1991: 5). What Rorty denies is the possibility of certainty regarding truth: “The trouble with aiming at truth is that you would not know when you have reached it, even if you had in fact reached it” (RORTY 1994c: 82). Therefore, the (possibility of certainty regarding the) difference between appearance and reality on the ontological–representational–epistemological level falls. On the linguistical level, we cannot, according to Rorty, divide our speaking about the world from our being engaged with the world: language is a tool “to deal with the environment” (Rorty 1996: xxiii). “There is no way to divide up this web of causal connections so as to compare the relative amount of subjectivity and of objectivity in a given belief. There is no way, as Wittgenstein has said, to come between language and its object, to divide the giraffe in itself from our ways of talking about giraffes” (Rorty 1996: xxvii). Beliefs (“truths”), thus, are not “representations” but “habits of action” (RORTY 1996: xxv).

William James, one of Rorty’s sources, stresses the psychological–empirical level in our decision–making<sup>5</sup>: “[...] as a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use” (JAMES 1897b: 10). Logicians, for example, exclude everything for which they, “in their professional quality of logicians, can find no use” (JAMES 1897b: 11). Rorty formulates this to fit Kant: having invented a discipline called “Fundamentalwissenschaft”, which he anchors in the likewise invented transcendental subject and its rationality, Kant has no use for anything that is not “rational” in his definition of the word (Rorty 1979: 131–8). James distinguishes between “live” and “dead” hypotheses that are “proposed to our belief” (JAMES 1897b: 2) — there is not

5. I owe this reference to James to Ursula Diewald–Rodriguez. I am also grateful for the suggestions of two anonymous referees. Furthermore, this article would not have been possible without the patient proof–reading of Rose Simpson and Jim Genaro.

always “an electric connection” (James 1897b: 2). Whether we are willing to believe certain theses or not is not “intrinsic” to the hypotheses but depends on the “relations to the individual thinker” (JAMES 1897b: 2). “Evidently, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions” (1897b: 11). According to James, this starting situation should not be described as pathological but “we must treat it as normal element in making up our minds” (JAMES 1897b: 11). Therefore, “reason [...] is but one item in the miracle” (James 1897a: VIII–IX) and “Many of my professionally trained confrères will smile at the irrationalism of this view” (James 1897a: ix–x). Socialization determines what we are willing to accept as “rational” or “true” and what we discredit as “irrational” and “false”: training creates commensurability<sup>6</sup>.

For Rorty, in this case following the steps of Dewey, moral obligation has no source other than tradition, habit, and custom (RORTY 1994c: 76): “morality is simply a new and controversial custom” (Rorty 1994c: 77).

All that the categorical imperative does, Dewey said, is to command ‘the habit of asking how we should be willing to be treated in a similar case’. The attempt to do more, to get ‘ready-made rules available at a moment’s notice for settling any kind of moral difficulty’, seemed to Dewey to have been ‘born of timidity and nourished by love of authoritative prestige’ (RORTY 1994c: 75).

According to Dewey, Kant’s insistence on scientificity results from his wanting to be accepted in the scientific community. For Rorty, putting rationality in radical opposition to passion is a fiction that supports Kant’s system. Rorty sees no fundamental difference between “Vernunft” and “Neigung”, but, like Annette Baier in the tradition of Hume, only gradual diversifications (RORTY 1994c: 77). “[M]oral progress [is] not a matter of an increase of rationality” (RORTY 1994c: 81) or of “rising above the sentimental to the rational” (RORTY 1994c: 82). Analogously to not knowing whether what you think is true really is true, even if it is: “you cannot aim at ‘doing what is right’, because you will never know whether you have hit the mark” (RORTY 1994c: 82). For Rorty, this is “simply a way of formulating the secularism of the Enlightenment — a way of saying that human beings are on their own, and have no supernatural light to guide them to the Truth” (RORTY 1996: xxvii). Hence, moral choice is “always a matter of compromise between competing goods, rather than a choice between the absolute right and the absolute wrong” (RORTY 1996: xxvii–xxviii). This does not open the door to chaos and nihilism because what we are willing to see as “morally good” still depends on our group affiliation. Thus, “it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people

6. This is Fleck and Kuhn *ante litteram*, see also RORTY 1979: 349; 1985 and 1987.

and things” (RORTY 1994c: 81). The ethical maxim that is based on practice not on truth is — Rorty follows Sellar’s argumentation here — to enlarge the group of people we speak of as “we”. This guarantees group-cohesion and mutual care (RORTY 1994c: 79, also 1989).

After having dismissed objectivity, Rorty, in *The Mirror of Nature*, consistently, deconstructs subjectivity by referring to the subject-conceptions of Gadamer and Sartre. Subjectivity is as fictional as the concept of objectivity that subjectivity was invented to support. As Donald Davidson puts it in reference to C. I. Lewis, “Content and scheme [...] come as a pair; we can let them go together” (DAVIDSON 1988: 96). Davidson already sees the aurora of that new morning:

it seems to me that the most promising and interesting change that is occurring in philosophy today is that these dualisms are being questioned in new ways, or are being radically reworked. There is a good chance they will be abandoned, at least in their present form. What we are seeing is the emergence of a revised view of the relation of mind and the world (DAVIDSON 1988: 43).

