

Metaphilosophy, Pragmatism and a Kind of Critical Theory: Kai Nielsen and Richard Rorty* *Kai Nielsen*

Abstract: Metaphilosophy is itself philosophy about philosophy. It is not something before or independent of philosophy. Both Kai Nielsen and Richard Rorty are deeply concerned (someone might say obsessively preoccupied) with metaphilosophy. They both are thoroughly historicist and contextualist resolutely rejecting any form of a transcendental or metaphysical turn. They argue against claims to absolute validity (as well as against absolutism in any form) and a natural order of reasons: some 'Reason' to which any rational agent must be committed. They both see philosophy as a transitional genre first (historically speaking) from religion then metaphysics and more latterly from scientific conceptions of the world. But they differ about what philosophy is transitional to. For Rorty it is historical narrative and utopian proposals; for Nielsen it is critical theory. Rorty claims this, Nielsen's intentions to the contrary notwithstanding, commits him to enlightenment rationalism. Nielsen replies that his form of critical theory is deeply historicist and contextual without being resolutely atheoretical. This plays out in political orientation to Nielsen's being a socialist while Rorty is a social democrat.

I

Metaphilosophy is not meta to philosophy. It is itself philosophy about philosophy: philosophizing about what philosophy is, has been, can be, should be, what the point (if any) of it is, what its relation to our lives can be or should be, and what its relevance to thought about and action concerning the institutions of our society and even to reflection concerning what the very structure of societies can be and even should be. Philosophy has given us visions of what society and our lives should be, though this is not, of course, all that it does. Yet some philosophers have it that this is a practice

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philosophy should abjure. Metaphilosophy, among other things, grapples with this.

Richard Rorty has a cluster of well thought out and perspicuously articulated, well-known metaphilosophical views. These views in some circles are much admired while in still wider circles they (if not just ignored) are much derided. I, though not uncritically, am on the admiring side (Nielsen 2005). I will bring out here something of what I take to be the attraction and viability of his metaphilosophical views, views which, in a somewhat different characterization, I largely share. That done, I shall turn to his opposition to critical theory and, more broadly, to his opposition to even moderately theorizing our views about society and political life (Rorty 2004, 2007). I shall argue that there is a plausible case to be made on the other side. I shall argue (*pace* Rorty) that we can and should (though with caution) theorize about society and politics and that there is a non-rationalistic form of critical theory that merits our attention—that yields an attractive emancipatory account of society (Nielsen 2003, 41-138).

To put my cards on the table, making a blunt and stark capsule articulation of my views:

- (1) In metaphilosophy I am roughly a Wittgensteinian therapist.
- (2) In what Rorty and Burton Dreben as well call ‘Big P Philosophy’—Philosophy asking questions about the *nature* of certain normative notions such as ‘truth’, ‘justice’, ‘rationality, and ‘goodness’ in the hope thereby of better acting in accordance with such norms—I take a Wittgensteinian therapeutic turn.
- (3) I try instead to do *philosophy* in a much less problematical sense of philosophy which Rorty has called the little-*p* sense in which ‘philosophy’ comes to mean simply what Wilfred Sellars called ‘an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together in the broadest possible sense of the

term.¹ I try to philosophize, roughly after the fashion of John Dewey and John Rawls in their own distinctive ways, carrying as little baggage from *Philosophy*—as little metaphysical, epistemological, metaphilosophical, or metaethical baggage as possible.

- (4) Finally, I try to do philosophy—something I call critical theory—as social theory and social critique, including what has been called Ideology-critique after the fashion (broadly speaking) of Marx, Gramsci, and the analytical Marxists.

There is considerable overlap between (3) and (4) still I hardly think of (4) as philosophy at all but as social theory misleadingly called ‘the Philosophy of Karl Marx’ or ‘the Philosophy of Antonio Gramsci’, though perhaps sometimes so-calling it doesn’t do any harm. Moreover, while through most of my life I was unfortunately preoccupied with the ‘demarcation problem’ (see Introduction, with Jocelyne Couture, to our volume *Metaphilosophie*),² I have come however to think like Quine (though somewhat ambivalently) that what gets classified as philosophy and what not should be of more interest to librarians than philosophers. But for good or for ill I have tried to do those four things which it might be useful to classify in that way. Obsession with the demarcation problem—certainly a metaphilosophical issue—would be a (5). But (5) is something I would now set aside.

II

I am sceptical concerning whether we can gain anything with any considerable substance—have any knowledge or understanding—that

1 This is not Wilfrid Sellars’s own view of philosophy but what he takes to be an uncontroversial conception of philosophy widely held by philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Besides this, for Sellars, it is crucial to do big P *Philosophy*. He developed a distinct kind of scientific realism that is reasonably regarded as *Philosophy* in the grand old metaphysical style: that is big P *Philosophy*. Rorty, by contrast, regards only little p *philosophy* as a legitimate enterprise. Rorty 1982, xiv-xvii.

2 Couture and Nielsen 1993, 1-40.

transcends a historicist perspective. Like Rorty, I do not think this implies a general scepticism, nihilism, or relativism, though it might imply something like Hume's mitigated scepticism (i.e., a resolute fallibilism).³ But it does imply that we are not going to gain a context-transcending understanding of anything substantial. We cannot, that is, overleap history. We can gain no Archimedean point or skyhook—no 'moment of transcendence'—to appraise our practices. We have no understanding of how to think outside or beyond our practices, though we can, relying on our practices, repair the ship at sea and we can make modest idealizations of our practices that can sometimes lead to an improvement of them. The pragmatists, including Quine, are right: fallibilism rather than a thorough scepticism or relativism, is the name of the game. Moreover, I think Michael Williams is right in thinking that fallibilism and Hume's *mitigated* scepticism come to much the same thing.⁴

So, broadly speaking, I agree with Rorty against Jürgen Habermas, Thomas McCarthy, and Christine Korsgaard in rejecting unconditionality, namely the belief that there are some beliefs or arguments that are unconditionally valid, that must just be accepted by anyone who would be rational regardless of context.⁵ There is nothing substantive that just must be accepted at any time and place whatever beliefs, interests, desires, stances or social practices one has come to have. We will never get anything like or at least non-platitudinously like that. We may have a few Peircian acritical beliefs (e.g., fire burns, people die, water is wet, things change) but that is all. Justification is time, place, and context dependent. If to espouse critical theory is to accept unconditionally, universal validity (as anything other than a purely

3 Rorty nicely puts how I also take 'historicism' as follows: 'By *historicism* I do not mean claims about historical inevitability of the sort Popper rightly criticized in *The Poverty of Historicism*, but rather the idea that our philosophical vocabularies and problematics are attempts to deal with contingent historical circumstances rather than "perennial" or "basic" ones'. Rorty 2006, 152.

