

Prologue

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Reading Rorty: A Sketch of a Plan

DANIELLE MACBETH

Reading Rorty can be hard, not because his ideas are especially difficult but because they very often are, or at least seem on the face of it to be, quite straightforward and yet somehow wrong. But this is very unlikely: Rorty is not a thinker to get straightforward things wrong. We need, then, a plan for reading Rorty. And Rorty himself offers a suggestion. He tells us that we will not understand him until, and unless, we distinguish between his ordinary, unreflective talk and his reflective, philosophical talk, between his lay and his philosophical uses of words such as “true.”¹ This is helpful, but it does not, I think, go far enough in providing us with the tools we need in reading Rorty insofar as there seems to be not two but *three* different sorts of discourse in which Rorty engages. Indeed, I will suggest that in this regard Rorty’s reflections on truth bear a remarkable (and remarkably suggestive) similarity to Plato’s reflections on knowledge in his dialogue *Theaetetus*. This is a large and unprecedented claim, one that I can only begin to explicate here. But even this mere sketch of a plan for reading Rorty will be enough, I think, to show that reading Rorty as engaged at various points in three very different sorts of discourse will enable us to make good sense of claims that have seemed to many readers, even otherwise sympathetic readers, to be quite wrongheaded.

The overall framework is relatively straightforward. The basic case is our first-level discourse, that is, our ordinary, everyday and unreflective, talk about things, including the talk involved in first-order inquiry into things such as cats, corporations, and courage. But we can also engage in a different sort of discourse, as when we conduct a reflective, philosophical inquiry into first-order inquiry. Obviously, such second-order, reflective inquiry is possible only in light of first-order inquiry; second-order inquiry can be pursued only where there is already a good deal of first-order inquiry to be made the object of one’s reflective gaze. Second-order inquiry seems also to be qualitatively different from first-order inquiry insofar as first-order inquiry seems, at least on the face of it, to be inquiry into how things are, second-order inquiry seems better described as concerned to understand, or to make manifest, the nature of our first-order inquiries.

The third sort of discourse we will be concerned with here is different again. It is not merely more of the same, a kind of philosophical reflection on the practice of philosophers – though that too is possible. The third sort of reflection and discourse as it will concern us here does not take the form of *inquiry* at all but is instead a reflection on something more fundamental, something that might be described as our existential condition, our being as humans. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, as I read it, not only are all three sorts of discourse in play, as I will suggest they are in Rorty, the three sorts of discourse are also relatively well marked in Plato's text, as they are *not* marked in Rorty's writings, or we will see, often even in Rorty's thought. Let us begin, then, by recalling some of the most striking features of Plato's remarkable dialogue.

Theaetetus was written after such middle dialogues as *Republic*. However, it manifests many characteristic features not of the middle dialogues but of Plato's earliest, aporetic dialogues. It focuses on a "What is ...?" question, in this case, the question "What is knowledge?," and over the course of the dialogue a series of answers are proposed, discussed, and ultimately rejected. Also, as in the early dialogues and by contrast with middle dialogues such as *Republic*, Socrates claims to have no knowledge himself, save for the knowledge that he does not know.

But there are also important differences between this dialogue and Plato's early dialogues. First, and perhaps most strikingly, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates's main interlocutor is not (as he is in all the early dialogues) a self-professed expert in the topic under discussion. Socrates's interlocutor in this dialogue is instead a mere boy, the sixteen-year-old student, Theaetetus, who, although already manifesting remarkable intellectual gifts, does not profess to know what knowledge is. Indeed, he is presented at the opening of the dialogue as having just the sort of wisdom Socrates claims for himself: Theaetetus knows that he does not know. The dialogue also combines the standard dialogue form with a more reflective description of Socrates's method that is reminiscent of Socrates's description of his activities in Plato's *Apology*. But whereas in the *Apology* Socrates likens himself to a gadfly, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates again and again describes himself as a midwife to the ideas of others – though, as he tells Theaetetus, it is a "secret" that he has this art. The *Theaetetus* is written in dramatic rather than narrative form, and as is emphasized in the prefatory dialogue within which the main dialogue is embedded (as it were, halfway in that there is a prologue but no corresponding epilogue), the main dialogue is in the form of a written document, which, according to the prefatory dialogue, is being read aloud by a slave. What we have in the *Theaetetus*, then, is a written dialogue, a piece of text, within a written dialogue, a piece of text.² Among other things, this embedding allows Plato to emphasize to the reader that the account of the main dialogue derives directly from Socrates and "has, in effect, Socrates' own approval and imprimatur" (Sedley 2004, 16). There is, finally, a very curious section midway through the main dialogue, a section that Socrates himself describes as a digression, within which Socrates sketches the life of the philosopher as it contrasts with the lives of others. The digression clearly recalls themes from *Republic*, but it is not at all easy to understand why it is there, how exactly we are to read it, or what relationship it has to the rest of the text.

