

Assessing Richard Rorty's Ironist Individual Within the Context of the Ecological Crisis

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Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) serves as an important example of the double bind the ecological crisis now places us in. That a highly esteemed philosopher who has taken on the task of aligning our epistemological assumptions with a vision of liberalism that seems half John Stuart Mill and half John Dewey completely ignores the ecological crisis suggests the real depth of the difficulties that lie ahead; at least for those of us who expect philosophers to make a contribution to addressing the paramount issues of the day. Rorty's silence is not so much the problem as is his influence on that part of the discourse where philosophy and ideology merge in a more self-conscious manner. This brings us to the real source of the double bind; namely, the form of liberalism Rorty proposes we adopt in the name of progress is reactionary in terms of bringing our cultural patterns into sustainable balance with the life sustaining eco-systems. Before considering why Rorty's arguments lead to one of the most reactionary and nihilistic formulations of modern liberalism it is essential to summarize what has now become part of the daily news coverage on the damage being done to different systems that constitute the biosphere upon which human life depends.

According to numerous scientific reports, the demands of a rapidly expanding human population (which increased nearly 3 billion over the last 50 years) on natural systems are contributing to a greenhouse effect that threatens major disruptions in other areas of the biosphere, including the fertility of soils already depleted by our overuse of petrochemicals and availability of usable fresh water. The increasing devastation of tropical forests (about 27 million acres a year) and loss

of species diversity among plants and animals continues unabated. To this alarming list must be added the vast amounts of toxic wastes being poured into the atmosphere, onto the land, and into the water systems. That human cultures may be close to crossing critical thresholds in the capacity of natural systems to sustain life is a possibility that is being given serious consideration by both national and international agencies that are monitoring a growing body of scientific evidence.

Aside from the numbers of people in Africa and Asia who are starving (or perilously close) in numbers that overwhelm our capacity to comprehend fully what is happening and how to respond, we must also recognize that the wealthy countries of the world (which constitute only a fourth of the population) consume 80 per cent of the world's commercial energy, and that 40 per cent of all the carbon dioxide building up in the atmosphere is emitted by the seven most wealthy countries of North America and Europe. The figures and trends cited here should now be familiar to anybody who has even the most casual contact with the media. But what the litany of daily news reports on the worsening condition of the environment fail to address is the way in which cultural beliefs and practices contribute to the deepening crisis.

It is against this background of rapid environmental degradation that Rorty's ideas must be judged. Rorty's arguments on the nature of language and thought, as well as his attempt to extrapolate a coherent set of ideological guidelines for living a personally and socially meaningful life, are framed in a vocabulary that has wide appeal to people who still believe in the emancipatory and progressive vision of liberalism. Unfortunately, readers who identify with his messianic political vocabulary may lose sight of the fact that the ecological crisis is the most important challenge we face. In assessing the adequacy of Rorty's ideas for meeting this challenge, we must also keep in mind that the stream of liberalism he proposes to revitalize served as the ideological engine of the Industrial Revolution that treated the earth as an exploitable resource. As one of the central arguments being advanced here is that this stream of liberalism (as well as its more technocratic mutations) is exacerbating the cultural forces that continue to degrade the earth's eco-systems, it is important to avoid treating the vocabulary of liberalism as sacrosanct. We must also be open to considering the possibility that primal cultures that have evolved ecologically sustainable ways of knowing may have more relevance for addressing the current imbalance between cultural demands and life-sustaining capabilities of eco-systems than the ideas of leading philosophers like Richard Rorty.

