Rorty against Rorty:

Climate Change, Rug-Pulling, and the Rhetoric of Philosophy

Whatever happened to Richard Rorty? Twenty years ago, his call to free ourselves from absolutes made him one of America's most renowned, if vilified, intellectuals; now he's most widely discussed as the guy who predicted the rise of a "strongman" to the United States' highest office in a "forgotten book" from 1998.[1] (The fact that *Achieving Our Country* was practically out of print when its prophetic passage went viral is very much to my point.) In literary studies—my corner of campus—Rorty is more likely to be invoked as a historical figure than as a guiding theoretical light, a thread of the cultural fabric of the 1980s or 90s rather than a model of "the way we argue now," as Amanda Anderson presented him in her 2006 study of contemporary theory.[2] Even in discussions of pragmatism, where Rorty's legacy should shine brightest, his most distinctive claims about the obsolescence of metaphysics, the centrality of language, and the insurmountable nature of the public/private division have been sidelined by theorists embracing the ontological assertions of William James and John Dewey. It's possible now to write about pragmatism, even to call oneself a pragmatist, without spending much time with Rorty.

How did this happen? I ask this question as a friend, but not a fanboy. That is, I think that Rorty is largely right about the big issues, but I disagree with him on enough of the details not to feel bothered if his particular vision falls out of favor. When it comes to making the case for why philosophers (and scientists, artists, and everyone else) should drop the

---

[1] Sean Illing, "Richard Rorty's prescient warnings for the American left," *Vox*, 11 January 2017. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/2/9/14543938/donald-trump-richard-rorty-election-liberalism-conservatives.

[2] Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), ch. 5. For a more recent discussion of Rorty as part of the culture of irony in postwar US, see Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

search for foundational Truth or bedrock Reality, I'm right there with him. His diagnosis of the problem is about as good as it gets. But his solutions often leave me cold. Ideas like "endless conversation" and "social hope" are nice—certainly we could use more of the latter—but they are vague, probably intentionally so, since Rorty didn't like to dictate from the philosopher's armchair. He preferred to tell people what they should "drop": epistemology, experience, talk of correspondence or representations, attempts to formulate a master discourse capable of subsuming public aims and private aspirations, and so on. He eschewed the acts of conceptual construction associated with metaphysics and, for him even worse, systematic metaphysics. Yet this negative stance has left Rorty open to the charges of "relativism" that his philosophy should have made obsolete.[3] And in a climate of "post-truth" politics, where "alternative facts" are invoked to justify deplorable acts, such charges have renewed bite.

I see Rorty as a Moses figure. He envisioned the promised land of a culture devoid of the desire for absolutes, but his own philosophy—or, more precisely, his own rhetoric—couldn't lead all the way there. This is for two big reasons. First, Rorty's eagerness to prevent any one discourse from crowning itself king led him to dismiss not just hierarchies but also distinctions, and so it's difficult, using Rorty alone, to push back against the anti-expert rhetoric of the contemporary Right. And the one distinction that he did leave in place—that between nature and culture, or, in his preferred jargon, causes and meanings—keeps his work from bearing directly on the challenges posed by climate change (reason #2). In the first instance he went too far; in the second, not far enough.

If we want to stick with Rorty's vision, we will have to give up these two points. We'll also have to resume, in turn, several things he asked us to drop. To make this case—

[3] For a clear statement of both Rorty's negative approach and his rejection of the relevance of relativism, see the introduction of *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999). Hereafter cited as *PSH*.

which is ultimately a case for a more robust way of doing without absolutes—I will read Rorty against a concurrent strain of thinkers also charged with relativism and also, though less directly, linked with pragmatism. The philosophical wing of science studies in the 1980s and 90s, particularly Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, and Donna Haraway, developed an approach every bit as antifoundationalist as Rorty's, but more carefully guarded against accusations of mere social constructivism (in part because of their focus on scientific practices). For these thinkers, metaphysics as such was never the problem, only a particular metaphysical description that had been naturalized in the epistemology of modern science. Nor do they scorn "experience," but rather embrace it as a way of emphasizing the relational processes that tie humans to nonhumans. They show what contemporary pragmatism looks like when it takes its cues from James's radical empiricism, swerves to avoid the linguistic turn, and proceeds through ethnographic inquiries into the practices that produce disciplinary knowledge, starting with the sciences. They develop the concepts and descriptions needed to step out of the rubble that Rorty made of traditional philosophy, without rebuilding the old monuments. Rorty probably wouldn't have liked many of the steps they (or I) recommend. But what could be more Rortian than rejecting a philosophical jargon that we deem to have outlived its usefulness?

Freedom and Constraints: Where Rorty Goes Too Far

Rorty hated authoritarianism. His central philosophical mission, as I understand it, was to prevent people from invoking a nonhuman authority—God, Reason, physics—to make other people shut up. He wanted to keep the conversation free and moving, with all comers entertained so long as they agreed to use persuasion rather than force. The idea is summed up in the title of a late collection of interviews: "take care of freedom and truth will

take care of itself."[4] What Rorty rightly worried about was the threat to liberal democracies and the "conversation of the West" posed by totalitarianism and the weakening of the welfare state.[5] This theme surfaces in the last chapters of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), comes front and center in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), and motivates the quote about the "strongman" in *Achieving Our Country* (1998). The epigraph of *Contingency*, taken from one of *the* anti-totalitarian novelists of the period, Milan Kundera, spells it out clearly. Kundera hails "the imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood" as the legacy of "modern Europe." Rorty wants to protect this legacy, and he famously follows Kundera in looking to the novel to do so. His antifoundationalism is part and parcel of his commitment to freedom.