The *Theaetetus* is, then, a text with a very complex structure, one that has been carefully crafted to be read on at least three levels. First, and most obviously, there is the examination itself, which, after some preliminaries, comprises three proposed

definitions – that knowledge is perception, that knowledge is true judgment, and that knowledge is true judgment with an account – all of which are examined and ultimately rejected. At this level of reading, the fact that the examination is cast in the form of a dialogue, the fact that it is embedded in another dialogue, the fact that Socrates digresses halfway through, all are merely stylistic, merely decorative; what matters are the ideas, what knowledge is said to be, and the arguments to show that it cannot be that. This, then, is first-order inquiry, inquiry into what something is, in this case, not what a cat, corporation, or courageous act is, but what knowledge is. And as already remarked, that inquiry fails; none of Theaetetus's answers to the question "what is knowledge?" survive Socrates's examination of them.

When one asks a "What is ...?" question, one addresses oneself to something in hopes of clarifying its nature, what it is to be that. One aims for knowledge. In the *Theaetetus*, it is knowledge itself that is addressed, and this, we are to come to see, is a fundamentally different sort of question. Although there can be first-order inquiries in the vicinity, for example, in the sociology of knowledge or in cognitive science, to understand what *knowledge* requires a distinctively philosophical reflection, that is, a form of investigation that is conducted in the self-understanding that it is essentially different from first-order inquiry. Those who turn to philosophy in order to achieve certainty, or to find an answer to the skeptic, or to secure the foundations of first-order inquiry, fail to grasp this first and essential lesson of the *Theaetetus*. There are and can be no marks of truth as there are marks of cats, courage, and corporations.

Suppose, for instance, that we said that the mark of truth is clarity and distinctness, that one ought to judge as true only what is clearly and distinctly perceived. It would follow of necessity that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is itself already knowledge. Socrates makes this point, and it is the very last point that he makes in the dialogue: "it is surely just silly, when we are trying to discover what knowledge is, that it is correct judgment accompanied by *knowledge*" (210a). Socrates is of course talking here about the third answer that Theaetetus had proposed to the question "What is knowledge?," namely, that it is correct, or true, judgment with an account, in effect, justified true belief. His point is that if so then one's justification must already have the status of knowledge. As we are to come to see, knowledge is not a thing with marks that one could tell by discerning its marks but instead the fruition of a course of inquiry. It is one's *capacity* for knowledge, in particular, one's capacity for critically reflective examination, that holds the key to the understanding we seek regarding the nature of knowledge. Where we had been focused on the product, knowledge, and looked in vain for marks that distinguish knowledge from, say, mere true belief, now we are to consider instead the process, the *activity* of inquiry, the exercise of one's power to know that, if all goes well, does culminate in knowledge.

To read the dialogue at this second level, as a philosophical reflection on first-order inquiry, is to take into account the fact that the *Theaetetus* is written as a dialogue between Socrates, in his self-described role as midwife, and the student Theaetetus – with the occasional intervention of Theodorus, a famous geometer and Theaetetus's teacher. Reading at this level, we find Plato engaged in an extended reflection on the nature of first-order inquiry, and in particular on the role of critically reflective examination in inquiry. We are taught, for instance, to distinguish between mob-oratory and serious discourse, between the philosopher and the champion conversationalist. But, as the

digression pointedly reminds us, even this second-order inquiry into the nature of first-order inquiry does not exhaust the meaning of the dialogue as a whole. Relative to the second-order inquiry into the nature of (first-order) inquiry, the digression clearly *is* a digression, just as Socrates says it is; but as its placement midway through the dialogue indicates, it is also central to the message of the dialogue as a whole. Together with other, subtler clues, it marks, I think, yet a third, quite distinctive sort of reflection, this time on philosophers, Plato included, and philosophizing.

