

The Call of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Politics of Language

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Abstract

This article deals with Donald Davidson's concept of metaphor and Richard Rorty's use of it for his version of political liberalism. Rorty assumes that metaphor is a linguistic element that is impossible to understand. Metaphor is an unintelligible "call" that, from within the private sphere, provokes in individuals the desire to create alternative forms of life. Once metaphor has become literal, it –and the new form of life that it entails– can form part of public life. Metaphor is the guarantee of the constant renewal of political liberalism. As against Rorty, yet also relying on Davidson, I argue that both metaphor and literal meaning are comprehensible, and must therefore be said to exist in a relationship of mutuality. This allows me to subject to a thorough re-elaboration Rorty's strict internal division of the political along the lines of the public and the private.

Keywords: Rorty, Davidson, metaphor, politics, language

I. The "Call" of Metaphor

Rorty's favorite themes from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to his latest essays in *Philosophy and Social Hope* have turned around the critique of the repre-

sentational theory of knowledge and the political consequences of abandoning such a theory. These themes draw heavily on Davidson's philosophy of language. Central features of representationalism are the theses that language is something which structures the world and the self, and that knowledge can discern the adequacy or inadequacy of the representations provided by language. I will, firstly, reconstruct Rorty's Davidsonian criticisms of representationalism's concept of language, his concomitant rejection of the related notion of conceptual scheme, and his also Davidsonian alternative formulation of knowledge as the linguistic justification of beliefs. Secondly, I will advance Rorty's placement of metaphor within this picture. My aim in reconstructing Rorty's conception of language and knowledge and in locating metaphor within it is to demonstrate that while Rorty correctly criticizes representationalist views of language, and also correctly formulates an alternative conception of language as inherently normative, he nevertheless fails to see that Davidson crucially modifies his ideas about metaphor between "What Metaphors Mean"¹ and "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"² –Davidson's two main articles on metaphor. This failure amounts to an exclusion of metaphor from language and has important consequences for Rorty's ideas concerning language and knowledge as recontextualization. I will argue that Rorty's faithful adherence to "What Metaphors Mean" leads him to conceive of metaphor as non-constitutive of language, and thus to cast it out of the realm of rational linguistic justification, as well as to reduce language to what I here denominate a restrictive concept of literal meaning.

Throughout his work, Rorty has repeatedly argued that most metaphysical positions derive from a mistaken view about language. This view conceives of language as an entity that organizes or reflects the world. According to Rorty, Davidson denies the validity of this view by showing that it leads to unsustainable theses about untranslatability between different languages, and by proving that it introduces skeptical doubts about the adequacy of one's representations to the world that are equally untenable. Following Davidson, Rorty develops his own position through his criticism of these two consequences of what he calls the notion of language as a medium. He tries to demonstrate that if we address questions of translation and meaning as inextricably connected with questions about knowledge, we solve the two problems, untranslatability and skepticism, together, and we are at the same time led to a more satisfactory understanding of language and knowledge.

The typical formulation of untranslatability as a consequence of the notion of language as a medium arises from the fact that, if language is seen as an instance imposed onto the world, as a grid of concepts that shape and interpret the world, and

¹ Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 245-264.

² Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", in *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 183-198.

if different languages have different conceptual frameworks, it follows that alternative conceptual schemes construct the world differently. Rorty's response to this claim runs as follows:

if one thinks of "meaning" in terms of the discovery of the speech dispositions of foreigners rather than in terms of mental essences (ideas, concepts, chunks of the crystalline structure of thought), then one will not be able to draw a clear distinction between the foreigner's using words different in meaning from any words in our language and the foreigner's having many false beliefs. We can and must play off awkward translations against ascriptions of quaint beliefs, and vice versa, but we will never reach the limiting case of a foreigner all or most of whose beliefs must be viewed as false according to a translating scheme that pairs off all or most of his terms as identical in meaning with some terms of English. We will not reach this case (so the Davidsonian argument goes) because any such translation scheme would merely show that we had not succeeded in finding a translation at all.³

Rorty here claims that if we accept the premise that different languages possessing alternative conceptual schemes yield different and untranslatable worlds, then when encountering somebody using a purportedly incommensurable language there is no way to determine whether this person is actually using a language at all. For we can only find out that the foreigner is using a language –and not merely making senseless noises– when we recognize that some of the words that she uses actually refer to the same things that we do, that is, when we can translate her language into ours and vice versa. Therefore the idea of an untranslatable language cannot hold. Moreover, to say that her and our words refer to the same thing is to say that when dealing with this thing she uses her word in the same way we use ours. She and we actually believe the same about the thing; in other words, we both believe the same thing to be true. Thus, having a language rules out untranslatability, and at the same time amounts to the thesis that meanings and beliefs co-imply each other.

The second consequence of the notion of language as a medium is the skeptical thesis that since language provides us with representations of the world, and we only know the world through these representations or set of concepts, we might quite easily have inadequate representations, ones that do not actually correspond to the way the world actually is. The notion of conceptual schemes concomitant to that of language as a medium results in the thought that we might have false beliefs. Rorty's critique of this kind of skepticism points out that it results from the entanglement of two orders of relations that should be kept apart: relations of causation and relations of justification, that is, causal relations to objects, and normative relations between arguments. According to Rorty, when language is conceived as a set

³ Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost", in *Consequences of Pragmatism. Essays 1972-1980* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 5-6.

of concepts that organize the world, and the world is understood as the extra-linguistic field which produces our beliefs, we make the fallacy of advancing that things, events, or actions in the world cause our ideas. In so doing, they simultaneously justify those ideas or beliefs.⁴ Against this inclusion of causality within normativity, Rorty maintains that what the world causes us to believe is beyond what we can justify as true or false. We can only justify beliefs in relation to other beliefs. If this is so, then the skeptical question “but, do my beliefs actually represent the world accurately?” should be given up and replaced by the question “do my beliefs actually fit with the rest of my beliefs?” Rorty quotes Davidson’s argument to the effect that we can meaningfully shift questions:

What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is, in my view, the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects.”⁵

Here Davidson underscores that people understand each other when they converge on the meaning that words have at the moment of their utterance, that is, when they are subject to the normative constraints imposed by communication. He also adds that, in effectively binding our discourse to these constraints, we are at the same time accepting that the relations they allow will be justified. Thus, if we stop thinking of objects in the world as normatively constraining our beliefs, and assert instead that only claims that are subject to what can be said in communicative practices justify other claims, then we can drop skepticism, for as long as we can successfully communicate we will be holding justified beliefs.