The two worldviews — Kant’s and Rorty’s, or in Rorty’s words: dualists/rationalists/etc.<sup>7</sup> vs. empiricists/pragmatists — are (almost) incommensurable. The first one (dualism) insists on two spheres, where one sphere (subject, mind, scheme) investigates, recognizes, “mirrors”, and is able to give a veracious representation of the other (object, body, content). The second one (pragmatism) negates the whole basis for argumentation: there is no clear distinction between the two spheres and there is no “proof” for “truth” other than group affiliation. However, the second — “new” or “improved” or just “different” — paradigm must in some way be connected to the first — “old”, “outdated”, “different” — paradigm.

From Rorty’s point of view, both paradigms are purpose-built ways of description. Therefore, whether you call the two approaches incommensurable or not and whether you call the second paradigm “new”, “improved” or just “different” also depends on what you want to do with these notions: you can decide whether to sell your (Rorty’s) position as further development and radicalization or as disruption. In the first case you need to stress continuity and commensuration (offering, for example, a description using words and concepts of the old paradigm). In the second you stress discontinuity and incommensurability<sup>8</sup>. When words do not represent “reality” but

7. As previously mentioned in my introduction, Rorty has several other names for this tradition, for example platonists, foundationalists, essentialists, representationalists, etc., and for his own tradition, e.g. antifoundationalists, antiessentialists, antirepresentationalists. He uses the names more or less synonymously and chooses them according to which notion he particularly wants to stress.

8. Both are, in my opinion, linked in Kuhn’s notion of “revolution” (1962/70) that explains scientific revolution as growing within normal science but shifting its major paradigms by creating a

serve to fit specific needs in social contexts, which word to choose is not due to a logical necessity but due to a strategic and political decision. One of the supposed problems with Rorty's philosophy, as will be considered shortly, is that he never clearly decided whether the emancipation he calls for radicalizes or disrupts with Enlightenment's philosophy. I will show that he did not have to decide because deciding between the two is necessary only from the dualist-paradigm's point of view.

Rorty is aware that his concept of the morally good as guaranteeing happiness and freedom to the largest number is itself a product of the social pressure of post-enlightenment western society — a society in which he himself grew up — and that the social utopias of “strong poems”<sup>9</sup> like the *New Testament* and the *Communist Manifesto* shaped his ideals (RORTY 1998a). He is also aware that liberalism and pragmatism are just one of many possibilities to try to make sense of our existence (RORTY 1996: xxxii). Why, then, call for another emancipation and not just work within one of the aforementioned groups (Christians, Marxists, Analytical Philosophy and so on)?

“Dewey thought, as I do, that the vocabulary which centres around these traditional [dualistic] distinctions has become an obstacle to our social hopes” (RORTY 1996: xii). According to Rorty, the social hopes planted in the Enlightenment, cannot be realized if we simply shift hierarchies from the outer (God-world/we) to the inner dominion. We have to give up thinking in hierarchies/dichotomies altogether. Just as Foucault does in his twin essays *What is Enlightenment*, Rorty splits up the critical movement of the Enlightenment. The never ending emancipatory project-character of the Enlightenment must be preserved. Its perversions — in Foucault's view the substantialisation of knowledge in an instrument of power, in Rorty's view, the installation of a new God called Ratio or Truth and the related dualistic schism — must be ruled out<sup>10</sup>. Both Rorty and Foucault see salvation in the

new one. You can see this in the fact that Kuhn calls “revolution” also “paradigm shift” — notwithstanding the fact that Kuhn insists on the “incommensurability” of old and new paradigms. The language you choose depends on the propaganda you intend to use in support of your position. Mara Beller, for instance, showed that the final acceptance of Quantum Mechanics within the scientific community was largely due to Bohr's rhetorical manoeuvres, making connections or describing the new position in the old newtonian and relativistic paradigms so that the new (in Heisenberg's first version from 1925: incommensurable) theory could start its way to success (including concepts like “space-time” in Heisenberg's 1927 version; BELLER 1996). “[P]resent[ing] changing views as a natural elaboration of the previous position, rather than as a major change or an about-face” increases “persuasiveness and credibility” (BELLER 1996: 199). This is not to say the new paradigm cannot be completely game-changing — as is the case for certain interpretations of Quantum Mechanics and for Rorty's version of Pragmatism.

9. Rorty takes this concept from Harold Bloom, and means by “strong poets” not only literary authors but, and I think above all, philosophers as well as scientists.

10. The main of many differences between Foucault and Rorty is the fact that Foucault insists on “rupture”. From Rorty's point of view, as I will state in my conclusion, this is shortsighted. Michael

“ethos” of the aesthete: Foucault in the dandyism of Baudelaire, Rorty in the attitude of the romantic poet.

## 2. Poetry – the persistence of the dualistic worldview?

For Rorty there is no appearance–reality–dichotomy, no dichotomy between ratio and passion, and, therefore, also no speaking about truth because “truth” is an unintelligible word in a non–dichotomic worldview (RORTY 1996: xvii). Alternatively, we *can* speak of truth but only when “truth” means “what is good for us to believe” (RORTY 1985: 22). It is not the word “truth” itself that has to be silenced because “truth”, if granted its contingency and constructiveness, can, actually, be a powerful tool for liberals as well. What has to be silenced is the realism in dichotomies and our belief that we have a privileged position of access to these substantialized “truths”. We have to fight the notions of “true” that are opposed to “false”, not the ways of using the word “true” meaning beneficial for our social hopes (RORTY 1996: xxiv)<sup>11</sup>. Rorty does not mean to replace “objectivity” with “subjectivity” nor to replace “found” (truth) with “made” (socially constructed) as these substitutions would still remain inside the dualistic worldview and its vocabulary (RORTY 1996: xviii). “Our opponents like to suggest that to abandon that vocabulary is to abandon rationality [...]” (RORTY 1996: xx) and call pragmatists “irrationalists” but “these charges presuppose precisely the distinctions we reject” (RORTY 1996: xx). Pragmatists, Rorty suggests, should call themselves “anti–dualists” (RORTY 1996: xx): “We hope to replace the reality–appearance distinction with the distinction between the more useful and the less useful” (RORTY 1996: xxiv–xxv).

