

Utopia Limited An Anthropological Response to Richard Rorty

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Utopia's much too big for one small head
I'll float it as a Company Limited!

Gilbert & Sullivan, *Utopia Limited*

Introduction: When Worlds Collide, or Political Hope and Philosophical Irony

Dubbed "Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism" by David L. Hall, Richard Rorty, one of the most prominent figures on the American philosophical scene, is gaining notoriety on the political stage as well. Rorty's latest book, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, advocates pragmatism in the form of New Deal-style political activism. Rorty enjoins American intellectuals (synonymous with the Left, "the party of hope") to take the fight for social justice out of the ivory tower and back into the streets of America. Rorty would rehabilitate an increasingly pessimistic and theoretical liberalism, for which "[h]opelessness has become fashionable..." (*Achieving* 37), as a viable motor for social change. He affirms that "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement" (3). In order to make meaningful political contributions, the Left needs to "kick its philosophy habit" (91).

Whether interventionist speaking the plain language of "tough love," political stumper/analyst, or theologian of the religion of democracy, Rorty has chosen the role of actor rather than that of passive spectator (*Achieving* 9). Although Rorty's multi-purpose rhetoric may be extremely tricky to contextualize, it is nevertheless consistent with *Achieving's* promotion of intellectual crossover from the contemplative to the politically active and necessary to his basic intellectual program in which "the traditional tasks of moral philosophy should be taken over by literature and political experimentation" (*Penguin*

Dictionary of Philosophy).⁽¹⁾ As a philosopher, Rorty has staked out the territory of pragmatism, where truth-as-correspondence, epistemology, and religion (as witness his mantra “truth is not out there” [*Contingency* 5]), are conceptual *personae non gratae* and contingency “goes all the way down,” obviating any possibility of a transcendental ego.⁽²⁾ Rorty’s notion is that cross-over thought is mutually beneficial for all parties involved. As he says in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, “philosophers help provide a redescription for political liberalism, but political liberalism also helps provide a redescription of their [philosophical] activity” (54).

However, his resolute and persistent identification with a liberal/leftist political position—he proposes that we eliminate the distinction (*Achieving* 42)—places him in a camp that privileges a particular set of values for human interaction; it defines him not as one who continually re-describes existing vocabularies but one who has already re-described them and must now defend the position created by that redescription. As Gianni Vattimo asks, “is Rorty’s distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics itself epistemological, that is, argumentative, or is it hermeneutic and ‘poetic’?” (*Beyond* 99). This juxtaposed geography may weaken both Rorty’s philosophy and his politics, but it paradoxically continues to drive forward his project of reorganizing the way we think and solve problems in a world without metaphysical foundation by provoking prolific response and debate. However, if Rorty’s position is between here and somewhere else, his reader’s position is likewise problematized, for any attempt to situate Rorty’s self-styled politico-philosophico-artistic discourse can be construed as a demonstration that one lacks the intellectual cosmopolitanism, daring, and flexibility this thought calls for. It seems that Rorty is everywhere—and nowhere—at once.

To be sure, Rorty acknowledges the problematic position that he has created for himself in his attempts to bridge the gap between philosophical theorizing and political activism, but this concession is just as much an invitation to his reader to enter the labyrinth of his intricately wrought oppositions as it is an admission of conceptual inadequacy. He justifies his compromises as problematic precisely because they constitute redescription in a new mode (*Contingency* 54), one which cannot be verified in the present. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he offers to “make this abjuration of philosophical neutrality in the interest of political liberalism more palatable” by reminding us that “a new vocabulary ... will have its utility explained only retrospectively” (55). We will know only in the future. One is reminded of the early nineteenth-century Stendhal’s recurrent remarks that he would be understood in 1930. The unspecified and ever-receding future serves as a guarantee of the unfalsifiability of present hypotheses.

2

The future is no mere rhetorical alibi for Rorty; it is a fundamental principle of his thought. For him, those who change the world are models of human existence, and the “strong poet”

is a hero (*Contingency* 53). When he declares that “the creative artist, in a wide sense that includes critics, scientists, and scholars, provides the paradigm case of a career whose conclusion leaves the world a bit different from what it used to be” (*Achieving* 122), he implicitly makes a case for himself as firebrand philosopher and standout in the spheres of art and politics, and a preemptive strike against his would-be traditional philosopher critics. Rorty affirms the possibility of “intellectual and moral progress,” which he envisages “as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are” (*Contingency* 9).

Rorty’s own metaphor of choice for exploring a world that has come to grips with the “contingency” of its ideas is that of *utopia*—a term that, curiously, the scholarly Rorty does not contextualize within the considerable scholarship on the subject. Always on the horizon of his thought, utopia would in fact be the motor of history, “the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process—an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth” (*Contingency* xiv). Indeed, in his introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Rorty asserts that what he sees as “most worth preserving” in the work of John Dewey, his intellectual forebear, is his notion of the change from our sense of dependence on the past “to a sense of the utopian possibilities of the future...” (17). In *Achieving Our Country* Rorty declares that “Whitman and Dewey tried to substitute hope for knowledge. They wanted to put shared utopian dreams—dreams of an ideally decent and civilized society—in the place of knowledge of God’s Will, Moral Law, the Laws of History, or the Facts of Science” (107).

This characterization could just as easily describe Rorty’s own project, whose telos is utopia as substitute for illusory metaphysical Transcendence. Rorty’s gravitation toward utopia as a metaphor reveals that he still feels the pull of foundational philosophy. Jürgen Habermas characterizes Rorty as a disappointed convert from traditional metaphysics who compensates the grief of his reluctant farewell to metaphysics by dramatizing the farewell “at the moment of its [metaphysics’] fall” (Habermas 346-47).⁽³⁾ Habermas goes on to claim that nostalgia prompts Rorty to arrive at an “adapted Hegelianism” with a perspective on everyday practices (Habermas 347-48). Vattimo has also diagnosed these “romantic” tendencies and their resulting overly oppositional rhetoric (*End*149).

