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Rortian Irony and the Humility of Right Reason

I.

The more one pursues the similarities, the more the parallels between pragmatic antirealism and life in Plato’s Cave strike the mind. Just as in that gripping parable of a strange people “like us” who feast on nothing but shifting images and shallow goods, so pragmatists like Richard Rorty paint a picture of “a world without substances or essences” in which linguistic descriptions are self-consciously nothing more than “useful tools” for limitless self-invention. The world once understood to be constituted by stable natures and given actuality by intelligible form is, according to Rorty, “a world well lost.”

That this is a fait accompli in the mind of the Rortian antirealist does engender one marked difference between his condition and that of the Platonic prisoner of doxa. For the postmodern ironist, there is no way out of the cave of appearance, preference, and manipulation. Rorty is “convinced that the Platonic quest, the attempt to get behind appearance to the intrinsic nature of reality, is hopeless.” Thus, there is no possibility of ascent up to the daylight of intelligible essences, final causes, or first principles. There is no
Good in itself, only the useful to me; no Beautiful in itself, only the pleasing to me. The rational struggle to grasp the elusive, but enrapturing, splendor of intelligible form has given way to ungrounded advocacy of the maximization of emotivist preference in the global bazaar of secular, social democracy.

When pressed on the matter, however, Rorty concedes that the assertion concerning truth’s impossibility (a theoretical claim) is really in the end only an expression of its undesirability (a practical claim). “Pragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness.” In the Rortian world of irony and autonomy, recognizing an even potential opposition between public reality and private desire is not deemed fruitful for pursuing one’s aesthetic experiments. This is why Rorty states that the distinctions between reality-appearance, nature-convention, finding-making, and truth-power are just “not useful,” and thus are more profitably abandoned. Such distinctions get in the way of personal “fantasizing” which, to get to the heart of the matter, is “the end product of ironist theorizing.”

Thus, it is not, Rorty explains, that the traditional philosophical distinction between the in se and the quoad nos turned out to be incorrect. It simply does not serve the felt needs and desired ends of Rorty’s “light-minded aestheticism” and moral “experimentalism.” Rorty is quite to the point: “The best, and probably the only, argument for putting foundationalism behind us is the one I have already suggested: it would be more efficient to do so, because it would let us concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education.” Such education does not constitute a movement from the false to the true, or from the disordered to the ordered. The accent, rather, is on the nonrational manipulation of sentiment, an expanding capacity for which creates a tolerant indifference to other people’s projects of fantasy and self-creation.

All the same, while it is important to realize that Rorty’s willful repudiation of the reality-appearance distinction is self-consciously grounded in aestheticist preference, and not in theoretical judg-
ment, this desire is nevertheless paradoxically accompanied by a sense of residual obligation not to speak in a contradictory manner. To avoid such self-contradiction, Rorty rightly refrains from making the nonperspectival, nonpragmatic truth claim that all truth claims are perspectival and pragmatic expressions of utility and desire. Accordingly, Rorty concedes that his antirepresentationalism isn’t the real account of things that finally liberates us from the false belief in objective truth, for that would still presuppose the mind’s capacity to get at a truth that is more or less adequate to reality, somehow closer to how things really are, which is exactly what Rorty prefers us to stop wanting and attempting. Realism isn’t the appearance and pragmatism the reality, for that would be a contradiction in terms:

Our opponents . . . think of us as saying that what was previously thought to be objective has turned out to be merely subjective. But we anti-Platonists must not accept this way of formulating the issue. For if we do, we shall be in serious trouble. If we take the distinction between making and finding at face value, our opponents will be able to ask us an awkward question, viz., Have we discovered the surprising fact that what was thought to be objective is actually subjective, or have we invented it? If we claim to have discovered it, if we say that it is an objective fact that truth is subjective, we are in danger of contradicting ourselves. If we say that we have invented it, we seem to be being merely whimsical. Why should anyone take our invention seriously?9

Accordingly, one must constantly keep in mind that Rorty isn’t actually making any claims or arguments with which the realist would be obliged to reckon. He is not offering us an alternative formulation of the “One True Account of How Things Really Are”10. He is merely speaking in a way that pleases him and that he finds “more useful”11 for his chosen purposes. In this way, Rorty’s very articulation itself of pragmatism is merely a useful way of speaking that serves his desired end of creating more secular, liberal ironists who
prefer living aesthetically experimental lives to seeking the true and the good. Obviously, one cannot refute what is not claimed, and so one must resist the temptation to treat Rorty as though he were seeking rationally to “refute” realism, as opposed to merely trying to make it look bad.

Thus, we can see a second difference between Plato’s hapless prisoners and Rorty’s postmodern ironists: the former mistakenly take the surrounding shadows for actual reality, while the latter are perfectly content in their self-constructed virtual realities, consciously taking turns playing the roles of manipulating spin-doctor and titillated consumer of images. As Rorty proudly tells us: “The anti-essentialist specializes in creating this hall-of-mirrors effect—in getting us to stop asking which is the real thing and which the image, and to settle for an ever-expanding choice of images.” To become content with mere images is thus to be finally freed from “the ambition of transcendence” and all “Heideggerian nostalgia.” It is no longer to feel the need or obligation to give good reasons for why we live the way we do, but simply to be content with finding sufficient resources for everyone to pursue their experimentally aesthetic fantasies. The construction of this postmodern Cave of liberal ironists is desirable, Rorty tells us, even if it means that the “typical character types” inhabiting it are “bland, calculating, petty, and unheroic.”

In this way, Rorty’s liberal utopia is populated by people who sound remarkably like Nietzschean “last men,” beings whose souls have lost all affinity for questions of ultimate import, and who are thus content with their “little pleasures for the day and their little pleasures for the night.” The arrow of wonder and longing is no longer released from the bow of such souls to be shot out over mankind, and thus up and out of the Cave. Aristotle’s “desire to know” seems conspicuously absent down here. As Nietzsche consummately captured it, “‘What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?’ thus asks the last man, and blinks.” Such postphilosophical creatures, Nietzsche pointed out, will not be con-
fined to the illiterate, but will populate the intellectual class as well: “Formerly all the world was mad,’ say the most acute of them, and blink.” These “last academics,” unmoved by longing and stars, “know everything that has ever happened, so there is no end to their mockery.”