Rorty, therefore, calls for the implementation of a new vocabulary with-

Hampe summarizes regarding Foucault: “In Konzeptionen, die, wie die Nietzsches, Heideggers oder Foucaults, davon ausgehen, dass es eindeutige Brüche und Schranken in der Geistesentwicklung gibt, dass ein bestimmter Gedanke nicht wiederkehren kann, weil er ‘überwunden’ wurde, erscheint in der Regel das eigene Denken nicht als das Transformationsprodukt seiner Geschichte, sondern als überlegene Entlarvung vergangener Bewusstlosigkeiten, denen die eigene historische Kontingenz dunkel geblieben war. Doch woher kann eine Philosophie, die Geschichte nicht mehr als Annäherung oder Verwirklichung des menschlichen oder eines anderen Wesens ansieht, ihre Fortschrittsgewissheit nehmen? Wie kann ein alles genealogisierendes Denken den Selbstanwendungstest bestehen und sich selbst als etwas anderes als die kontingente, aber stetige Steigerung des Historismus betrachten?” (HAMPE 2006: 42).

11. Rorty argues analogously for the use of the word “rational”: “In our culture, the notions of science’, ‘rationality’, ‘objectivity’, and ‘truth’ are bound up with one another. [...] We tend to identify seeking ‘objective truth’ with ‘using reason’. [...] So we tend to use ‘methodological’, ‘rational’, ‘scientific’, and ‘objective’ as synonyms” (RORTY 1987: 35). “Another meaning for ‘rational’ is, in fact, available. In this sense, the word means something like ‘sane’ rather than ‘methodological’. It names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinion of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force” (RORTY 1987: 37).

out representational functions. But how should this substitution of vocabulary be accomplished? Furthermore, how can the tension needed to prevent new substantialisations be maintained, preventing that liberalism itself becomes the new patron?

Rorty's answer is well known: The Romantic's postulate of the world as a poem should guide us. This is not because the Romantic's vision is "true", but because their vision better reflects our epistemic, social, and linguistic boundaries and, more importantly, their vision is more useful to our social hopes. Romantic irony must help us avoid essentialisations to keep the never-ending emancipatory movement going (RORTY 2007a: 112, 117). Epistemic "Polytheism", the creation of ever new metaphors, and solidarity — this is Rorty's utopia (RORTY 1998b, also 2007a, 1989)! But can we really all be poets and ironists all day long? Rorty's view has often been accused of being elitist and not applicable to the public sphere, because, while the ironist's position might keep the epistemic search and the problematization of selfhood going, why and how should irony and poetry guarantee social cohesion and solidarity?

Rorty himself understood the problem of how to link romantic irony and social cohesion and has offered different solutions over his career. Nancy Fraser has identified three ways in which Rorty refers to Romanticism in the years up to 1990, all of which are, as she correctly states, "cartoonish" (FRASER 1990: 303): 1. In a first period, Rorty parallelizes Romanticism and Pragmatism — both understood here as philosophical and political approaches — as "natural partners". The strong poet and the "utopian reform politician are simply two slightly different variants of the same species" (FRASER 1990: 304). Both are trying to re-write our cultural code: the reformer owes his/her tools of social-engineering to metaphors provided by strong poets. There is no difference, therefore, between the moral and the aesthetic sphere. 2. Rorty emphasizes the "dark side" of Romanticism as being elitist and cruel, hence, the exact contrary of the pragmatist's social engagement. 3. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty combines the ways of argumentation presented in 1 and 2 and assigns the Romantic and what he now calls the Liberal (Pragmatist) specific places: "Irony" has to be used in the private sphere, whereas in the public sphere the dominant force should be "liberalism". Rorty defines the latter as the prevention of cruelty, which can also be based on "truths", as long as it is (privately) taken into account that these "truths" are constructed. The main instruments by which these constructed "truths" have to be implemented are television, mass media, and literature, all of which show us the pain and suffering of others and provoke our compassion.

Fraser thinks, and many agree, that this split between private and public, and between irony and consensus is not tenable, as will be seen shortly. I



think Fraser's version should be refined: the split, as others have pointed out (MÜLLER 2014), should not be understood as implemented and concrete, but rather as two parts that are in tension. I think that *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Fraser's step 3) is Rorty's attempt to formulate his paradigm in the language of the other (dualist) one. In doing so, he gets caught up in a seemingly confused use of language and dichotomies, which also appear in his later works. The contradictions center around the following interconnected issues: Rorty's insistence on subjectivity (hence dichotomy), his ambivalent connection to and fight against tradition (see e.g. HAMPE 2006: 155–181; MARRAMAIO 2007), and his presentational style that “remains well within the stylistic conventions of contemporary analytic philosophy” (STATEN 1986: 458).