Rorty’s affinity for the idea of utopia is troubling on the eve of the millennium. The persistent unproblematized use of a term that has acquired in this century such strong connotations and undergone such definitional permutations suggests an outlook that is not only nostalgic but rigid and severely limiting. Rorty’s insistence on utopia as a goal, a methodology, and a value points to the need to rethink (or redescribe) utopia in new terms.

A World “Other”

Rorty’s substitution of utopia for the epistemological frustrations of theory suggests that it

functions as much as a mask as an alternative and cannot be considered an innocent figure, even in his own vocabulary. The tangle of definitions and subsequent implications of utopia does not unravel easily. For Judith Shklar, “by now *utopia* stands for political hope” (41); utopia serves as a horizon that is necessary “if we are ever to look beyond an unacceptable actuality” (55, referring to Benhabib). In this view, history is asymptotic to utopia, for it pursues the utopian horizon in hopes of gaining incremental improvements. This was not the case, she points out, in More’s and Rousseau’s utopias, which they never expected to become realizable and which served as reflective critiques of contemporary society (44). However, as both Shklar and Vattimo emphasize, the scientific progress of the nineteenth century inspired a new kind of utopian thought. Whether driven by a faith in technology as an answer to humanity’s ills or faith in the escape from (or overthrow of) technology and a return to previous agrarian (read hierarchical) forms of social organization, this new conception of utopia was one of attainability. As Shklar writes, “The utopia of the nineteenth century is a blueprint for a planned new society” (47). One could revel in the rapid scientific advancements like the Saint-Simonists, or peacefully retreat to one of many utopian communities inspired by the likes of Fourier, or develop an ideological stance worth fighting for against the deleterious effects of technology.

Hence the muddle when we consider the question of utopia today. Impossible critique or horizon of hope? A simple glance at the table of contents of Manuel and Manuel’s *History of Utopian Thought in the Western World* indicates that the arc of utopia’s history does not exclude either possibility but is rather the story of their permutations, from Plato’s *Republic* to Freudo-Marxism. In his famous *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim maintains a distinction between the two terms on the basis of the class that thinks them: *ideology* is the province of the dominant groups while *utopia* is the territory of the oppressed (40). This is a neat binary opposition: the dominant class is interested in the status quo and hence blinded to any elements that would threaten their dominance, while the oppressed groups are focused on the elements they wish to negate (40). However, the revolutionary vs “conservative” aspects of these distinctions become blurred as the relative dominance of the groups changes, and it is crucial to note that Mannheim’s distinctions date from before the watershed of the Holocaust and the Cold War. As the conception of utopia becomes more entwined with history as historicity,⁽⁴⁾ its practical consequences—either failed hopes or violent approximations of realizations—tend to implicate utopia, strangely enough, in the vocabulary of not only impossible but negative projects. Mannheim’s binary distinction between ideology and utopia maintains itself with difficulty in our own fin-de-siècle cataloguing of twentieth-century good intentions gone horribly awry.

Louis Marin’s later analysis reflects these historical modifications by emphasizing the structural homology of utopia and ideology. According to Marin, utopia is the ideological critique of the dominant ideology of the historical moment of its formulation (10), or an ideology in figural form. But Rorty’s utopia is recalcitrant to such labeling: Rorty would hold fast to the idea of utopia while denying the very possibility of a distinction between

ideological and nonideological: "Calling a story "mythical" or "ideological" would be meaningful only if such stories could be contrasted with an "objective" story" (*Achieving* 11). Rorty's denial of the possibility of an operational articulation of the terms "ideology" and "utopia" makes Shklar's question, "What is the Use of Utopia?" yet more pertinent.

3

Gianni Vattimo adds a useful new dimension to the definitional problem by privileging the categories of "dystopia" and "heterotopia" alongside utopia. While Rorty's thought regularly turns toward an idealized traditional felicitous utopian figure, Vattimo has argued that "the salient feature" of twentieth-century utopia is its formulation as anti-utopia, dis-utopia, or counter-utopia (*Transparent Society* 76). In Vattimo's vocabulary, utopia can be characterized as "an optimal reality by way of rational design, whether it be oriented metaphysically... or technologically" (79). Dystopias or counter-utopias, on the other hand, "retain the 'optimizing' character of utopia... they imagine a reality in which what are at present only possibilities are realized in all their most extreme implications... a total and irremediable unhappiness" (76). Vattimo suggests that the emergence of the prominence of dystopia is the epochal change occasioned by the "discovery of the counter-finality of reason" (81), that "the rationalization of the world turns against reason and its ends of perfection and emancipation, and does so not by error, accident, or a chance distortion, but precisely to the extent that it is more and more perfectly accomplished" (78). Along with the weakening notion of rational progress comes the end of a "unilinear" concept of history (81) and the proliferation of heterotopia, or images of progress that are not all-encompassing but local. In other words, he sees a "strict connection" between the histories of modern rationalism and utopia-dystopia-heterotopia (78), and when conceived within the context of the history of rationalism, the distinctions among utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia are intelligible and useful.

For Vattimo there is yet another twist in terminology: many late twentieth-century dystopias are better characterized as "post-apocalyptic utopias," for once the onerous possibility of destruction has been lifted by the catastrophic consequences of the rationalization of technology, a vision of returning to a happier state of nature, a la nineteenth-century utopias and the "flower power" of the sixties, becomes possible. Vattimo prudently confines his argument to a vision of the "topias" tied most closely to the history of rationalism. But if we consider the broader implications of the terms "happiness" and "irremediable unhappiness," the very distinction between utopia and dystopia seems impossible to maintain. To distinguish dystopia from utopia on this basis relies on the subjective privileging of a moment either of happiness or unhappiness in the "topian" text. A work like *The Turner Diaries* that accomplishes the fictive expulsion of a resented enemy (Jews, non-whites) viewed responsible for societal woes falls into the dystopian or utopian category according to the perspective of the reader. Conversely, a work like Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, cited by Rorty as a work of "self-disgust" (*Achieving* 4), turns the race tables against

the white-anglo-imperialist society that has unjustly dominated the real native Americans. Is the novel a dystopia or a utopia; are these categories even valid in discussion of this novel? In his introduction to *Heterotopia*, Tobin Siebers contends that utopian desire cannot be distinguished from dystopian desire for “utopian desire has both hopeful and pessimistic sides: it yearns for happiness but only because it is so unhappy with the existing world” (3). In terms of the resultant (relative) happiness or unhappiness, we might be better advised to follow Vattimo’s historical model and say that the distinction depends on the presence of a narrative that allows different moments of the text to be differentially even if subjectively privileged.