As Plato asks in the *Theaetetus* what knowledge is, so Rorty asks what truth is, that is, what is the mark, the necessary and sufficient condition, of something's being true. And in keeping with the aporetic conclusion of Plato's *Theaetetus*, Rorty answers, I would say correctly, that there is no such mark, no test for truth and hence no way to *guarantee* that one has gotten things right. *Anything* we think we know may turn out to have been mistaken. There is, as Sellars would say, no Given. Like Plato's first-order investigation into knowing in the *Theaetetus*, Rorty's first-order inquiry into truth, according to which truth is just one more thing in the world to be investigated, inevitably comes up empty-handed.

But Rorty occasionally seems to want to go further in this mode. In particular, he sometimes suggests that there is no truth whatsoever at the level of first-order inquiry, no way things in the world are that we might discover. He seems almost to think that we discovered, at a certain point in history and contrary to what we had at first naively thought, that reality can play only a causal role in our cognitive lives, not a justificatory one, and hence that reality as it is, is unknowable in principle because there simply is no way the world is, no joints in reality at which one might carve, whether correctly or incorrectly. This, to my ear, sounds like just the sort of philosophy-as-super-science that Rorty otherwise so strenuously objects to. Better, I think, to hold that whatever philosophical reflection on first-order inquiry may achieve, it is *not* more first-order knowledge about how things are, or are not. First-order inquiry into truth, as into knowledge, is *inherently* aporetic: again, there is no mark of truth, or of knowledge, waiting to be discovered, as there is of cats, corporations, and courage.

Because there are no marks of truth, truth cannot itself be made the goal of inquiry, as Rorty often reminds us. It does not follow that there is nothing to be said at the second level about the nature of first-order inquiry. In the *Theaetetus*, we have seen, Plato's Socrates emphasizes, at this level, that inquiry constitutively involves critically reflective examination, and such an examination is aimed, in particular, at discovering whether one has knowledge or only the appearance of knowledge. Socrates's practice of midwifery, as it is portrayed over the course of the dialogue, shows just what this means, and it is not hard to hear echoes of Plato's reflections on the nature of inquiry in those of Rorty, in particular, in Rorty's proposal that "we should be retrospective rather than prospective: [that] inquiry should be driven by concrete fears of regression rather than by abstract hopes of universality" (Rorty 2000d, 61). Socrates the midwife is much more concerned that one has *not* gotten things right, that one does *not* know what one professes to know, than he is hopeful that one does know.

Nor is it merely a piece of good advice to admonish people to spend more time worrying about the possibility that they are wrong than they do hoping that they are right. That advice reflects a fundamental insight into the rationality of inquiry, one that is the positive corollary, in reflective, philosophical discourse, of the realization

(of first-order inquiry) that there is no mark of truth. It is the insight that, in Sellars's (1997 [1956], sect. 38) words, "empirical knowledge ... is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once." Even recognizing that our powers of knowing are inherently and unavoidably fallible, we can nonetheless strive to do better than we have done, seek to correct such errors as we are in a position to recognize – whether errors in our beliefs, errors in our conceptions of things, or even errors in what we take to be rational at all. Sellars's point is that it is precisely this capacity for self-correction, of *anything* that we think we know, that explains the rationality of inquiry, that is, the fact that it constitutes *inquiry* at all, the striving for truth. It is for just this reason that, as Rorty (2000a, 24) says, "although we do not need ... a theory of rationality, we do need a narrative of maturation." And this, I think, goes some way in explaining why Socrates's interlocutor in the *Theaetetus* is a mere boy, a student. Were the dialogue a first-order inquiry into something such as courage or piety, it would make sense to engage a supposed expert in the relevant object of inquiry. But if the inquiry is, as it is in the *Theaetetus*, into the nature of inquiry itself, then it is more appropriate to engage a student, that is, someone who is being educated and in the course of that education must be taught, among other things, to think for himself, to use his own powers of critically reflective rationality.