4 Michael Williams 2003, 61-80.

5 Jürgen Habermas 2000, 31-55, Thomas McCarthy 1991, Christine Korsgaard 1996.

formal device), transcendental arguments, quasi-transcendental arguments, or context-independent arguments, then I am no critical theorist. Rorty and I are at one over critical theory *so construed*. The kind of critical theory I espouse is articulated in my *Globalization and Justice* and most programmatically articulated in Chapters 1-3.

‘Enlightenment rationalism’ is not pleonastic. I am not an ‘Enlightenment rationalist’ or any other kind of rationalist. But I also think the Enlightenment is not a dead artifact of an earlier time. In the way Dewey was an Enlightenment figure I am an Enlightenment figure. I believe a better world is possible and that we need not and should not live in the hell we live in now. I not only believe there is a lot of *unnecessary* suffering, unhappiness, and alienation now but that in many respects the world we live in now—our social orders—can and should (*pace* Rorty) without mythology or obfuscation or reification be characterized as irrational.⁶ I believe in the possibility of moral progress

6 One referee ‘had trouble understanding [my] use of the word “rational” and its cognates’. Within *Philosophy* the subject of rationality has—and understandably—become a vast and for *Philosophy* a critical topic. I try to stick close in this essay to the ordinary uses of ‘rational’ and to avoid theorizing about it. But I certainly deploy at times the ordinary instrumental use of ‘rational’ where to be ‘rational’ is to take the most efficient means to achieve whatever ends we may happen to have. Hume and Russell think that is the only coherent sense of ‘rational’ that we have. It is certainly one use of ‘rational’ and in certain contexts an important one. But, like Habermas, I do not agree that it is the only coherent one. Habermas explicates a conception of communicative rationality that is distinct, irreducible to instrumental rationality and crucial in our social lives. We communicate via the medium of speech directed toward reaching understanding. And when we do this we act rationally. We engage in communicative reasoning. This conception of rationality is the basis of the normative idea that social relations must in general be criticizable and justifiable in a discourse among free and equal participants. However, and again understandably, this referee wonders if we can make sense of speaking, as I do, of the world as being irrational or (I add) being rational. Certainly instrumental rationality would not be adequate here—indeed it would abjure such a notion—but perhaps communicative rationality would. When we say (if we say) the world is irrational, we mean something like we live in a world where people’s most basic needs could be met but they are not being met; there is instead, and quite unnecessarily, given the productive capacity of the world, extensive poverty, starvation, illiteracy, hopelessness where a better world is possible and without the need at all to commit fiscal hari-kari on the part of the rich. This sort of world should be said to be irrational. This is not all we mean in saying it is irrational, but it is moral things like that, that we have in mind when we make such a judgment. From Plato to

and the possibility of economic progress. I believe in the irrationality of religion (though some denominations are more irrational than others) and I believe that with more education and more social wealth we could well come to do without religion. And I believe that some social orders are more reasonable and more productive of happiness than others. In short, I believe in most of the various beliefs of the Enlightenment, but I see no need—or indeed any desirability—of tying such beliefs into the usual rationalistic beliefs that typically go with it or indeed into any rationalistic beliefs. So far, some perhaps contentious or misleading unessential phraseology aside, and perhaps my willingness to ascribe irrationality to some societies aside, Rorty and I are one.

There are other things that we both agree about: (1) We do not think that some arguments are *intrinsically* better than others. Justification is always to a reasonably determinate audience for a reasonably determinate purpose and is always time and place dependent; (2) there is no *natural order of reasons*; (3) there is nothing more immutable about our present ways of doing and viewing things than our past ways; (4) truth is not the goal of inquiry or the goal of anything else; (5) there are no interest-free and context-free criteria of unity, coherence, and completeness; and (6) the source of our moral obligations are our historically conditioned social practices. (Indeed we might even drop talk of ‘obligation’ from our moral repertoire.)

Contrasting my views, as expressed above, and his views of what ‘philosophers might do after they give up on metaphysics and epistemology,’ Rorty has it, his idea about ‘what comes after the demise of

Horkheimer, people have spoken of the rationality of ends and not just of means. This has been thought to be problematical but doesn’t that belief that it is problematical go with a thorough moral skepticism and the belief that ends are not something we can argue about? Isn’t that quite problematic? Is there any other plausible reason to regard a rationality of ends as problematic? But even if there is, will not a Habermasian conception of communicative rationality, or a Rawlsian conception of reasonability, do the normative work we require here (Rawls 1993, 48-66)? Years ago I wrote an explication and defense of a substantive conception of rationality (Nielsen 1974, 55-89). I would not put everything now as I did then, but I think that paper continues to have considerable force.

the tradition' is roughly 'historical narrative and utopian proposals, [while mine is] roughly critical theory' (Rorty 2007. See also his 2004). That is quite right provided two things are kept in mind: (1) that my way of doing critical theory not be conceived as a Kantian-Habermasian enterprise, that is, it not be conceived as the search for the unconditional via a search for universal validity, some deeply embedded modalities or in any other way; and (2) that philosophy can be a narrative philosophy doing cultural history *and* a critical theory which is both a narrative philosophy and a problem solving philosophy integrally melded. Problems are solved in the context of a cultural and intellectual history clearly displayed and argued for. In this way problem-solving has a context *and* keeps narrative philosophy from just being story telling—setting out what some anthropologists call just so stories; in simple terms, my type of critical theory seeks rather to give narratives with historical and empirical constraints. We should remember Dewey's slogan that philosophy recovers itself when the problems of philosophers become the problems of human beings. Rorty actually so practices philosophy himself. Any adequate narrative *philosophy* must be a narrative philosophy *and* a problem-solving philosophy.

But how does this add up—or does it add up—to philosophy as critical theory? A narrative philosophy need not be a critical theory and Rorty would think a critical theory is *too theoretical to be useful*. But the way I conceive of critical theory out of the Marxian tradition, this does not seem to me to be so. I should put some flesh on those bones (Nielsen 2003, 41-138).