This differentiation is crucial to understanding the broader implications of “heterotopia,” a term introduced into the modern theoretical corpus by Foucault.(5) Kevin Hetherington proposes that we understand the ongoing development of modernity as a result of the interplay between utopia and heterotopia. For Hetherington, heterotopia is an “in-between space” that implies a process of differentiation which defines modernity itself:

Heterotopia do exist, but they only exist in this space-between, in this relationship between spaces, in particular between eu-topia and ou-topia. Heterotopia are not quite spaces of transition—the chasm they represent can never be closed up—but they are space of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve—social order, or control and freedom. Heterotopia, therefore, reveal the process of ordering to be just that, a process rather than a thing (see Law 1994(6)).
(Hetherington ix)

Like utopia, dystopia and heterotopia are far from innocent terms that imply not only modes of thought but their cultural products. The history of the definition of the genre of science fiction, from its roots in H.G. Wells and his “ambivalent” attitude toward utopia(7) to the huge variety of SF products now available, largely depends on whether one considers dystopia a form of science fiction or science fiction a sub-genre of dystopia.

Artists and Carpenters

By the logic of the active anti-spectatorial stance Rorty takes in *Achieving*, the active imagining of utopia is a key tool in the analysis of social practice as well as a goal worthy of Dewey and Whitman. In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* Rorty states that, “My own view is that it is not much use pointing to the “internal contradictions” of a social practice, or “deconstructing” it, unless one can come up with an alternative practice—unless one can at least sketch a utopia in which the concept or distinction would be obsolete” (16). Deconstruction (in the broad sense) is therefore useful only in the presence of its constructive correlate. Yet, while Rorty’s active, dare we say positive, method implies a proposed course of action, the result of his effort at construction remains an ideal product

rather than a concrete plan, for, as he admits, “we cannot tell ourselves a story about how to get from the actual present to such a future. We can picture various socioeconomic setups which would be preferable to the present one. But we have no clear sense of how to get from the actual world to these theoretically possible worlds, and thus no clear idea of what to work for” (*Contingency* 182). Nonetheless, Rorty advocates “a general turn against theory and toward narrative” for the “historicist and nominalist culture of the sort [he] envisage[s] would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other” (*Contingency* xvi).

4

Rorty’s repeated recourse to this figure of utopia without analysis of its *raison-d’être* suggests a late twentieth century romantic faith—unironic in Rortyan terms—that utopian thought is a legitimate way out of the dilemmas of traditional philosophy. Ironically, utopia for Rorty is less a heuristic filter for the process of redescription than a mold into which his ideas are poured and hardened. That Rorty is aware that utopia is an impossible proposition is a given dispensed with at the beginning of *Contingency*, but this circular recognition makes the status of his own utopia ambiguous. His repeated caveat is that in this ideal liberal society, general acceptance of redescription will create a situation in which the thorny questions of maintaining certain distinctions as we know them will become obsolete. His claim in *Contingency* that “This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable” (xv) seems to invite the disassembly of his utopian apparatus, for it not only asserts that clear conceptual distinctions persist (in the equally valid demands of self-creation and solidarity) but it in fact creates and fixes these distinctions firmly in place rather than, as he prescribes, rendering them “obsolete” (16).

Rorty’s utopian discourse is not so much about utopia *per se* and its function as about the detailed contents of his own imagined utopia. Like More’s *Utopus*, Rorty carves his utopia out of already existing territory, a jumbled landscape of public-private, ethical/moral-pragmatic formations. The Rortyan utopia is a unique man-made island of delicate balance between the public and the private that is effected by their fictitious and rigorous separation. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he attempts to describe at length what he terms a “liberal utopia”: a polity peopled by liberals, those “who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do,” (8) *cum* ironists, imaginative people who realize “that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” and who do not take themselves too seriously (*Contingency* 73). These “liberal ironists” are able to segregate their private ambitions for autonomous selfhood (personified for Rorty by “ironist” figures such as Proust and Nabokov) from their public responsibility to society (according to models of liberals like Orwell or Derrida).

According to Rorty, the ironist fulfills three conditions:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to her reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (*Contingency* 73)

The goal is to see the other "as one of us." In Rorty-speak, the question of who "us" is remains unclear (or perhaps remains all too clear), for the set of ironists is not coterminous with that of private persons, but only a subset of it. Irony is defined in contradistinction to its other, "common sense" (*Contingency* 74), and these qualities in turn define the people who bear them. "In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not. The latter would, however, be commonsensically nominalist and historicist" (*Contingency* 87). Clearly the division between private and public is insufficient to characterize his ideal society; in *Achieving*, the pertinent distinctions are set forth in terms of both political orientation—Left or Right—and of "career." The intellectuals and nonintellectuals of *Contingency* morph into artists vs carpenters:

The reason I cite poets, critics, and painters, rather than dentists, carpenters, and laborers, as having careers is that the former, more typically than the latter, are trying to make the future different from the past—trying to create a new role rather than to play an old role well. The difference is obviously not hard and fast, since there are such things as hack poetry and creative dentistry. But the creative artist, in a wide sense that includes critics, scientists, and scholars, provides the paradigm case of a career whose conclusion leaves the world a bit different from what it used to be. (*Achieving* 122)

Careers of "artists" are likened to a "sociopolitical campaign" in that they "can be seen to have succeeded or failed—or, or more frequently, to have succeeded to a certain degree while still falling short of its initial aims" (*Achieving* 121-22). But the definition of "artist" still depends on the success or failure of his/her career; a failed artist might as well have been a dentist.