Rorty’s appropriation of Davidson addresses the two outcomes of the notion of language as a medium, the problem of untranslatability and the problem of skepticism, and shows how, when they are paired with one another –that is, when we realize that each offers an answer to the other’s difficulties– the original problems disappear. More importantly, in pairing off meanings and beliefs we gain alternative conceptions of knowledge and language. For once we have rejected the idea that different languages have different conceptual schemes providing the subject with representations incommensurable to other languages, then what he have instead is a concept of language as constituted by on-going communicative processes. On this account, language cannot be seen as composed of fixed meanings that correspond

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 139-148; pp. 155-164.

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 133.

to objects and discrete actions in the world, but as constantly modified by its users. This claim can be further developed to rule out the possibility of incommensurability between languages due to different fixed conceptual frameworks. Rather, languages differ in the same way people deal with the world differently. And untranslatability only amounts to the fact that “two groups are not talking about the same things if they talk about them differently.”⁶ Conversely, to talk about the same things is to have the same intentions, expectations or beliefs about them. Rorty further states that participants agree on the meaning attached to the words on the basis of contextual information. Because this agreement between speakers is completely geared to the occasion, language is a contingent set of meanings and beliefs which constantly develops in response to new problems that arise in our dealings with the world and with others. Moreover, when the contingency of language is so understood, we also obtain an alternative conception of knowledge. If meanings are contingent, then knowledge is an equally contingent enterprise. Knowledge cannot be conceived of as the discernment of the actual correspondence of representations to pre-given facts or objects in the world, but as a two-fold enterprise: on the one hand, as the empirical study of the causal (natural and physical) relations between objects in the world and; on the other hand, as the constant formulation and reformulation of beliefs or statements that stand in inferential relations to other beliefs. That is, knowledge is not a matter of ascertaining whether an object or fact produces the right representation, for nothing in the world exerts normative pressure on beliefs; rather, knowledge is the on-going process of learning about how the world impinges on us and others. It is the constant reassessment of beliefs, and the justification of beliefs in relation to other beliefs.

Rorty’s concept of language as a web of meanings-beliefs that are constantly altered in response to both the effects that the world has upon us, and the requirements of other meanings implies that knowledge is an open-ended process of reinterpretation. To reinterpret is to take into account changes in the environment, to be aware of possible new beliefs produced by these changes, and to modify beliefs to make them cohere with other beliefs. These beliefs are necessarily held within the vocabulary in which one speaks and lives. Knowledge, he continues, is “not (...) a relation between mind and object, but, roughly (...) the ability to get agreement by using persuasion rather than force.”⁷ If knowledge about the world is a series of revisable shared beliefs, when these beliefs change, confirmation of their truth is attained, not by testing beliefs against the world—for there is nothing given to justify beliefs—but by interacting and communicating with others, that is, by convincing or being convinced by others to believe the same. Therefore, knowledge is a pragmatic and holistic endeavor of testing beliefs against other beliefs, dropping

⁶ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 103.

⁷ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 88.

those which do not cohere with the rest, and incorporating those which come to be accepted as social practices.

Given Rorty's account of knowledge as a collection of beliefs, there are three ways in which new beliefs join a vocabulary or old beliefs are dismissed: by perceiving new information that produces new beliefs, by inferring of a belief from other beliefs, or by using metaphor. In the cases of perception and inference, knowledge proceeds within the realm of beliefs; we incorporate new beliefs that arise through awareness or deduction. When either sort of these new beliefs emerge, they may introduce incoherence or they may simply confirm those beliefs already held. If they create incoherence, inquiry is then the task of recovering the lost congruity. However, Rorty contends that the case of metaphor is different:

Both perception and inference leave our language, our way of dividing up the realm of possibility, unchanged (...) A metaphor is, so to speak, a voice from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling up of a portion of that space, or a logical-philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. It is a call to change one's language and one's life, rather than a proposal about how to systematize either.⁸

Here we can see that Rorty accords metaphor a very special mission, that of shaking –through a “call”– the whole structure of one's beliefs. In the rest of this section I want to clarify this point with the aim of locating metaphor within Rorty's conception of knowledge and the philosophy of language.

The importance of metaphor for Rorty's views on language and knowledge as well as on his political convictions, cannot be underestimated. At a philosophical level, Rorty praises metaphor throughout his work as a device for expressing previously unrecognized beliefs, desires, and needs, and as a means of bringing attention to things otherwise unnoticed. Metaphor is what allows us to conceive of language as an open set of beliefs. Only through metaphor are those beliefs developed into new forms that do not simply respond to the results of empirical enquiry or deductive reasoning. In order to show how metaphor has this agitating effect, Rorty takes up Davidson's theses in “What Metaphors Mean”. Language can endlessly be modified, and metaphor is the tool by means of which new ideas are introduced into a vocabulary. However, Rorty argues that metaphor cannot be comprehended as possessing metaphorical meaning, but only the literal meaning of its words along with an added series of unpredictable effects. If metaphor were interpreted as providing metaphorical meaning, Rorty claims, it would be reduced to another of the series of beliefs already held within one's vocabulary. But metaphor is never pre-figured or pre-given within a set of statements. Rather, metaphor combines old beliefs in a

⁸ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 1991, pp. 12-13.

novel and different way, and the novelty of its usage changes and questions our settled, taken-for-granted combinations of beliefs.