Turning back to Rorty, one is tempted to think that he consciously swallowed this text whole, for he himself writes with uncanny similitude, “We are better off than these intellectual ancestors [Plato, Aquinas, and Luther] because we have a lot of historical knowledge about how and why such stars first blazed, and then faded out—knowledge which has made us wonder whether we might not be able to get along without any such stars.” Clearly, Rorty knows everything that has ever happened, so there is no end to his irony.

In this way, one can see that the evaluation of life in the Cave has changed in tone since Sartre articulated his earlier, more despairing version of Plato’s parable. Rorty echoes Sartre’s portrayal of an antiessentialist existence in which there is “no exit” from our pragmatically engendered perspectives. Only this time, the postmetaphysical cave of a “liberal ironist” utopia where “everything everybody does to everyone else . . . can be described . . . as manipulation” is not a “hell” that induces nausea, but is, on the contrary, admiringly called “the noblest imaginative creation of which we have record.” Rorty, having overcome the “terminal wistfulness” of Nietzsche’s agony and Sartre’s nausea, has discovered happiness—and blinks.

II.

Confronted by such an antiphilosophical expression of pragmatic irony, what is the philosophical realist to do? How ought the defender of natural substances and final causes respond to Rorty’s aesthetic and rhetorical “psychological nominalism?” If we are to take Rorty at his word (something a bit paradoxical, by the way), I think the thing not to do is to seek to refute him. This is so for two reasons. First, the fact that “nature” exists at all, and that some things are
“natural” for a living thing and others “unnatural” (e.g., the growth of eyes in a developing human being as opposed to blindness) are truths, as Aristotle rightly points out, that one does not need an argument or a demonstration to know. This is not the same thing as saying that everything natural and proper to a living thing is always manifest and easily known, but that things have a nature at all, and therefore natural acts and ends, is (i.e., this latter truth is manifest and easily known). Aristotle writes, “That nature exists it would be absurd to try to prove; for it is obvious that there are many things of this kind, and to prove what is obvious by what is not is the mark of a man who is unable to distinguish what is self-evident from what is not” (Phys. II, 1). Thus, there is nothing more known in light of which one might be able to convince the pragmatic ironist that some things are natural for human beings, while others are unnatural.

Second, and at least as important, Rorty is not, as he himself tells us repeatedly, actually advancing propositional claims about the way the world is. We must constantly keep in mind that, for pragmatists like Rorty, truth is not a goal of inquiry. Rather, inquiry is an aesthetic exercise in ever-evolving self-invention, an “endless recontextualizing” of beliefs the configuration of which “depends on one’s current purposes.” As Rorty puts it, “the only point of having beliefs in the first place is to gratify desires.” Accordingly, all of Rorty’s linguistic “marks and noises” are simply serving the nonreferential, non-demonstrative end of advancing Rorty’s non-rational preferences.

This last sentence may sound too extreme to one not familiar with Rorty’s characteristic thoroughness, but he is quite willing to go all the way and assert that language “never represents at all” and so “is not a medium of representation.” Rorty will “accept the gambit” that “you never get outside your own head,” but merely reweave your own beliefs to suit your current (and always contingent) purposes. Putting aside Rorty’s assertion that language “never represents” and the question of who he thinks he is writing for if he never gets outside of his own head, these words should persuade
us to take seriously Rorty’s assertion that he has “changed the subject”29 from philosophy to a rhetorical form of “literary criticism” which merely suits his fantasy life.

When Rorty considers “how intellectual life might be led” after philosophy, he suggests that it should be “pursued without much reference to the traditional distinctions between the cognitive and the noncognitive, between ‘truth’ and ‘comfort,’ or between the propositional and the nonpropositional.”30 This evasion of the cognitive and the propositional is important to keep in mind, for one can potentially refute erroneous truth claims, but not rhetorical fantasies that make no pretension of actually signifying anything. So, instead of incoherently attempting to refute a theorist who is only privately indulging an emotivist preference, we should look elsewhere for a fitting way to respond to the phenomenon of pragmatic nihilism.31

Lest anyone think that by doing so we would be abandoning the field and leaving Rorty unchallenged upon it, he himself tells us that were we to advance any critique of his writings, he would categorically refuse to concede to us the validity of any argumentative principles within our philosophical arsenal. In response to any objections, Rorty would “try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticism head-on.”32 This may sound outrageous to a mind habituated to attributing significance to philosophical argument, but, Rorty points out, “in the ironist view I have been offering, there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ order of justification for beliefs and desires. Nor is there much occasion to use the distinctions between logic and rhetoric, or between philosophy and literature, or between rational and nonrational methods of changing other people’s minds.”33 One is accordingly left resourceless in terms of persuading Rorty in any distinctively philosophical way by appeal to some rational principle he would concede as authoritatively transcending his appetites or preferences. This, of course,
does not constitute a challenge to such principles that would need to be reckoned with, for that would entail that Rorty start philosophizing. It is merely Rorty’s personal statement that he chooses not to be moved by anything of the sort, not to play the philosophy-truth-reality game, and thus become another footnote to Plato.  

In this way, Rorty hopes, like Proust and Derrida before him, to realize his ultimate aim, which is to “achieve autonomy” and forever “extend the bounds of possibility.”

III.