Ramberg is right in stating that Rorty refers to Gadamer at the end of *Mirror of Nature* but, oddly, makes no reference to him in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (RAMBERG 2011: 45)<sup>12</sup>. It really is astonishing to see how flat the hermeneutics and the hermeneutical subject is in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* when compared to Rorty's complex constructions in *Mirror of Nature*, which evoke Gadamer's “wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein” and Sartre's “être en-soi/pour-soi”. Although Rorty problematizes the contingency of language, selfhood and liberal community in his first chapter, he then insists on poetry and irony for the private sphere (Rorty's second chapter) — meaning romantic self-creation and epistemological endless search — whereas the public sphere has to be trained in being good liberals (third chapter). The hermeneutical concept used for the public sphere is a much simplified version of the schleiermacherian “Einfühlung”, although Rorty does not drop the name: the reader should empathize with the novel's figures, become “familiar with strange families as the Karamasows” (RORTY 1989: 80), feel compassion, and thereby be trained in commensuration<sup>13</sup> and, linked to this, in solidarity.

12. Like myself, Ramberg thinks that “Rorty's pragmatic conception of the mental still remains hampered by dichotomizing presuppositions” but for Ramberg “these give rise to the worry [...] that Rorty affords us no escape from arbitrary individualism” (RAMBERG 2011: 45). Ramberg wants to “escape” subjective subjectivity by emphasizing “embodied aspects of subjectivity”, “accepting the idea of the propositional as a matter of inter-subjective engagement but including in their conception of agency and subjectivity the capacities that make such engagement possible and provides it with much of its purpose and direction” (RAMBERG 2011: 32) to have possibilities to counter the arbitrariness of Rorty's final vocabulary, which seems “without ability to supply norms with authority” (Ramberg 2011: 33). In my reading of Rorty, “no authority” is exactly what Rorty is aiming for, and his persistence on words and concepts like “subjectivity” has no analytical cause but serves, as will be seen subsequently, his political goal.

13. This is the task literature had to fulfill in the Enlightenment — but not in the “good” emancipatory and ever-proceeding enlightenment but the “bad” one with moral and epistemic truth. Much cutting sarcasm has been voiced on this account and, as Leyboldt summarizes, the “specter of neo-conservatism” has been “invoked” (LEYBOLDT 2008: 145). Rorty insisted on the educational character of literature in the public sphere until his death, adding in one of his last texts — the autobiographical “The fire of life” — yet another purpose of poetry: “comfort”! (RORTY 2007b: 521).

S/he shall see the “we” in the other, guaranteeing therewith social cohesion. Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, in their trivialized version, are, notoriously, a methodology that aims to produce “right” and “wrong” interpretations, where both, the reader and interpreter, are thought of as more or less stable identities, although shaped by their time and social context<sup>14</sup>.

Like in the public sphere, subjectivity is also re-established in the private sphere. The cause is that when Rorty speaks of Romanticism he primarily means Nietzsche, whom he admires for his audacious vision of the world as our creation (e.g. RORTY 2007b: 110, also 1989) — something which Rorty needs — and whom he simultaneously despises for his antidemocratic attitudes (RORTY 1998b). “Emerson, like his disciple Nietzsche”, Rorty states, “was not a philosopher of democracy but of private self-creation [. . .]. His America was not so much a community of fellow citizens as a clearing in which Godlike heroes could act out self-written dramas” (RORTY 1994a: 26). Fraser showed very clearly how Rorty’s separation of private and public sphere ends up being a “single-I” vs. a “single-we”: the “public” has to be trained in commensuration and therefore become a “monological single-we” — everyone is chanting the same identical solidarity song. The “private-I” — thought of as in no direct connection with the “public” and therefore also “monological” — has to create the social-paradigm in which the public has to be trained. Rorty’s approach, according to Fraser, ends up being a genius-self-sufficient-single-I vs. the dummy-public-single-We. Fraser asks, where this single-I and her/his ingeniousness should come from: Is s/he not, as part of the public-group, also subjected to the manipulation by mass-media and shaped by her/his context? Furthermore, contradicts the call to implement a new paradigm not Rorty’s call for pluralism? Fraser states that the distinction between private and public is not tenable. She asks for a “dialogical subject” and the fall of the distinction between the private and public sphere (FRASER 1990). Rorty, too, saw the problem. The question is: why did he insist on the distinction?

### 3. Dialogical subjects and “Unverständlichkeit” (incomprehensibility): Why not?

As previously stated, what bothers Rorty in Nietzsche and Emerson is the problem of singularity vs. plurality, of private vs. public sphere. Leypoldt is

14. For a more complex analysis of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics see e.g. FRANK 2007; Frank, for reasons I will explain further on, feels the jamesian “electric connection” with the schleiermacherian approach precisely because in the end there are subjects and individuality in Schleiermacher (whereas these do not appear in Frank’s Gadamer), wherefore the very simplified version above might suffice. For Frank also see footnote 23.

right when he defends Rorty from Shusterman's attacks (which are similar to Fraser's): "it is hard to see why Rorty would have to be told [...] that firm public-private distinctions are 'untenable because the private self and the language it builds upon in self-creation are always already socially constituted and structured by a common field'" (LEYPOLDT 2008: 150, cit. SHUSTERMAN 1992: 259). It is true that after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty continuously speaks about "flexibility in selfhood" (for example, RORTY 1994C: 81), emphasizing the fall of the appearance-reality-dichotomy and that language is a social construction which also creates our selfhood, but it is also right that when using the "strong metaphor" "Romanticism" he neglects to stress sufficiently that the Romantic creator of worlds is her/himself a creation. This omission led to many of the criticisms of his philosophy.