Rorty's vision of a liberal society that optimizes the individual's need for self-creation, and at the same time reduces suffering, is based on a radical view of language, which he attributes to Donald Davidson. Although Rorty does not acknowledge it, this view of language also has roots in several other academic disciplines—including the sociology of knowledge—which treats all beliefs and values as contingent (that is, as relative). The following statements by Rorty sum up the two main threads of his arguments about the language-thought connection, and the form of liberal society his contingency view of language leads us to. Following the lead of Nietzsche, Freud, and now Derrida, Rorty suggests that we should “treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance.”¹ He also reiterates the competitive model of classical liberalism when he writes: “a liberal society is one which is content to call ‘true’ (or ‘right’ or ‘just’) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter.”² Rorty's view of what will hold together the ideal liberal society, what he terms the “glue,” is also quite interesting—given the expressions that anomic individualism have taken in the last few decades. The necessary “glue” is a shared “consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that that goal requires, beside peace and wealth, the standard ‘bourgeois freedoms.’”³ But perhaps the most critically important statement by Rorty, given the relativism of these previous quotations, is that the charge of relativism “should not be answered, but rather evaded.”⁴ That is, the argument that his position is built upon the shifting sands of relativism (nihilism would be a more accurate term) must be viewed as an expression of a “deep metaphysical need.” The antidote he prescribes for this archaic intellectual and moral condition is to invent new vocabularies that will reframe how the problem is understood.

As his liberal ideology is based on what he sees as the successful overturning of the epistemological-metaphysical problems that have bedevilled philosophers from Plato to the present, we shall focus on the adequacy of how he represents the language-thought connection. This is the connection, from his point of view, that has been incorrectly understood, thus leading to a long and varied history of false claims about the correspondence between thought and the external world. In claiming that the world is indifferent to how humans describe and think about it, Rorty is taking a position that would be supported by thinkers who identify with different streams within the sociology of knowledge (from Marx to Peter Berger), and even by cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz. But they avoid the problem of relativism by

recognizing the intersubjective nature of human understanding, and that most of the shared cultural knowledge is experienced as part of the person's natural attitude toward everyday life. Rorty omits these considerations by adopting Donald Davidson's instrumentalist view of metaphor as the primary basis for understanding the language-thought connection. This strategy enables him to build an argument for thinking of the individual in the atomistic and voluntaristic terms required by his desire to give new life to a now largely defunct interpretation of liberalism. But his position is made especially vulnerable by the fact that Davidson, with the characteristic penchant of British philosophers for treating language as a culture-free phenomenon, adopts one of the most narrow interpretations of metaphorical thinking in the literature.

Rorty's more general views of language would be accepted today by many scholars as conventional wisdom: that humans create language, that language helps to constitute how the world is understood and experienced, and that language is used to express the inherently metaphorical nature of human thought. Or as Rorty puts it, the history of thought "is the history of metaphor." But few would accept his way of understanding of the role that metaphor plays. Citing Nietzsche's definition of "truth" as a "mobile army of metaphors," Rorty sees himself establishing the basis of another Nietzschean-like pronouncement: namely, that philosophy is dead. Epistemological and metaphysical concerns, in effect, cannot be taken seriously when we recognize that thought is metaphorical, and that metaphorical constructions are a result of historical contingencies (that is, chance occurrences that reflect the absence of an inherent purpose and order in the world). As there is no basis for a final vocabulary, Rorty turns away from philosophy and toward ideology. Had he adopted a more culturally grounded view of metaphorical thinking he might have avoided a problem that has contributed to the sterility of Western philosophy. That is, the failure to recognize that such words as truth, rationality, justice, language, individualism, equality, and all the other godwords of professional philosophers, cannot be properly understood apart from the cultural groups who use them. This is, in part, the message of Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Rorty refers to culture, but in treating the word as another expression of his abstract theory of contingency he fails to recognize that the patterns of a culture, whether we are talking about linguistic, social interaction, or forms of aesthetic expression, are experienced by its members as part of their natural attitude—like the taken-for-granted patterns of the cultural group Rorty reproduces in both his form of communication and patterns of thinking (e.g., his unquestioning acceptance of the myth of progress).

In his more general statements about the history of thought being based on metaphorical thinking, Rorty inadvertently gives support for a view of metaphor he wants to deny in his more direct explanations of how we use metaphors. But as his more focused explanation serves as the fulcrum upon which he balances both his image of the “ironist” who is the new hero figure he presents us with and his views on the nature of liberal society, we shall turn to this more pivotal part of his argument.