This is all straightforward enough in his political writings; yet in his philosophy Rorty allows freedom, here understood as the "hands-off" variety sometimes called "negative" freedom, to slide into a rhetoric of *leveling*—and this rhetoric has proven politically dangerous. The aim of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is to cure philosophers of the delusion that their discipline has special access to Reality, grounded either in a special method (say the "scientific" one) or a special feature of human nature ("our glassy essence"). Nothing's special in this way for Rorty—only useful for one task or another. Neither philosophy nor science nor religion can, by his lights, have the unconditional power to tell others to shut up since they alone have the "true" jargon, the "right" description of the world. Everything can be redescribed; "there are many descriptions of the same things and events, and . . . there is no neutral standpoint from which to judge the superiority of one description over another."[6] Such statements, easy to find in Rorty's work, begin with an important

---

[4] Eduardo Mendieta, ed. *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005).
[5] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [1979] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), chapter 8, hereafter cited as *PMN*, and *Achieving Our Country*.
[6] Richard Rorty, "Getting Rid of the Appearance-Reality Distinction," *New Literary History* 47.1 (winter 2016): 67-81, 79.

premise—that there's no master discourse for understanding reality—but suggest that the main upshot of this premise is that all descriptions exist on the same level. The rhetoric is deflationary (and could border on condescending).[7]

No one who has read Rorty will be surprised by this characterization; it's part of his professional and popular image. But it's worth reminding ourselves of what it feels like to read him, since I'm arguing that it's the rhetorical presentation of his positions, more so than the positions themselves, that has distorted his philosophical legacy. Take the end of "Inquiry as Recontextualization" from 1988. After pages spent dismantling the realist view that an object of inquiry has a "context of its own" that the inquirer should privilege, and then proposing an alternative perspective that inquiry is a matter of recontextualization, Rorty argues that recontextualization is a good in itself—all the philosopher or anyone else needs. But of course, as Rorty admits, there's no ground for this belief, no "context" or feature of the world that makes it true. So how can Rorty defend it? "All I can do is recontextualize various developments in philosophy and elsewhere so as to make them look like stages in a story of poeticizing and progress."[8] Even a reader pulled along by the force of Rorty's dismissals throughout the essay will likely trip over this presentation of the point as one so based on manipulating appearances ("make them look like") that it can't help but invoke the contrasting notion of a "reality" that Rorty in fact tries to "dump." Likewise, when Rorty addresses literary critics in "Texts and Lumps" (1985), published when Theory still ruled in English departments, he asks critics to stop searching for a philosophical "method" and instead "to simply have favorite philosophers" whom they praise and others whom they damn

[7] See, for instance, when Rorty likens a person who has been redescribed to a child whose "precious possessions" have been called "trash" in ch. 4 of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. See also *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 322-33, for the argument that, with a hat-tip to Kuhn, arguments in science are no different from arguments in politics, morality, or art.

[8] Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as recontextualization: An anti-dualist account of interpretation," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 96, 106, 110.

"by making invidious comparisons."[9] Again, even a critic persuaded against searching for a grand method to ground her reading practices will still bristle at the alternative being a kind of child's game of liking or not liking philosophers. Though the case against "method" is convincing, the "ironic" alterative is destined to irritate and disappoint.

In 1989, at least, Rorty was confident that the ironic stance he advocated would not weaken liberal societies. In "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," chapter four of *Contingency*, he responds to the contention that the widespread embrace of philosophical irony would be bad for liberalism by drawing an analogy with religious belief: just as Europe didn't collapse into barbarism when large numbers of people stopped believing in immortality and an all-seeing God, so too will we manage just fine, probably better, if we give up abstractions like "Truth" and "human essence," in recognition that all such "final vocabularies" are contingent. With this analogy, Rorty shrugs off the objection.[10] Thirty years later, it's not so clear that there's nothing to worry about. The insistence that there's no final authority on matters of reality easily blurs into the claim that there is no authority, and from there to the sentiment that, as Michael Gove put it, the British people "have had enough of experts," or, in Jared Kushner's version, "We've read enough books." I'm not saying that Rorty is somehow the same as the anti-intellectual Right. But I do think that in his effort to free culture from intellectual authoritarianism he misstated his case by allowing his *general* antifoundationalist point to overshadow the *particular* ways in which localized authority—also known as expertise—is practiced and maintained.[11]

---

[9] Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78, 79.
[10] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 85-91. Hereafter cited as *CIS*.
[11] Rorty misdescribes the problem here when he characterizes "*the* problem of ironist theory" as "the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority" (*CIS* 105). As will become clear, I think that the problem is less how to "overcome" authority than how to *situate* it.

Rorty credits the philosophy of science, and particularly Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), with the idea that no one method can grant exclusive access to Reality. I agree that science studies is the place to go here—but I think that the most useful insights come from work that followed Kuhn, work that takes up some of the same issues as Rorty but approaches them from a different disciplinary perspective. In the 1980s, for instance, Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway both adamantly opposed the dominance of epistemology and the pretensions of a neutral ground, what Haraway called the "god-trick." But Latour's ethnographic studies of contemporary scientific practices led him into more direct engagement with working scientists and forced him to articulate a third way between the so-called postmodern relativists (whom the scientists understood as treating scientific objects as reducible to social constructions) and the camps that Rorty called "know-nothings": religious fundamentalists, "scientists who are offended at the suggestion that being 'scientific' is not the highest intellectual virtue," and traditional epistemologists (*CIS* 82). Latour and Rorty were often lumped together as belonging to the relativist side of this dichotomy.[12] Both dismissed the framework that produced the apparent division between relativist "making" and realist "finding." But where Rorty mostly told readers to "drop" the framework and came to suspect that "all that either side [of the debate] can do is to restate its case over and over again, in context after context," Latour has labored to create an alternative schema, one that could cultivate the intellectual habits that Rorty valued (*PSH* xxxii).[13]

---

[12] See, for instance, physicist Steven Weinberg's essay "Sokal's Hoax," *New York Review of Books* (8 August 1996), which Rorty discusses in "Thomas Kuhn, Rocks, and the Laws of Physics," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

[13] Rorty wrote favorably about Latour, though not at any length. He reviewed both *We Have Never Been Modern* (in *Common Knowledge*) and *Aramis; or the Love of Technology* (in *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*), and he mentions Latour (again, favorably) in *Achieving Our Country* (p. 121) and *Philosophy and Social Hope* (p. 47). As far as I know, he didn't write about Stengers or Haraway, nor did they or Latour write about Rorty. There is, however, a record of an event, just before Rorty's death, in which Haraway, Stengers, and Rorty all spoke at Stanford about Alfred North Whitehead. The occasion is notable for how much Rorty set himself apart from the other two speakers. A recording of the event is available at https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/whiteheads-account-of-the-sixth-day/id385665061?i=1000085438278.