Although there is no mark of truth, no certainty, nevertheless inquiry is rational and it is rational because it is self-correcting. This furthermore applies not only to first-order inquiry but also and equally to second-order reflective, philosophical inquiry. Second-order inquiry into the nature of first-order inquiry, like first-order inquiry itself, inevitably involves various presuppositions any of which may turn out to have been mistaken. For example, Rorty seems to think that giving up the idea that language serves to *represent* reality entails giving up the idea that language is in any way revelatory of reality. He seems to think that the fact that our descriptions of things are invariably in some human vocabulary or other entails that those descriptions cannot be conceived as cutting reality at its joints. But perhaps neither entailment holds. It is true that, as Rorty (2000e, 185) says, "the story of biological evolution is helpless to explicate the coping-representing distinction, helpless to say when organisms stopped coping and began copying." But we are not restricted either to a representational conception of language or to the notion of biological evolution. We can think instead of language as *enabling* our cognitive access to reality (as, for instance, Sellars and McDowell do), and we can do so, I would say, in large part because we can retrospectively trace a course of Hegelian *intellectual* evolution – as indeed Rorty himself recognizes in other contexts.³ He writes (2000b, 89):

Once we give up the idea that rationality is a matter of applying ahistorical criteria (as we have to in order to deal with the fact that criteria of choice between theories and policies are as mutable as the theories and practices themselves), we have nowhere to turn except to such [Hegelian] stories. Hegel's historicization of philosophy seems to me important precisely because Hegel grasped the emptiness of Kantian attempts to make "Reason" the name of an ahistorical faculty, and to build ahistorical criteria into the structure of the human mind. His solution was to start replacing transcendental arguments with narratives – stories about how we hook up with our past.

Much more might be said about second-order philosophical reflection on first-order inquiry as, for instance, Plato does in distinguishing mob-oratory from serious discourse and the philosopher from the champion conversationalist, and Rorty does in his discussions of intellectual virtues such as seriousness, truthfulness, and curiosity. I want, however, to turn now to yet another familiar theme in Rorty's writings, one that I will suggest should *not* be seen as a piece of second-level philosophical discourse but instead as a reflection that belongs to the third, more existential sort of discourse. It is the theme that instead of grounding solidarity in objectivity we should reduce objectivity to solidarity.⁴

As McDowell reads it in "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity", Rorty's claim that the discourse of solidarity ought to replace the discourse of objectivity is addressed to philosophers concerned to understand first-order inquiry. As McDowell (2000, 109–10) writes:

What Rorty takes to parallel authoritarian religion is the very idea that in everyday and scientific investigation we submit to standards constituted by the things themselves, the reality that is supposed to be the topic of the investigation. Accepting that idea, Rorty suggests, is casting the world in the role of the nonhuman Other before which we are to humble ourselves. Full human maturity would require us to acknowledge authority only if the acknowledgement does not involve abasing ourselves before something nonhuman. The only authority that meets this requirement is that of human consensus. If we conceive inquiry and judgment in terms of making ourselves answerable to the world, as opposed to being answerable to our fellows, we are merely postponing the completion of the humanism whose achievement begins with discarding authoritarian religion.

The idea of answerability to the world is central to the discourse of objectivity. So Rorty's call is to abandon the discourse, the vocabulary, of objectivity, and work instead towards expanding human solidarity.

McDowell reads Rorty's call for solidarity in place of objectivity, then, as a second-level claim, one that, according to McDowell, is mistaken and liable to lead to more of just the sort of philosophy that Rorty urges us to give up on, namely, the search for certainty, indubitable foundations. With Rorty, McDowell deplores a "wishful conception of attunement with how things really are, as a means of avoiding an uncomfortable acknowledgement of the limitations of reason and the contingency of our capacities to think as we believe we should"; but McDowell at the same time opposes Rorty's call for us to "[abandon] the very idea of aspiring to get things right", "the very idea of making ourselves answerable to how things are" (McDowell 2000, 112).

As McDowell reads him, Rorty presents us with what is in fact a false dichotomy regarding the nature of and our capacity for first-order inquiry: either solidarity or objectivity, either freedom or truth, *but not both*. On this reading, Rorty's claim is that our freedom to call any claim into question as reason sees fit is *incompatible* with recognizing that truth is a norm of inquiry: To choose truth and objectivity is to prolong our "cultural and intellectual infantilism"; to choose freedom and solidarity is to achieve full human maturity. But as McDowell argues, this is simply not so. The dichotomy is, we will soon see, a false one.