According to Rorty, we will face up to the contingent nature of human existence when we develop “a willingness to face up to the *contingency* of the language we use.”⁵ And we can understand the contingent nature of language by taking seriously Donald Davidson’s way of thinking about language and, more specifically, his view of metaphor. The strength of Davidson’s position, as Rorty puts it, is that “he does not view language as a medium for either expression or representation.” This leads to the claim, which Rorty accepts, that metaphors do not have “a special meaning, a specific cognitive content.”⁶ But if metaphors do not possess cognitive content (that is, do not provide a schema for understanding) then what function do they perform? Davidson’s answer is: “What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning, but use—in this it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticizing.”⁷ That is, metaphors (which Rorty equates with language) are like tools, and thus must be assessed in purely instrumental terms. According to Rorty,

We should restrict ourselves to questions like “Does our use of these words get in the way of our use of other words?” This is a question about whether our use of tools is inefficient, not a question about whether our beliefs are contradictory.⁸

This view of language, as a vocabulary that elicits responses in the same way as grunts, groans, and pauses, provides the basis for Rorty’s view of the ironists who have “radical and continuing doubts” about the vocabulary they use, who realize that their “present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts,” and who do not consider that their current “vocabulary is closer to reality than others.”⁹ This instrumentalist view of metaphor serves to provide the conceptual foundation for Rorty’s arguments that language should be understood as part of the process of natural evolution, “as new forms of life [metaphors] constantly kill off old forms—not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly.”¹⁰ But it differs radically from the views of metaphor advanced by Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, Donald Schon, and Michael Reddy—to cite just a few of the scholars who make a convincing case that metaphor provides a schema of understanding and thus have cognitive content within a language community. I should like to summarize this more mainstream view of the connection between

metaphor and thought by situating the discussion within a cultural context. This is essential both for understanding a major area of silence in Rorty's theory, as well as for bringing into focus how Rorty's view of a liberal society would further exacerbate the ecological crisis.

What the Rorty/Davidson view of metaphor cannot account for is how the root metaphors of a cultural group (which can also be understood as master narratives, world views, paradigms, and so forth) influence the process of analogic thinking, and the subsequent encoding of the schema of understanding worked out in the process of analogic thinking in the iconic metaphors that do their work at the taken-for-granted level of understanding characteristic of everyday discourse. If we consider the symbolic world of cultural groups not overwhelmed by the syncretism of modernity, we find a shared way of thinking, communicating, developing and using technologies, and expressing aesthetic preferences that are made coherent by their root metaphors. An example is the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest whose culture was organized in terms of a master schema of understanding (root metaphor) that represented all life as part of a process of eating and being eaten by others. Stanley Walens describes their root metaphor in the following manner:

Thus, the Kwakiutl moral universe becomes united, not by any vague religious sense but by the fact that the entire universe contains all beings within its bounds, and that all beings are subject to the principle of being both hungry and the food of other beings who are themselves hungry. The Kwakiutl universe is a universe of related beings, all of whom have the moral responsibility to control their eating. Eating is a universal property of the world, and thus it is the basis of morality.¹¹

Masks, dwellings, implements, dances, and narratives are given a form that expresses metaphorically this way of understanding the universe. The root metaphor also serves to frame their way of understanding what constitutes a moral life—which is synonymous with being Kwakiutl. Because the world is viewed as discordant and self-destructive, as life is sustained only by making a meal of other life, it is “only when its inhabitants agree to co-operate to maintain order at the expense of their own personal desires, agree to suppress their hunger, and to modify it into its proper proportion can the world operate.”¹² This basic organizing schema influences how relationships are understood as well as bodily actions and forms of knowing—as witnessed in how the rights to various forms of food are organized, how the life of an animal may be taken, and how the preparation of food is divided along gender lines. Each cultural pattern has metaphorical significance.