As narrative philosophy is, as Rorty puts it, a 'meld of moral philosophy and social and intellectual history,' so critical theory should also involve critical intellectuals—those who with a critical consciousness would speak truth to power—practicing their vocation, namely engaging in a meld of social criticism and ideology-critique, social and economic theory and history, and political and moral theory after roughly the fashion of Rawls, Levine, Scanlon, Geuss and Daniels. It would utilize narrative philosophy as characterized by Rorty, but in using the various forms of narrative critique just mentioned it would provide a critical edge that purely narrative philosophy lacks. (But remember sometimes certain

perspicuous descriptions undermine or on the other hand underpin certain moral beliefs.) It would not only show us what our cultural history has been, is now, and perhaps is going to be, but teach us to look at these narratives with a critical eye: to try to weed out the just so stories. It would help us (among other things) to take note of mystifications and to spot trends that can have very harmful effects and trends that can have liberating effects. There are a lot of narratives around. Practicing what I call ‘critical theory’ would help us to pick out narratives that are more plausible—have greater warranted assertability—than others. It would indeed not give us the one true or uniquely adequate description of the world. There is no such thing. It would not give us a narrative that was universally valid and unassailably true. Again there is no such thing. But it perhaps could, if we work very hard at seeking clarity, accuracy, and sincerity, yield some sorting out of narratives giving us ones we could reflectively and knowledgeably endorse as for the time the most adequate account or at least more adequate than the run of the mill accounts.⁷

The wider and more diverse the groups of people in conversation with each other, probing each other’s views and convictions, the more likely we are to get, for a time, a more adequate view of things. We never get anything which is final—the ‘last word’—but we can, with luck, get something that for a time is compellingly reasonable to believe and do. Critical theory melded with narrative accounts is more adequate than narrative accounts alone. Moreover, in practice critical theories have been narrative accounts though accounts carrying too much Kantian transcendental baggage with them.

Rorty argues that there is not much that philosophy more traditionally conceived can do here. Perhaps, as I would conjecture, some of the social sciences including history and social geography can do something useful, but not philosophy (Harvey 2000). (Presumably here

⁷ Rorty with his anti-representationalism (something I share with him) will *perhaps* not be happy with talk of accuracy here. It looks like it commits one to representationalism. But I think it can be (and should be) de-mythologized away from representationalist epistemology into something that travels philosophically light.

Rorty means *Philosophy*.) Appealing to grand philosophical categories either metaphysical (ontological) or epistemological will not much help us to understand how society is developing, what fundamental social structures there are and what they are like, or what our fundamental political options are and which are the more attractive. As Rorty puts it, 'Discussion in such areas as epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science is not easily made relevant to spotting sociopolitical trends, nor to the construction of safeguards against the dangers such trends foretell.'⁸

III

We philosophers are likely to think that we are specialists in the elucidation of rationality. But, even *if* we are, that won't help much in setting forth a critical theory. The same is true of other regulative ideals such as truth, completeness, coherent unity, or coherence taken apart from particular contexts. These philosophical categories yield nothing thick enough to serve as criteria for social critique. Rorty remarks that 'Gadamer seems to me quite right in saying that one context's domination is another context's liberation. And that the ideas of complete freedom from domination and complete independence of context are empty.'⁹ And Rorty adds that 'Foucault seems to me quite right in suggesting that history will always reveal domination hiding behind Enlightenment.'¹⁰ Neither philosophers of the genteel tradition, analytic philosophers, nor non-analytic continental philosophers

8 Rorty 2001, 52. See also Rorty 2004.

9 Rorty 2001, 49.

10 Rorty 2001, 49-50. More attention might have been paid to self-reflective or self-referential problems. My historicism as well as Rorty's rules out universal, totalizing interpretations of history. But Rorty reads Foucault as claiming that 'history will always reveal domination hiding behind Enlightenment' and I claim (as Rorty would as well) there is no transcending our historical perspective and gaining some absolute universality 'rooted in reason'. But, one referee notes, are not these examples of the very universal totalizing interpretations of history that we say we eschew. They are not. They are empirical interpretive generalizations that are open to infirmation could be infirmed (weakly disconfirmed).

command special techniques that enable them to function as critics of culture. Neither philosophers nor anyone else have super-concepts that enable them to clarify ordinary concepts. Philosophers of any sort have a very limited role in critical theory, limited to things like cleaning the Augean stable, making suggestions about broad outlooks, and (perhaps) clarifying *sans* super-concepts—contested concepts—uses of words not free from historical change—deployed in critical theory. But I could and indeed do accept such a critique of Philosophy and still say in articulating critical theory, as I conceive of it, that it is not another Philosophy but a *successor* subject to Philosophy after the demise of the tradition that can do some critical and emancipatory work. What I think critical theory can do, without getting (as Habermas does) in the old Philosophical stew, in spite of his talk of post-metaphysical philosophy, is to articulate a critical account of society that is empirically, historically, geographically and sociologically based and that yields some measure of objectivity (if you will, so as to not reify objectivity, the intersubjectivity of wide reflective equilibrium) (Erik Olin Wright 2006).

Rorty would retort that critical theory with its utilization of sociology yields no new such objectivity. We still have *over-theoretization* along with the naive scientific belief that social science can save us. Perhaps nothing can save us, but certainly no discipline can. If we think critical theory can, we are just spitting in the wind. What we need here is not more theory but more openness, more conversation with different people with different slants or takes on things, more democracy, more freedom to broaden our horizons, and the like. We should be more like Foucault and less like Habermas and kick the theory fetish.

Certainly we should have that openness and I think Rorty's, as well as Foucault's, distrust of theory is a very salutary thing. We should particularly be skeptical of grand theory in the social studies. Perhaps there is no such thing as a *science of society*. Yet we can learn a lot from Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Polanyi, and Keynes. Rorty, for example, applauds Marx for his prophesy and his inspirational value. In this he throws him in with the poet Shelley. But their values and take on things

are very different. Moreover, Hitler prophesied and inspired as well. Many a 'Big Mouth' has prophesied and inspired. Even George W. Bush, to my incredulity and dismay, has done so. It isn't his inspirational and prophetic side that makes Marx valuable, or Weber, Durkheim, Polanyi, or Keynes. And it is not *just* that Marx (as well as Habermas and Foucault) 'are imaginative and well read trend-spotters', though that is valuable. 'Marx,' Rorty remarks, 'warned us against such trends as the tendency of the modern state to become the executive committees of the bourgeoisie, and the increasing ability of capitalism to immiserate the proletariat by maintaining a reserve army of the unemployed.'¹¹ Similarly, Habermas was a trend-spotter when he spoke of the 'colonization of the life-world' as was Foucault when he spoke of the 'medicalization of the sexual life.' But these trend-spotting remarks, unless they are to function only as inspirational propaganda, must be backed up, as they are, by Marx, Weber, Habermas, Polanyi, and Foucault, with reliable empirical accounts including theory-rooted observations and argument-rooted theoretical elaboration entwined in narratives. Foucault's trend-spotting account is less theory-elaborated than Marx's or Habermas's, but it isn't a theoretically innocent characterization without interpretive conceptualization and argument either. And Marx's and Habermas's trend-spotting remarks are comprehensively theoretically elaborated. *Perhaps*, indeed very likely perhaps, some of this theory can and should be excised. But not all of it should be. It is not irrelevant that we sometimes have good reason to believe that what is claimed to be trend-spotting, is not *just* trend-spotting, but actually captures something that is the case; that gives us some insight into how societies work. This requires confirmation and infirmation and something like coherently putting the pieces together, utilizing something like wide reflective equilibrium, critically attending to alternative accounts, and intelligently and thoughtfully attending to objections. This is what it is for an account to have intellectual force.