Because the same denial of metaphysical foundations that is crucial to Vattimo's "weak thought" underpins Rorty's own thinking, one might assume that his notions of individual autonomy and self-creation would lead him to express his views in terms of something like Vattimo's concept of heterotopia. Why does Rorty steadfastly privilege the utopia of the liberal ironist over a heterotopic vision and not directly address the question of differences of utopia when he clearly advocates the dynamics of democratic conversation and compromise? The answer lies in his regular reflexive return to binary distinctions, constituents of what Marin would call his "simulacrum of synthesis" (26).

In spite of Rorty's caveat *entre-deux* of "hack poetry and creative dentistry," his evolving description of utopia is constructed from unproblematized binary opposites. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty's belief in a starkly delineated Left and Right never seems to be in doubt. Nor is the Right's role presented as in opposition even in the academy; academic Leftists "have collaborated with the Right" in substitution of "cultural politics" for "real politics." According to Rorty's definitions, "The Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left's struggle for social justice as mere troublemaking, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved" (14). In Rorty's narrative, the Left is portrayed as a *chevalier errant* that must find its way back to court by accomplishing honorable deeds and the Right is cast in the role of the dragon. The Left is future-oriented and is responsible for provoking essential dialogue; it is in fact the motor of political life. Rorty never discusses the good in terms of values in which both sides can actively participate. Sides must be chosen: "Insofar as a Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left" (*Achieving* 14). Maintaining strict separations of incompatibles is essential to Rorty's utopia.

5

Rorty affirms, "My defense turns on making a firm distinction between the private and the public" (*Contingency* 83). But in order to separate them effectively for his picture of liberal utopia he must freeze-frame them as if by fiat in order to resolve the tension between the two. He has noted rather tellingly that Dewey expended a great deal of effort trying to reinsert philosophy into history (*Achieving* 14), but in his own liberal utopia, he must eliminate the temporal aspect of the relationship of give and take that in fact allows democracy to function more or less along the lines that he advocates. This conceptual stasis recalls the figural aspect of utopia signaled by Marin: utopian text is paradoxically "quasi-iconic" (87) and as such can be read as a sign in a larger discursive context. The choice of the word "iconic" is doubly apt in Rorty's case, for this particular sign is one that stands in the place of the metaphysical transcendence that he has had to deny and that Habermas suggests he still mourns. Or to borrow a phrase from Gans, it implies "presence as an absolute coincidence of sign with referent, as a moment of absolute peace and communion in transcended and annulled desire" (*End of Culture* 126).

Measure twice, cut once

The telos of Rortyan thought as designated by the figure of utopia is the elimination of desire. If we construct, as Rorty suggests, a “narrative” from *Contingency*’s utopia to *Achieving*’s less explicit one, we discover that the concept that must be made obsolete is that of conflicting, converging-mimetic-desire. Behind its liberal mask, Rorty’s utopian construction is a symptom of the lingering virus of metaphysics and betrays a fundamental dependency on representational metaphors much stronger and more pervasive than he has been willing to admit. Rorty would deny that he wishes to eliminate desire altogether. However, if we understand desire as mimetic, then we know that desire is mediated by others and will tend to converge conflictually on like objects, both concrete and abstract.

Gianni Vattimo has suggested that for a critique of metaphysics to be truly radical, it must take into account both the violence that metaphysical fictions—human attempts to impose order—have exercised on thought itself (*Violence et métaphysique* 57) and the conflictual violence that is revealed with the “fall” of metaphysics, for in the absence of metaphysics “there is no longer anything to limit the conflictiveness of existence, the struggle between the weak and the strong for supremacy” that knows no other criterion than force (58). Beyond the failure to justify his own redescriptive prescriptions that Vattimo associates with the “irrationalism of hermeneutics” (*Beyond Interpretation* 99) lies Rorty’s failure to come to grips with the conflictual reality of existence that metaphysics and religion help to control. Rorty does not wish to deal with the fundamental realities of human interaction and the role that representation and the sacred play in mediating this interaction. It is not insignificant that Rorty’s ironist-artist hero focuses on private ambitions rather than on a relationship to the public and its recognition or rejection. Liberals like Orwell who wish to change the world function for the general good in the public sphere, where private ambitions for success would be out of place. In *Achieving* the liberal is an artist and the artist is a liberal.

Although unaware of its relationship to desire, Rorty is not unaware of the danger of violence, which he defines rather as a quality of individual action than as a collective phenomenon. This quality goes by different names in the progression from *Contingency* to *Achieving*. In *Contingency*’s liberal utopia, “cruelty” is the destructive force threatening solidarity that must be kept at bay. As anyone who has read René Girard knows, “cruelty” is another word for the violent manifestation of mimetic desire. In ritual societies, violence is checked by sacrificial rites that focus a diffuse violence on a central victim. Rorty’s implied notion that sanctioned inequality is the cause of the violence is erroneous. As Girard has demonstrated, the more highly differentiated the society, the greater the control over the contagion of violence.

Lacking any notion of or respect for sacrificial mechanisms or the sacred, for these would be part of the unenlightened past, Rorty’s secularized, de-divinised liberal utopia faces in

cruelty an unresolvable problem, one with which his anti-foundationalist thought is unprepared to cope in the absence of a notion of the self “that goes all the way down.” For this reason, Rorty displaces the focus of violence-avoidance from the private in *Contingency* to the public in *Achieving*. If in the first book the avoidance of cruelty was the basic principle of utopian social organization, now the problem of cruelty, which he now calls “sadism,” is overshadowed by an overt commitment to doing away with the effects of selfishness—as he admits, government can in some ways correct selfishness, but not sadism (*Achieving* 99). Rorty relocates his society of “free consensus” within a larger conception of social justice based on the elimination of “castes or classes, since the kind of self-respect which is needed for free participation in democratic deliberation is incompatible with such social divisions” (*Achieving* 30), and he nods in agreement with an idea of a civic religion centered around “substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country’s principal goal” (*Achieving* 101). Social justice à la Rorty is ultimately the other side of the cruelty coin, for the liberal sees social justice in terms of equality, even at the expense of individual freedom. But alas, once again, this is simply trading one problem for another, since lack of individual freedom critically infringes on the private ambitions of the ironist.