How does this conception of metaphor, then, fit with Rorty's ideas about knowledge and language? The first characteristic of Rorty's conception is that metaphor is meaningless. Metaphor uses established meanings, but the result of its usage is never itself a meaning. To make this claim, Rorty takes up Davidson's separation of meaning and use. Only by conceiving metaphor exclusively within the domain of use can it be said to exert its emphatic force. Because the only meaning a metaphor has is the literal meaning of its words, and because it is outside the realm of currently held beliefs, metaphor can only be a non-habitual use of words or, as Rorty likes to say, an "unfamiliar noise". Common uses of words provide meaning, and this meaning is a repeated or shared social behavior, an agreed upon belief. Metaphor is, on the contrary, a meaningless, disruptive use of language. Only the literal uses of words can be understood because literal meanings are the only utterances that respond to the "current theory about how to handle (...) linguistic behavior."⁹ Therefore, whereas literal uses are regularities that respond to current social practices, metaphorical expressions interrupt those social practices by introducing perplexing remarks that can only stem from "idiosyncratic genius".¹⁰

The second feature of Rorty's characterization of metaphor is its extra-linguistic nature. In his view, metaphor belongs to the category of the natural forces: it does not convey belief or desire, but rather causes them. Metaphor is thus "natural", not "symbolic" (ibid). It does not express knowledge, but provokes its users to change their beliefs. So even if it opens up the possibility of having new beliefs by provoking surprise metaphor by itself does not increase knowledge:

[N]otice that the same can be said about anomalous non-linguistic phenomena like platypuses and pulsars. The latter do not (literally) *tell* us anything, but they do make us notice things and start looking around for analogies and similarities. They do not have cognitive content, but they are responsible for a lot of cognitions. For if they had not turned up we should not have been moved to formulate and deploy certain sentences which do have such content. As with platypuses, so with metaphors.¹¹

Here Rorty situates metaphor within his account of knowledge. As we observed above, he formulates a conception of knowledge as a two-fold task: both an empirical study of causal relations between objects in the world, and as the reassessment of statements in causal response to those natural effects or in normative response to other statements. Since on his view a metaphor is a meaningless expression that

⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 167.

¹⁰ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 14.

¹¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 167.

does not provide any cognitive content, convey any belief or desire, or obey the regularities of familiar expressions, then it has to be seen as an extra-linguistic contingency, equal in status to physical and natural forces in the world.

Rorty's account of the relation of metaphor to knowledge rests on a number of presuppositions. The most obvious is Rorty's emphasis on novelty and singularity as intrinsic features of metaphor. Metaphor is external to language and produces unexpected effects that induce modifications in knowledge. It has no cognitive content, because only familiar sentences or commonly held beliefs transmit a content that can be expressed similarly with another sentence. Metaphor's novelty eludes paraphrase. It is, in Rorty's view, similar to the novelty that characterizes variation in the world:

Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agape*, and Newton's metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy –some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata. It hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. There had never been such things before.¹²

Rorty's causal theory of metaphor thus states that, on the one hand, metaphors are caused by psychological states, by the unconscious motivation of, or conscious coming to terms with, one's private life and, on the other hand, that metaphor can cause new beliefs in those who employ hear them. Thus, new causal forces are the main sources of changes in beliefs. Linguistic and social practices are changed when they incorporate new practices –when new perceptions occur, when new inferences from old beliefs are made, and, most importantly, when new metaphors are created with the faculty of imagination. Because of the novelty it produces, imagination is not a socially shared enterprise, but the distinctive achievement of an individual. The second presupposition of Rorty's appraisal of metaphor as a unique tool for change is that metaphor, in being extra-linguistic, is not subject to the normative constraints of communication. "To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game. Metaphors, by definition, do not."¹³ Normativity only applies to literal uses of language, that is, to "behavior which is sufficiently regular among large numbers of people to give those people a handle for notions like 'correctness', 'rule' and 'social practice'."¹⁴ As a consequence, metaphor can be neither true nor false. A metaphor, he writes, "is a sentence which one cannot confirm or disconfirm, argue for or against. One can only savor it or spit it out."¹⁵ Rorty's third presuppo-

¹² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 17.

¹³ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 18.

¹⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, pp. 166-7.

¹⁵ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 18.

sition is that, even if metaphor is an extra-linguistic tool, it needs conventional literal language in order to materially exist: “Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was ‘all metaphor’ would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just a babble.”¹⁶ Metaphor uses old literal words and relies on clearly defined familiar meanings. Without them, without “the quite narrow (though shifting) limits of regular, predictable, linguistic behavior –the limits which mark off (temporarily) the literal use of language”¹⁷ metaphor could not arise. Rorty fourthly presupposes that literal meanings shared with others and inherited from the past are for the most part burdened with metaphysical connotations. “Metaphysics is (...) irony gone public and flat –liquefaction congealed, providing a new ground on which to inscribe new figures.”¹⁸ The language of metaphysics is settled, rigid literal discourse that has forgotten its metaphorical origin. Consequently, a metaphysician is someone who prioritizes literal discourse and sees no value in metaphor –someone who wants to adhere to common sense, to a “final vocabulary”¹⁹ that allows no redescriptions. She is someone who, by fixating meanings, ends up believing in essences, in the real substance of things lurking behind the words that refer to them. Thus, metaphysics, Rorty concludes, goes hand in hand with representationalism in its dismissal of contingency and metaphor.

II. The Fuel of Liberalism

Rorty’s philosophy of language is intertwined with his political theory, which asserts the contingency at the heart of any form of identity. In this section I will spell this out in relation, firstly, to Rorty’s suggestion that we replace the representationalist theory of language with a conception of language as a social practice, and, secondly and immediately connected to this, to his praise of metaphor as a tool for individual and social transformation. According to Rorty, then, “[t]o see one’s language, one’s conscience, one’s morality, and one’s highest hopes as contingent products, as literalizations of what once were accidentally produced metaphors, is to adopt a self-identity which suits one for citizenship in (...) an ideally liberal state.”²⁰ This sentence best expresses Rorty’s views of language coupled with its political implications. Because Rorty takes all forms of identity to be constituted through lan-

¹⁶ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 41.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 164.

¹⁸ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 128, footnote.

¹⁹ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 73 ff.

²⁰ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 61.

guage, and sees contingency as the central feature of language, he argues that all forms of political identity, private or public, are also contingent. Following this claim, Rorty explicitly ties together the dismissal of the representationalist conception of language with the embrace of a political framework that understands knowledge as an ongoing social enterprise and language as always open to change. By placing normative weight on a reality independent of human affairs, and conceiving of language as conforming to or organizing that reality, representationalism fixes meanings in their ostensible mirroring of the world. It sees knowledge as subjecting itself to the intrinsic nature of things. By contrast, if we adopt a philosophy of language which only sees meanings as having relation to other meanings and which thus does not attach any normative importance to any kind of independent reality, then notions like nature and reality lose their foundational status. Instead, we are left with the normativity inherent in communication with others. Abandoning representationalism and affirming the contingency of language implies withdrawing our beliefs from any external source of justification, and assuming instead that what we know of reality always depends on our language and beliefs. According to Rorty, then, liberalism is the political arrangement which best satisfies the requirements of this conception of language. Rorty defines liberalism as the political system that acknowledges and fosters contingency as the source of one's private identity, and also demands a public life that does not hinder this private self-description. Literal public language, Rorty continues, should also recognize contingency by calling for persuasion rather than rational argumentation. To accept contingency—either in the private sphere of one's freedom for self-creation (what Rorty calls irony²¹) or in the public arena of allowing people profess and follow their own idiosyncratic views in spirit of solidarity,—is to conceive of one's self and one's community as open to metaphor. Thus, liberalism is the political arrangement which sees the contingency of metaphor as its origin, and metaphorical creation as the necessary tool for its health and renewal.