¹¹ Rorty 2001, 51.

Nothing here, of course, will be the last word. But this is just to acknowledge fallibilism. And some accounts (e.g., Marx's, Habermas's, Gramsci's and Foucault's) are so fallibilistically backed up. They are not giving us just so stories or making prophecies. Or at the very least they are not just telling stories or making prophecies.

IV

Rorty will say that there can be better and worse narratives, though none of course, have 'the final say', but, he would add, we are better off here with *just good journalism* than with *Philosophy*. (Sometimes some types of good films and types of good literature serve a similar function.) Theory, Rorty claims, just gets in the way.¹² Good journalistic accounts, good films, and good narrative literature are by contrast indispensable. But—so I claim—they are not sufficient by themselves. Moreover, there is journalism and journalism, films and films. I spoke above of 'good journalism' but some may balk at that. They shouldn't. As Noam Chomsky allegedly does, I grind my teeth at a not inconsiderable amount of journalism occurring in even such prestigious papers as *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *The New York Herald Tribune* (and these are good newspapers compared to many). But in spite of the fact that I at least think I recognize a lot of the writing there to be ideologically slanted, I realize we usually get a fairer, more thorough, more accurate, and better account of things there than in the tabloids. It may well be that all newspapers are in some way or another ideologically slanted or, if you will, to some extent socio-politically slanted. But still there is journalism and journalism. I would put more trust in *Le Devoir* than *Le Journal de Montréal* or even *L'Express*. Some might say that expresses political bias on my part, but it would be hard to say that if, wanting views that were reasonably objective, I restricted my comparison to *Le Devoir* and the tabloid *Le Journal de Montréal*. If I am on the Metro and I see someone reading *Le Figaro* I will surmise that person is right-

12 Rorty 1998, 13-24.

leaning (though probably intelligently so) and if I see instead someone reading *Le Monde* I will guess she is more left-leaning or at least more liberal. Similar things are true if I am in Germany and I see someone reading the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* or the *Frankfurter Rundschau* or in the U.K. and I see a person reading *The Times of London* or *The Guardian*. In those situations as well I make similar conjectures to those I make concerning Quebec newspapers. What I want to emphasize here is: (a) that none of these major newspapers are just propaganda sheets; (b) they are all responsible newspapers; (c) they contain some good journalism; and (d) they all present a *political* perspective, though surely somewhat different political perspectives; moreover they can all have their failings in the way Chomsky vividly details. Similar things are even more true of more general socio-political-economic journals. I like to read *Le Monde Diplomatique*. My conservative friends like to read *The Economist*. I have read *The Economist* often enough to know it is not a mere right wing political rag and I think just a little attention to *Le Monde Diplomatique* would convince a fair-minded conservative that *Le Monde Diplomatique* is no merely moderately leftist rag. Yet I think I get a better picture of what is going on in the world from *Le Monde Diplomatique* than from *The Economist* and my conservative friends think just the opposite. Who, if anyone, is more nearly right, concerning which journal usually comes closer 'to telling it like it is'? Is there anyone, or can anyone, justifiably say 'Is there anything like a reasonable approximation to telling it like it is here?' Contestable as such claims are is it implausible to think such claims cannot be justifiably made? Without abandoning fallibilism I think they can.

Journalists in such journals are typically well educated and sometimes have lived in the area they standardly report on for a long time and know the local language. Their reporting seeks to be accurate while unavoidably remaining interpretive and almost invariably has a somewhat distinctive political orientation. We can also see (usually by reading between the lines) that their reportage has in its background the study of at least some of the great socio-political theorists. They, of

course, need good empirical evidence and they need to ascertain how (if they do) the referred to things fit together. They, if they will be responsible, cannot make up stories. That they sometimes do, as Chomsky shows, reveals that even such accounts are not always responsible. The journalists need, when they are being responsible, to make interpretations which are not off-the-wall. In providing us with informed and probing interpretations of specific matters they and we both need a reasonably good understanding of background matters—an understanding of the general socio-political-economic background and some understanding of social-political theory, including crucially some understanding of what I have called critical theory. Good journalism is, of course, crucial, but so (*pace* Rorty) is a good empirically based theoretical understanding of society e.g., Marx, Weber or Polanyi. Something that is difficult but not impossible to have and it need not be so politically biased that it either blocks our understanding or paralyzes our determination to act. I agree with Rorty that journalists typically should carry on their investigations and reportage ‘without using either the jargon of the social sciences or that of philosophy.’¹³ But that is another matter.

Rorty is right that *philosophy*—particularly big *P* Philosophy—is not of much help here except perhaps in teaching us to be cautious, attentive to nuances, to respect clarity, and to teach us to make (in many situations) distinctions. (Sometimes there is the making of too many distinctions, e.g., C.D. Broad on egoism.) But Rorty is also right in believing that Marx, Habermas, and Foucault will not have been assisted in their trend-spotting from having read *Critique of Pure Reason* or more generally most of what we study in studying Philosophy. These things, whatever their distinctive merits, will not help us in gaining a greater socio-political awareness and I would add a better grasp of what *I* have called critical theory.¹⁴

13 Rorty 2001, 51.

14 Rorty 2001, 51-2.

V

I think Rorty and I will continue to disagree in part about the importance of theory in socio-political matters. I say ‘in part’ because I am usually on Rorty’s side in the discussion of such matters both with standard analytical political philosophers, Habermasian critical theorists and with some of my Marxian comrades. This is particularly true of those Jon Elster has dubbed as Marxist Fundamentalists. I think, to put it crudely, that philosophers and many other intellectuals tend to greatly overemphasize the importance of theory. I’m not enthusiastic about post-modernism or even very informed about it, but I agree with Rorty that many philosophers, even good philosophers (e.g., Daniel Dennett and Akeel Bilgrami), get too Colonel Blimpish about post-modernism. That notwithstanding, I have tried to do a little something here to convince Rorty (as well as others) that figures like Marx, Keynes, Weber, Durkheim, and Polyani have been—and continue to be—of considerable importance to us and not principally as prophets and inspirers and that something called critical theory is an important *successor* to Philosophy. But I suspect that Rorty will continue to resist such theorizing in our social life and social understanding.