Rorty’s movement toward equality implies that desires frustrated in the hierarchical system will be fulfilled in the “democratic” system, his new guiding light. Yet Gans’s examination of Pericles’ *Funeral Oration* makes clear that the founders of the first democracy were acutely aware of the resentment generated by broad access to positions of privilege. (9) “Contrary to what might appear at first glance, fairness is inversely proportional to objectivity. The fairer one wants to be, the more specific the evaluation one must make for the specific task at hand, and the more unpredictable the results.... Hence the fairer the society, the more an individual who is not chosen for a particular task is likely to disagree with the society’s judgment” (2). An equal society is not a resentment-free society; on the contrary. The more “social justice” as a guiding value prevails, the more the less capable are likely to be humiliated and the more capable to become resentful.

6

The shift from the emphasis on cruelty to that of social justice reveals the weakness of a model of society conceived on the basis of a single and ambiguously defined value. The formula for Rorty’s hypothetical social glue is faulty; Rorty assumes that individual efforts at optimal self-creation do not conflict (*Contingency* 84), that they will not be predicated on limiting others’ chances or on publicly humiliating others through redescription. Rorty’s ironist hero Proust created bitingly accurate portraits of many of his contemporaries who were deeply offended to recognize their own traits in Proust’s composite characters. Rorty’s coda that “peace, wealth, and certain ‘bourgeois freedoms’” are necessary for this to occur begs the question. Even Rorty’s impossible utopia—still peopled by human beings after all—must have a mechanism for expelling or deferring cruelty.

Since neither version of his utopia provides Rorty with a means of controlling either cruelty or inequality, the logic of this shift bears closer examination. Both models implicitly rely on a rational self that can recognize and intellectualize its own cruel and selfish impulses. In the first vision, cruelty emerges as the principal vice to be conquered, an end to be accomplished primarily by trying to see the other “as one of us” in hopes that the resulting compassion will cause us to work toward solidarity in our public lives.⁽¹⁰⁾ Yet seeing the other as one of us does not necessarily have a positive valence and it offers no principle of practical social organization. Cruelty does not rein itself in just because it is the worst thing we do. Rorty’s shift in emphasis from cruelty on the bottom of the list (the worst) to social justice on the top of the list (the best) suggests that he believes cruelty to stem from social inequalities that must be corrected.

Those who are in pain, for example, are humiliated because they do not have the language to speak and must rely on the liberal to speak for them. Yet, as Rorty acknowledges, “The redescribing ironist, by threatening one’s final vocabulary, and thus one’s ability to make sense of oneself in one’s own terms rather than hers, suggests that one’s self and one’s world are futile, obsolete, *powerless*. Redescription often humiliates” (90). Rorty’s response to this problem is to attempt to implicate metaphysics in the negative effects of ironism: “But notice that redescription and possible humiliation are no more closely connected with ironism than with metaphysics” (90). Rather than dealing with the unhappy realities of liberal-ironist redescription-humiliation, Rorty merely alleges that this same combination exists in a world of metaphysical foundations: the metaphysician, who is not an ironist, redescribes too, and implicitly, the metaphysician’s redescription can humiliate.

But as Rorty himself admits, the ironist arouses special resentment because “when [the ironist] claims that her redescription is better, she cannot give the term “better” the reassuring weight the metaphysician gives it when he explicates it as ‘in better correspondence with reality’” (91). Since ironic redescription is the intellectual’s own medium for private self-actualization, Rorty cannot deny that it gives him a privileged means to cruelly humiliate anyone he chooses to redescribe. Rorty builds a structure of humiliation and resentment into his utopia in the division between the intellectuals, who are ironists and redescribers of others, and the nonintellectuals, who are commonsensical-by definition not ironic-and, we presume, liberal. One group is plainly equipped to dominate and humiliate the other group. Even if we look at the matter realistically and understand the infinite incremental variations that are bound to exist between these two categories, we still must cope with the hierarchization of society without a theoretical mechanism to help us.

“May God, or the ironic contemplation of his absence, save us from the utopian search for final solutions.” (Signs of Paradox 74)

Rorty’s notion of moral and intellectual progress clearly implies the opposition between a more primitive past and a more enlightened future. As he sees it, we are moving beyond the

need for metaphysics, beyond the need for religion and, we hope, beyond a world of cruelty and obdurate thinking. The future society Rorty seems to have in mind is what Vattimo calls an “accomplished nihilism” in which the stable structures of Being are weakened, but unlike Rorty, Vattimo recognizes the potential for violence that accompanies this weakening. In contrast, the only explanation we can extrapolate from Rorty’s writing as to why ritual societies were more cruel than modern society is simply that modern society knows better. From the perspective of originary thinking, such a vision of history neglects the most important (and interesting) aspects of human existence, the evolution and proliferation of strategies for creating the representations that defer violence. What Rorty reads as modernity’s greater understanding is rather the omniscience of the mature market system in which desires are generated and deferred in a continual process of exchange of both goods and representations.

Rorty’s belief that religion becomes increasingly less necessary neglects the diffusion of the sacred in its concentrated form into circulating heterotopias. As Vattimo has suggested most recently in a criticism specifically aimed at Rorty’s redescription, the secularization of Western thought should not be misread as the decline of religion, for which art becomes a suitable substitute (*Beyond* 56-57), since any such substitute only “mirrors, expresses, repeats and interprets this [that of metaphysics] experience of transcendence” (53). For Vattimo, “a different and more powerful type of global theory continues to stand in opposition to that modeled on the plurality of the artistic ‘openings,’ namely, the world of religious doctrines and churches” (56). It is impossible to think modernity without thinking the sacred, for it is the very secularization of Christianity that has liberated “the plurality of myths” and relegitimated religion (54).