Truth, according to McDowell, is a norm of inquiry in the sense that achieving a satisfactory standing in the space of reasons, that is, knowledge, requires that one's

judgment be true. Truth, that is to say, is internal to justification; one's belief is fully justified only if it is true (see McDowell 1995). Because one's capacity for knowledge is inherently fallible, this means that one's standing in the space of reasons is subject to an analog of what Bernard Williams has called moral luck: even with the best will in the world and the most favorable evidence, one's judgment can after all be mistaken. Judgment, that is to say, involves both a moment with respect to which one is active insofar as judging is an act of spontaneity, and a moment with respect to which one is wholly passive, the moment of truth. Although one is wholly responsible for one's act of judging, one is not wholly in control of the successful outcome of that act. Judging is not, in other words, merely a matter of assenting to or endorsing some claim. It is, or at least aims to be, an *acknowledgment* of truth. And if what one aims to acknowledge as true is not true then the judgment fails of its aim. Given that this is what judgment is, it follows, as McDowell (2000, 120) argues, that it is not the defender of the discourse of objectivity who needs to grow up but Rorty:

If there is a metaphysical counterpart to infantilism anywhere in the vicinity, it is in Rorty's phobia of objectivity, and the suggestion that we should replace talk of our being answerable to the world with talk of ways of thinking and speaking that are conducive to our purposes. This fits a truly infantile attitude, one for which things other than the subject show up only as they impinge on its will. Acknowledging a nonhuman authority over our thinking, so far from being a betrayal of our humanity, is merely a condition of growing up.

On McDowell's view, to appeal to truth and objectivity is not to abase oneself before a nonhuman authority but instead to take the *full* measure of our contingency, finitude, and historicity in the recognition that the successful outcome of our acts of judgment are not fully in our control. Our acts of judgment succeed only if what we take to be true *is* true. And this seems clearly to be right.

If we read Rorty's call for solidarity and freedom instead of objectivity and truth as McDowell does, as a piece of second-level philosophical reflection on our capacities for truth and knowledge, then I think it is clear that, as McDowell argues, Rorty is just wrong. Solidarity and freedom are not incompatible with objectivity and truth. But then we are left with Rorty's inexplicable failure to see this – even after it has been pointed out to him. Rorty seems, in that case, to have an incurable blind spot here, just as McDowell (2000, 117) says he does, one that renders him incapable of realizing McDowell's point. And while I do think that there is something to this, we need also to recognize that there is a deeper and philosophically much more interesting reason for Rorty's holding fast to his either/or, either solidarity or objectivity but not both.⁵

McDowell reads Rorty's call for solidarity as opposed to objectivity as a piece of philosophical reflection on first-order inquiry to the effect that because truth (certainty) is beyond our ken, we have only ourselves to answer to. I want to read that call for solidarity instead as belonging to a *yet another* mode of discourse, one that is about *us* in particular. Read this way, Rorty's thought is that *when it comes to us*, there is no point trying to ground solidarity in objectivity, in some "ahistorical human nature", because there simply is no such thing as ahistorical human nature (Rorty 1991, 22). When it comes to us, solidarity is all we have, where this is meant not as the upshot of a first-order inquiry into how things are, nor even as a philosopher's second-order reflection

on first-order inquiry, but as something different again, something more fundamental, more existential. The task is to understand what exactly that might mean.

As Hegel was perhaps the first explicitly to recognize, the history of our intellectual development over the past few thousand years shows that standards of rationality change over time, sometimes very radically. As Rorty (2000d, 60) provocatively puts it, “what counts as rational argumentation is as historically determined, and as context-dependent, as what counts as good French” (see also Macbeth 2014). But one does not need a lesson from history to question the rationality of what one is up to. Any sufficiently intelligent and reflective thinker can have moments of profound self-doubt, moments “when,” as Rorty (2000b, 89) puts it, “we want to reassure ourselves of our own rationality – to convince ourselves that we are not being caught up by something merely voguish or merely self-interested.” In such moments the reflective thinker is an ironist, in Rorty’s sense, “[facing] up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires” (1989a, xv). The ironist, as Rorty understands him, is “the person who has doubts about his own final vocabulary, his own moral identity, and perhaps his own sanity” (Rorty 1989b, 186).

“All human beings”, Rorty writes in “Private Irony and Liberal Hope” (1989c, 73),

carry about a set of words [that] they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.

Such words form a person’s final vocabulary in Rorty’s sense. To be an ironist (in his sense) is to have “radical and continuing doubts” about this final vocabulary, and hence about who one most fundamentally is and about what value one’s life actual has.