We can see in our own history how a root metaphor provides a master schema for the process of analogic thinking. When Johannes Kepler

wrote in 1605 that “my aim is to show that the celestial machine is to be likened not to a divine organism but to a clockwork,”¹³ he was helping to establish the foundations of a new root metaphor that would, like the Kwakiutl cosmology, provide the master schema for organizing the culture—including the early development of science, the technological revolution, and our way of thinking about nature. For example, William Harvey broke with the final vocabulary used by Medieval thinkers, to use Rorty’s phrase, when he referred to the human heart as a “pump.” Though separated by nearly 400 years, the Cal Tech professor who said, “In a sense the hardware for making a man is 23 chromosomes” was engaging in a process of analogic thinking framed by the same (slightly updated) root metaphor. It would be highly unlikely that the Cal Tech professor working on the frontier of molecular biology would be aware of how a deeply rooted cultural template had influenced him to represent a human being in mechanistic terms. Root metaphors partially expressed in such images as fallen man (or original sin), a man-centred universe, a mechanistic universe (and now as a giant computer), and Gaia, as well as iconic metaphors that encode earlier processes of analogic thinking (e.g., artificial intelligence, individualism, freedom, data, and so forth) provide schemas that connect individual thought/experience to the deeper symbolic levels of a cultural group. And this “determinative memory,” to use Gregory Bateson’s phrase,¹⁴ operates largely at the level of the individual’s natural attitude; that is, the individual is largely unaware of how the cultural episteme influences the process of thinking.

Mark Johnson sums up in the following way the complexity of conceptual patterns, continuities, and layered nature of metaphorical thinking:

. . . understanding does not consist merely of after-the-fact reflections on prior experiences; it is, more fundamentally, the way (or means by which) we have those experiences in the first place. It is the way our world presents itself to us. And this is a result of the massive complex of our culture, language, history, and bodily mechanisms that blend to make our world what it is. *Image schemata and their metaphorical projections are primary patterns of this ‘blending.’* Our subsequent propositional reflections on our experience are made possible by this more basic mode of understanding.¹⁵

It should be added that our “propositional reflections” are also framed by these taken-for-granted schemas of understanding. The Rorty/Davidson view of metaphor lacks this depth of cultural contextualization, and thus represents a serious misunderstanding of the metaphor/thought connection.

Rorty's view of ironists as strong poets (that is, individuals who endlessly metaphorize without needing assurances that language has any cognitive relationship to the larger ecology of which they are a part) leads him to embrace a view of liberalism that contains an inner tension between the rights of the individual and the responsibilities of community membership. Although Rorty has an aversion for all final vocabularies, he nevertheless acknowledges that

Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs. J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word."¹⁶

As a number of recent theorists have addressed the problem of how to reconcile the areas of conflict that arise from this formulation, most notably William Sullivan, Benjamin Barber, and Robert Bellah, I shall frame my criticisms of Rorty's liberalism in terms of the ecological crisis—which now seems to be the paramount political as well as existential issue.

Rorty's view of the ideal political system that will maximize the freedoms of ironist individuals (i.e., autonomous individuals) is based on a number of cultural assumptions that can be traced back to early Hebrew and Christian theology, and to the Enlightenment tradition of thinking that now underlies modern society: the linear organization of time that trivializes the cycles of the natural world, the progressive nature of change, the efficacy of abstract ideas, the individual as an autonomous rational and moral agent, and the anthropocentric universe. The identification of these cultural assumptions is critical to understanding why Rorty's liberalism represents the ultimate irony; that is, how the anthropocentric cultural assumptions underlying what many Western thinkers regard as the most progressive and enlightened way of thinking have been turned into a reactionary position by the ecological crisis.