It seems Rorty secularized truth-claims (objectivity) but not subjectivity. Two phrases from after 1990 (Fraser analyses up to this point) demonstrate how Rorty refers to Romanticism — a tradition in which he sees himself: "Romantic art [...] is a paradigmatic project of individual self-development" (RORTY 1998b: 450). "Just as the Enlightenment had capitalized and deified Reason, so Shelley and other Romantics capitalized and deified Imagination" (RORTY 2007a: 109). I am no expert on Shelley, so I cannot make premises on this account. The "other Romantics" certainly had different — and for Rorty's purposes more fertile — conceptions, tying together reason and imagination in the case of knowledge, and linking self and other in the case of subjectivity, hence this fulfilled what Rorty called for: the end of dichotomies! Referring to these concepts would, on an analytical level, have saved Rorty a lot of trouble and avoided producing the sort of contradictions Fraser points out. However, pragmatically, this would have weakened his position and impact in the scientific and public field, as my arguments will show.

The early German romanticist Friedrich Schlegel is a anti-foundationalist<sup>15</sup> in the rortyan sense of "no dichotomies", but where Rorty stopped, Schlegel followed through to the end: He insisted on the dissolution of subjectivity and adopted a way of writing that is not contradictory to his philosophical approach. Analogies in Schlegel and Rorty have been noticed when it comes to irony<sup>16</sup>. I do not wish to repeat here what the work of others already shows, but merely indicate that in Schlegel's concepts of investigation and creation, "romantische Ironie" and "progressive Universalpoesie", there are parallels to Rorty's concept of irony and world-making. Jure Zovko, furthermore, stresses in his seminal monograph on Schlegel the im-

15. For a description of Schlegel as "anti-foundationalist" see e.g. LANDGRAF 2006: 592–3; SPEIGH 2011.

16. See e.g. FRISCHMANN 2011; MÜLLER 2014; WAAS 2003; ZIMMERMANN 2001.

portance of not-understanding and incomprehensibility (“Nicht-Verstehen” and “Unverständlichkeit”) in Schlegel’s hermeneutic. Not-understanding is not the counter-part to understanding, nor is the process of understanding a dialectic oscillation between understanding and not-understanding, but not-understanding is an integral part of every understanding (ZOVKO 1990). This is also due to Schlegel’s dialogical concept of subjectivity. In Schlegel there is no genius-“single-I” which creates the world out of him/herself, as in Rorty’s Nietzsche<sup>17</sup>, but the process of world-creation (“progressive Universalpoesie”) — which “embraces everything poetic, from the greatest system of art which, in turn, includes many systems, down to the sigh, the kiss”<sup>18</sup> (SCHLEGEL 1968: 140) — is continuous, never ending, and comprises the artist her/himself. The “I” is dialogical from the start, or, more aptly put, there is no start: the process of creation is “always becoming and [...] can never be completed”<sup>19</sup> (SCHLEGEL 1968: 141).

As there “is” no origin, the tension at the center of Schlegel’s subject will never be solved in some sort of a mystical or dialectical union. “[D]as romantische Streben nach Einheit zwischen Subjekt und Objekt bleibt reines Sehnen, das in Traum, Fragment und Ironie zum Ausdruck kommt, das jedoch diesseits der dialektischen Totalität bleibt und daher keine konkrete Einheit zwischen Subjekt und Objekt, Sein und Denken herstellen kann” (ZIMA 2000: 110). What is normally perceived as lack of romantic thought is, actually, its major force and demonstrates its logical coherency. The only affirmative part, if one could call it that, is the “Sehnen” itself — the longing and tension. There is no dialectic because there is no discontinuity between “I” and “you”/“world”. You cannot make splits although, in our dualistic way of speaking, you have two. This perfectly illustrates the point of *Mirror of Nature*: the subject arises together with the will to explain. In Romantic theory “the subject is no longer a ground that precedes and underlies judgements” (COLEBROOK 2004: 52). “Subjectivity” is a fictional tool that we use when we want to “explain”. There is no single “I” investigating world and others (that would be the dualistic approach) but a continuous and forever proceeding dialogue without completely distinct speakers. “In short, they [Hardenberg and Schlegel] adhere to a notion of subjectivity that accepts the impossibility of overcoming its inherent fissures and rifts while simultaneously accepting the ideal of a unified self as an ethical imperative” (SCHULTE-SASSE 1997: 25)<sup>20</sup>.

17. Rorty could have also stressed other parts in Nietzsche, to whom, for example, SZCZEPANSKI (2007) attributes a concept of “subjectivity” that is aware of its own creation (in analogy to Schlegel).

18. “umfaßt alles, was nur poetisch ist, vom größten wieder mehre Systeme in sich enthaltenden Systeme der Kunst, bis zu dem Seufzer, dem Kuß [...]” (SCHLEGEL KFSa II, 182, 116).

19. “ewig nur werden[d], nie vollendet” (SCHLEGEL KFSa II, 182, 116).