In such instances where one cannot speak reasonably to someone, one can at least speak reasonably about the things that person says. Accordingly, efforts to engage postmodern pragmatists like Rorty are more profitably directed toward articulating the reasons why Plato and Aristotle’s claims about the truth, intelligibility, purpose, order, and goodness of reality do not resonate in certain minds (and, indeed, in certain cultures). One ought, that is, to explain the possible reasons why the claims of “realist partisans of objectivity” strike the pragmatic, antiessentialist mind as a “transparent device”
that does not convince. In other words, if someone disclaims all recognition of anything natural or true and refuses to recognize philosophy as anything other than poetry or manipulation, one can at least give a cogent account of how a mind can fall into this condition. One can explain how a mind can degenerate into seeing all conceptual claims as, to use Nietzsche’s phrase, “mere words,” and thus come to take the final plunge of saying that their beliefs are merely instruments of their appetite.

I want to do this by examining, first, what Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas understood the intelligibility of reality to consist of, and second, to articulate how the habits of the appetites and will affect the intellect’s ability to grasp this intelligibility. In other words, the most fruitful response to the postmodern condition exemplified by Rorty’s ironist theorizing is to raise the following question: Given the nature of intelligibility, are there any particular habits one must have and cultivate in order to be open and able to recognize the “nature” of man and his proper acts and ends? Is there a necessary link between one’s character, which is to say, the set of intellectual and moral habits by which one is disposed to perceive, interpret, and experience the world, on the one hand, and the capacity of the intellect’s operations to be properly recognized, on the other?

In this way, I seek to pose the issue “transcendentally”: Supposing that reality was in fact intelligibly accessible to reason, that there was an abiding truth, purpose, and goodness to things, supposing that things had natures, essences, and natural ends as Plato and Aristotle affirmed, what would be the necessary (although not sufficient) conditions for human consciousness to acquiesce in them as such? When the question of the intellect’s adequation to reality is posed in this way, the theoretical resources of the perennial tradition can be seen to shed a unique light on our contemporary “postphilosophical” environment. Proceeding in this way also has the advantage of not asking the pragmatist to assume that reality is intelligible, but merely to inquire into what would be epistemologically entailed if it were.
The perennial tradition recognizes a number of prephilosophical factors that shape our habits of perception and interpretation, and thus determine how possible a genuine life of philosophy is for a soul. The climate of public opinion, the people one has come to trust, one’s material conditions, the usual way in which one is accustomed to hear things described, the historical events that transpire around one, the mental habits one has developed from non-philosophical learning . . . even one’s own native language all have a significant, albeit not determining, influence upon how we are disposed to perceive the world.

In this article, however, I want to focus specifically upon the influence of moral habits on the proper operation of the intellect. Following Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas, I will make the following argument: Because the very nature of intelligibility itself requires of the knowing subject at least a certain commitment to the moral virtues, particularly humility and temperance, for the intellect’s adequation to fundamental moral and metaphysical truths to be possible, expressions of pragmatic nihilism inevitably will manifest themselves where this relationship is neither aspired to nor understood. In other words, because the right functioning of the life of the mind on matters metaphysical and moral does not take place in an amoral vacuum populated by ahistorical subjects, but properly operates only to the degree that there is a right ordering of the will and appetites, “philosophers” formed under an instrumentalist understanding of reason in a social context constituted by morally disordered customs will not be disposed to clearly see and openly accept the first principles and natural purposes of human experience. The inevitable result will be, despite the residual force of \textit{synderesis} (conscience), recurrent and variously articulated expressions of pragmatism, relativism, and nihilism.

The heart of what I am saying is expressed nicely by the German Thomist Josef Pieper, who writes, “Since we nowadays think that all a man needs for acquisition of truth is to exert his brain more or less vigorously, and since we consider an ascetic approach to knowledge hardly sensible, we have lost the awareness of the close bond that
links the knowledge of truth to the condition of purity." What is crucial to recognize here is the nature and force of this “bond” and “link.” A docile habit of will and a certain degree of right ordering of the appetites constitute a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for the knowledge of certain truths. Correspondingly, dispositions that the perennial tradition labels moral vices corrupt the power of the human intellect and will to recognize and accept the nature, essence, and good of things.

Accordingly, for someone, first, to conceive of reason in a purely procedural and amoral way and, second, to praise habits and practices of a morally vicious nature, is to render oneself suspect as a person who has been badly habituated to the point that one’s rational faculty is no longer fully capable of adequation to the truth and good of certain things. For example, the desire and affection for the radical “contingency of conscience” cannot but be interpreted by a Thomist as a sign that something has gone drastically wrong, not only with someone’s moral habituation, but also with one’s potential for understanding. Such a person, in the eyes of Plato, Aristotle, or Aquinas, is no longer capable of what these thinkers conceived to be the philosophical life, however analytically rigorous and scholarly that person’s activity otherwise is.

Now with respect to the first point, Rorty represents a typical instance of the postperennial assumption that the acquisition of truth merely requires the “exercise of the brain,” and does not, accordingly, have any relation to “asceticism” or the “condition of purity.” We catch a glimpse of this assumption in one of his autobiographical essays, in which Rorty reflects on his early religious dabbling. He writes: “I was attracted by [T. S.] Eliot’s suggestions that only committed Christians (and perhaps only Anglo-Catholics) could overcome their unhealthy preoccupation with their private obsessions, and so serve their fellow humans with proper humility. But a prideful inability to believe what I was saying when I recited the General Confession gradually led me to give up on my awkward attempts to get religion. So I fell back into absolutist philosophy.”
What is interesting and relevant here is not the history of Rorty’s relationship to revealed religion, or his motives for rejecting Christianity. I have no present interest in anything specifically theological, or even anything particularly biographical. My interest is strictly in the philosophical claim implied. What is pertinent for my purpose is the reason Rorty gives for why he turned away from religion to the “absolutist philosophy” of the Platonic tradition.