What's more, Latour and Haraway saw the weaponization of postmodern thought by the Right coming. This is the set-up for Latour's oft-cited (and frequently misread) 2004 essay, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," which takes the cynicism of the George W. Bush presidency and the growing damage of climate-change denial as an occasion for asking how the humanities might reclaim notions like "reality" and "truth" without slipping back into Reality and Truth. It's also the point of Haraway's "Situated Knowledges" (1988), a central text in feminist science studies and a model for how to skirt the dead-end dichotomy of making and finding. Because they were working to develop accounts that could simultaneously deny the absolute authority of any one discourse while embracing the partial and embodied ways that localized authority is achieved, Latour and Haraway give us better tools for confronting our contemporary situation, when a bad appropriation of the postmodern critique of knowledge threatens to undercut all claims to expertise.

What, then, are these tools? How did science studies of the Latourian ilk construct concepts and descriptions that pushed beyond the initial Kuhnian insight? Latour, with his knack for slogans and catchphrases, has proposed replacing "facts"—understood as entities whose truth value exists apart from human interest—with "*factishes*," a mixture of facts and fetishes (entities whose value depends entirely on human interest). The factish is thus a straightforward attempt to populate the middle ground between the poles of fact and value, an effort to provide a handhold for the work required to "drop" the habit of thinking in terms of that dichotomy. To start, it changes the questions we ask of scientific objects. If we think of a neutrino (or gravity, or DNA) as a *fact*, then we assume that it has always been out there in the world, waiting to be discovered by humans who had finally devised the proper tools or means. Once it's discovered, we can then consider it apart from the means and tools used. Not so when we switch to seeing the neutrino as a "factish." In that case, the product is inseparable from the practice; scientific objects, even as they are granted an "autonomous"

existence, don't exist apart from the interested and attentive efforts that bring them into being: all those experiments, laboratory equipment, and grant funding. And so we regard the neutrino differently. We ask—with interest!—what trials brought it into existence and how its autonomy has been achieved. The object in "objectivity" then refuses to block out the activities of which it is a part.[14]

The factish is Latour's attempt to *situate* scientific claims to knowledge. "Situate" is Haraway's term—an immensely useful one for detaching objectivity from the authoritarian exaggerations of modern epistemology. She begins with the feminist insight that all human activities, including all practices of knowledge-production, are embodied, and that the notion of a disembodied way of knowing is a fantasy, too often used for pernicious ends. Like Rorty, she attacks the ocular metaphors of Western philosophy and rejects the "god-trick" of an all-seeing perspective (and she goes further in tracking the role these ideas have played the histories of capitalism, patriarchy, and whiteness). Yet she also insists on the need for ways of speaking about "reality" and "objectivity" that don't level all discourses in a free-for-all: as she puts it, she would "still like to talk about *reality* with more confidence than we allow to the Christian Right when they discuss the Second Coming."[15] Here's where embodiment comes in, because when activities are embodied, they are also localized and situated. Rather than seeing this as an impediment to Knowledge, Haraway presents it as the only way anyone ever knows anything. "The knowing self is partial in all its guises," she writes, "never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another," to achieve the "partial connections"

[14] Latour develops this concept in *The Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and "The Slight Surprise of Action: Facts, Fetishes, and Factishes," ch. 9 in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). The example of the neutrino comes from Isabelle Stengers's elaboration of Latour's concept in *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Roberto Bononno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
[15] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (autumn 1988): 575-99, 577.

that, for Haraway, make for the only kind of objectivity worth wanting (586). Such connections aren't totalizing, in the way that Rorty's "know-nothing" philosophers and scientists might want, but because they are situated they are *responsible*, meaning that they can be "called into account" in the way same way as Latour's factishes (583).[16]

The Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers's seven-volume *Cosmopolitics* (1997) offers an impressive account of how this focus on embodied and situated practices can refashion "reality" and "objectivity" outside the framework of the Mirror of Nature. Stengers too aims at moving past the impasses of the so-called Science Wars that pitted realist scientists against relativist humanists, and to do so she builds on Latour's "factishes," which she sees as "relating the power of truth to a *practical event* and not to a world to which practices would merely provide access."[17] So in one crucial way her project overlaps with Rorty's: both *Cosmopolitics* and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* tell the story of how a particular discipline—physics for Stengers, philosophy-as-epistemology for Rorty—came to regard itself as the sole arbiter of claims about Reality. Stengers devotes several hundred pages to charged moments in the history of physics, from Galileo to Prigogine, each time attending to how the creative achievements of experimental practice were de-situated and generalized into an epistemology that elevated scientific "access" to the physical world over all other claims to knowledge.

Unlike Rorty, though, Stengers is careful not to present herself as a rug-puller. Where Rorty's critics saw him as casually shrugging as he told a whole profession to scrap what

---

[16] I want to emphasize again that Haraway and Rorty share the same targets and would, I imagine, agree on a lot. Consider the following passage in which Haraway distinguishes "situated knowledges" from relativism. "Such preferred positioning is as hostile to various forms of relativism as to the most explicitly totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority. But the alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision, which is always finally the unmarked category whose power depends on systematic narrowing and obscuring. The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges *sustaining solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology*" (584, emphasis added). One can imagine Haraway with *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* on her desk while she wrote that last sentence.