20. See also SZCZEPANSKI 2007: 220; LANDGRAF 2006.

Taking account of the fictionality — meaning the constructive part — of every knowledge does not mean to give up the epistemological search as a whole. Schlegel tries to avoid the contradictions, which he and Rorty point out in Kant, by his tools “Wechselerweis” and “Wechselkonzept”, which take account of the self-referentiability of every act of knowledge-making (see e.g. SCHLEGEL KFSÄ XVIII, 521). Rorty also insists that dichotomies are still a useful and necessary tool of inquiry but that we should be aware that they are nothing more than this (RORTY 1996: XIX). Schlegel famously states: “It is equally deadly for a mind to have a system or to have none. Therefore it will have to decide to combine both”<sup>21</sup> (Schlegel 1968: 136). Schlegel still assumes an Absolute (the “Infinite”, das “Unendliche”) but — like subjectivity — it is a “fiction” although an “absolutely necessary one”: “[Das Unendliche] ist *Erdichtung*. Aber eine schlechthin nothwendige Erdichtung” (engl.: SCHULTE-SASSE 1997: 23; SCHLEGEL KFSÄ XII, 9). Philosophy needs the concept of an Absolute to keep the knowledge-machinery going, but you cannot divide the concept from the consciousness that is thinking this concept<sup>22</sup>. In Schlegel, as Jochen Schulte-Sasse puts it, “Knowledge is a function of the subject’s relation to posited objects” (SCHULTE-SASSE 1997: 24). Therefore, “Knowledge is ultimately grounded in ethics and aesthetics” (SCHULTE-SASSE 1997: 24).

In Schlegel, socially/historically/aesthetically created subjects create the social/historical/aesthetic sphere. This leads back to the first step in Rorty’s appropriation of Romanticism, as described by Fraser, except for the fact that Rorty does not stress the subject-theory (enough) making it thereby possible for Fraser to demand a “dialogical subject”. Hegel, and many others following him, did not see or were not willing to accept this point in Schlegel. “With his (mis)reading of Romantic notion of imagination, Hegel might very well have inaugurated the nineteenth-century misconceptions of Romanticism. [...] In fact, nothing is more rigorously assailed by the Romantics [...] than the very desire for consonance [of subject and object] [...] that Hegel reads into [them]” (SCHULTE-SASSE 1997: 26f)<sup>23</sup>. Put in a rortyan way of description: Hegel

21. “Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden” (SCHLEGEL KFSÄ II, 173, 53).

22. „Wir müssen also das *Unendliche* schlechthin setzen. Wenn wir nun aber das Unendliche setzen, und dadurch alles aufheben, was ihm entgegengesetzt ist, so bleibt uns doch immer noch etwas, nämlich das *Abstrahierende*, oder das *Setzende*. Es bleibt also außer dem Unendlichen noch ein *Bewußtseyn des Unendlichen*. So ist das Bewußtseyn gleichsam ein Phänomen bey dem Unendlichen“ (SCHLEGEL KFSÄ XII; 5). „Das Unendliche hat Realität für das Bewußtseyn. Das Unendliche kann man nur schlechthin setzen. Das einzige Objekt des Bewußtseyns is das Unendliche, und das einzige Prädikat des Unendlichen ist Bewußtseyn. | Die beyden Elemente machen eine geschlossene Sphäre, in deren Mitte Realität liegt. Zwischen den beyden Extremen Bewußtseyn und dem Unendlichen muß Synthesis gedacht werden. Durch Abstraktion gelangen wir nur zu ihnen, und die Tendenz der Abstraktion ist synthetisch“ (SCHLEGEL KFSÄ XII, 6).

23. Schulte-Sasse makes reference to Hegel’s reading of Schelling here, but one easily could

and his followers became imprisoned in the dichotomical use of language, not seeing that the use of dualistic language itself produces the dichotomy they claim to discover in Romantic thought. In Schlegel there are no parts which seek reconciliation. Schlegel eliminates dichotomies collocating the self in his/her environment without clear distinction between *Natur* and *Geist*, or he uses dichotomies only marked as created categories taking thereby account of the self-reference of every epistemological act.

Not falling captive to the dichotomical-affirmative-representational language, and taking account of all the self-referentialities and necessary ironical moves, means writing in an almost incomprehensible way. In the last issue of the review *Athenäum* — this publication was discontinued because it only created irritation and was not “understood” — Schlegel famously published a sort of manifesto called “Über Unverständlichkeit” (On Incomprehensibility) wherein he claims that “the salvation of families and nations rests upon [incomprehensibility]”<sup>24</sup> (SCHLEGEL 1971: 268). In this performative piece you cannot, at any point, distinguish what is serious and what is ironic<sup>25</sup>, but the Jenaer Frühromantiker clearly had political interests, calling for an “ästhetische Revolution”. The goal of this revolution was the implementation of a new (or other) worldview and — connected with that — a new use of language. The Romantics pursued their goal exactly by using this new way of speaking. Besides being declared fools (incomprehensible, “irrational”) and asocial, they did not have a large impact. Selling your idea is a pivotal part of science/philosophy/literature/politics if you are interested in success, and to succeed you have to speak the language of the main discourse which is dualism. Otherwise — as the case of the Early German Romantics shows<sup>26</sup> —