For all his protestations about metaphysical thinkers who want to discover truth and then impose their final vocabulary upon others, Rorty's own thinking is deeply rooted in the Western myth of progress. For example, in the struggle between metaphysicians and ironists he sees the latter prevailing. This same sense of progress is expressed in his argument that we should "see language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly kill off old forms . . ."¹⁷ While he rejects the idea of cosmic design or a purpose being worked out in the evolutionary process, he nevertheless retains the assumption that a life based on continual doubt, and the acceptance of contingency, represents a progressive process—just as his reference to Mill's formulation of a

liberal society is framed by a view of political evolution that is progressive in nature.

Rorty's embeddedness in the Western view of progress can also be seen in his way of understanding tradition. Part of the legacy of the Enlightenment was to frame tradition in binary terms. Tradition represented the dead weight of the past on the living present; it was also regarded as circumscribing the individual's potential for rational self-direction. Progress was (and still is) understood as moving away from tradition. This binary way of thinking precludes the possibility of considering tradition and progress as complementary; just as it is impossible within this binary framework to view social change as the renewal of tradition. Rorty's Enlightenment attitude toward tradition can also be seen in the intellectual and emotional traits he associates with ironist thinkers whose task of self-creation is dependent on continually questioning the authority of tradition. According to Rorty, "ironists are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up if they only know the people in their own neighborhood . . ." ¹⁸ For the ironist individual, tradition poses a particularly difficult existential challenge because there are no criteria for judging whether the basis of their continual questioning is justified. Writes Rorty:

The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion for wrongness. ¹⁹

In another passage, Rorty states that "the opposite of irony is common sense. For [common sense] is the watchword of those who unconsciously describe everything in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated." ²⁰ The common sense (what others might call the taken-for-granted patterns) and the habituated are, in Rorty's way of thinking, synonymous with tradition, and are thus a source of authority external to the individual. In good Enlightenment fashion, Rorty wants to locate authority in the reflective doubts of the individual, even if that "reminds herself of her rootlessness." ²¹

Irony is also an appropriate word for understanding Rorty's view of tradition, as the authority for his actions and thoughts is embedded in traditions that are part of his own natural attitude—or what he terms "common sense." These include, in terms of what is visible to the reader, the patterns of writing from left to right; organizing and expressing thoughts in terms of a subject-verb-object pattern shared by

the rest of his language community; using the conventions of capital letters, spaces between words, and paragraphs; and holding the belief that explicit and propositional representations of knowledge have more authority and legitimacy than tacit or orally communicated forms of knowledge. The reader would probably be correct in surmising that Rorty also takes for granted such other forms of tradition as money (and royalty payments), technologies, libraries, clothes, and non-verbal patterns of communication—to cite just a few of the areas of daily life that involve the re-enactment and, over time, transformation of traditional patterns. The problem with Rorty, as philosopher and liberal ideologue, is that he is embedded in what Edward Shils refers to as an “anti-tradition tradition”; that is, a tradition of thinking that has as its mission the denigration of all forms of knowledge considered as limiting the possibility of human emancipation. The problem is that this tradition, which has split into intense rivalries, has given legitimacy to a limited number of ways of knowing—and most of these are highly experimental in that they make a virtue of newness and originality. Knowledge learned through bodily experience, tacit forms of understanding and performance, spiritual knowledge, and knowledge encoded in technologies and cultural patterns, simply have been ignored by philosophers, like Rorty, who are in the anti-tradition tradition of Enlightenment thinking.

Rorty’s view of the ironist individual reflects another assumption that has been a mainstay of many liberal thinkers: namely, that the intentions and acts of critically reflective individuals (ironists) will be essentially good. Whereas James Madison argued for institutionalizing checks and balances in order to protect society from selfishly motivated misuses of power, Rorty represents the ironist individual as possessing a natural proclivity of acting toward others in a way that enhances solidarity and the alleviation of pain and suffering. This natural proclivity, however, should not be “thought of as a recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings.” Nevertheless, he states that “the view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity.”²² Perhaps the best example of Rorty’s optimism can be seen in how he frames the problem of reconciling responsibility toward others and the ironist’s pursuit of self-interest—which he refers to as “self-creation.” Writes Rorty: “. . .our responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such private motives.” What a moral obligation means is also to be worked out by ironists who do not consider that their “vocabulary is closer to reality than others . . .”²³ In

the final analysis, the moral relativism of Rorty's position is defensible only because of his optimism about the proclivity of ironist individuals—an optimism that is not historically grounded.