[17] Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Roberto Bononno (Mineapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 24. This translation collects the first three books of the full volume; the others are collected in *Cosmopolitics II*.

they had been doing and start again, Stengers devotes the first volume of *Cosmopolitics* to laying out concepts (including the factish) aimed at transforming how scientists become interested in their work—not what they do in the lab but how they come to regard its importance, how they understand it. Because she sees scientists and critical philosophers alike as her audience, she distinguishes herself from the "relativism" she associates, tellingly, with "irony": the reduction of factishes to "a routine of human, all too human, negotiation" and compromise, with its attendant attitude of disinterest in the practices it redescribes.[18]

In other words, Stengers is not a leveler. She insists that practices are neither equal nor free. They have authority, within their limits, and it's this embrace of limitation that most decisively separates Stengers from Rorty. "The desire for a theory of knowledge is a desire for constraint," Rorty once wrote; he meant it as an insult, an example of how philosophy has enshrined the bad-faith fear of contingency (*PMN* 315). But even if absolute constraints reflect such fears, localized and situated constraints are the very means by which anything is created. And so Stengers asks us to approach scientific practices by inquiring after the constraints that define them, specifically the *obligations* that practitioners submit themselves to in order to "create the value of their activity" and the *requirements* that must be satisfied for a phenomena to enter into these activities.[19] How Stengers defines and uses these concepts is at present less important than the way she associates them with a "principle of nonequivalence" that insists on the singularity of "modes of existence" peculiar to practices and their products (54). Experimental research, contra the "relativists," is "irreducible to just another argumentative strategy" (52). For that reason, Stengers's metaphor for how the various knowledge practices relate to one another is not that of a generalized "conversation," in which no one is the absolute authority and everyone can talk, but an "ecology of

[18] Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, 24, but also see 38.
[19] Ibid., 55, but see 42-55.

practices," in which each discipline acts through its own constraints to add its objects to an evolving reality. She treats tolerance as a "curse" and as a cousin to "irony" for the way it levels out the messy differentials that define this ecology.[20] Indeed, she makes the perception of such differentials a goal of her work: she joins Rorty in resisting philosophy's traditional path of generalization, but she takes this project one step further by creating concepts aimed at training readers to respond to more and more differences.[21]

This all boils down to the difference between getting rid of hierarchies and getting rid of distinctions. The first is a fine task, the second misguided. I don't think that Rorty really wanted to level all jargons this radically. But I do think that his rhetoric leaves many readers with the debilitating feeling that he's robbed them of the ability to discriminate, beyond naming "favorites" or spinning "as if" stories. Thus the chorus of critics protesting that "utility" or "fit" for particular tasks simply can't be the full story about truth.[22] "The world does not speak. Only we do" (*CIS* 6). Rorty allowed this point to slide into the idea that one jargon is as good as any other when it comes to knowing the world. He let his antifoundationalism make him a leveler, which then left him vulnerable to being remembered as a "postmodern relativist." But Latour, Haraway, and Stengers point to a different way to give up absolute foundations, one that unsettles the dualism of Nature and Culture that underwrites Rorty's "one world, many descriptions" framework. "Many worlds, many practices," all situated and embodied, is more like it.

---

[20] See Book 7, "The Curse of Tolerance" in Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics II*, trans. Roberto Bononno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Stengers's topic here is the social sciences, and the "curse" is "upon anyone who thinks they are free to redefine, in their own terms, the way in which the 'other' inhabits this world, even when they are willing to tolerate them, even when they regret their own lost innocence" (310).

[21] For an elaboration of this aspect of Stengers's work, see Bruno Latour, "How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies," *Body & Society* 10.2-3 (2004): 205-29, and Martin Savranksy and Isabelle Stengers, "Relearning the Art of Paying Attention," *SubStance* 47.1 (2018): 130-45.

[22] See the essays in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) and Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007). I should admit that Blackburn and other critics of Rorty would be unlikely to agree that Latour or Stengers provide the full story about truth either. Addressing that larger debate lies far beyond the scope of this essay. But I do believe that the emphasis on situated practices, developed in the next section, cuts short the usual complaints about antifoundationalism.

Not Far Enough: Rorty's Lingering Essentialism

Rorty wouldn't have liked that last formulation. He suspected talk of multiple worlds, and lamented that Kuhn occasionally lapsed into such rhetoric.[23] It smacked of metaphysics; it kicked open the door that Rorty had so firmly shut to keep appeals to nonhuman authority out of human conversation. Rorty was no friend of dualisms, but he clung to variants of this one throughout his career: nonhuman and human, causation and meaning, Nature and Culture. He rejected the "mirror" but left Nature in place. The science studies camp, on the other hand, made this dichotomy one of their foremost targets. They argued that getting past the deadlock of making vs. finding required an overhaul of the whole metaphysical framework that divided brute, physical nature from reason-giving, agential humanity. Rorty's unwillingness to do this led him to exaggerate the leveling claims he made about competing discourses. He went too far in his rejection of authority because he didn't go far enough in rooting out his lingering essentialism.

Rorty's philosophy rests on the concepts of Nature and Culture. Admittedly he never would have used those terms, and he would have rejected them when stated so baldly. But nonetheless they structure his central argument that, as he puts it in the first chapter of *Contingency*, "The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not," and that since "only descriptions of the world can be true or false," then we should stop looking to the world to secure our claims for truth and look instead to one another, to our language-games and the moves they make possible (5). Here as elsewhere he doesn't argue the distinction so much as take it as self-evident. Rorty knows what counts as social (namely, practices of justification) and what counts as natural (brute forces), and his gambit is to get us to stop thinking that the latter sets any conditions upon the former. The world might exert "causal

[23] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 324, 325 , and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 168.

pressures" that lead us to change our beliefs, but the only way to act on, understand, or formulate those beliefs is through human language (*PSH* 33; see also *CIS* 6, *PMN* chs. 3 and 4). For Rorty, there's a Rubicon that divides physical causes from social justifications, and this underlying rift shows up in the easy way he generalizes about "the world," which he casts as a matter of causal forces beyond our concern, and in the importance he places on "culture" as the only form of situatedness that he discusses at any length (his trademark ethnocentrism).