To translate this continued disagreement between us into the concrete let me discuss where we disagree politically. Rorty rightly says, ‘...Nielsen and I share the same political theory for the achievement of most goals.’¹⁵ We both want an egalitarian, classless, nonracist, genderless, nonhomophobic, nonstatus ridden world—a world, as George Orwell put it, where there is no bowing and scraping. Still we importantly differ. *Rorty is a social democrat believing that the advancement of socialism is not possible, while I am a socialist believing that socialism is both possible and desirable.* Neither of us believes socialism is inevitable and I am even sceptical enough to think (on my more depressed days) that it may not even probably, however it is labeled, get on the historical agenda again. Still I both hope and think it is possible and should be struggled for. We need to take our chances in our rough and troubled world. Rorty contrariwise thinks that the struggle to

15 Rorty 2007.

achieve socialism is a spitting into the wind. What we should hope for, he has it, is a capitalist society with a human face, the most egalitarian, classless, nonracist, nonhomophobic, nonsexist, nonstatus ridden society that we can attain compatible with (what, so he believes, we cannot avoid anyway without doing even more damage) a capitalist ordering of our social life and economy. He might be for socialism if he thought it were achievable without tyranny, stultifying bureaucracy, and considerable inefficiency and I might reluctantly acquiesce in the kind of capitalism that he wants (a social democratic capitalism) if it proves to be the closest that we could get to egalitarianism, classlessness, nonstatusism, nonracism, nonsexism, nonhomophobiaism and to (to put it generally) people being less brutalized and coming to have more control over their own lives. And *if* I came to believe that with what can come to pass for socialism we will get none of these things and added to it an inefficient tyranny and a stultifying bureaucracy then I would acquiesce in the ideal of a Rorty-style capitalism and abandon my socialism. There would be nothing else to decently do if, as Rorty thinks, we would get the world of Josef Stalin or his lesser tyrannical followers rather than that of Rosa Luxemburg. I don't take that road because I believe that we would get none of these bad things if socialism came into existence in a society that could sustain it (e.g., a society of considerable wealth, such as in our own rich capitalist democracies, and a society with a secure social democratic tradition). Moreover, with the shift in such conditions to a socialist society we would get good things that capitalism even with a human face could not provide. I think such a socialist society, and eventually such a world, can come to be, and that *only* such a society could be classless (if any society could), thoroughly democratic (with both economic [workplace] democracy and extensive political democracy), and thoroughly egalitarian. That is why I am a socialist and why I think that Rorty, believing that anything like that is impossible, remains a social democrat. I have argued against Rorty on that, arguing that such a socialist world is possible (briefly) in my 'Taking Rorty Seriously' and more extensively in Chapter 5 of my *Globalization and Justice*. (See also Wright 2006.)

I shall return to only that part of my argument that contests Rorty's claim that *theoretical considerations* are of *scant* importance here being wheels that turn no machinery even where we are trying to decide whether we, if we are egalitarians and want (as Rorty does) a classless society, should go for socialism or social democracy. I do not claim that theoretical issues are decisive, indeed I think nothing concerning anything substantive is going to be decisive and particularly *nothing is going to be decisive over such issues that are so important to our lives*. But I do not think that all theoretical considerations are idle wheels here turning no machinery.

Socialists, and most particularly Marxists, Rorty tells us, put too much trust in theory and particularly in grand social theory: a theory that would make plain the underlying structure and necessary (factually necessary) development of society. There is, he plausibly claims, no such 'science of society.' Belief in one leads us into metaphysical nonsense or at least to confusions, to dogmatism, and to arbitrariness. There is nothing like so-called 'scientific socialism.' There is nothing here that is actually scientific in any straightforward sense of the term.

The intellectual Left generally, and Fundamentalist Marxists in particular, are, as Rorty puts it, 'dominated by the notion that we need a theoretical understanding of our historical situation, a social theory which reveals the key to future development, and a strategy which integrates everything with everything.'¹⁶ The Soviet experiment has, Rorty claims, abundantly shown us that in a modern dynamic economy answering to people's needs, a socialism *without markets*, will not work. It is inefficient and features a stifling bureaucracy. It cannot obtain goods and services when they are needed and where they are needed. It cannot be innovative and produce things that people want. People in such a world will not adequately get either what they need or want.

Rorty also stresses that there is a strong tendency for a socialist society to either not be democratic at all or to be minimally insecurely

¹⁶ Rorty 1998, 45.

democratic.¹⁷ Worse still, what has been taken to be the Marxist tradition, by some people, is a tradition, Rorty remarks, ‘that is covered with filth because of the governments that have called themselves Marxist.’¹⁸ Think, for example, of Romania when it had a communist regime or now of North Korea. Marx, Engels, and Luxemburg had good intentions alright, but they assumed too easily that after such a class-based revolution, with the struggle, discipline, and control that that would require, and that with a workers’ victory, no doubt in the beginning an insecure victory, democracy would still rather easily come into being and be sustained. They thought that, victorious in a class-based civil war, we could and would move from a socialist society with little in the way of democratic traditions to a fully democratic socialist society: a society with both an economic democracy and a political democracy. But that was unrealistic and it did not happen.

VI

Rorty from such considerations concludes that an efficient and democratic socialist society, let alone a world, is not in the cards. I have argued that he has not made his case (Nielsen 2003, 191-223). But here I want to argue that whether or not he has made his case, both he and his opponents appeal to theoretical considerations and that we cannot reasonably argue for or argue against socialism without them. Having good moral intuitions, having careful descriptions, having strong commitments, and being on the side of ‘the good guys’ and against ‘the bad guys’ is not enough. We can and should do without grand philosophical narratives, including philosophical metanarratives. Going for these grand philosophical narratives we have Hegel and Leo Strauss but not analytical Marxists or some other Marxists (Gramsci for example) or people like Weber, Keynes, Durkheim or Polanyi. Analytical

17 There have been post-capitalist statist societies *calling* themselves socialist. But, as Wright well argues, they are not genuinely socialist societies but non-capitalist statist societies. To count as socialist a society must be democratic (Wright 2006).