The above quotations provide a good picture of Rorty's view of community as an ongoing set of relationships where each member attempts to reconcile self-creation with their equally individualistic interpretation of the meaning of solidarity. But there is another aspect of his view of community that has particular relevance in terms of the ecological crisis. Rorty's way of understanding community, like both the Classical Liberal and Deweyian traditions he resonates with, involves humans only. In effect, Rorty's efforts to envision human life lived without the false security of final vocabularies remains embedded in the root metaphor of an anthropocentric universe. It is his unconscious acceptance of this root metaphor that frames his understanding of community in a way that ignores the interdependence of humans with other life forms that make up the biosphere. When we recognize this interdependence, which involves the viability of food chains that are far more basic to life than final or any other form of vocabulary, both Rorty's liberalism and his naive epistemological formulations begin to unravel. There are indeed absolutes that govern relationships, and one of the most critical ones is that humans (including "strong poets") cannot survive the destruction of their habitat. The well being of humans and habitat, over the long run, go together—though the habitat would not be adversely affected if humans were to disappear.

There have been a number of thinkers who have used the natural ecology as a root metaphor for challenging key elements of liberal thought. Aldo Leopold, for example, argues that humans must be understood in terms of their place in the food chain. Whereas Rorty's anthropocentrism leads him to limit moral obligations to the domain of human relationships, Leopold extends the boundaries of moral obligation to include all the other elements contributing to what he describes as "energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals."²⁴ He even argues for a moral absolute: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."²⁵ That is, freedom is to be understood as self-limitation for the sake of others. But this is not meant to be understood in altruistic terms; "others" include the entire biotic community that is the source of energy for sustaining life. Viewed in ecological terms, self-limitation is essential over the long term to the sustenance of the individual's own life—including her/his progeny.

Gregory Bateson is another thinker who has challenged the anthropocentric foundations upon which Rorty's intellectual edifice rests. Unlike Rorty, who views thought as a mental activity occurring in the head of each individual, Bateson argues that mental activity ("information," in its most simple form of expression) is synonymous with an ecological system. As he puts it, "*the mental characteristics of the system are immanent, not in some part, but in the system as a whole.*"²⁶ A system, for Bateson, should be understood in cybernetic terms, where a "difference that makes a difference" represents the most primitive and basic unit of information. Bateson also recognizes that the information exchanges that occur in the relationships that characterize a natural "ecology" (where humans are not necessarily the principal actors) are understood by humans on a metaphorical and thus conceptual level.

The metaphorical constructions are, in Bateson's terminology, the conceptual maps or schemas that make interpretation possible; the ecology of differences that make a difference represent the territory. Conceptual maps are not always adequate for recognizing the characteristics of the territory. Or in more Batesonian terms, many of the information exchanges occurring in the system are not thought about or adequately understood because of the individual's conceptual (cultural) way of knowing. One expression of this possible incongruity between map and territory is the metaphorical representation of the individual as an autonomous thinker—which is the position Rorty adopts. Another example of the inappropriateness of a conceptual map to an understanding of the information exchanges that are part of a cybernetic system was the long-term failure to recognize the relationship between pesticide use and the decline of animal populations. Before Rachel Carson challenged the conceptual maps that characterized 1950s' thinking, pesticides were thought of in terms of controlling "pests"—which is itself an interesting metaphor that illuminates and hides in accordance with a cultural group's root metaphors. A third example is the long held belief in a form of progress that involves the depletion of non-renewable resources. The purpose of Bateson's metaphorical distinction between map and territory is to highlight how our lives are inextricably embedded in natural systems, and that all human activities involve relationships with other elements that make up an ecosystem. Two statements by Bateson sum up the basic difference that separates him from the anthropocentrism of Rorty:

The total self-corrective unit which processes information, or as I say, "thinks" and "acts" and "decides," is a *system* whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the "self" or "consciousness". . .²⁷

And in addressing the question of whether individuals can survive while the natural systems that make up their habitat fail, he states that “*the unit of evolutionary survival turns out to be identical with the unit of mind.*”²⁸ It must be remembered here that, for Bateson, the unit of mind is the ecological system of which the individual is an interactive member.