His attraction, he tells us, stemmed from that fact that it “seemed clear that Platonism had all the advantages of religion, without requiring the humility which Christianity demanded, and of which I was apparently incapable.” Rorty’s self-description is significant because it clearly manifests the assumption that philosophy in the absolutist, Platonic sense, unlike Christianity, has no relation to the virtue of humility. Rorty, apparently, believes that pride would in no way hinder a Platonic quest for the True and the Good. His statement thus presupposes that there is no link or bond between the philosophical grasp of the intelligible form of things (Plato’s aspiration) and the nature of one’s habituated character and moral commitments.

As I will show, this is simply false. Humility and purity are intrinsically related to right reason, and their opposing vices to the eclipse of reason. Contrary to Rorty’s assumption, the proper operation of the intellect on significant philosophical issues presupposes a serious commitment to the virtues of humility and chastity. To possess the opposing vices (pride and intemperance) would, in Plato’s mind, disqualify one from the philosophical life because of the consequent negative impact upon the proper functioning of one’s rational faculty. Correspondingly, the degree to which these virtues are present is the degree to which one will be disposed and receptive to the intelligible form of things. Thus, Plato, no less than St. Paul, calls us to a kind of “conversion” (periagoge) that is ethical in nature and explains, as we shall shortly see, that philosophical education is intrinsically moral education.

Accordingly, Rorty’s claim that the traditional philosophical as-
piration to grasp the nature and good of reality just hasn’t “panned out,” that “absolutist” philosophy was simply never able to do its job successfully, falls flat if, as Rorty seems to think, this “job” was thought to be accomplishable independent of the moral order of the soul, which is to say, of the rectification of the appetites and will. Unfortunately Rorty, like most contemporary philosophers, sees “the traditional image of philosophy” as having sought to articulate rigorous and “neutral” criteria that yield “non-controversial results concerning matters of ultimate concern.” This image applies largely to the Enlightenment traditions (the bankruptcy of which are accordingly unsurprising), but certainly not to the Platonic-Aristotelian traditions.

For Plato and Aristotle, as well as for Aquinas, the knowledge of many of the most important principles is deeply affected by the rest of one’s life, especially one’s moral life. While affirming realist truth claims, these philosophers possessed no conception of the intellect as a “neutral” faculty that could disinterestedly grasp all valid principles that no one, no matter what their character, education, upbringing, or moral habits, would contradict or ignore. On the contrary, there was from the beginning a keen understanding that the presence of certain disordered habits renders one more rationally damaged than most (for as Plato would affirm, we all are, to some degree) and thus philosophically handicapped. This follows, as Plato and Aristotle clearly saw, from the very nature of intelligibility.

Thus, within the perennial understanding, the mere fact that someone’s consciousness is thoroughly pragmatic, utilitarian, or nihilistic, that it doesn’t see any objective order, purpose, or good in the nature of things is not yet theoretically interesting. In the perennial understanding, there will unfortunately, but invariably, be certain kinds of persons (or even cultures) habituated in certain ways for whom one should expect this to be so, and about whom one should be amazed if it were not so. Accordingly, to return to my central theme, in terms of becoming receptive and adequate to the intelligible form of things, and thus of ascending up and out of
the pragmatic Cave of nihilism, only the humble make it out. It is intrinsically impossible for the kind of truth to which Plato and Aristotle aspired to be the possession of the habitually proud, manipulative, or intemperate. Thus, contrary to Rorty’s understanding, Platonism, and indeed all authentic philosophy and higher reasoning, presupposes a kind of humility similar to that which authentic religion demands.

IV

A good place to begin a discussion of the intrinsic relationship between intelligibility and the moral life, and the consequent damage of vice upon the intellect, is Plato’s treatment of philosophical education in the Republic. In book VII of that work, Socrates claims that no one can grasp the nature and good of things without a progressive reformation of one’s whole character and orientation. This process includes the appetites as well as the intellect. Plato writes: “The instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the Good” (Rep. 518c–d). Notice that the philosophical movement of soul from sensible becoming to intelligible being requires the “whole” soul to be turned around. What Socrates says immediately afterwards makes clear that this “whole” includes the emotions and appetites as well as the intellect. In this way, Plato points to an intrinsic relationship existing between what reason pursues and loves and what our passions have been cultivated to pursue and love. Accordingly, there are certain necessary virtues, the formation of which alone disposes one to a philosophical life open to the intelligible form of things. To realize this life, Socrates tells us, requires the cultivation of “habit and discipline (askesin),” preferably from “childhood,” whereby we are weaned from our dis-
ordered bodily appetites.50 “Feasting, greed, and other such pleasures” pull the soul’s vision downward “like leaden weights,” while a soul freed from such vices through proper, long-term habituation, that is, through the cultivation of the virtues, “would see [true things] most sharply” (Rep. 519b).

This is why Plato concludes in book IX that the tyrannical soul, consumed as it is by lust and pleonxia (desire for more), is, of all character types, the most blinded to reality and estranged from true happiness. Plato anticipates and encompasses David Hume by pointing out that, in such a character type, reason becomes the instrumental slave of the inordinate passions. In one whose habits are licentious or greedy, “the divine part” of the soul becomes “capable of learning only the things that flatter” its malformed appetites. In other words, it loses what capacity it had to recognize and accept the forms, principles, and ends that it would, rightly habituated, naturally be capable of grasping through an examined life. The rational “sight” of the “vicious but clever” soul “isn’t inferior, but rather is forced to serve evil ends” (Rep. 519a). Why? Because its proud and licentious habits eclipse the soul’s perception of other, more noble ends.51

It is accordingly the chaste and virtuous soul that is singularly capable of judging rightly, for it alone is habitually disposed to “receiving” or “welcoming” (aspazamenous) each being as it truly is (Rep. 480), as Socrates characterizes the philosopher in book V. There is thus a necessity for humble surrender to the natural form and intrinsic good of things. Any willfulness corrupts the translucence of reality’s intelligibility, because it introduces stubborn preference and a will to pleasure or power into a soul that ought to be fundamentally receptive. As Plato, seeking to emphasize the importance of self-mastery in the philosophical life put it in the Phaedo, “It is not possible for the impure to grasp the pure” (Rep. 67b).