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 of wrongness. (Rorty 1989c, 75)

And here again, because he does not explicitly recognize that such doubts belong to a very distinctive mode of discourse, Rorty has a tendency to confuse the point that the ironist aims to make with broader claims about reality, inquiry, and truth. He tends to conclude, for example, that “nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence” (Rorty 1989c, 74). But this does not follow: it is one thing to think that human beings, as the *essentially* social, cultural, and historical beings they are, have no intrinsic nature, no real essence, and quite another to think that *nothing* has such a nature or essence. Rorty’s unfortunate tendency to slide from the one claim about *us* to the other claim about *everything* should not be allowed to obscure what I think is the profoundly important point that Rorty is really after here.

We have seen that what is at issue in the ironist’s moments of profound self-doubt is her rationality, her sanity, and her moral identity. Given that it is, it should be clear that the discourse must have shifted again, from inquiry itself, whether first- or second-order,

to questions about one's *capacity* for inquiry, for a form of practice that is by its very nature neither merely vogueish nor self-interested. Such reassurance as one might seek in such moments obviously cannot, without vicious circularity, turn to inquiry for satisfaction. Instead one turns, Rorty tells us, to "those who helped make us what we are", in particular to "imaginary conversations with people (our parents, our teachers, our friends) who might be imagined to have doubts about what we are up to" (Rorty 2000b, 89), to "people intelligent enough to understand what one is talking about – people who are capable of seeing how one might have those doubts because they know what such doubts are like, people who are themselves given to irony" (Rorty 1989b, 187). As I want now to indicate, I think that the central section of the *Theaetetus*, the section that Plato has Socrates describe as a digression, is just such a moment of irony on Plato's part.

In the digression Plato has Socrates compare the life of "the man of the law-courts" to the life of "the man brought up in philosophy, the life of the student" (173d–e). The former is likened to a slave and is, Plato says, always in a hurry; although he is skilled at worldly affairs, his soul is "small and warped" (173a). The philosopher, by contrast, is like a free man, one with plenty of time; he knows nothing of worldly things, and, Plato says, quite surprisingly given what we know of Socrates, that of these things "he knows not even that he knows not" (173e). Indeed, the philosopher, as he is described in the digression, is so far removed from worldly affairs that "he scarcely knows whether [his next-door neighbor] is a man or some other kind of creature" (174b). As I read it, what Plato is offering us here is a parodic version of the distinction he so skillfully draws in *Republic* between the tyrant enslaved by his desires and the truly just man.

Why would Plato have done that? Why would he write such a parody into the heart of the *Theaetetus*? Here are two possible reasons. First, he may have done it as an expression of just the sort of self-doubt that Rorty takes to be characteristic of the ironist. Perhaps the philosopher is merely flattering himself in thinking that he is in some way better than others, in some way more in tune with reality. Perhaps even he is caught up in something merely vogueish or self-interested, not rational at all. Alternatively, Plato may be responding to flat-footed readings of *Republic*, readings that find in that work two wholly separate realms, that of being, knowledge, and reality, on the one hand, and that of becoming, opinion, and appearance, on the other. Undoubtedly there would have been such readers in Plato's day, as there are today; perhaps Plato is responding to such readers by carefully laying out that reading in a way that clearly shows just how silly it really is.

Suppose that we take the digression the first way, as an expression of profound self-doubt. In that case, we will read the dialogue as a whole as a sort of imagined conversation that Plato is holding with his beloved teacher Socrates. This is not an unreasonable reading given that Socrates, the actual historical person, might well have been expected to have doubts of just the sort Rorty describes, that is, doubts about what Plato has been up to, particularly in dialogues such as *Republic* in which Plato quite freely presents his own positive views as if he has some special and uniquely ahistorical vantage point from which to see things as they really are. If we take the digression in the second way, as a response to uncomprehending readers of *Republic*, then we will read the *Theaetetus* as an especially well-crafted, multi-layered attempt to find the sorts of readers that Rorty's ironist seeks, readers who are "intelligent enough to understand

what one is talking about.” Largely as a result of my reading of Rorty on irony, my own best guess, which I will not pursue further here, is that the two are in fact deeply related and both at work in Plato’s dialogue. What I do want to pursue further is the question of the nature of such conversations given that they do *not* take the form of inquiries, whether first- or second-order, together with the idea that in this case we need to focus on solidarity *rather* than objectivity.