On Rorty's account, the liberal political system is maintained and renewed through the literalization of metaphor, that is, through metaphor becoming dead: “[o]ld metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors.”²² This process consists of two distinct levels: on the first, new metaphors are employed by individuals in their own private acts of redescription. Then, on a second level, these new metaphors become accepted as lit-

²¹ Rorty recently writes in response to Laclau about the term “irony”: “I admit (...) that the word does have overtones of what Laclau calls ‘offhandish detachment’, so perhaps it was a bad choice. Still, now I am stuck with it. So all I can do is to remind people of my definition, and ask them to ignore the irrelevant overtones.” Richard Rorty, “Response to Ernesto Laclau,” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (New York, London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 69-76, 74.

²² Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 16.

eral by others, that is, and so become part of the public domain of social practices. On the first, individual level, Rorty argues that if we reject the representationalist concept of language, we also give up the notion of language as a medium to access this reality. Abandoning representationalism means no longer thinking of individuals as possessing beliefs and desires, or that there is something like a substance to be grasped or discovered which possesses those beliefs. Individuals are instead constituted by webs of belief and desire. The lesson Rorty extracts from this is that, given the intrinsic contingency of those webs of beliefs, individuals who aim at transformation should reweave their beliefs and incorporate new metaphors, in their private lives, as part of their own ethic of self-creation. That is, transformation starts at home, with self-redescription. The second distinct level of the introduction of metaphor to a shared vocabulary is its passage from its private origin to the public domain. For metaphor to move into the public arena, Rorty argues, it must become literal. In Rorty's political scheme, irony, the assumption and radical affirmation of contingency and singularity, is an exclusively "private matter".²³ The constant ironic innovation of living metaphor cannot be transported to what is shared with others, because metaphor, being purely idiosyncratic, cannot be understood.

How, then, does Rorty account for the literalization of metaphor, its jump from the private realm into the social practices of shared social meanings? As we have observed, metaphor is, Rorty claims, a cause that affects beliefs from outside a conventional vocabulary. In its singularity, metaphor simply transmits an individual's very particular perspective about something that pertains to her. Thus, metaphor is a "cause for belief," not a "reason for belief."²⁴ A metaphor starts to convey something—that is, becomes a reason for belief—only when it ceases to be a metaphor. Rorty does not explain how a metaphor stops being a pure cause of belief and becomes instead a reason for belief. In fact, he believes that no explanation is possible. Only chance accounts for literalization. On Rorty's view, to explain metaphor is to reduce it to a reason, to make it literal, and metaphor, by definition, cannot be justified. Instead of an explanation, Rorty offers a taxonomy of examples of "unfamiliar" and "familiar" noises that reveals his sharp distinction between the literal and the metaphorical. This classification, he contends, has to be conceived of as a "spectrum": at one end of the spectrum, clearly unfamiliar noises are those produced in a "primeval forest" by "a bird hitherto unknown to science;" at the other end, he locates truisms, which are, according to this distinction, completely familiar noises. In between we find, on the one hand, living metaphors used in fiction and, on the other, both metaphorical expressions used in non-fiction and dead metaphors.²⁵ Rorty writes of the relationship between these two intermediate levels:

²³ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 87.

²⁴ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 48.

²⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 170.

Between (2) and (3) [between living and dead metaphor] we cross the fuzzy and fluctuating line between natural and non-natural meaning, between stimulus and cognition, between a noise having a place in a causal network and having, in addition, a place in a pattern of justification of belief. Or, more precisely, we begin to cross this line if and when these unfamiliar noises acquire familiarity and lose vitality through being not just mentioned (...) but used: used in arguments, cited to justify beliefs, treated as counters within a social practice, employed correctly or incorrectly.²⁶

Thus, Rorty situates metaphor within the realm of the natural causes, as an irrational force, and leaves justification exclusively within the domain of literal discourse. The line between one and another is fortuitous, because metaphor responds to the irrational drives of those who create them, and becomes literal when others find them useful. Or, as Rorty puts it, “poetic, artistic, philosophical progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need.”²⁷

Rorty’s liberalism, then, consists in redescription by means of metaphor at the private level, and social transformation by means of literalization of metaphor at the public level. Liberalism’s dignity, Rorty claims, consists precisely in its hearing and accepting as many new metaphors as possible, in their rapid assimilation into the social fabric of normative relations. The banalization of new expressions amounts to a liberation from old vocabularies through the invigorating effects of metaphor. A liberal community’s degree of progress depends on how flexibly it can incorporate metaphors into its shared vocabulary. Poetry, he concludes, is the fuel of liberalism.

III. Rorty’s Liberalism: The Last Conceptual Revolution?

For Rorty, metaphor is a more effective device for individual and social transformation and progress than any other form of action. Of his three ways of acquiring practical knowledge –namely, perception, inference and metaphor– only the latter, in his view, provides enough change within a vocabulary to be counted as relevant for the liberal community’s self-reflection and improvement. In this section I will agree with Rorty’s general claims about language as social practice and about the intrinsic contingency of all linguistic behavior and action. However, I will criticize Rorty’s prioritization of metaphor as a tool for individual and political transformation. I will claim that Rorty’s adherence to Davidson’s “What Metaphors Mean” leads him to conceive of metaphor as a non-linguistic tool thus outside normative justification, and thus to lapse into a “myth of the given”.²⁸ I will then point

²⁶ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 171.

²⁷ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 37.

²⁸ Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism & The philosophy of mind* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

out the political implications of Rorty's ideas on metaphor: contingency is mistakenly taken as pure randomness, and the use of metaphor is deprived of normativity. For Rorty, liberalism is the best political arrangement to give metaphor free rein in the private sphere; metaphors should, however, become dead as soon as possible in order to be used in the political public domain. I will argue, against this, that if we cannot accept Rorty's thesis on the non-linguistic character of metaphor, then we cannot grant the political implications that Rorty infers from it. Rorty's related political categories will, therefore, also need revision.