In addition, when this receptivity of soul is present and the philosopher’s intellect begins to be conformed to the intelligible form of things, his character and passions will likewise receive a corresponding moral information. As Plato put it in Republic VI, “By con-
sorting with the ordered and the divine, the philosopher himself becomes as ordered and divine \((\text{kosmios te kai theios})\) as a human can” \(500d\). In this way, the practice of philosophy cultivates the “theomorphic” nature of the soul from its initial untutored and unruly condition. This process, then, obviously involves the will, as well as the intellect. One must choose, as a fundamental option and way of life, to surrender to the order of things so that one may understand that order. “Like is only known by like.”

Thus, the pursuit of Platonic \textit{theoria} is character transforming, or it is nothing at all. When the latter is the case, as for example, with those who learn the art of dialectic without a sufficiently ordered soul open to the synoptic vision of the Good, philosophy turns into a “game of contradiction” \((\text{Rep. 539b})\) that succeeds at nothing except discrediting all moral opinions. Such pseudo-dialecticians, Socrates explains in book VII, are more like sniping puppies that succeed only in shredding apart peoples’ opinions without replacing them with anything sounder. Plato, it seems, was perfectly aware of the perverse dynamic that engenders a pragmatic and nihilistic consciousness.\(^{52}\)

These basic points taken from Plato’s most famous dialogue ought to disabuse us of Rorty’s assumption that philosophy, in the Platonic sense, is as indifferently open to the prideful, the pleonectic, and the morally experimental as it is to the humble, the receptive, and the morally ordered. To repeat, this is most emphatically not to say that “metaphysical realists” have ordered souls, while the souls of “pragmatic antirealists” are disordered. That would be a preposterous caricature. Everyone is caught up in this drama and this struggle. Socrates himself, Plato’s quintessential example of a noble and enquiring philosophical realist, frequently expresses in the dialogues both his unworthiness and his inability to fully comprehend the intelligible form of things.\(^{53}\)

One can affirm moral absolutes while falling miserably short of them. Plato is quite clear that ascending out of the Cave is a painful and dramatic struggle for everyone, for we all begin with untu-
tored and unruly appetites. Recovering the “theomorphic” nature of the soul is a way of life for Plato, not a starting point. The life of contemplative reason is a fragile journey for every rational soul existing “in between” (metaxu) the rival pulls of the sensible and the intelligible. The crucial thing is to have made, and to ceaselessly renew, the fundamental option of humble receptivity to the form and order of reality.

V

Even more important than seeing that there exists an intrinsic interrelationship between the life of reason and moral order, is understanding why it exists. The most penetrating account of this, I believe, is to be found in Aquinas, who articulates the most cogent and elucidated formulation of the intrinsic relationship between the life of reason and the moral order of the soul, between the loss of philosophical insight and the elevation of private autonomy as the end of living and theorizing. It is to this account that I now proceed.

The pragmatist and the nihilist assert that they are unmoved by any claim to reality’s intrinsic intelligibility. One could state this in equivalent terms by saying that the natural, intelligible forms of which Plato and Aristotle spoke strike the mind as nothing more than hollow and contrived terms, leaving one in “a world without substances or essences,” as Rorty put it. With increasing intensification, the vocabulary of formal and final causality that constituted the heart of perennial philosophy’s understanding of the actuality of beings has struck modern consciousness as empty and artificial.

The reality of intelligible form is, of course, the crux of the issue, for both Plato and Aristotle understood that reality is intelligible, which is to say, that it is knowable and that truth is possible only because the mind can become adequate to the essential form of things. As Aquinas succinctly puts it, “All cognition and every definition are through form.”54 If things are not substantially constituted by form, which is to say, by that nonmaterial principle of
logos

intelligibility that gives things their intrinsic unity, actuality, and essential identity, then Rorty (if he were to be unironic for a moment) would be right that our thoughts and descriptions of things do not signify anything in nature, and thus are merely nonrepresentationally nominal terms of convenience for getting along with our chosen agendas.

The relevance of all this for our discussion is seen when we grasp the dependence of the notions of form and intelligibility upon the notions of the end and the good. In other words, bound up in the very idea of what it means for something to be intelligible is the notion of what the end of that thing is, of what it is for and thus, of what constitutes its good. To use a Platonic term, every form (eidos) is “boni-form” (agathoeide, Rep. 509a2), because the intelligibility of something is inextricably bound up with that thing’s purpose, with what would constitute its proper operation. For example, one does not really know what a watch is unless one knows what a watch is for, that is, portable time-telling. If a watch realizes this end, then it is a good watch, which is to say, it is a watch, for strictly speaking, a broken watch is no watch at all. In addition, it is the realization of this end, that is, the good of portable time-telling, which dictates the form of the watch. A watch’s unity, order, and properly essential features are what they are because of the end. An artifact whose formal identity could not realize the end of portable time-telling could not be a watch.

To move from the artificial to the natural, one can see that natural substances are quite similar. Take a human being, for instance. A human being understood as a substantially unified natural organism with specifically proper operations (such as “understanding,” “willing,” “loving,” and “seeing”) and not merely as a complex artificial machine with no natural identity and no naturally proper or improper operations, is possible only if the perennial understanding of form stands. Take away intelligible, substantial form as the active intrinsic principle of natural substances, and one is ultimately left only with a brute material collection of “stuff” whose unity and
purpose are only apparent, and not real. On this understanding, consciousness, for example, is not explained, but explained away, for there is no one unified thing there to possess consciousness. Even Rorty willingly concedes this, although he is perfectly content with the result. Accordingly, the denial of form leaves us with no possible understanding of man or the human as a natural, intelligible, and unified entity. Any unity or meaning given to such a notion would be purely contrived.