Vattimo’s critique allows us to understand, as Rorty does not, the inextricable dependency of Western utopian thought on Christianity. Originary thinking allows us to develop a still sharper notion of utopia by understanding it as a function of *remembering* toward the horizon of the future rather than, as Rorty uses the term, simply thinking whose *telos* is the future. The originary event is the origin of utopia. As Gans says, “Because the scene of representation solved the problem of averting conflict over the appropriation of the central object, its reproduction made it appear as the model of a world without conflict, a momentary golden age” (*End of Culture* 126). All subsequent representational acts are attempts to recover this originary moment, which can only be re-enacted and never definitively established as Rorty would like. This moment of perfect reciprocity, which establishes our notion of the moral and hence the impulse toward fairness, is the only “true” utopia, the model of the always-already that deconstruction seeks to avoid. As Marin has indicated, it is precisely in the unnatural neutrality of utopian space that the *supplément* of utopian discourse reveals itself: utopia exists only as a figure of the transcendence of all figuration. Rorty’s reliance on “supplementary” redescription prevents him from recognizing either the originary connection of this ur-figure to the metaphysics of presence or its denial of mimetic anthropological reality.

Marin justifies his choice of utopian texts for analysis—from the 16th to the 18th century—because this is a period of historical break between the feudal and capitalist (10) economies. It is Marin’s contention that the contradictions between nascent capitalism and dying feudalism are figured in these utopias but that they are not theorized and do not reach the level of a concept. Rorty’s two conceptions of social organization—before and after the fall of metaphysics—correspond roughly to Marin’s distinction, or to Gans’s opposition between ritual and market society. These two types of organization are not just political but economic as well, yet for all of his talk about conversation, in no meaningful sense does Rorty ever deal with other modes of exchange. The essential change between the feudal and capitalist modes is the proliferation of centers of significance prompted by the Christian revelation and the modern heterotopia. The ubiquity of mature consumer society reveals the exchange-relation at the heart of every human interaction. Hence Tobin Siebers’ suggestion that “the new model of community is based on the romantic couple” (9). Within the omniscient market, this minimal configuration offers the closest approximation to the ideals of nonmimetic desire formerly represented in utopias. Elena Illouz’ *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* makes explicit the interpenetration of individual desire in the couple’s “producing” and “consuming” one another. Gans sees this as a model that can function without a third party through the mediation of desire within the configuration of the couple:

The phenomenon of romantic love as we know it since the feudal era extends to the erotic sphere the Christian revelation of the equivalence between divine and human personhood. In love, the object of desire is revealed as not simply a troubling otherness that attracts our desire by withdrawing from it, but as an other subject. The so-called overestimation of the sexual object is not an illusion but, on the contrary, a realization that the structure of desire is essentially interpersonal rather than objectal. The erotic couple attempts to expel the mediating other from the scene of representation, to substitute a dual reciprocity, a mutual mediation, for the circulation of the mimetic triangle. Triangularity haunts erotic desire as its origin and inevitable temptation, but it is not the structure of the erotic in itself. (*Signs of Paradox* 114)

Utopia and Linguistic Truth

We are now prepared to address the question of the usefulness of distinguishing utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia in an anthropological vocabulary. Whereas Vattimo rightly sees utopia and dystopia as the represented consciousness of different moments in the history of metaphysics, examination of these categories in the light of mimetic theory allows us better to understand their critical relationship to society.

Classic utopias are situated outside of narrative. We may visit there or hear tales of visits there, but typically there is no means for us to emigrate there. Similarly, Rorty tells us where he thinks we would like to go and what he thinks it would be like there, but he offers us no viable method for getting there. The reason for this impossibility is not that an imagined society cannot reconcile apparently irreconcilable opposites, but that not even an imagined society of human beings can eliminate mimetic desire. The lesson of the originary hypothesis is that humanity itself is a function of mimetic desire and of representation's capacity to defer-not end-violence. As Gans points out, "In the nonviolent utopia of universal love, there would be no means available to carry out the essential cultural operation of *différance*: deferral through differentiation" (*Signs* 166). Or as Siebers posits in his introduction to *Heterotopia*, "Utopian desire is the desire to desire differently, which includes the desire to abandon such desire" (3). Expressed more explicitly in the vocabulary of mimetic desire, to desire differently is to desire unmimetically, but when all desire is one, there is no alternative to mimesis. However, Siebers' contention that utopian desire cannot be distinguished from dystopian desire (3) bears further exploration in light of the generative model. The definition of utopia as happy and dystopia as unhappy is not only ultimately too subjective and variable a criterion to be useful, but it fails to address the desire at the root of all utopian and dystopian thought. If we speak in terms of desire and all desire is one, then matters of sentiment are largely irrelevant. The question is not whether we are "happy" or "unhappy," but to what degree culture is successful in deferring violence.

Vattimo's definition of dystopia as a scenario of "irremediable unhappiness" is perhaps less useful than the post-apocalyptic examples he cites, like *Blade Runner* and *Planet of the Apes*. In these films, as in Rorty's examples of *1984*, *Snow Crash*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *The Fire Next Time*, we see a world radically changed that is nonetheless, at bottom, recognizable as at least partly human. These worlds are thinkable in a way that utopia is not: as optimal rationalizations of existing potentialities. There is always a sense that this could happen here. Rorty emphasizes this in both *Contingency* (184-85) and *Achieving* (87), where he warns that these scenarios are not altogether far-fetched. These dystopias, however improbable, do not suffer from the immovable contradictions upon which utopia is built. The topographical problem posed by dystopia is not how to get there, but how to get back to a world previously known. This potential of either return or forward movement gives the dystopia narrative possibilities missing in the utopia, which cannot budge by creating a temporal space.

This is made evident in the respective consumption of the two genres; utopia is typically "boring" while the dystopian film and novel attract an enthusiastic public. Fourier was never a best-seller and More's *Utopia* has never been made into a film. The public is able to identify with dystopian desire in a way that is structurally impossible in utopia; a "suspension of disbelief" or, as Gans would put it, an indefinitely deferred question of truth maintains the dystopia as an esthetic object whose experience can be renewed. The dystopia is fiction, but as such, it is not subject to verifiable truth conditions beyond its ability to

perpetuate itself as an object of desire. The public is able to experience the horror of a maximal manifestation of mimetic desire and put itself in the place of the dystopian hero.