At this point some readers will protest: what about Rorty's marvelous dismissal of the very idea of "the world" in opposition to our conceptual frameworks? Hasn't he, more so than most other philosophers, encouraged us to celebrate "the world well lost"?[24] It's true that Rorty joins Donald Davidson in rejecting the scheme/content distinction. But in this endeavor he sets up a different binary between "brute physical resistance"—the meaningless push and pull of naturalism—and the languages we use to reweave the "webs of beliefs and desires" that make us who we are.[25] The two don't touch each other. And though he usually uses the terms "reasons and causes," he acknowledges that, "more broadly," the distinction is between "the mental and the physical."[26] Again, Rorty's strategy is to give us less instead of more: he concedes a realm of "brute, inhuman, causal stubbornness" but only to say that it doesn't really matter, that all we need to "satisfy our realist intuitions" is the habit of talking *as if* objects are independent of us.[27] It's talk, not causes, that count.

One of the most scandalous positions held by Latour, Stengers, and Haraway is that the self-evident division between Nature and Culture is not only not that evident but also downright harmful. The central thesis of Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) is that

---

[24] Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost," *The Journal of Philosophy* 69.19 (1972): 649-665.
[25] Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 81, and "Inquiry as Recontextualization," 93.
[26] Richard Rorty, "Non-Reductive Physicalism," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 116.
[27] Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," 83; "Inquiry as Recontextualization," 101.

this partition is of recent make, that it in fact coincides with the story about the invention of "mind" in the seventeenth century that Rorty tells in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Being "modern," Latour argues, means believing in this division, despite the fact that the actual practices of those who call themselves modern produce *hybrid* entities that stretch over the supposed chasm of mute things and speaking humans. He builds on the ethnographic studies of contemporary scientists published in *Laboratory Life* (1979) and *Science in Action* (1987) to insist that, as the title has it, we've never abided by the creed we profess, and that the proof is in our actions. As a corollary (and as the truly scandalous bit), Latour revises the modern account of agency by extending the category to nonhuman things. Stengers and Haraway too: "Situated knowledges," Haraway explains, "require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource" (592). It's not that there's no difference between humans and nonhumans; after all, the point of doing away with this big dualism is to allow us to register the myriad distinctions it papered over. Rather, their point is that objects make us act, they make a difference in our activities, and for that reason they must be granted a role in our accounts of knowledge and society.

In short, Latour wants to shake his readers' confidence about what counts as natural or social. Is a melting polar ice cap a "natural" phenomenon or a "human" one? What about a bridge, or a subway system, or a work of art? In *The Politics of Nature* and *Reassembling the Social*, Latour shows that we'll never get straight about such things unless we replace the Nature-Culture division with detailed accounts of the hybridizing practices that crisscross that boundary to produce their objects. The social, by this account, is not a distinct domain but rather a way of assembling actors and networks, a way of forming relations and thus constituting a common world. Prior to investigation, you can't know what the social will entail. The same goes for nature. As Barry Allen points out, Latour's project puts Rorty in an awkward light: because Rorty insists on the "stark alternative" of nature on one side and

convention, language, and social practice on the other, he puts himself in "the uncomfortable position of knowing a priori from what class of facts any explanation of knowledge must draw."[28] There's a lingering essentialism in his work that shapes how he pitches his problems and describes his solutions. And it's one that science studies in the constructivist mode attacked head-on.

Think back, for instance, to the quote about the world (singular) being "out there" while descriptions (plural) are not. This is a classically Modern formulation.[29] Despite his antipathy to dualisms, Rorty did not so much dispense with this one as tell us to forget about one half of it, since no discourse provides a direct pipeline to Reality. And he had no patience for those who pined for what had been lost. He dismissed "scary rhetoric about 'losing touch with the world'" as distorting the very simple point that we can only make sense of things using the words we have to make sense of them (*PMN* 276). "The world" doesn't enter into it. I admire the way that Rorty refused to engage in the pathos for a lost Real that haunts the work of other twentieth-century antifoundationalists (Derrida, Baudrillard) (e.g., *PMN* 310-11). But in the end his "What, me worry?"-stance led to the rug-pulling rhetoric discussed above and ultimately proceeded from his disinterest in questioning the Nature/Culture binary. To get past the destructive phase of this project requires giving up *the* world, yes, but only to then acknowledge *many* worlds, all grounded in practical activity.

Latour, Stengers, and Haraway can take this next step because they have reconfigured the categories of agency, objects, and reality outside the split between discourses and the world. They start with *practices*, usually experimental practices, and that means starting with

---

[28] Barry Allen, "The Cultural Politics of Nonhuman Things," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 8.1 (June 2011): 3019, 15. In this insightful essay, Allen juxtaposes Latour and Rorty and covers many of the same points covered here, including Rorty's "sociological" understanding of expert knowledge (15) and the way his exclusion of the nonhuman "seems to grow from a worry about arbitrary authority" (16). The difference between our approaches is that Allen emphasizes objects and I emphasize practices.

[29] See anthropologist Phillipe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), a book that Latour cites with enthusiasm.

the active tangle of humans and nonhumans in the process of working something out, something that could only later be classified as "social" or "natural." They then treat these situated activities as examples of *world-making*, by which I simply mean that in instituting relations and bringing new objects into existence (genes, ADHD, Romantic notions of genius) they participate in the processes that define reality. After all, giving up the bedrock of Reality doesn't mean that nothing is real, only that things aren't real in the way that epistemology would have us believe. We can trade the solid ground of "the world" for the evolving realities of practice—and in that way lose foundations without losing discrimination. This is the task of Latour's most ambitious work to date, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013). Here Latour treats a range of modern practices—the sciences, engineering, law, economics, art, and religion—as each involving a distinct "mode of existence," its own way of linking product and practitioner to practice in the mode of the factish. His pluralism is ontological: it goes all the way down. It's not about a plurality of ways of talking about a single world but rather a variety of techniques for bringing a world into existence. Latour can thus dispense with Reality while interesting us in the myriad ways in which the world is realized, the specific practices that give the big abstractions of Truth and Being all the ground they need.