But, as Aristotle saw quite clearly, man is the natural thing that he is with the specific and unified identity that he has, only because he has a naturally proper end, the realization of which constitutes his good. That a human being’s natural end is, according to Aristotle, a life lived according to reason, which is to say, contemplation and moral virtue, is the reason for the natural, substantial form he has with specific faculties and operations corresponding to it. One cannot, therefore, intelligibly separate the formal cause of man from the final cause of man, his nature from his good, his essence from his end. Indeed, speaking of the various causes of man in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle distinguishes man’s form and essence from his final cause and end only to immediately highlight their unity, by adding, “But perhaps both of these are the same.”

Aquinas develops this unity in distinction between these causes by noting a hierarchy among them when he writes in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*: “The end or the good has the nature [ratio] of a cause. And this species of cause is the most powerful of all the causes, for the final cause is the cause of the other causes. It is clear that the agent acts for the sake of an end. And likewise it was shown above in regard to artificial things that the form is ordered to use as to an end, and matter is ordered to form as to an end. And to this extent the end is called the cause of causes.” Thus, the final cause, which is to say, the end and good of a thing, is the ultimate cause and ground of the intelligibility of any thing, “the cause of the causality of all causes,” as Aquinas puts it in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*. Therefore, we cannot really be
said to genuinely understand things until we understand their end, and thus their proper and improper operations that flow from this end. We only know what things are to the degree that we know what they are for.

This natural hierarchy of dependence, in terms of the causes that make a thing be what it is, is important for our purpose, because we learn from it that *we cannot alienate the good from the true, and thus our appetitive relation to the good from our cognitive relation to the true*. This is where the question of the rectitude of an agent’s will becomes inescapably relevant to his potential for knowing the nature of things. For the will, by which a human being directs himself or herself, always acts for an end. Every human choice is freely made with some good in mind to accomplish some intended purpose. This is what makes human action strictly human. Thus the object of the will is always some perceived good toward which a human agent chooses to order his or her various activities.

Now, one of the activities a human being can choose to engage in is understanding. Thus, it is the will that wills the intellect into operation. So, while it is true to say that intellect moves the will, in as much as “reason reasons about willing” and presents to the will goods that can become its object, nevertheless, at the same time, the will moves the intellect and all the powers of the soul subject to choice. Aquinas states this mutual operational inclusion as follows: “From this we can easily understand why these powers include one another in their acts, because the intellect understands that the will wills, and the will wills the intellect to understand. In the same way good is contained in truth, inasmuch as it is an understood truth, and truth in good, inasmuch as it is a desired good.” In other words, one cannot separate out and abstract from each other the goods that the will is inclined to pursue and the truths that the intellect is seeking to understand. The activities invariably intersect with one another and influence the success or failure of each, for the will has to desire truth as a good, and be willing to allow the true end or good of things to be what they are, while at the same time the true
cannot be seen as true if its end or perfection or good is not seen as the ground of its identity as true.\textsuperscript{62}

Given that the intelligibility of something is not separable from grasping its good and that the will is always bound up in one’s intellectual judgments so that it must be willing to understand and receive the intrinsic good and purpose of the things it is directing the intellect to understand, we must ask what becomes of the inquiring subject if the natures graspable through reason’s apprehension of form embody goods that are contrary and in opposition to the habituated inclinations of its will? In other words, what if there exist disordered habits in a will and its appetites, such as pride, greed, or lust? Will these not strongly predispose a potential knower to see the good of man and things in a way corresponding to these vices?\textsuperscript{63}

This is the obvious consequence, given what has been said about the very nature of intelligibility, for the human intellect does not exist in a vacuum but is intrinsically bound up in relation to the will and emotions. It correspondingly flourishes or languishes according to the quality of the habits characterizing the faculty of choice and the sensible appetites. Accordingly, a malformed will, which is to say, the habituated inclination of disordered appetites toward goods contrary to nature, obstructs, if not destroys, the capacity adequately to receive and accept the form of things if they are contrary to that vice.\textsuperscript{64}

The truth is, by nature, a desired good, but this does not mean that every will invariably desires to receive the truth of each thing according to its actual nature, for sometimes its good conflicts with a soul’s habituated desires. Aquinas comments in \textit{De Veritate}: “The philosopher says, for instance, that custom is a second nature; and Tully says that virtue accords with reason after the manner of a nature, and in the same way a habit of vice inclines one as a sort of nature to what agrees with it. The result is that to the one who has the habit of lust whatever fits in with it as being of the same nature seems good. This is the Philosopher’s meaning when
he says that “each person judges of the end in accordance with his own character.”

Accordingly, if one’s character inclines one to a committed affection for autonomy and moral experimentalism, one will be disposed by one’s formed habits of will and appetite (a second nature, as Aristotle puts it) to perceive and judge the end of man and the nature of things accordingly. This is why the natural act of understanding, and hence the speculative activity of the intellect, requires, as a necessary precondition, an at least incipient purity ( chastity) and receptive willingness to let things be as they are (humility). One must have some fundamental commitment to and humble respect for the good, the order, and the ends of nature and natural things (including man himself), whatever they may be. This is the true piety of thinking, to use Heidegger’s expression, for it is philosophically impious to be already subjectively committed to reducing the nature of things to that which conforms to one’s uses, as, for example, when a pragmatist says that the rational/nonrational distinction is no longer really useful for “our” purposes.

The need for the philosopher to exercise humility is why a life of philosophical contemplation is laborious, imperfect, and difficult for everyone. All of us, according to Plato, Aquinas, and universal human experience, find ourselves living in medias res with unruly passions and stubbornly disordered appetites. Some have gained more mastery over them than have others, but a perfectly virtuous human being is rarely, if ever, to be found. What philosophical ascent calls for, then, is moral struggle, not surrender. To whimsically abolish the difference between the two is, in Plato’s eyes, to resign oneself to being a philodoxical “lover of sights and sounds” who will seldom, if ever, penetrate to the intelligible unities and purposes underlying our sensible experience.