18 Rorty 1998, 21.

Marxists (whom Rorty utterly ignores) avoid such grand *a priori* and teleological roads; instead (as we shall see in the next section) they construct accounts of historical materialism that are empirically testable, that give us a causal account (sometimes a functional account which is also a causal account) of epochal social change, have clearly articulated concepts of class, and show us both that and why we have class and strata in our societies and how and why capitalist societies, no matter how human their faces come to be with social democracy, will—indeed must—remain class societies.

Furthermore (*pace* classical Marxists but with minimal changes in Marxist theory) they—think of the work of Alec Nove, David Schweickart, and John Roemer—have given us carefully articulated models of market socialism that could feasibly be a matter of social experiment in societies evolving from the rich capitalist democracies (Nove 1983, Schweickart 2002, and Roemer 1994). As in modern capitalist societies, a market socialist society would have in its economic life *both* market and plan working together. A market socialism could even have—indeed would have—central planning. But what it cannot have, and be even minimally efficient, in complex societies, is a command/administrative *allocation* system (which should not be confused with central planning). Such an allocation system does not work for modern industrial societies. But central planning in an economic regime that has markets is another matter. Central planning pervasively exists in capitalist societies and it could, and would, exist in socialist societies as well including market socialist societies. But such societies would not be consumerist societies, societies with a market orientation. Markets would have the limited function of being used for efficient allocation of goods, services and labor. This does not add up to the market society that orthodox Marxists rightly decry.

VII

In his discussion of socialism, Rorty contents himself with saying socialism didn't work in the past so why should we expect it to work now? But this

simply ignores the above theoretical considerations and ignores the classical Marxist claim that socialism piggybacks on developed capitalism. Socialism, the claim is, is only stably possible in a world with societies that are wealthy industrial societies—societies historically growing out of capitalism—and that are as well societies that have a firmly established tradition of liberal democracy. Socialism could not work in the Third World unless the First World was socialist or clearly on the way to becoming socialist. As Rosa Luxemburg recognized, the Russian Revolution was doomed when the Russian Revolution did not quickly extend to the West and, as G.A. Cohen has well argued, if the Soviet Union had *not* collapsed, historical materialism would have been refuted or at least infirmed, not confirmed. Without extensive capitalist development somewhere in the world we will not get socialism. We *may* not get it anyway, but we will not get it without a developed capitalism being transformed (perhaps in revolution) into socialism. A Second World country *might* ignite socialism, but unless it rapidly takes root in the First World—the wealthy and powerful capitalist countries—it will burn out or eventually be repressed. I wish it were otherwise, but I agree here with Rosa Luxemburg.

Rorty may think the strong and wealthy capitalist countries—particularly the present day king-pin, the United States—do not have a fat chance of turning in such a direction. But down the road a decade or so he with me on our perches in heaven *may* be in for some surprises.

There is *nothing inevitable* here. We may have to settle at best for a worldwide Sweden, though I think a genuinely socialist transformation and not just a social democratic one is more likely and more desirable. Even with capitalism, we may never have anything like *a worldwide Sweden*. Such rich countries *may* depend for their economic viability on some other societies being poor. But be that as it may, these are empirical-*theoretical* issues. Theory has its place here, though—whichever direction the wind blows—the issue surely will not be settled by empirical and theoretical investigations *alone*.

Both Rorty and I agree that the Left is the party of *hope*. I think social democratically that a worldwide Sweden (if it could come to be) would

not, to understate it, be such a horror. At least it would be far better than the world of Bush or even for that matter of Prodi and Clinton. But I hope I am not being too *parti-pris* in arguing and hoping that a genuine socialist alternative is possible and not just a social democratic compromise. But whether or not this is pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by will not be decided independently of theoretical considerations and social experiments as well as struggle. Here Rorty engages in theoretical arguments as much as his socialist opponents do. What Rorty is right about—or so I think—is that *Philosophy* won't be of much help here, particularly grand *Philosophy* setting forth grand philosophical narratives or metanarratives. But, thank God, there are straight, or relatively straight, empirical-theoretical theories of varying degrees of 'grandness' with both empirical and narrative impact. Testing here, as Elliot Sober has well argued, is crucial (Sober 1999). The utilization of such theories has not been shown to be so much love's labor lost as Rorty believes.

VIII

So while we both would like to refurbish 'the hopes and aspirations of the Enlightenment' we travel down two different roads in so seeking its refurbishment. Rorty 'doubts that anything of a theoretical sort will be of much use' in doing so. He is dubious of my claim that the great hope of the Enlightenment was in making rational criticisms of our social institutions and in setting out coherently structured and carefully reasoned alternatives. Well, 'rational' is ambiguous but not so ambiguous that we can't make it apparent what is at issue. (See note 6.) Moreover, the very idea of *the* great hope is too strong, but *a* crucial great hope is not. We can without wildness hope that a better world is possible and that it is indeed both viable and possibly achievable (Wright 2006). Moreover, and here I agree with Rorty, 'the great hope of the Enlightenment was to replace those institutions'—the institutions we have inherited from the past—'by institutions that would cause less suffering and would provide greater individual freedom.' But we need

equality here too. And rational criticism of our institutions is important too—though not by itself alone—for so is the articulation of perspicuous and emotionally engaging narratives, literature (the arts generally), and accurate description through history, geography, ethnology, and good journalism (Harvey 2000; Rorty 2004). (We critical public intellectuals need all of them in our toolbox.) Philosophy, taken as a classification and elucidation of concepts, can sometimes play a perhaps useful *subsidiary* role here. But the central thing is *not* just for intellectuals, Leftist or otherwise, ‘to inflame our imagination with glorious hopes of the results of a particular institutional change.’ Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini were rather good at that and so was Thatcher and rather mystifyingly so for a time was Bush. We should expect more and something qualitatively different of our intellectuals than that. Part of the task, as Rorty says, is to make proposals, suggest projects. But they should be reasonable proposals and projects backed up, or at least capable of being backed up, by the sort of considerations that usually make a proposal or project viable and reasonable, and, though both ‘viable’ and ‘reasonable’ are *at least* partly context dependent, they are not purely emotive or otherwise just non-cognitive. We, as John Rawls shows, can say something about ‘reasonable’ and, by extrapolation, ‘viable’ in determinate contexts (Rawls 1995, 48-66).

Neither *Philosophy* as traditionally conceived nor analytic philosophy have the tools, Rorty and I agree, to enable *Philosophers* to function effectively (even if they try) as *critics of culture*. We should give up (at least in such a role) on metaphysics and epistemology. Hegel made the right move—though it was too bad he did it in such a constipated way—when he saw philosophy as ancillary to history rather than to either religion or science (Rorty 2004). But it should also be ancillary to socio-political studies and crucially to social criticism, and this means it is ancillary to its successor—to what it is hopefully transitional to—critical social theory.