Inquiry takes place in the space of giving and asking for reasons and is, as Rorty (2000a, 17) says, improved by curiosity, by one’s eagerness “to expand one’s horizons of inquiry ... so as to encompass new data, new hypotheses, new terminologies, and the like.” In inquiry, one examines as much evidence as can be gathered, both the reasons for and the reasons against any particular view; one gives reasons to others and asks reasons of them; and one is rational throughout the process of inquiry just insofar as one feels the force of the better reason. Because all this is put in doubt by the ironist’s reflections, Rorty’s imagined conversations do not in the same way take place in the space of reasons. They are and must be instead tentative and exploratory. They are also, Rorty suggests, quite like the sorts of conversations that are involved in decision-making by consensus as it contrasts with decision-making by vote or majority-rule.

The process of decision-making by consensus is essentially egalitarian, cooperative, inclusivist, and participatory. Even more important for our purposes, it is also a powerful means by which to create a substantive sense of community and a shared voice, that is, solidarity. The process aims, as the etymology of the word “con/sensus” indicates, at a thinking and feeling together. In decision-making by consensus one does not so much talk *to* others, communicating thereby one’s thoughts on a matter, as *with* them in order to achieve a common understanding and shared sense of purpose. It is, I suggest, just this sort of discourse – tentative and exploratory, addressed to one’s hopes and fears as much as to one’s beliefs, and aimed at the *creation* of a community of inquirers – that best characterizes the sort of real or imagined conversations that Rorty has in mind as responding to the ironist’s self-doubts. Such conversations assuage one’s doubts about one’s own rationality precisely because and insofar as they realize solidarity.

Inquiry, whether first- or second-order, takes time; it takes time to amass data, to form hypotheses, to test them, and so on. But inquiry is not constitutively temporal; it takes time but it is not constituted in and by its unfolding in time – as, for instance, a living organism is. Inquiry does not have its *being* in time; that it takes time is accidental, external to it. Conversation of the third sort, the ironist’s conversation as modeled on decision-making by consensus, does have its being in time; such a conversation is essentially historical, and organic. It needs time to grow and develop, and it does so because the unity that is sought can be achieved only through such a process of growth and development. Quite simply, communities of the relevant sort can *only* be grown; they cannot be built. And they cannot be built precisely because there is no objective commonality, no essence to humanity that can be appealed to in unifying the community. This according to Rorty (1989b, 177) is something Orwell saw: “that there is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature, no built-in human solidarity, to use as a moral reference point” (see also Rorty 2000f). Rather the community is unified as a community of inquirers only insofar as we, its members, *have* unified it through our conversation, only insofar as we have made it the site of free, honest, and open inquiry

into matters of common concern. Perhaps a totalitarian state could be engineered, but a community in which one is free to speak one's mind, and heart, openly and honestly, and is able to trust others to do the same, cannot be engineered; it can only be cultivated.

This process of cultivation by means of which community, solidarity, is secured is furthermore intrinsically open-ended and ongoing. We cannot, in this case, retreat to something objective, even to what Cavell calls the Ordinary; as Rorty knows, there is, and at this level there can be, no "peaceful, non-obsessed, vision of how things deeply, truly, unproblematically are" because with each move in the conversation the whole subtly, or perhaps not so subtly, shifts in ways that call for further conversation (Rorty 2000f, 349). The conversation through which we realize our rationality, our capacity for any inquiry at all, has no end. It is the lifeblood of rationality itself. Rorty writes in his essay on Orwell (1989b, 176–7):

All that matters is that if you do believe it, you can say it without getting hurt. In other words, what matters is your ability to talk to [I would say: with] other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true ... If we are ironic enough about our [own] final vocabularies, and curious enough about everyone else's, we do not have to worry about whether we are in direct contact with moral reality, or whether we are blinded by ideology, or whether we are being weakly "relativistic."

What matters in this context is that one can speak freely, without fear, about how things seem to one, and can hear others as speaking likewise. For it is just this, and not any illusory human essence, that realizes us as a community of rational inquirers, seekers after truth.