Thus, one can hope to live a philosophical life as Plato, Aristotle, or Aquinas understood it, only to the degree that the habit of pride does not characterize one’s will. When such a vice is present, Aquinas explains, the damage to the intellect is dramatic. He writes:
Knowledge of truth is twofold. One is purely speculative, and pride hinders this indirectly by removing its cause. For the proud man subjects not his intellect to God, that he may receive the knowledge of truth from Him, according to Mt. 11:25, *Thou hast hid these things from the wise and the prudent*, i.e., from the proud, who are wise and prudent in their own eyes, and *hast revealed them to little ones*, i.e., to the humble. Nor does he deign to learn anything from man, whereas it is written (Eccl. 6:34): *If thou wilt incline thy ear, thou shalt receive instruction*. The other knowledge of truth is affective, and this is directly hindered by pride, because the proud, through delighting in their own excellence, disdain the excellence of truth.66

The vice of pride destroys the capacity of reason both in its speculative (or theoretical) and affective (or practical) dimensions. A soul marked by pride is, by its very nature, indisposed to receive and assent to the truth and good of things, should these ever conflict with its preferred estimation of how things ought to be. One is reminded here of Karl Marx’s preface to his dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus where he states that Prometheus, who “hates all gods” is the patron saint of philosophers. There Marx tells us that human consciousness is the supreme divinity and that there must be nothing on the same level as it.67 No argument is offered. No reasons given. The statement functions, rather, as a first principle. In the same way, Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, writes, “But to reveal my heart entirely to you, O friends: If there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god: Therefore, there are no gods.”68

This is an odd syllogism, to say the least. What it shares with the text from Marx is its clear manifestation of prideful willfulness about the nonexistence of anything over and above human consciousness from and through which it might receive the meaning and purpose of things. One need not even be convinced of a stable purpose to things to see that a will characterized by such a habit of pride is not in a position to be open to such a possibility.
A soul that will not humbly receive the nature of things as they are, but is committed to positing its own autonomy by regarding the world as purely a field for human creativity, has dramatically damaged the capacity of its intellect to function properly. It has rendered itself incapable of the life of theoria as understood by Plato and Aristotle.⁶⁹

Related to this intellectual catastrophe is the defect suffered by reason due to the presence of intemperance, the excessive habitual inclination to indulge the pleasures of taste and touch. Akin to the damage caused by pride is the darkening of the intellect brought on by the inability to master one’s bodily appetites. A philosopher, to the degree that he or she hopes to achieve theoretical and practical wisdom, must not only be lowly, but chaste and pure as well, for the intellect’s capacity for adequation to the intelligible form of things is profoundly damaged by self-assertive bodily appetites that have gained independence from rational governance. Lust and gluttony, in proportion to their dominance over the other goods the soul seeks, destroy the possibility of a contemplative life. Aquinas writes: “Through these vices, the intention of man is maximally applied to corporeal things. And as a consequence, the operation of man concerning intelligible things is debilitated. . . . And therefore from sexual license arises blindness of mind, which almost entirely excludes the cognition of spiritual goods. . . . And, contrariwise, the opposing virtues, namely abstinence and chastity, maximally dispose man to the perfection of the intellectual operation.”⁷⁰

This text goes a long way toward explaining why it is that philosophical insight is so rare in the world and why every single human being, no matter his or her theoretical commitments, is caught up in a daunting struggle of ascent to the intelligible that is both difficult and never final. To be a realist in theory is no help here, if one is not constantly renewing the practice of asceticism and continually struggling for that condition of purity of which Josef Pieper spoke. To the degree that these habits are absent, and the delectationes of the body intemperately hold sway so that “the intention of the soul
is attracted to inferior powers,”\(^{71}\) *ab intelligibilia ad sensibilia*, reason naturally “suffers defect,”\(^{72}\) is “maximally weakened,”\(^ {73}\) and can even become “totally buried”\(^ {74}\) to the point that the soul loses authentic contact with the intelligible form and end of things.\(^ {75}\)

**VI.**

When this intrinsic relationship between the moral virtues of humility and temperance, on the one hand, and the capacity of the human intellect to receive contemplatively the nature and end of things, on the other, is seen precisely as intrinsic, then we have successfully answered the question that I posed transcendentally earlier in the article, namely, “If reality were intelligible and purposeful, what would be the necessary preconditions for grasping it adequately?” The answer, as we have seen, is a soul characterized, or at least struggling to be characterized, by the habits of humility, docility, purity, and receptivity to the true and the good. A philosophical soul must possess a willingness to be formed by reality rather than to form it according to its own autonomous preferences. A habituated will to decide for oneself what is significant and beautiful, rather than to receive it (and then, if one is an artist, to express creatively that significance) necessarily damages the soul’s attunement to natural meaning and purpose.

Turning back to the phenomenon of pragmatic nihilism with this dynamic in mind, we are in a theoretically clearer position to understand one of the possible reasons why ironic partisans of anti-realist aestheticism honestly might not be able to see an intrinsic meaning and goodness in things. If I turn back to the body of Rortian texts from which I have been analyzing the pragmatist position, there does seem to be something from a Thomistic point of view that has gone drastically awry. For several expressions therein manifest the kinds of priorities, preferences, and commitments that Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas knew to destroy the possibility of metaphysical and moral understanding.
Without making *ad hominem* judgments, one can say in general that any true expression of a habituated desire for total autonomy from the claims of an objective moral conscience raises the question of whether or not that soul, because of its malformed habits, is any longer capable of a legitimate receptive grasp of the natural purposes of things. It is just such a question that is raised when the following claims about Freud’s leveling and mechanization of the passions are made:

The advantage of this way of thinking of the passions is that it enables one to take a similar view to conscience. For just as this view humanizes what the Platonic tradition took to be the urges of an animal, so it humanizes what the tradition thought of as divine inspiration. It makes conscience, like passion, one more set of human beliefs and desires—another story about how the world is, another *Weltanschaung*. Most important, it makes it just another story—not one that (in the case of the passions) is automatically suspect nor one that (in the case of conscience) is automatically privileged.76