In contrast, the utopian construction is neither narrative nor concept nor even plausible hypothesis but a figure of unrealizable desire. Deleuze and Guattari note in *What is Philosophy?* that utopia is a “bad concept” (110), and Gérard Raulet has argued that it is the “simulacrum of a concept.” In Gansian terms, it dwells neither in the world of the signifier or the signified, but tries unsuccessfully to straddle the two. Utopia is a figure, dystopia is a narrative. Dystopia is an anxious consciousness of mimetic desire, and utopia its illusory elimination. The esthetic experience of utopia can only be akin to the soulless uniformity thematized by dystopia.

8

Vattimo’s historical tracing of the movement of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia reveals the mimetic grounds of these concepts. Just as Marin’s 16th-18th century utopias reflect the contradictions of the transition from a feudal economy to a capitalist one (10), the utopian movements characteristic of the nineteenth century are a form of overt or implicit romantic resistance to the contaminated, manufactured desires of burgeoning consumer society. Both retreats from this society (Fourierism) and movements toward a new world (Saint-Simonism) are governed by a vision of absence of conflict; desires either attain satisfaction through simplification or are made obsolete by technology. If, as Vattimo claims, dystopia becomes more prevalent as metaphysics weakens, this process coincides with the growing awareness of the realities of mature market society: no one is immune to mimetic desire and the structural dynamics of the market pervade every aspect of our lives. As an expression of fear of the self’s disappearance in a world of enforced conformity, dystopia represents and confronts the extrapolated consequences of the ubiquity of the market. The increase in dystopias reflects a *prise de conscience* of mimetic desire unavailable within a utopian context. At the same time, the continued generation of new mediations for desire and the increased degrees of freedom brought about by mature market society enable the proliferation of personally-scaled heterotopias that marks the late twentieth century.

After the Holocaust: Utopian visions, dystopian representations

According to Gans’s view of history, the Holocaust is a watershed in the understanding of the Christian ethic and its representational possibilities. The Holocaust is the logical *reductio ad absurdum* of utopian thinking:

The horror of the camps is their scenelessness; for the first time in history, a central policy of violence is deliberately excluded from the scenic structure of culture ... Thus, what makes the Holocaust exemplary of a newly radical category of evil is not the multiplicity of its victims, but their lack of esthetic exemplarity

... Like a carnivore killing off the species it feeds on, the Nazi model was not meant to express antisemitism, but to abolish the need for it. The more Nazi society revealed its mimetic obsessions with “ugly images,” whether of Jews or of “decadent” art, the more desperately it sought the final expulsion of these images, after which its obsessions would presumably be lifted. This was history’s most radical attempt to expunge the Pauline revelation of the centrality of the victim in the cause of reserving the center for the positive figure of Aryan exemplarity.

(*Signs of Paradox* 164)

After the Holocaust, each is obliged to figure himself in the place of the arbitrary victim. But the overwhelming realization that to be the victim is also to be the center of significance makes the representational insufficiency of utopia even clearer. The previously tentative and ambiguous mutation of utopia into dystopia becomes formalized in the figure of the Holocaust as exemplary anti-utopia. Utopia having been turned into its horrible opposite, the dystopian text, structurally sounder in its narrative possibilities, becomes the locus of the renewed identification between public and central victim. Ironically, Rorty’s ideal poet-hero is not realized in his liberal utopia but is in fact generated as an oppositional figure within dystopia.[\(11\)](#)

If Rorty’s own utopia is difficult to imagine, the dystopias that he analyzes from *Contingency* to *Achieving* are quite vivid to the mind’s eye. They are intelligible within the originary post-Holocaust model. His choice of *1984* in *Contingency* conforms well to Vattimo’s definition of utopia/dystopia as “optimality by way of rational design,” for, as Rorty says, “Orwell thought of our century as the period in which ‘human equality became technically possible’” (169), providing the necessary conditions of possibility for totalitarian repression. Rorty claims that in thinking about Orwell, it is not useful to consider *1984* as having stripped away appearance to show reality but that it should be read “as a redescription of what may happen or has been happening” (173), as an alternative perspective. The world of *1984* is “dangerous” and “possible” (176). Rorty titles his chapter “The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty” (*Contingency* 169), a play on Rorty’s observation that “The provisional title of *1984* was *The Last Man in Europe* (170). But Orwell was the “last intellectual” precisely because he alone of Europe’s intellectuals refused the current version of the utopia of the Left.

In *Achieving* Rorty makes a distinction between an earlier generation of socialist novels—*The Jungle*, *An American Tragedy*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*—and a second generation, *Snow Crash* and *Almanac of the Dead*. The earlier generation represent hope based on the possibility of transformation “necessary because the rise of industrial capitalism had made the individualist rhetoric of America’s first century obsolete” (*Achieving* 8). The second generation are “descriptions of what America will be like in the twenty-first century...

written in tones of either self-mockery or of self-disgust" (*Achieving* 4) and symptomatic of the critical immobility of the late-twentieth-century intellectual. In *Snow Crash*, Rorty's example of "self-mockery," government gives way to business in an America in which the market has become all-powerful. Rorty notes that this novel capitalizes on the belief that corporations and government "now make all the important decisions" (5). In *Almanac of the Dead*, a work of "self-disgust," racial-ethnic identities become the focus rather than consumer society. The white race is seen as a plague whose destiny is to be squelched by the descendants of the America's native peoples in the riotous chaos of the collapse of the US government.

Admittedly, these are dark views, but views that become more clearly outlined when considered in terms of the resentment that inspires and drives them. As implicit acknowledgments of resentment, they also are able to work through their own phobias, which is ultimately healthier than utopian denial. For example, *Snow Crash* explores our fear of the market and provides a necessary contrast between those who have mastered the market (the former Americans) and the Raft people. The structural instability of the scenario provides what is ultimately, for the reader, hope for change in the possible open-endedness of history. *Almanac of the Dead* is a sacrificial novel in which resentment is purged in the destruction of the central victim—the white American. As representations of resentment, these works ironically do more to defer violence than to provoke it.