substitute Schelling with Schlegel: Hegel attacks Schlegel poignantly and Schlegel reacts likewise calling Hegel a “nachgeäfften Fichte” (Schlegel KFSÄ VIII, 595) whose dialectical thinking operates “[im] leeren Raum des abstrakten Denkens” (Schlegel KFSÄ X, 16); see Zovko 2010: 87–104. Hegel’s misinterpretation is propagated still today: see for example Frank 1997. You see Frank’s problems with this point also in his own philosophy where he still insists on some inner tower of strength although he also insists on the “gesellschaftliche Konstruiertheit des Subjekts” (Frank 2012: 25) and the fact that descriptibility itself creates the described categories: “Intersubjektivität ist eine notwendige Bedingung für die Individuation von Subjekten, aber sie kann nur aus einem Bewusstsein vollzogen werden, das jeder Spiegelung in anderen Subjekten voran mit sich bekannt war” (Frank 2012: 25f). “Ich leugne nicht eine zum Selbstbewusstsein hinführende [...] Entwicklung des Geistes, sofern sie [...] diskontinuierlich gedeutet wird, so dass der Irreduzibilitätsanspruch der Subjektivität mit seiner Erklärlichkeit aus einer Genese zusammen bestehen kann” (Frank 2012: 26).

24. “das Heil der Familien und der Nationen beruhet auf ihr [der Unverständlichkeit]” (SCHLEGEL KFSÄ II, 370).

25. Precisely this not being able to decide between seriousness and rhetorical irony is what Schlegel calls “romantische Ironie”. In rortyan terms this translates to a non-representational, pluralistic way of investigation and writing.

26. Although the socio-historical context around 1800 and the year 2000 is quite different, I do believe that there is a common ground when it comes to group behavior, on which I am concentrating here. Choosing to focus on group affiliation and rhetoric means asking a “rortyan” (as far as I reconstruct

all you can hope for is to disturb the social order for a moment, and nothing more.

For Rorty disturbing definitely is not enough, neither philosophically nor politically. A possible reason for Rorty's — from an analytical point of view most unfortunate — insistence on two spheres (private vs. public), his lack of sufficiently problematizing subjectivity, and for his not adopting ironic style might be that from a pragmatist's point of view it is not useful to do so. Neither investigating subjectivity further nor writing in a non-dualistical way would serve Rorty's goals: these are securing happiness for the greatest number by reducing cruelty.

In Rorty's version of Pragmatism there is no path leading from philosophy (understood as analytical investigation) to politics but there is from politics (understood very widely as "social interaction") to philosophy because what we want influences what we see, and what we want is shaped by our social and historical bonds (see the first chapter of this article and e.g. RORTY 1994: 23)<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, in a dualist way of putting it, practice (politics) always comes first, although a clear distinction between practice and theory (as between ideology and philosophy) is impossible. In a non-dualist way of description, there is no difference between philosophy and politics: the theory we prefer depends on which social language-context we were trained in, *and*, at the same time, society and language are shaped by our philosophical ideas (or, to use Rorty's words, by "strong poets"). To ask which one came first means seeing Rorty with dualist eyes. The question has no sense in a non-dualist world where "origin" is not a category with authority. Rorty thought that philosophy and politics (as well as the private and public sphere) are an inseparable bundle which is — to use Schlegel's words — "always becoming", although, when selling his approach — by translating it into "dualism" — Rorty insisted on the supremacy of politics, subjectivity, and non-ironic ways of writing.

Regarding subjectivity I would state: emancipation from dualistic rationality in Rorty always means emancipation from objectivity *and* subjectivity. Once we dismiss objectivity there is no need to insist on the instance which

Rorty) question and seeing the problem under a rortyan perspective.

27. Giacomo Marramao — whose "ontology of the contingent" has several points of contact with Rorty — sees here one of the great differences between his own and Rorty's position: For Marramao philosophy and politics are essentially tied together as both stem from the polis and everyday language (MARRAMAIO 2007: 83). In my opinion, the difference is one of perspective: Marramao asks a genealogical–archeological question whereas Rorty, in my view, does not ask for origins but rather how we should from an utilitarian and projecting perspective imagine our future: What sort of story is useful for our social hopes? These social hopes are themselves rooted in history and Marramao is right in underlining the seeming contradiction in Rorty's both historical and ahistorical claim (MARRAMAIO 2007: 84). I will show further on how I think Rorty avoided the contradiction.

was invented to produce objectivity and this instance is the (Kantian transcendental) subject. While Rorty wrote extensively against objectivity he did little to address its counterpart — which is subjectivity — after *Mirror of Nature*,<sup>28</sup> and, on the contrary, insisted on “strong poets” by making reference to a simplified version of Romanticism which he seemingly deprived of its major tools which are the dialogical subject and non-representational writing. The maxime “Against dichotomies!” is, in the dualistic dominated world Rorty lives in, a two-fronted war: you have to be against objectivity and subjectivity at the same time, and, although what dissolves objectivity also dissolves subjectivity, Rorty chose to concentrate on objectivity — and to not sell it as “war” but as “dialogue”. That might also have to do with the fact that Rorty needed/wanted to preserve a certain account of self-dominion and decision-making, which stands in no contradiction to the dialogical subject — as can be seen from the concept of “agency” used in social sciences<sup>29</sup> — but Rorty might have chosen to shortcut these discussions. It is not opportunistic to insist on the dissolution of subjectivity when you can do so many useful things with it. What is “true” for “truth” — not the “true” whose counterpart is “useless”, but only the “true” whose counterpart is “false” has to be ruled out — is “true” for “subjectivity”: as long as we are aware that it is a creation, we can use it for agency-purposes. Speaking of “subjectivity” is a habit of action that can be preserved as it does not obstruct Rorty’s social hopes.