To begin my assessment of Rorty's emphatic defense of metaphor as a political tool, I will focus on the specific historical occasion that, in his view, mostly necessitates the employment of metaphor. My analysis will lead me to discuss in detail the relevance of Rorty's concept of metaphor for political theory as well as the philosophical presuppositions that underpin his ideas. Rorty forcefully recommends metaphor in circumstances of social crisis. A social crisis occurs when a new generation is dissatisfied with the vocabulary employed by a particular community. In such situations these individuals are unhappy with the usual "hackwork"²⁹ language, with repeated or overworked discourse, with words which do not fit their present needs. Against the background of this hardened language, these individuals start using their imaginations in order to create new expressions. The newly formed utterances do not belong to the old vocabulary; "words stand out as words, colors as encrusted pigments." (Ibid.) Rorty characterizes the irruption of neologisms as the commencement of a battle both between different newly produced utterances, and between new utterances and the old literal discourse: "The jargon or style that wins –the one that exhibits staying power, that becomes the bearer of assimilable meanings and provides the tools with which to resume normal operations– ceases to stand out. It is not noticed again until the next dissatisfied generation comes along and 'problematizes' it by contrasting that jargon or style invidiously with recent novelties." (Ibid.) The combat between vocabularies is described in terms of an opposition between incommensurable world views:

Those who speak the old language and have no wish to change, those who regard it as a hallmark of rationality or morality to speak just that language, will regard as altogether *irrational* the appeal of the new metaphors (...) The question of why people speak this way will be treated as beneath the level of conversation (...) Conversely, from the point of those who are trying to use the new language, to literalize the new metaphors, those who cling to the old language will be viewed as irrational.³⁰

There is thus an extreme discontinuity between vocabularies in moments of

²⁹ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 88.

³⁰ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 48.

social rebellion against the status quo: the creators of new metaphors find the old language irrational, just as the conformist population think that the new words are meaningless. Poets and prosaic people simply do not understand each other. Because the two groups speak different languages, there is no common basis for mutual understanding.

Rorty seems to overlook the fact that to advocate such a view about incommensurable languages is to support the same philosophical presuppositions as representationalism. By presupposing the notion of a conceptual scheme opposed to reality, representationalism ends up in untranslatability, as I showed above following Davidson. In other passages of his work, Rorty himself fiercely criticizes the idea of untranslatable languages. However, in the case of metaphor he holds to the mistaken assumption that different conceptual schemes create different incommensurable worlds. Rorty's argument runs as follows. From the standpoint of an old vocabulary, new expressions stand out as mere words.³¹ On this account, a word stands out as a word when, firstly, it lacks meaning and, secondly, when it appears in discourse as a mere sound. Rorty thus sharply separates the form and content of a word: its form is its bearing the tag of being a word, its content is its meaning. But how can a word stand out as a word if it is perceived only as a sound? We can only recognize words as words, and thus part of a language, if we are able to translate them into our own vocabulary. Thus, if from the perspective of the old language one recognizes that new metaphors are words, this acknowledgment already rules out their being mere sounds. Rorty's distinction between a word possessing a form (a sound) but not a content (a meaning) therefore cannot be maintained. In rejecting it, the idea of radical discontinuity between the new and the old vocabulary must also be given up. From the point of view of an old language the new metaphors are not entities (sounds) external to language. A similar argument can be made from the perspective of the new language. If the creator of the new expression wants, as Rorty says, her metaphor to become literal, and moreover, if she sees the old language as irrational, how can she recognize, firstly, that the old vocabulary is indeed a vocabulary, and secondly, that her own metaphors are not mere sounds? For simply to see that the old vocabulary is full of words, and to recognize that her own metaphors are not just noises, she will have to admit that the old and new vocabularies are, in principle, translatable. Therefore, both the conformist and the creator will have to accept that their worlds are not incommensurable, and that they can, in principle, understand each other, either literally or metaphorically.

These criticisms of Rorty's demand for the use and prompt literalization of metaphor in times of crisis brings us back to the main features of his concept of

³¹ Rorty here follows the distinction between "words which stand out as words" and "assimilable meanings" made by Geoffrey H. Hartman. "Deconstruction and Circumvention," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 88.

metaphor: its meaninglessness and its extra-linguistic status, which he borrows from Davidson's "What Metaphors Mean". In this article Davidson maintains that metaphor is not constitutive of language, that it is not a deviant and merely ornamental use of language that can be paraphrased, but a mere producer of extra-linguistic effects. In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", however, Davidson changes his view completely and claims that metaphor is subject to a proper normativity. Like any other form of linguistic communication, metaphor makes use of literal meanings; and, when it is recognized as metaphor, it deliberately and explicitly formulates the speaker's intended meaning in a discursive manner. In order even to be understood, metaphor must respond both to its literal meaning and its relation to an intended meaning. Metaphor can be said to possess a meaning, and to be inherently normative, because of the relationship that it establishes between the literal and intended meaning of the words that constitute it.

I believe that Davidson's development of his concepts of meaning and language in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" offers a better approach to metaphor. If I translate its implications to political theory, we can start by denying Rorty's claims about the meaninglessness and extra-linguistic character of metaphor, and affirm instead that, because metaphor can be understood as conveying a metaphorical meaning that modifies the literal meaning, then using metaphor involves an effort to be understood in a determinate way as well as an interpretive effort on the part of the listener to understand. Metaphor is not a matter of simply being moved by emotions that cannot be grasped; nor is it a "call" to change one's beliefs. Metaphor is constitutive of language. I agree with Rorty that metaphor as well as other uses of figurative language manifest the intrinsic contingency of language as a set of expressions that can always incorporate new meanings. I also agree with him in his conception of knowledge as a non-representationalist enterprise, whose sole index of truth is the coherence of beliefs, rather than external reference to a non-linguistic world. However, to believe, like Rorty, that metaphor is a meaningless tool that can produce effects without conveying a meaning, amounts to: firstly, reducing metaphor to a "given" that escapes linguistic communication; secondly, and derived from this, separating metaphors from the performative intentions of the individuals or groups who create it; and thirdly, taking on the mistaken idealist view that metaphor, being relative to the specific generation that produces it, fabricates a world that pertains exclusively to them.