We saw that if Rorty's claim that we need to choose solidarity over objectivity is read, as McDowell reads it, as a bit of second-order philosophical discourse regarding first-order inquiry, then that claim seems to be simply mistaken. Insofar as our concern is to understand the nature of first-order inquiry we do not need to choose one or the other, either solidarity or objectivity. We can, indeed we must, instead recognize that both solidarity, freedom, objectivity, and truth, have an important role to play in our investigations into how things are. But in the context of the discourse of the ironist in doubt about his motives, his morals, and his rationality, we really do seem to be faced with Rorty's either/or: on the one hand, objectivity, that is, an appeal to something non-human that would silence once and for all those doubts, or on the other, solidarity, the self-conscious attempt to create and sustain a conversational community in which one is both free to express oneself and able to trust others to do the same. But if so, then Rorty is absolutely right to claim that full human maturity can be achieved only with the realization that in this case, the case in which the discourse aims at the *creation* of a community of inquirers, we really do have only ourselves to turn to. Any attempt, in this context, to achieve objectivity directly – that is, by appeal to some supposed ahistorical human nature, some human essence – rather than on the basis of an achieved solidarity will succeed only by fiat, by one's willed abasement to something. Where our concern is with the peculiar sort of discourse that the ironist engages in, we both can and should heed Rorty's call to take care of freedom on the grounds that if we do then truth will take care of itself.

Taking my cue from Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, I have distinguished three sorts of discourse: first-order inquiry into the various things we find around us, things such as cats, corporations, and courage; second-order reflective, philosophical inquiry into the nature and workings of first-order inquiry; and finally a third kind of discourse, a kind of existential reflection on ourselves as rational inquirers. Rorty's negative point that there is nothing interesting to be said about truth, no mark of truth, belongs, I suggested, at the level of first-order inquiry. Truth is not merely another thing in the world whose marks we might discover. But we have also seen that something more positive can be said about the rationality of inquiry at the second level, namely, that inquiry is rational precisely because and insofar as it is critically reflective and self-correcting. Both points are important, both the point that there is no mark of truth, no certainty, and also the point that the rationality of inquiry lies in our capacities of critically reflective self-correction. It is furthermore important that they are seen as belonging to different modes of inquiry. We need to be clear about the distinctive role of philosophy in our reflections on truth and knowledge, about what it can and what it cannot provide.

My principal aim, however, has been to suggest that Rorty's either/or, either solidarity or objectivity, can be read, as I think Plato's digression in the *Theaetetus* directs us to read and hence can itself be read, as an instance of yet a third sort of discourse, one that concerns, in effect, the conditions of the possibility of any inquiry at all. These conditions of the possibility of inquiry are not, of course, transcendental conditions that we (perhaps following Kant) might discover once and for all. They are rather existential, and hence political. That is, as Rorty writes at the end of his essay on Orwell (1989b, 188), "what our future rulers will be like [whether like Orwell's O'Brien or like J. S. Mill] will not be determined by any large necessary truths about human nature and its relation to truth and justice, but by a lot of small contingent facts." And here, I have suggested, Rorty is exactly right. Here we really are faced with Rorty's either/or, either solidarity or objectivity; and we are faced with it *because* we are the sorts of beings we are, not only contingent – as inanimate objects and nonhuman living things are – but also constitutively social, cultural, and historical. We have no ahistorical essence waiting to be discovered. And yet, I have urged, there can be objectivity, inquiry, the striving for truth. Nevertheless, Rorty is right: There can be objectivity, inquiry, the striving for truth *only* on the basis of solidarity, consensus, and shared meaning – only, that is, within an intentional community of ironists. Only if we take care of freedom can truth take care of itself.⁶

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Rorty (2000b, 89; 2000c, 263–4 and 266).
- 2 Again, the framing is incomplete: the dialogue as a whole ends with the end of the embedded dialogue.
- 3 In Macbeth (2014), I explore in detail this Hegelian idea of our intellectual growth and maturation, especially as it pertains to the science of mathematics.
- 4 In "Solidarity or Objectivity?" Rorty suggests that we call those wanting to ground solidarity in objectivity "realists", and those wanting to reduce objectivity to solidarity "pragmatists" (Rorty 1991, 22).

- 5 I offer a diagnosis of Rorty's blind spot in Macbeth (2008).
- 6 My thanks to Aryeh Kosman for very helpful comments on an earlier draft. A much shorter precursor to this chapter appeared in *Annales Philosophici* 2 (2011): 66–73.

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