Latour uses ontological pluralism—a very un-Rortian doctrine—to do exactly what Rorty wanted done: namely, shift the focus away from the endless gotcha game of "social construction" and towards "proposing some alternative construction: a more effecting and less damaging way of talking about what is going on."[30] Latour would only change "talking about what is going on" to "realizing a common world"—and in that way guard against the tendency to slide into cultural relativism ("one Nature, many Cultures") and foreground the on-the-ground work required to cultivate a shared reality. These tweaks, to repeat, allow

[30] Richard Rorty, "Phony Science Wars," *The Atlantic* 284.5 (November 1999): 120-22, 121.

Latour to foster Rorty's vision of philosophy as the cultivation of social hope even better than Rorty himself. Moreover, where Rorty tended to rest after explaining the impossibility of unmediated access, thinking that his work was done after taking off the philosophical blinders, Latour's enthusiasm for the detailed labor and procedures involved in the modes of existence—what Rorty once praised as his "genuine delight in empirical fieldwork"—makes him better equipped to demonstrate how robust and impressive our mediated access is.[31] Such demonstrations provide roadmaps into the ways of thinking that Rorty wanted to inspire in his readers, but that his own rhetoric stymied.

One reason that Rorty stalls in this regard is that he only really cared about one kind of practice, "the practice of giving and asking for reasons."[32] He usually called it "conversation," and by his own insistence it is *social* through and through. He wanted philosophy to be "a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with a nonhuman reality" (*PMN* 157). But as I hope to have shown, conversation won't cut it. It can't be stretched to cover the range of hybrid-making practices covered by science studies, and so offers a far less satisfying account of objectivity and the plurality of ways that humans and nonhumans conspire in the process of reality. If we want to keep conversation, we will have to extend it along the lines Haraway does in "Situated Knowledges," when she envisions the world as a "coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse." Such a formulation retains Rorty's lovely image of conversation as a process of getting to know another person and of finding a shared vocabulary, but it extends the exchange to include our engagements with nonhumans: "the loving care people might take to

[31] This passage comes from Rorty's review of Latour's *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (1992).
[32] Rorty, "Getting Rid of the Appearance-Reality Distinction," 74.

learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view, even when the other is our own machine."[33]

Rorty's treatment of conversation as the master-practice follows from his famous substitution of *language* for classical pragmatism's emphasis on *experience*.[34] He held that this switch pulled the pragmatist out of the muck of metaphysics. Yet the science studies camp's unabashed embrace of a pluralist ontology attentive to the modes of existence characteristic of situated practices (a mouthful to be sure, but hopefully a meaningful one at this point) flips this narrative, making a return to metaphysics and experience the hallmarks of twenty-first-century pragmatism. What Latour and Stengers and to a lesser extent Haraway have done is to give new life to discarded features of James's and Dewey's thought, usually in tacit opposition to Rorty. They've rebooted the pragmatist revival by starting with James's *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912) rather than *Pragmatism* (1907), and by drawing from Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925) as much as from *The Quest for Certainty* (1929). This certainly wasn't their initial intention—and in fact one can find skeptical remarks about pragmatism in their early work. But in the past ten or so years, both have held up William James and his philosophical heir Alfred North Whitehead as tutelary spirits for their own work.[35] They have found in early-twentieth-

---

[33] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 596, 583. For Rorty on conversation as getting to know someone, see *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 7, and the discussion of Donald Davidson in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 14-15.

Karen Barad, another science studies practitioner who fits easily in the lineage I'm tracing, builds on this idea from Haraway in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007). Barad too emphasizes practices as a way of dispensing with the nature/culture or matter/meaning distinction, and her contribution is to have elaborated specific concepts that change how we regard what used to go by the names of "words" and "things." Instead of language, she emphasizes "discursive practices" which encompass not only what is said but also the techniques and technologies that constrain what can and cannot be said (so apparatuses count as much as sentences). Similarly, rather than "things," she proposes *phenomena* constituted by an "intra-action" of various agencies, human and nonhuman. The upshot is that "[m]eaning is made possible through specific material practices," and thus that a hard distinction between "brute" causation and meaning distorts our ability to recognize how human efforts work in concert with a range of nonhuman agencies.

[34] For example, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 35. See also "Dewey's Metaphysics" and "Dewey between Darwin and Hegel."

[35] For an account of Latour's belated recognition that, in the words of Henry to William James, he had long been "unconsciously pragmatizing," see Antoine Hennion, "From ANT to Pragmatism: A Journey with Bruno Latour

century pragmatism a vision of experience as an ongoing process of making and instituting relations between an organism and an environment that fits their own studies of scientific practices as world-building affairs that knit together human and nonhuman actors. *Process* is key here, since what's important is that relations are always being reconstituted. As Latour writes in *Down to Earth* (2018), "there are not organisms on one side and an environment on the other, but a coproduction by both. *Agencies* are redistributed."[36] At this point we might look back to the argument of the previous section and recall that *expert*, etymologically, means *experienced* or *practiced*.[37] Learning to attend to the redistribution of agencies within experience, and to recognize and shape the distinctions that come to define it in any particular practice, is precisely what's involved in reclaiming "expertise" as a situated concept. So too can experience temper the Rortian emphasis on language-games; for within the broad process of experience, language is best understood as a component of practices, one way of establishing relations that takes its place within the world's wider network of conversations.[38]

This expanded sense of conversation—bolstered by a reconstituted pragmatism—entails a new understanding of description. Rorty exalts the creation of new descriptions above all else: it's what humans do, even what makes us human, since "our inviolable uniqueness lies in our poetic ability to say unique and obscure things" (*PMN* 123, see also

---

at the CSI," trans. Stephen Muecke, *New Literary History* 47. 2-3 (spring and summer 2016): 289-308, esp. 300-1.

[36] Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climactic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 76. Hennion makes clear that James's notion of "pure experience" also helped Latour to cut through the Nature/Culture divide.