My first point, the rejection of metaphor as a "given" external to language, as a symbol which incarnates the non-linguistic emotions or personal traumas of the poet or philosopher who uses it, also entails rejecting the idea that metaphor is a natural cause that resists communication. Metaphor connects and compares aspects of the world that were hitherto unrelated. Thus, metaphor, like literal language, is indispensable for politics. However, I have claimed that metaphor is constitutive of

language; this means that when it is used, it is also understood. Consequently, metaphor does not simply respond to the idiosyncrasy of its author. Metaphor is accepted as useful if it indeed reveals something, that is, when it stands in relation to other beliefs that it transforms and reorganizes. My second claim, that Rorty excludes metaphor from the performative intention of its maker, might seem paradoxical, given Rorty's stress on the inescapably individual origin of metaphor. However, if metaphor is conceived as a natural force outside language, then using it does not require its accountability to the rest of the author's beliefs. If metaphor were, as Rorty claims, an irrational device for modifying one's own and others' views, then it would not correspond to an intended meaning and be so interpreted. On this account, metaphor would serve no real political purpose, for it would relate neither to its own author, nor to its addressees. This is reflected in the fact that Rorty does not explain –nor wishes to explain– how metaphor becomes literal: the random relation he posits between living and dead metaphor derives from his belief that, since politics rests upon ultimately contingent needs and interests, there is nothing pre-determined in the common public aims that guarantees literalization. However, if metaphor is conceived as meaningful and linguistic, then its use, though contingent, can be legitimately and rationally questioned, just as we question any other use of language in politics. Thirdly, by insisting on the singularity of metaphor, and thus confining it to the world of those who make it, Rorty effectively asserts that metaphor is of a purely private significance: living metaphor is necessarily and exclusively relative to the particular poet's world. This is a consequence of Rorty's thesis about the "givenness" of metaphor. By rejecting this idea, and affirming instead that metaphor is linguistic, we correct the error that leads Rorty's argument into a form of relativism. If metaphor is linguistic, it can also be understood (given sufficient contextual information) by those who speak the language in which it is emitted, as well as by those who can translate it into other languages.

In the light of these amendments to Rorty's conception of metaphor, I turn now to the philosophical presuppositions which underpin his argument, and which crucially affect his political theory. Rorty conceives of metaphor as intrinsically novel, singularly produced by an individual in her private life. As opposed to metaphor, literal public language is a set of "banal, familiar terms –terms which do not need philosophical reflection and do not have philosophical presuppositions."³² Rorty's point is that metaphor is the only linguistic means by which individuals can express needs that are ignored by the common public language. By generating novel metaphorical utterances, individuals introduce their own particular views into an otherwise fixed and conventional language, which by itself does not allow for self-transformation. Rorty's claim about the need for a creative production of discourse

³² Rorty, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 17.

that changes people's identities in relation to themselves and to other groups is correct in that the language that we use expresses the way we are. However, Rorty sees novelty as both intrinsic and exclusive to metaphor, relegating old expressions that, in their familiarity, do not produce effects to the public, literal, realm. This distinction ignores that language, both figurative and literal, is necessarily constituted by two elements: the meaning of words and the meaning attached to those words by the speaker. Speakers can modify meanings so as to clearly introduce their own intended meaning, or they can intend to say only what the words usually mean. Thus, to accept with Rorty the contingency of language is to recognize that the novelty that results from the introduction of the speaker's perspective is potentially present in all utterances. Novelty is, then, not exclusive to metaphor; it belongs potentially to all communication, even when many new utterances (literal or metaphorical) are perfectly trivial. The political relevance of metaphor does not depend upon its novelty, but upon its playing a constitutive role in language. Conversely, literal language, since it also contains the intention to be understood in a determinate way, is not intrinsically "banal" and "familiar". Literal language can produce novel claims that are inferred from other claims. Thus, the literal language of public politics cannot be isolated from the scrutiny of critical, "philosophical reflection." Moreover, if as Rorty claims, public language stems from the literalization of metaphors, then reflection on the contingent historical and political events that made them literal will reveal how they came into existence, and whether their contemporary use is justified.

A central implication of Rorty's view is the exclusion of metaphor from the normative constraints inherent in communication. On his view, only plain literal language used in the public domain is subject to these constraints. However, if we give up Rorty's insistence on the extra-linguistic character of metaphor, then metaphor reveals both its relation to literal discourse and its subjection to linguistic constraints. The author of a metaphor in the private domain cannot simply bracket out the literal meanings of the words she uses; rather, metaphor is a deliberate reformulation of those meanings. If metaphor then proceeds into the public domain, it is because its author provides the necessary normative and contextual justification for its understanding, and others accept the proposed reformulation of meaning as justified according to their beliefs. Metaphor can be conceived as a "reason for belief" and not as a mere "cause of belief" if we give up Rorty's conviction about its extra-linguistic character as well as his related thought that "plain" literal language is necessarily burdened with metaphysics. For once we conceive of literal and metaphorical language as a continuum of practices whereby speakers rely on the contingently accepted meaning of words and simultaneously introduce their own modifications, then we can also reject Rorty's thesis that reasons for belief belong only to literal language, and to metaphysics. First of all, literal language is not

intrinsically metaphysical; this is true only of the representationalist theory which states that there is an independent reality to which language corresponds. Once we relinquish representationalism, then all language –literal and metaphorical– can be affirmed as contingent, and thus constantly modified by its users. Secondly, then, having a reason for belief need not mean having a logical proof that derives a conclusion from a set of pre-given premises; nor need it refer only to a restrictive literal statement. To have and give a reason for belief is to find a place for a belief among other beliefs. On this account, both literal and metaphorical language, conceived as equally constitutive of language, can provide reasons for belief.