Western philosophy has been a part of a nearly 2500-year effort to establish a new regime of truth that led to viewing primal peoples as intellectually and culturally inferior. These mostly agrarian, non-literate cultures have been studied scientifically and used as a source of artifacts for museum curators. They have also been used as a reference point for determining how far the rationally based cultures of the West have evolved. One of the possibilities denied by this regime of truth is that there is anything really important to learn from these cultures. But with the growing awareness that the values and ways of thinking underlying Western technological practices are degrading the habitat at an alarming rate, there is a growing recognition that primal cultures may be important for reasons that go beyond our fascination with their form of aesthetic expression. Of particular interest now is their ability to live in sustainable balance with their habitat. That they have been able to do this over a span of time we are not likely to match, even with our “superior” forms of culture, makes their achievement even more remarkable.

Although primal cultures vary widely in their belief systems, technologies, and patterns for guiding daily life, there are a number of shared traits that relate directly to their ability to live within the margins of their habitats. A brief identification of these characteristics may help put in focus why Rorty’s more progressive and rationally based ideas would likely contribute to further accelerating the destruction of the environment. The identification of these characteristics is not meant to be taken as ready made patterns we can adopt for our own culture. But they can suggest new pathways we might evolve along in our own distinctive way.

In the concluding chapter of *Pig Earth*, John Berger identifies a basic difference that separates modern cultures from tradition-oriented primal cultures. He notes that peoples who live within the limits of their bioregion tend not to be experimental in terms of new ideas, values, and technologies; nor do they view the future as an ever expanding horizon of new possibilities. As a people who have survived where others have perished, their chief concern is to hand on to the next generation the means of survival, which means ideas, values and technologies that have been proven within the context of their own lives. The exemplary

models or analogues for how to live are thus located in the past, but the obligations are to ensure that the possibilities for survival of future generations have not been diminished by current practices.²⁹ Berger points out that the Western approaches to modernization are based on the opposite way of thinking. We view the future in terms of expanding knowledge, power, and consumer conveniences; that we might already be close to the margins of survival in terms of availability of topsoil, uncontaminated water and air, and other non-renewable resources, is not a concern of most modern thinkers. For example, Rorty makes experimentation with ideas and values the highest achievement of the ironist individual; in fact, moral and intellectual relativism are represented by him as synonymous with progress.

Another contrasting characteristic of primal cultures is the manner in which their root metaphors (epic narratives, mythic accounts of origins, and so forth) situate humans *within* the natural world, rather than separate from it or in a hierarchical relationship where humans are given a privileged position that allows the rest of the biotic community to be treated as a “natural resource.” The root metaphors are constitutive of the cultural group’s way of knowing, sense of moral obligation, and use of technology—just as our root metaphors have been the foundations upon which our cultural beliefs and technological practices rest. One of the implications of primal root metaphors that represent humans as interdependent with other life forms, while avoiding the separate conceptual categories that keep certain forms of knowledge and technological practices isolated from moral considerations, is that their technological practices are guided by their understanding of moral and spiritual relationships. In effect, the technological, moral, and spiritual are not separate domains of experience; it should also be pointed out that their knowledge of local habitats often represented a depth of knowledge and technical skill that exceeds what is now possessed by all but the most specialized modern person (and the modern expert generally has a very narrow range of competency).