[37] Oxford English Dictionary, *expert*, adj.1. Kathryn Murphy points out this etymology in "Of Sticks and Stones: The Essay, Experience, and Experiment," in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, eds. Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[38] It's only fair to note that Rorty does come close to this position in a paragraph from *Philosophy and Social Hope*, when he describes the relationship between language and the world in Darwinian terms. Language is a tool, he explains, and "there is no way in which tools can take one out of touch with reality" since "tool-using is part of the interaction of the organism with its environment." Where things start to go a bit funny is when Rorty proceeds to treat the Darwinian approach as thinking of words as "nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment" (xxiii). Rorty temporarily aligns language and causes by conceding that, from a Darwinian perspective, language is part of nature, but he might instead have asked how the "causal network" itself looks different when it is understood as including all the features of language, including meaning, as integral rather than somehow separate and merely human.

378). He holds "the power of strangeness" in high regard (*PMN* 360). Yet because he adheres to Davidson's view of metaphor as "meaningless," he never delves too deep into explaining how novel descriptions come about. At times, when he's borrowing from Harold Bloom, he suggests that the "strong poet" creates new vocabularies "by her own sheer strength" (*CIS* 28). More often, he chalks such achievements up to accident, a freak variation at the "causal" level that bubbles up to the space of justifications and, if it's lucky, gets taken up by others: meaningless metaphors becoming meaningful only by "dying," becoming literalized, and so "enlarging social space."[39] Hence Rorty's doctrine that "poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need" (*CIS* 37). He not overly curious about how this all happens; he just wants us to be grateful when it occurs.

James J. Bono, whose work on "performative metaphor" offers a Whiteheadian alternative to this view, links Rorty's vagueness on the emergence of novel descriptions to his Kuhnian allegiances. For Kuhn, revolutionary change comes about when a shift in "paradigm" pushes practitioners to see things differently. But as Bono joins Stengers in pointing out, this explanation prevents us from recognizing the more basic work of positioning accomplished through practices.[40] What we do, how we are caught in the "forms of material-semiotic engagement with the flow and flux of entangled 'things,' relations, and processes in our experience of nature," shapes what we see more than any conceptual or linguistic "paradigm." In following Kuhn, Rorty made redescription a matter of "revolution" rather than an arduous "material-semiotic" process. As a result, Bono explains, his account of

[39] Rorty, "Non-Reductive Physicalism," 124.

[40] Stengers and Bono both emphasize the tendency to elide practices and ideas that has affected the reception of Kuhn's work. As Stengers argues, "the originality of Thomas Kuhn's concept of a 'paradigm' was to show us how the members of a scientific discipline learn to recognize and *treat* problems. This question of treatment has most often been forgotten, assimilated into the very conventional notion of a 'vision of the world,' with its equally conventional notion of a silent world, one that allows itself to be indifferently deciphered and interpreted according to whatever ideas are prevalent at the time" (39). Rorty's understanding of Kuhn in terms of redescriptions and language-games falls more in line with the "idea" camp than the "practice" one.

vocabulary change "comes perilously close to admitting no choice, *no intrinsic contest*, in the making of the new."[41] Another case of no distinctions. Because he retained a Modern picture of how meanings are distributed, Rorty inevitably fell into a rhetoric of genius (Bloom) or fluke (Davidson) that obscures how and why some vocabularies win the day.

Descriptions are just as important for Latour, Stengers, and Haraway. Yet these thinkers, because of how they have remade the notions of agency and causation, press further into the question of how such novelty occurs. They build it into the very fabric of reality, not as "accident" but as what Latour calls the "slight surprise of action," the unpredictable way in which a practitioner is taken outside herself in the act of practice. "Whenever we make something *we* are not in command," Latour writes; "we are slightly *overtaken* by the action: every builder knows that."[42] Since agency exists outside of humans, since it's distributed within action, acts of creation involve not just the "sheer strength" of the strong poet but a whole range of entities that Actor-Network-Theory (the name for Latour's sociological approach) aims at describing. Antoine Hennion, for instance, a longtime colleague of Latour's, applies this method to the study of music; to prevent aesthetics from being reduced to mere sociology (Pierre Bourdieu's approach), he treats the artwork as "a heterogeneous tissue (human, material, corporeal, collective . . .) with its resistances and cumulative effects (a keyboard, a sound, a scale, the body of the instrumentalist, limited space and time . . .)."[43] As with the "factish" in science, this reconceived object is not only constructed (with great interest taken in the components and procedures of its construction) but also granted the agency to construct its maker in turn. By un-blackboxing novelty in this way, thinkers in the radical empirical line are better equipped to excite a taste for new descriptions (of the sort

---

[41] James J. Bono, "Science Studies as Cultural Studies," in *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science*, ed. Steven Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 166, emphasis in original. See also James J. Bono, "Perception, Living Matter, Cognitive Systems, Immune Networks: A Whiteheadian Future for Science Studies," *Configurations* 13.1 (winter 2005): 135-81.
[42] Latour, "The Slight Surprise of Action," in *Pandora's Hope*, 281.
[43] Hennion, "From ANT to Pragmatism," 294.

Rorty wanted to encourage) for the simple reason that they approach this activity as a practice rather than a gift.