Rorty's defense of the need for metaphor in private self-creation and public transformation also assumes that metaphor, in order to exist at all, requires the support of a public literal language. For Rorty, if all language were metaphorical, there would be no basis for understanding. Metaphor relies on the public glue of literalness for its creative force to flourish. The fact that "most people do not want to be redescribed"³³ makes metaphor, in its dependence on a predominantly literal environment, "marginal and parasitic".³⁴ Rorty's assumption points to the metaphor's reliance on literal discourse: whenever a metaphor is formulated, it modifies the meaning of the literal words of which it is comprised. However, Rorty does not explain how and to what end a metaphorical expression depends on its literal words. In fact, he cannot explain their relation, owing to his conception of the metaphorical and the literal as completed unrelated, as belonging to different spheres of action (the private and the public), and as occurring in distinct parts of the community. Against this distinction, if we begin by seeing literal discourse and metaphorical creation as two aspects of language which co-implicate each other, then we can also provide an account of the dependence of metaphor on its literal words. Metaphor expresses a speaker's intention to mean something determinate; if the metaphor is understood at all, this intention always relates to the literal meaning of the words employed. A metaphor can thus only be comprehended when both its metaphorical meaning and its relation to the literal meaning are available to the interpreter. It is not, then, that the creators of metaphors express what they wish among their own circle of (marginal) acquaintances. Rather, metaphor, whether marginal or commonplace, needs literal meanings to exist, and is answerable to them inasmuch as it depends on its intended meaning being understood in relation to the literal words. Thus, nothing prevents metaphor from being understood by anyone who understands the literal meaning of its words, and who also grasps, given the necessary contextual information, the intended author's meaning.

Rorty also believes that literal discourse, by fixing meanings within a vocabulary, necessarily becomes the locus of common sense and banal information. He

³³ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 89.

³⁴ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 41.

contends that the public realm only accepts metaphors once they are dead, because living metaphors –and the contingency of language they represent– are not generally understood. This is because public political discourse has an unavoidable tendency to reject contingency. So even if Rorty advocates a political arrangement in which contingency is affirmed at the basis of all political identities and institutions, he relegates this same contingency to the private sphere of individual perfection: “Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics.”³⁵ Against this contention, I want to argue that there is nothing intrinsically metaphysical nor anything intrinsically familiar or banal, in literal language. Briefly, a metaphysical theory of literal language assumes that there is a one-to-one, permanent relationship called meaning between a word and a thing in the world. It further defines meaning independently of use, and always propositional and context-independent. Thus, it sees language –literal and metaphorical– as distinct from social practices. As we have seen, Rorty correctly argues against this conception of language. But by restricting contingency to the private use of metaphor, he also precludes living metaphor from being used in the public domain and, equally importantly, conceives of public discourse as necessarily ruled by a restrictive concept of literal language, and thus by metaphysical presuppositions. If we instead assert contingency all the way down, we can conceive of language as a continuum of social practices wherein literal and metaphorical meaning are necessarily formed by the literal meaning of words in relation to the intended meaning ascribed to them by speakers and interpreters. On this interpretation of linguistic contingency, literal expressions also convey the speaker’s intention. Here the speaker makes the intended meaning coincide with the literal meaning of the words; speaker and interpreter understand that the intended meaning is already revealed in the words. If this is the case, it follows that there is nothing intrinsically familiar or banal in literal language. Literal language is familiar only insofar as its users intend it to be familiar or banal, that is, when they use it in a context in which all the expressions are already known by the interpreters, or when they use explanations and examples to make it so. Similarly, metaphorical language is banal insofar as the speakers who use it make it so.

Defending an antifoundationalist and contingent view of language all the way –Rorty’s avowed intention in his critique of representationalism and metaphysics– and thereby conceiving of individuals and institutions as contingent vocabularies, implies, I want to argue, a series of objections to Rorty’s conception of liberalism. Firstly, in light of the previous problems with Rorty’s distinction between literal and metaphorical language, we should question his related distinction between the par-

³⁵ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 83.

ticular loci of different modes of speech, that is, his consignment of metaphor to the private sphere and literal discourse to the public sphere. This will lead me, secondly, to another distinction that informs Rorty's political thought, and which is related to his understanding of metaphor and literal speech: his distinction between sentimentality and reason, and his reliance on the former to produce political change. Thirdly and finally, I will briefly comment on Rorty's emphasis on democracy. While I agree with his support of democracy, I will question the priority he grants to democracy over philosophy for public political use. I will question the view that philosophy must therefore be consigned to private self-transformation. I will link these claims with his conception of language, with his call for the banalization of metaphor, and with the underlying suspicion throughout his work that "contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its improvement (...). Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs."³⁶

Firstly, then, Rorty's best renowned distinction is his strict separation between private self-fashioning and public solidarity. Rorty sees this division, which is common among liberal theorists, as one of incommensurability. My previous analysis has attempted to show that the philosophical bases of Rorty's private/public divide are his commitment to a conception of knowledge as constrained by language use, and his exclusion of metaphor from language. If we accept the first thesis but reject the second—that is, if metaphor is not excluded from language but understood—then the divide between the private and the public loses its incommensurability. Vocabularies from the private sphere can potentially be used in public. What separates the private from the public is the purposes assigned to vocabularies (as Robert Brandom explains in his recent discussion of Rorty³⁷). In this interpretation of metaphor, then, the same expression can be taken literally or metaphorically depending on by whom and for what purpose it is used. The private-public divide need not rest on the notion of metaphor's dying in order to be understood in public (although this can be the case), but simply on different contexts of use and different intentions. A metaphor can be metaphorical while remaining in private, and be taken either literally or metaphorically in public. By the same token, nothing prevents metaphor from being metaphorical in public, and being taken literally in private. Thus, language and meaning correspond, both in private and in public, to the meanings of words in relation to their intended meanings. Distinguishing between the private and the public spheres of meaningfulness is a matter of determining who will understand metaphor—that is, who will relate it to his set of meanings and

³⁶ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 63.

³⁷ Robert R. Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism", in *Rorty and his Critics*, ed. Robert R. Brandom (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 156-183.

beliefs, and who will thus acknowledge it as standing in relation of justification to those beliefs. And, if metaphor is conceived as constitutive of language, it follows that the contingency of language is not simply to be affirmed in the private sphere, but is also to be asserted in public. To uphold contingency in the public realm is to see that speakers and interpreters can use metaphor while nonetheless following the normative demands implicit in communication, since they deliberately modify meanings only in relation with the literal meaning of words.