Rorty is on the mark when he says: ‘Not all politically engaged philosophy has been bad philosophy, but a lot of it has been boringly

programmatically and tiresomely self-righteous.’¹⁹ I know that all too well from fundamentalist Marxists: good political comrades of mine but tiresome philosophers and theoreticians. But this is true of any type of philosophy or way of doing philosophy, including narrative philosophy. There are plenty of uninspired narratives around. However, it was an important and perceptive thing for Hegel to have said that philosophy is time held in thought.

IX

In the last half of his ‘A Response to Kai Nielsen’s Proposal for a Transformation of Philosophy’, Rorty makes some incisive criticisms of me, some of which I now think are well taken, but they critique some ideas that in my last four books I have set aside (Rorty 2007). I have come to give up, reluctantly and ambivalently, the idea, common to the classical pragmatists (Peirce and Dewey), the logical positivists and Bernard Williams, that science has any privileged epistemic or methodological place in our lives. There is nothing special, as far as that is concerned, about science. It has a reasonably specific cluster of jobs to do and if you want to find out what is the best thing to think concerning *these matters* you better trust the relevant science and the relevant beliefs should be fixed by the relevant scientific method. If you want to know if atoms are observable, trust science. If you want to know if the SARS virus jumped from a certain sort of monkey to human beings, trust science (unless it gets politically inspired there). If you want to know why the earth has been getting warmer for the last twenty years, again, if practitioners do not get politically inspired, trust the relevant science. The answers given by the various scientists in question may be wrong—we never escape fallibilism—but they are (to put it mildly) very likely to be much more reliable than any alternative non-scientific answers. The scientists in their different scientific disciplines have their different beliefs and more or less determinate ways of answering their questions,

¹⁹ Rorty 1998, 20.

fixing their beliefs. But (*pace* Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Ernest Nagel) there seems to be nothing so general as *the* scientific method that we can rely on in all domains to fix belief. There are simply somewhat different scientific methods for different disciplines and in many other domains there are other methods, some of them reliable and some less so; perhaps in some domains their methods are not reliable at all. But I have now come to agree with Rorty: there is no single method—nothing like *the* scientific method—putting us uniquely in touch with reality. There are better and worse ways—and perhaps sometimes there is no determinate way—of finding out whether there are blue-jays in Australia, that and why the Earth is getting warmer, if the SARS virus jumped from a determinate type of monkey to human beings, whether in our societies there are classes or only strata, whether capitalist globalization causes more immiseration than would obtain without it, whether neutrinos have mass, whether the Vikings planted vineyards in Newfoundland, whether expressionism is more complex than impressionism, whether *Anna Karenina* has more verisimilitude than *Madame Bovary*. But none of these inquiries—not even the physics ones—puts us in greater touch with reality. We cannot determine something like that for we do not know what we are talking about in talking about reality *full stop* and we have no non-question begging criteria for determining which (if any) of the various realities we are talking about is the *really real*. (Indeed what the devil are we talking about in talking about ‘the really real?’) To privilege physics here (*pace* Bernard Williams) is simply arbitrary.

Rorty is not so far off the point in saying that in *After the Demise of the Tradition* I was still to a certain extent in the grip of a tradition that we both now wish we have transcended. There is no area of culture that is more or less in touch with the non-verbal reality than any other. This does not mean that all texts are caught in a web of texts though no discipline is free of something like texts, i.e., none is transcendent of or to all social practices. I agree with Rorty and Putnam (again *pace* Bernard

Williams) that there is no way of knowing what just is there anyway.²⁰ Indeed we don't even understand what we are talking about here anymore than we understand Kantian *noumena*. Such talk is at best useless and at worst incoherent. Kuhn is right in thinking that progress in science consists in greater problem-solving ability rather than an increased ability to represent or know *the world as it really is*. Here by now Rorty and I are in complete agreement.

X

However, in the last few pages of the above mentioned article he rings me in with Habermas's Enlightenment rationalism. When I wrote *After the Demise of the Tradition* I was, at least partially, *unwittingly* caught by such rationalism. But by now my more historicist and contextualist orientation would, even with WRE, never let me speak of or assume our ability to take 'everything into account', or to believe or even to understand what it would be to have the force of the better argument that would preserve the Enlightenment idea that there is something called Reason 'which always sides with the good guys'. I do not know what it would be like to take everything into account, to have a unified overarching conception of rationality, to have a completed or final physics or anything else, or of what it is to speak of Reason, and to know that it will always side with the good guys. I once made the terrible mistake of speaking of the *widest* reflective equilibrium.²¹ There is no widest reflective equilibrium and if there were we wouldn't know when it obtained. There can only be wider equilibria when in a determinate context we are comparing different equilibria for a determinate purpose. When we are in a problematic situation where we have two or more conflicting wide reflective equilibria answering to that problematic situation, we, in trying to see if we could come to a reasonable consensus, seek a wider reflective equilibrium and, if problems remain, we seek a

20 Nielsen 1996, 418-424.

21 Nielsen 1993, 316-33; Nielsen 1994, 3-42; Nielsen 1996b, 23-36; Nevo 1996, 3-22; and Nevo 1998, 22-35.

still wider equilibrium. Yet we do not understand (let alone even remotely expect to understand) what it would be like to gain *sans* context a widest equilibrium where in good objective idealist fashion anything is related to everything, where we would have gained the 'last word', and seen what Reason, God, or the Absolute requires. There is, of course, no such 'dance of the dialectic'. We can, as Rorty himself stresses, if we are lucky, converse with ever wider audiences, gain an understanding of and a feel for how more and more people see things, gain greater and ever wider consensuses which are not *mere* consensuses but what we would get by getting our different and conflicting views into—for a time—a wide reflective equilibrium. But such WRE, striving to gain an ever greater coherence, is sometimes faced with conflicting views. We should *seek* (though we might not get) in such a situation a wider reflective equilibrium that would satisfy the conflicting parties with different wide reflective equilibria where their differences could be reasonably settled without a fight or just an arbitrary decision: something that in *some* situations might obtain. We might get a wide reflective equilibrium that the contending parties could each reflectively endorse when they each had carefully applied the method of wide reflective equilibrium. There is still the need for *endorsement* here, but it is not a blind or arbitrary endorsement but a *reflective* endorsement. It is not that I think, as Rorty has it that Christine Korsgaard has it, that if you really think things through, if you carefully apply the scientific method or apply WRE, you will always come out on the right, emancipatory side of current political controversies. You still may be on the wrong side, but you will have the best obtainable reasons, for a particular time and in a particular place, to think you are on the right side. What it is reasonable to think or do may always turn out to be false or mistaken. But it is, being in WRE, all the same the best thing to think and do for that time. Rudolph Carnap in 1932 was right: *truth is time independent but confirmation is time dependent*. But what we want to know about is not truth (strange as this may sound) but about what the applications of wide reflective equilibrium tell us is the time, place, and context-dependent notion of what we are justified in