Descriptions embedded in practices which in turn build worlds of humans and nonhumans: in their most recent work, Latour, Stengers, and Haraway have insisted that such an account is necessary for more than philosophical reasons. Without it, we will have a harder time responding to climate change.[44] For what is the Anthropocene if not an admission that humans and nonhumans are intimately entangled? In *Down to Earth* (2018), Latour argues that the climate crisis is ultimately the Earth reacting to the activities of modernization, and that without learning to *converse* with all that had once been mutely locked into the Nature concept, we won't be able either to conceive of the problem or to institute solutions. What's needed, he insists, is "alternative descriptions." But he treats this not as rhetoric pure and simple but instead as the effort to "inventory, survey, measure, centimeter by centimeter, being by being, person by person, the stuff that makes up the Earth for us."[45] Latour courts accusations of being a "representationalist" by Rortians here, but that shouldn't worry us, because Latour has embedded the act of "representing" nonhumans in the experimental practices and institutions of science. It's not about mirroring Nature but contriving ways of allowing it to speak its tendencies, patterns, affinities, and relationships, and then bringing such speech into politics. The "work of description" therefore occurs "on the part of all animate beings" (98). This is a far cry from Rorty, who once said flatly that "we have no duties to anything nonhuman."[46]

---

[44] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (Open Humanities Press, 2015); Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climactic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
[45] Latour, *Down to Earth*, 94.
[46] Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers Vol. Three* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 127, quoted in Allen, "The Cultural Politics of Nonhuman Things," 7. Allen elaborates Latour's efforts to claim speech for nonhumans in greater detail, with special reference to Latour's *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004). He makes the excellent point that Latour has a more concrete motivation than Rorty for his anti-essentialist, relational metaphysics: people should "take up his

For Latour, descriptions sensitize us not just to the pain of other humans (Rorty's claim in *Contingency*) but also to the reactions and agencies of the Earth and all that's in it. Haraway, too, devotes *Staying with the Trouble* to inventing alternative ways of telling the story of climate change that avoid the twin traps of techno-optimism (we can invent our way out of this) or "game over" pessimism. For instance, she rejects the term "Anthropocene" as perpetuating the myth of humans as isolated agents and opts instead for the Lovecraftian neologism "Chthulucene," a marker of the entanglement of human and non-human agencies. Here and throughout the book, she pursues a speculative practice of creating concepts that modify our habits of thought, that teach us to regard ourselves as creatures among creatures in the vast Terran ecology. Only then can we set about the urgent labor of inventing new ways of living and dying together on this planet. Rorty did not write about climate change—but in an interview conducted in 2005 he suggested that he didn't find this particular labor more urgent than other sorts of labor, because he retained his conviction that what mattered was how we talk to each other, not how we might learn to listen to the nonhuman world. Indeed, as we've seen, he devoted much of his career to telling people to *stop* trying to listen to the nonhuman world.[47] Yet given that the gravest threats to liberal democracy at the moment can be persuasively tied to climate change—whether understood in terms of rising nationalism in response to climate refugees, "post-truth" politics that denies the human contribution to climate change, or the coming apocalypse—this expansive sense of description within a more-than-human conversation should, by Rorty's own lights, take precedence over his own model of free and open conversation, where no authority can check the happy accidents of redescription.

---

ontology of hybrid quasi-objects" because "hybrid objects are not benign, and how we think (or don't think) about them can make a difference in how they behave" (11).

[47] *Entitled Opinions* podcast, with Robert Harrison, 23 November 2005, starting around 39:00; available at: https://entitledopinions.stanford.edu/richard-rorty-future-philosophy-0.

* * *

I've said that Rorty went too far in his willingness to level all discourses in order to dispense with the idea of a single master-discourse. Because he wanted to fix this problem at the general level at which philosophers have mostly treated it, he didn't follow up with more fine-grained accounts of situated authority and localized expertise. And his rhetoric offers little motivation for doing so. I've also argued that one of the reasons Rorty exaggerated in this regard is that he didn't go far enough in rooting out a fundamental dualism of modern philosophy from his work. He kept the division between Nature and Culture, meaningful discourse and meaningless causes, in place. I've read his work against that of Latour, Stengers, and Haraway to show up these shortcomings and suggest ways of moving past them.

In closing, I'd like to draw a final contrast, this time in the service of bringing out a more important similarity. Both Rorty and the science studies cohort place philosophy in close proximity to literature. Rorty, in awe of the poets, assigns his fellow philosophers the tasks of comparison and local evaluation that he admires in literary critics, especially those of the pre-Theory days: Bloom, Lionel Trilling, Frank Kermode, Edmund Wilson (*CIS* 80). Latour and Stengers, by contrast, assume the mantle of maker for themselves; they echo Alfred North Whitehead's assertion that "philosophy is akin to poetry."[48] This means that they create concepts that, as Whitehead said of his own work, "evoke a vivid feeling of what lies beyond words," and they do so because they see speculative philosophy, as Stengers writes in *Cosmopolitics*, as a technique for "learning to resist a future that presents itself as obvious, plausible, and normal."[49] They share this last goal with Rorty, who also wanted

[48] Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* [1938] (New York: Free Press, 1968), vii.
[49] Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 5; Stengers, *Cosmopolitics*, 10.

philosophy to cultivate novelty and foster hope, but their emphasis on linguistic constructions that attune us to "what lies beyond words" imagines a more dynamic back-and-forth between language and our entanglements with others. This is one reason why the science studies crowd is significantly weirder than Rorty. Rorty lets the strong poets do the work of being odd and gives himself the role of translating their insights into good, clean, neologism-free prose so that others might be persuaded to take them up. Latour, on the other hand, says things like "factish."

Yet for each of these philosophers—Rorty no less than Latour—literature exemplifies the loosening of cultural habits, the creation of new horizons, what Stengers calls the "care of the possible."[50] The ability of imaginative writing to "inspire," to "recontextualize much of what you previously thought you knew" and so change what you think is possible, underwrites the reorientation of philosophy around hope (*AOC* 133). Rorty's goal was to free us of the bad habit of yearning for One True Truth so that we might celebrate the imaginative creation of new and better (for our purposes) discourses. He commanded us to "drop" things. Latour, Stengers, and Haraway pick up where Rorty left off, showing us how to cultivate the new habits required for living without essences or foundations. They add to our stock of tools; they help us to see more rather than less. In each case, however, what matters is the perpetuation of philosophical hope and possibility—a Rortian vision worth saving from Rorty's rhetoric.

[50] Isabelle Stengers, "The Care of the Possible: Isabelle Stengers Interviewed by Erik Bordeleau," trans. Kelly Ladd, *Scapegoat* 1 (2011): 12-17. For an elaboration of pragmatism in terms of possibility, including a chapter that looks to the literary genre of comedy to understand liberalism, see John McGowan's *Pragmatist Politics: Making the Case for Liberal Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).