9

Similarly, James Baldwin's novel, *The Fire Next Time*, incidentally the source of the title of Rorty's *Achieving* (12), offers an example of a "process of decision," in which "we raise questions about our individual or national identity as part of the process of deciding what we will do next, what we will try to become" (11). In this narrative the prophet Elijah Muhammad represents in the extreme the unwillingness, shared in part by Baldwin, to forgive white America for its sins, whose only explanation can be that the "white people started out as homunculi created by a diabolical scientist" (12), while Baldwin's ultimate decision is not to forgive but to look forward toward solidarity of the races despite the huge obstacles that must be overcome. Baldwin's novel offers a choice between a past-oriented and a future-oriented vision of history. The future here is not cast in utopian terms; history conceived as future is history whose course must be forcibly changed. As Baldwin says, "we may be able... to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (*Achieving* 13).

While Ernst Bloch's view of utopia is consistently one of hope and ultimately revolution, his understanding of the "artist" self, what Vattimo calls his "reappropriated subject," is modeled on the clown (*End* 39) and based in the end on irony. Bloch's preferred vehicle for the discourse of hope is *colportage*, which his translators and editors describe as "the genre of popular literature comprising adventure story, picaresque tale and thriller..." (1: 352).

Unlike Rorty's ironist, Bloch's *colporteur* tells a tale that overtly reveals the utopian nature of his own desires. This narrative conception of the extremities of desire, realized by playing against other discourses of desire, thematizes utopian desire rather than trying to actualize it. Quite tellingly, Rorty comments on one of his favorite ironists and his relationship to his ideas: "Nabokov's best novels are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas" (*Contingency* 168).

* * * * *

Utopia Limited, a little-known Gilbert and Sullivan opera first performed at the Savoy in 1893, relies on irony that thematizes its own impossibility. Paramount, King of Utopia, presides over a ritual structure of government in which his word is absolute and his subjects have no need to desire on their own, for he defines their desires. He is the absolute ruler in the center of Utopian society, but like Frazer's sacrificial kings, he is accountable to two Utopian judges who can have him exploded by the Public Exploder at their whim. Paramount desperately wants his country to emulate the English in every way possible, and he enlists his daughter, who has studied in England, to assist him with her imported advisors, the Flowers of Progress. British clothes and manners are introduced, but the most significant addition is the concept of the limited liability joint stock corporation. When each Utopian declares his worth and becomes a corporation, the King becomes free from the ritual system of order, for the judges do not have the power to explode a corporation. But all is not well in Utopia, for the complete prosperity and peace brought about by Anglicization has put many Utopians out of work. All that remains is to add the missing ingredient: government by party. This sharp satiric narrative does what Rorty's description of utopia cannot: it puts its own seriousness into question.

Perhaps Habermas is correct that Rorty's protean efforts to elaborate a convincing liberal utopia can best be characterized as a romantic nostalgia-resentment for a metaphysics that has disappointed and disillusioned him. But the impact made by his work suggests a more focused explanation.

Rorty's utopian vision is so close to garden-variety left-liberalism that one is tempted to ask: "Why all this talk about utopia? The society you are calling for is pretty much the one we have already, one that includes political mechanisms for solving the problems you remain upset about. Why insist on unworkable utopias when your program is essentially that of the dominant wing of the Democratic party?" But Rorty is not speaking to an audience of politicians, or even of political scientists. His base in the academic world is in the Humanities, and professors of the Humanities remain largely on the far Left, hostile to capitalism and American democracy. Rorty's influence comes from his ability to speak the language of this group. In *Achieving Our Country*, he makes what despite its philosophical vagueness is ultimately a useful attempt to sell to his audience as utopia the dystopia that is American democracy—the "worst form of government imaginable, except for all the others

that have been tried so far”(13). At the end of the twentieth century, dystopia is the only structure of hope.

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Notes

1. Quoted from Carlin Romano's *Nation* review of Rorty's *Truth and Progress*.[\(back\)](#)

2. As Keith Topper puts it: "Rorty's invocation of contingency moves between a restatement of the undeniable fact that human beings and human history are something more than the combined effects of culture and nature and a voluntarist notion that the only impediments to human change and transformation are those set by the human will itself" ("Richard Rorty, liberalism and the politics of redescription").[\(back\)](#)

3. T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton (London, 1973), p. 408 (amended translation), quoted in Habermas.[\(back\)](#)

4. Vattimo makes a sharp distinction between the two—we are not at the end of history, but at the end of historicity (*End* 5).[\(back\)](#)

5. Cited in Hetherington (viii). M. Foucault, "Of Other spaces," *Diacritics* 16(1): 22-7.[\(back\)](#)

6. J. Law, *Organizing Modernity*, Oxford, Blackwell. 1994.[\(back\)](#)

7. See Alexandra Aldridge, *The Scientific World View in Dystopia*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI

Research Press, 1984.[\(back\)](#)

8. After Judith Shklar's designation in *Ordinary Vices*.[\(back\)](#)

9. "Democracy and the Critique of Pure Fairness" (forthcoming).[\(back\)](#)

10. Rorty borrows the idea of the gentle liberal from Judith Shklar's book *Ordinary Vices*, but basing his "liberal utopia" on the avoidance of this single "vice" severely narrows the implications of Shklar's discussion of a number of vices and how they should perhaps be ranked in importance. There is a considerable leap from placing cruelty first on the list of vices to avoid because it englobes more than the others to the tacit assumption that it is the vice from which all others stem.[\(back\)](#)

11. This is not the place for the development of a theory of "narrative fiction as dystopia," but it seems reasonable to suggest this possibility.[\(back\)](#)

12. "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (quoted in *Achieving* 12-13).[\(back\)](#)

13. This famous dictum of Winston Churchill is quoted by Rorty himself in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 29.[\(back\)](#)