The last characteristic that will be used as a basis for questioning the relevance of Rorty’s thinking for living in sustainable balance with the ecosystem has to do with how primal cultures have chosen the pathways of developing the spiritual languages of dance, song, narrative, and art rather than the more political pathways that characterize Western cultures. These spiritual languages, as Gary Snyder points out, represent forms of cultural storage of a collected and tested wisdom of how to live in a balanced relationship with the rest of the biotic community. That is, the spiritual languages provided the moral/political/spiritual templates for regulating group life. In effect,

primal cultures appear to have evolved in a way that expanded the symbolic world for its members, while reducing the political domain. They also provide members of the culture a means of active participation in the celebration, sanctification, and renewal of these highly metaphorized templates. Lastly, it should be pointed out that participation in these spiritual languages does not require the degradation of the physical environment, which has not been the case in our efforts to provide for the forms of happiness and success demanded by the self-creative form of individualism that seems to be at the centre of popular culture.

The difference that separates the form of liberal culture needed to maximize the freedom of Rorty's ironist individual from primal cultures that used their marginal bioregions to construct complex symbolic worlds, brings into question another assumption Rorty takes for granted. The characteristics of thought that Rorty associates with the ironist individual contributes to politicizing more areas of cultural life—which appears to be the exact opposite to ecologically sustainable cultures. That is, questioning the final vocabularies and common sense that provide the sense of authority (taken for grantedness) for the patterns that guide daily practices has the effect of relativizing them. Questioning the cosmology and ceremonies that maintain the temple system for regulating the irrigation water essential to the ecosystems of Bali, to cite a concrete example, might create more ironist individuals (Rorty's goal) but it would threaten the food production patterns that depend on the complex integration of social and natural cycles worked out over the past several centuries by the Balinese. Furthermore, if every individual emulated Rorty's ironist as a cultural model, the relativizing process would be extended by the need of individuals to rely upon their own interpretations and need for self-creation. The political process of reconstituting the patterns upon which relationships are to be based and resources allocated would thus become even more fractious. But Rorty does not acknowledge this problem. The difficulty of achieving new grounds of consensus opens the door to a form of politics based on the illusion that technicist solutions are politically neutral. Either way, the epistemological foundations of Rorty's liberalism would contribute to furthering an experimental approach to the political process, rather than using the political process within a moral framework committed to sustaining and improving ecologically viable cultural patterns.

The basic issue posed by the ability of primal cultures, with their non-experimental and non-individualistic approach to politics, and our inability to live in sustainable balance, not just within our bioregion but within the earth's ecosystems, is whether primal cultures are more

relevant guides to the future than the ideas of a philosopher who is totally unaware that the fate of humans is dependent upon the fate of other forms of life that make up the biotic community. The forms of knowledge recognized by primal cultures are very close to what Bateson is getting at when he says the mental characteristics are immanent in the system as a whole, and to what Dogen, the Zen master, meant when he answered his own question, “Whoever told people that ‘Mind’ means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts?” by saying “Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles, and grasses.”³⁰ This view of knowledge does not lead to final vocabularies in Rorty’s use of the phrase, but it does put in focus what should be understood as the principal relationships.

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Notes

- ¹ Rorty 1989, p. 22
- ² Ibid., p. 67
- ³ Ibid., p. 84
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 54
- ⁵ Rorty 1989, p. 9
- ⁶ Davidson 1984, p. 262
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 259
- ⁸ Rorty 1989, p. 12
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 73
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19
- ¹¹ Walens 1981, p. 6
- ¹² Ibid., p. 12
- ¹³ quoted in Merchant 1980, pp. 128–9
- ¹⁴ Bateson 1972
- ¹⁵ Johnson 1987, p. 104
- ¹⁶ Rorty 1989, p. 63
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 19
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 80
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 75
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 74
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 75
- ²² Ibid., p. 192
- ²³ Ibid., p. 9
- ²⁴ Leopold 1970, p. 253
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 262
- ²⁶ Bateson 1972, p. 316
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 319
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 483
- ²⁹ Berger 1979, p. 203
- ³⁰ quoted in Snyder 1990, p. 20