believing and doing: what we should at a given time and place *take* for truth. We will never get by such a method something that will yield unconditionally universal validity: what we must, for all time, if we follow Reason, believe, and what is the last word. There is nothing like any of these things. Spinoza was wrong about this. We do not know what it would be like to have the last word. But maybe we can get, if we are lucky and persistent, what for a certain people, at a certain time and place, with certain interests, is the more reasonable and desirable thing to do and reflectively endorse. We probably can't even get that. I am perhaps persistently too Whiggish. But some reflective stasis remains an empirical possibility. Our reach must exceed our grasp or what is humanity for?

There should be no forced choice between narrative or problem solving or theory. All are needed. We need our Balzacs, Zolas, and Dreisers and we also need our Marxes, Webers, and Durkheims. They both play different but complimentary roles in attaining wide reflective equilibria.

Rorty, though he himself appeals to reflective equilibrium, does not think I can get as much out of it as I want to. He remarks (like Nicholas Wolterstorff):

This is because the bad guys can be as reflectively equilibrrious as the good guys. Each side can paste together an equally coherent set of moral convictions, moral principles, and plausible empirical predictions about the results of emancipatory policies. Neither will have much trouble whomping up an empirically based broadly scientific conception of *homo sapiens* an account of human nature to suit their own needs. The racists, the phallogocentrists, and the homophobes, for example, are all happy to offer accounts of human nature that dictate that various emancipatory changes should not be attempted.²²

Surely with some bright spin doctor they can *whomp* them up. But they would have to *whomp* them up. Wide reflective equilibrium forces us to eschew *whomping* and rather to look carefully with an earnest attempt at

22 Rorty 2007.

impartiality at a wide range of considerations. When we do so and carefully reflect on them and take them to heart we are less likely to be racists, phallogocentrists, homophobes, Bushites, or Neofascists. We are less likely to just whomp things up. (Or is one man's careful and honest looking at things another man's whomping?) It is not impossible that a present day well educated person will be a racist or a Bushite but it is rather unlikely and rather difficult. It is perhaps no accident that (for example) most of the better educated strata do not oppose same-sex marriage. Yet *perhaps* these things are not a matter of 'education' but 'indoctrination': just plain social acculturation, what gets drilled into us. Sad tales can be told on all sides and maybe for some ears (but hardly the same ears) with verisimilitude. The Nazis had their sad tales too. And if the Nazis had won the war, conquered the world, and stabilized things, our (what was left of us after the ethnic cleansing had been carried out) children and grandchildren would no doubt be good little Nazis. That is a chilling thought, but where wide reflective equilibrium is functionally in place, or something like it is in place, those things, as damaging as they are, are not likely to persist. It is hard (but not impossible) to be a Black-hater or a Jew-hater if we have a little information about or acquaintance with people. If we come to know the people on the other side of the mountain it is usually more difficult to hate them.²³ It is much harder for an educated person to believe—really believe—that Jews are a race with a different evolutionary history. Harder, but not, as we sadly know from history, impossible. Wide reflective equilibrium never promised a rose garden where right, or even reasonability, would always

23 A referee remarks that he finds implausible my claim that once we know people we are unlikely to hate or oppress them. Perhaps I am being too Whiggish here? It is certainly not an article of faith for me. It is an empirical conjecture of mine. *Perhaps* it expresses more of a hope than anything else? There is, however, one thing that should be cleared up. I have in mind, in so speaking, situations where people work together and in some degree share a life. (I am not speaking of intimate relations between people.) My conjecture is that when people are together in that kind of social situation and really get to know each other it will be more difficult to hate or oppress each other. But surely that is an empirical matter and my conjecture may be false. It will be a bad day for humanity if it is.

triumph or even usually triumph. It did promise a way, fallibilistically of course, to ascertain what is more likely to be reasonable and right. This will, like all substantive understanding, be for a time and place. What else is new? And while Rorty is right in thinking there is no essence of human nature (or indeed of anything else), we have slowly come to have a not inconsiderable empirical knowledge of human nature that we can appeal to in wide reflective equilibrium. Lukács was right about this in his dispute with Sartre. If we recognize that contingency and fallibilism is all pervasive, we will not be surprised that what is right (or the closest thing thereto) does not always prevail or can even always be ascertained. But wide reflective equilibrium will provide us with a way of ascertaining (sometimes successfully) what is most plausibly to be believed at a given time and place to be the right thing to do and what is most plausibly believed to be the best explanation of why that is so. It is not so far from Rorty's enlarging the circle of cooperative and sympathetic understanding.

Surely the society that both Rorty and I would like to see come into existence, replacing the horror that we have now, is 'a world in which there is less suffering and more freedom,' but that will in considerable part be so because our societies and our world will become more reasonable, less ethnocentric (anthropologist's sense), and better educated. With our as a matter of fact worldwide increase in literacy, we get some gain in reasonableness. Human nature is plastic, but *perhaps* not all the way down. We can learn something from the ways we have been and are.²⁴ Indeed, this will help us ascertain what we might become. Anthropology and contemporary geography—I did not say only these disciplines and I am not forgetting about literature—can teach us

24 It is also thought that I engage in some hand waving as I finish up, in effect claiming there is a human essence. But I am anti-essentialist to the bone. I agree with Sartre and Rorty about that. But I think, as does Lukacs, that there are as a *matter of fact* some properties that are common to and distinctive of all statistically normal featherless bipeds e.g., being able to speak. But these are factual matters and not something we must have: something that is a kind of metaphysical necessity. But it may be a very strong empirical necessity

something about the ways we have been and are.²⁵ Ways that are not, or need not be, just giving us just so stories.²⁶

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²⁵ Harvey 2000, 529-64.

²⁶ In 1987 I published an essay programmatically articulating philosophy as transformed into a distinctive type of critical social theory that is holistic and already moving in the historicist direction of my later work. It already rejects unconditionally and an appeal to what was coming to be called ‘a discourse ethics’. It specifies further my conception of the structure of my thoroughly naturalistic critical social theory. See Nielsen 1987. See also Nielsen 2005 as an article complementing my discussion with Rorty here.

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