Concerning style and tradition I would state: Rorty was very familiar with the work of Derrida and other poststructuralists, so it is implausible to assume that a skilled philosopher like Rorty did not see the problem regarding irony and style, as has been claimed. Personal reasons<sup>30</sup> might have had their weight but commensurability and comprehensibility may be other causes. Staten, addressing the difference between Rorty and Derrida, summarizes:

28. However, if one reads closely, every text contains at least one or two lines addressing the problem. Those stressing the contradiction in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* normally make no reference to chapter one (contingency) but explicate only chapters two to three (irony, and solidarity; FRASER 1990; HAMPE 2006).

29. “The concept of agency has commonly been associated with notions of freedom, free will, action, creativity, originality and the very possibility of change through the actions of free agents. However, we need to differentiate between a metaphysical or ‘mystical’ notion of free agency in which agents are self-constituting (i.e. bring themselves into being out of nothingness) and a concept of agency as *socially produced* and enabled by differentially distributed social resources, giving rise to various degrees of the ability to act in specific spaces. [...] In sum, agency is determined [...]. It is the socially constructed capacity to act and nobody is free in the sense of undetermined [...]. Nevertheless, agency is a culturally intelligible way of understanding ourselves, and we clearly have the existential experience of facing and making choices” (BARKER 2000: 182f). Agency, put very pragmatically, means “making a difference” (BARKER 2000: 182).

30. One accusation is vanity — Derrida’s program was just too similar to Rorty’s approach to get his approval, as Staten maintains (1986).



So at this point we have two characterizations of the history of philosophy. (1) It is a constantly changing, self-deconstructing enterprise which is therefore not characterizable in terms of any single system of metaphors. This view is unambiguously Rorty's. (2) It is a "metaphysical tradition" which has dreamed the dream of a closed, total, and transparent vocabulary which would tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. This view is Derrida's and, ambiguously, Rorty's. If (1) is true, then there is nothing to be sidestepped. If (2) is true, and there is a unity of structure to this dream, then there is something to be sidestepped, and it is also plausible that, guided by our understanding of this structure, we could find a system of metaphors undergirding the tradition that has dreamed it (STATEN 1986: 456).

Staten's summary, regarding Rorty, seems correct to me and it is exactly Rorty's affiliation to both lines that produces seeming contradictions which, in my opinion, can be integrated: Rorty is not a philosopher who stresses rupture, and politically, as is known, he always opted for reform instead of revolution (for instance, RORTY 1998a). He also did so in philosophy:<sup>31</sup> his emancipation from rationality (comprising objectivity and subjectivity) is, in his way of selling it, more a reform than a revolution. From a merely analytical point of view at our point of history, irony would be the "right" answer: Rorty's non-dualistic approach is incommensurable with the previous one and calling it "revolution" and not using dualistic language anymore seems correct — and this is Staten's "2". Rorty's approach "No dichotomies!" would change the whole game: What would a society look like in which everybody is always aware that s/he is just using language and not making any truth or power-claims? Maybe that really is utopia. In any case, in Rorty's view, the implementation of this non-representational language is very unlikely to happen soon — especially when we point to incommensurability — and Rorty's pragmatic answer is that private ironists should become public liberals, meaning pluralists whose major interest is to prevent cruelty. This political level of liberalism (pluralism) can and must be thrown back to the philosophical level by seeing the philosophical ground as just another *agorà* where paradigms shift: self-impeachment (irony) also has to be assumed for Rorty's own approach, and that is Staten's "1".

From a pragmatic point of view, your position has more success if you try to establish the "electric connection" in people's heads instead of only disturbing them. Disturbing can cause some people to reflect but the foundationalist-antifoundationalist-fight itself shows how impossible change is when you stress incommensurability. Fraser is right in saying that this is manipulation, and Rorty overtly opted for this calling in mass-media and making his much derided assertions about empathy and literature, but it is a sort of manipulation that does not outsource dominion or responsibility to

31. Although, as said, a clear distinction between philosophy and politics is impossible for Rorty.

anyone other than yourself and a sort of manipulation that has to contemplate the possibility of self-impeachment (Staten's "1"). Asking who this self is and where the power for decision-making comes from is the wrong question. For Rorty, asking about origin and empowerment is a question that arises together with the dualistic worldview. Don't ask where agency comes from, use it! This does not mean there are no tools against (dualist) extremists, as preventing cruelty and fighting non-secularized/non-pluralist theories has to be pursued with all necessary severity (Staten's "2"). But we cannot fight this fight by making dualist truth-claims (Staten's "1").

This is clearly a Western-world approach, as it bears the stamp of and is only possible in a post-enlightenment-society where power (on paper) has already been given to the largest number, but Rorty was aware of this (see e.g. RORTY 1998a). Grassroots movements and participatory democracy are the radicalization of the Enlightenment as Rorty describes it, and to some it might seem more tempting to sell this as "revolution" and "rupture" rather than as "reform" and "progress". From a pragmatic point of view this means choosing the campaign you think will be more successful. Rorty decided to insist on the dialogue with the dominant discourse.

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