Another well-known distinction in Rorty's political theory is his separation between sentimentality and reason when discussing human rights across different cultures. Rorty believes that moral progress toward greater consideration of human rights is produced not by an appeal to any rational ground or universal principle, but only by sentimental education. To be educated sentimentally is to learn to sympathize with others and to treat them as fellows.³⁸ Rorty's insistence on the need for feelings of inclusion toward other human beings, instead of the construal or discovery of foundationalist principles, is consistent with his defense of a philosophy of language that does not appeal to any independent reality as a ground for knowledge. Foundationalist principles are seen as necessary and independent of linguistic creation and modification, and thus deny the contingency of human practices. For Rorty, rationality is not an ahistorical ground, but just a set of shared social practices that functions only among members of a community. If this community is liberal, its rationality consists in the public discourse of politics and social institutions which promotes solidarity. If such a liberal community interacts with other, non-liberal communities, its public discourse of solidarity will most likely not be understood by them, since they have a different vocabulary which does not include human rights, and which simply has other standards of rationality. For this reason, Rorty concludes that sentimentality, and not reason, is required in cases when individuals do not understand each other, or when they do not speak the same language or belong to the same culture. Thus, when they cannot invoke any common shared ground. Rorty's definition of rationality is, I want to argue, two-fold: on the one hand, Rorty contends that liberal "rationality is roughly synonymous with tolerance"³⁹ and with "a reliance on persuasion rather than force";⁴⁰ on the other hand, he also affirms that the language through which this rationality is expressed is that of literal meanings. This is the public language that everybody within the liberal community understands, but cannot be comprehended by others who do not share the same set of meanings. Because other communities communicate via other meanings, public rationality cannot bridge communities.

³⁸ Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 167-185.

³⁹ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 186.

⁴⁰ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 187.

In my view, Rorty's reason/sentimentality dichotomy –his rejection of reason and praise of sentiment– and his account of incommensurability stem from his restrictive view of literal language and his concomitant view that rational discourse relies only on literal meanings. Rorty reduces understanding to learned conventions and thus fails to see understanding and rationality as on-going processes that are never pre-determined, neither within a given community nor between different communities. On the contrary, I believe that literal discourse is never this restrictive; it is not merely familiar, nor is it outside the intended meanings accorded to it. As a consequence, the meanings of words such as “human subject” or “solidarity” are subject to revision; moreover, they are always transformed by their users depending on the contexts in which they are employed. Thus, on this account of literal and metaphorical meaning as belonging to a continuum of social practices, language does not prevent understanding between different cultures. Because meanings are geared to the occasion of their utterance and interpretation, people who employ different languages have the potential to understand each other when they want to understand and be understood. In principle, they can always translate their words into another language. As Brandom writes regarding the meaning of words such as “freedom” and “justice”, “though the goals of justice and freedom (...) may not *move* all those to whom we would in our actual circumstances, and with our actual traditions, like to address political claims in a public vocabulary, these goals are evidently intelligible to them.”⁴¹ On Brandom's account, we need not appeal to raw emotions as the sole means of coming to terms with others who belong to other cultures. If having a language is the capacity to make oneself understood and understand others, then standards of rationality are derived from this capacity to communicate, and from nothing else. As Rorty writes, there is no extra-linguistic or transcultural ground to look for. However, sentimentality on its own cannot help much either. While sentimentality plays a necessary role in understanding, this role cannot be seen as primary. If to use reason is to be able to justify beliefs and statements as fitting the rest of the beliefs that one holds and actually or potentially shares with others, then it can never be given up. Sentimentality is not opposed to, but is intrinsic to rational communication.

Rorty's political project exhibits a third dichotomy, that of democracy as opposed to and prior to philosophy. On his view, democracy is the public culture of a liberal community, one which promotes solidarity among its members as holders of different private world-views. Philosophy, for its part, has a tendency to look for foundationalist principles, to ground or legitimate the political order. Their relationship, he argues, is dilemmatic:

⁴¹ Brandom, “Vocabularies”, p. 174.

To refuse to argue about what human beings should be like seems to show a contempt for the spirit of accommodation and tolerance, which is essential to democracy. But it is not clear how to argue for the claim that human beings ought to be liberals rather than fanatics without being driven back on a theory of human nature.⁴²

According to Rorty, then, democracy and philosophy stand in a relation of contradiction. On the one hand, democracy is a political order which allows every individual's beliefs to coexist with others as long as they do not threaten other individuals, and which thus does not endorse any particular belief as better than others. On the other hand, democracy has a commitment to toleration that is a true belief about how human beings should be, and therefore a philosophical foundation. To solve this dilemma, he argues, we simply have to embrace the first horn as more important than the second for public matters, and consign worries about truth or philosophical foundations for the private sphere of self-creation. By so doing, he concludes, one "disengages the question of whether we ought to be tolerant and Socratic from the question of whether this strategy will lead to truth."⁴³ I agree with Rorty on the need to disentangle democracy from metaphysical presuppositions; however, I believe that the case of democracy can be philosophically defended –if by philosophy we do not mean the search of legitimacy in a reality external to contingent social practices, but instead the justification of beliefs by means of other beliefs and the affirmation of the contingency of all beliefs. Thus, if we conceive of philosophy as being as much at odds with foundations that affirm the authority of a single and external truth as democracy is with political orders based on the rule of a single, external will, then the dilemma between them disappears.

My analysis of Rorty from the perspective of his philosophy of language has revealed that his emphatic support of metaphor as a political tool rests on a series of dichotomies that contradict his espousal of a non-representationalist philosophy and a non-foundationalist conception of politics. If metaphor is seen as external to language and suitable only for private self-creation, and if public language is thereby reduced to restrictive literal discourse, the political possibilities of linguistic contingency are arrested both in private and in public. Rorty's separation between metaphor and literal language also precludes speakers from actively introducing their intentions and particular views in the public discourse of politics –hence his conviction that liberalism, with its strict separation between private and public, is probably the last conceptual revolution that is needed in politics. But if, against Rorty's restriction of linguistic creation and philosophy to the private sphere, contingency is present all the way down, then nothing in language or philosophy precludes a "conceptual revolution" in private or in public. If we stop thinking of

⁴² Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 190.

⁴³ Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, p. 191.

metaphor as a “given” external to language, and see it instead as constitutive of language, then it need not become dead or banal in order to enrich public discourse. Nothing in language prevents metaphor from being introduced in the public realm, except the incapacity of its users and interpreters to clarify its intended meaning and its relation to literal meaning by means of contextual information. Moreover, if literal meaning is also understood as introducing speakers’ and interpreters’ intentions, then the language of politics cannot be seen as intrinsically banal or familiar, but rather as the always modifiable product of assimilated meanings and disputes.

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