What makes this text alarming, from the Platonic and Thomistic point of view, is that the “advantage” of seeing conscience in this deconstructed and demythologized manner is not the veracity of such a view, but its usefulness for not having to treat the claims of conscience as in any way privileged any longer. The text continues:

Freud, by helping us see ourselves as centerless, as random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs rather than as more or less adequate exemplifications of a common human essence, opened up new possibilities for the aesthetic life. He helped us become increasingly ironic, playful, free, and inventive in our choice of self-descriptions. This has been an important factor in our ability to slough off the idea that we have a true self, one shared with all other humans, and the related notion that the demands of this true self—the
specifically moral demands—take precedence over all others. It has helped us think of moral reflection and sophistication as a matter of self-creation rather than self-knowledge.

It is clear from this text that the help given by Freud is not an aid to a soul’s understanding, but to its desire to live its life as an autonomous project of self-expression that need not take into account anything other than its own whims and fancies. In other words, Freud tells a story that ironic aesthetes now believe, because ironic aesthetes find it useful and desirable to believe it. Why is it useful and desirable to believe it? Because the world thereby loses whatever residue of a natural order of obligation and higher perfection it previously possessed and becomes instead the materia prima for our private fantasies.

This, Rorty points out, is what was and is so great about pragmatism as a historical movement. He writes, “The principal social and cultural function of this movement has been . . . to break down the influence of old moral codes and replace them with an ‘experimental’ attitude.”

This cultural transvaluation is taken to be a good thing because “the temporal circumstances of human life [are] difficult enough without sado-masochistically adding immutable, unconditional obligations” to them.

Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas, of course, did not view the unconditional duty to seek and aspire to the true, the good, and the beautiful as sadomasochistic, but as the precondition for fully realizing one’s humanity, and thus of achieving happiness. Nevertheless, Rorty is not inclined to side with them, but with David Hume, whom he, with Annette Baier, praises “for ‘de-intellectualizing and de-sanctifying the moral endeavor.’”

This project of disenchantment is, if he is to be taken at his word, something that motivates Rorty’s own literary output: “I can . . . make one point to offset the air of light-minded aestheticism I am adopting toward traditional philosophical questions. This is that there is a moral purpose behind this light-mindedness. . . . Such philosophical superficiality and
light-mindedness helps along the disenchantment of the world. It helps make the world’s inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality. To speak of this as a moral purpose is simply to toy with the reader, for the signification of that word here, on Rorty’s own terms, can only mean “my own contingent and emotivist agenda.” It cannot signify some noble or obligatory goal, but merely what Rorty happens to want here and now. As such, the employment of the term here is either an inconsistent relic or a ploy to lend an alien gravitas to Rorty’s stated levitas.

Nevertheless, if achieving disenchantment and a hollowing instrumentalism are really an adequate reflection of a pragmatist’s aim and moral commitment, if it is indeed the case that the pragmatist ultimately wants reason to be purely procedural and the world denuded of higher purpose, then neither Plato nor Aquinas would be shocked to hear that the pragmatist conscientiously professes an inability to see any natural truth, order, or purpose in things. On the contrary, the perennial philosopher would expect and predict it.

Such a declaration of nihilistic antirealism could, of course, be a matter of personal concern, something to provoke Socrates into his usual mischief. However, it certainly would not be a matter of surprise or theoretical confusion. Quite the opposite, it is exactly what follows, given the very nature of intelligibility and the conditions for grasping it. For someone with declared commitments to the contingency of conscience and autonomous self-creation to say that conscience, natural finality, human nature, personal identity, and indeed, the very concept of the real, are hollow contrivances that neither convince nor move is simply not philosophically interesting in the sense of being a philosophical conundrum that the perennial philosopher must struggle to unravel.
VII.

Thus, one of the chief ironies I discover in concluding my analysis of Rortian irony is that it isn’t subversive, new, or avant garde at all. It does not represent a subtle challenge or nuanced threat to the perennial tradition’s rational coherence or philosophical legitimacy. On the contrary, it is, from insights at least twenty-five centuries old, quintessentially predictable, textbook, and precisely what one would expect. This is not to say that Rorty is not an exceptional writer or a skilled expositor of ideas. Nor does it entail that one refuse to admit anything good in the skewed and watered-down residuum of Christian solidarity that is Rorty’s postmodern, liberal version of the same. There are indeed genuine manifestations of the old virtues of justice and compassion, of the preferential option for the poor, and the commitment to the priority of labor over capital, which periodically crop up throughout Rorty’s texts.

But no perennial philosopher who understands the tradition’s insights concerning the teleological nature of intelligibility, the mutual interpenetration of intellect and will, the darkening effects of pride and intemperance on the intellect, and the influence of custom and habit in the intellectual life will regard Rorty’s texts as constituting a theoretical danger to the claims of the perennial tradition of philosophical realism. On the contrary, they serve rather neatly as illustrations of a core aspect of the Thomistic understanding of how the intellect’s natural ordination toward adequation to the truth of things may become damaged and frustrated. The only way out of this conundrum that would open up what capacity there is in us to grasp the essence and nature of things is to make a fundamental option for the virtues of humility and temperance that we have seen to be as necessary for the philosopher as they are for the saint or mystic.

There is not a single philosophical seeker after truth who, aware of the fragility of all human endeavors, does not need daily to renew this struggle for meekness and purity in himself or herself, and solidarity and compassion toward others. Such virtues are not
granted at the beginning of the climb, but formed only over a life-
time. Like the Socrates of the Phaedrus, we must continually pray
that our interior life will reflect the beauty and order of truth (Rep.
279c), that we assent and gratefully receive the natural end and true
form of things, and not impose a smothering willfulness over them.
Receptivity, not manipulation, must be our fundamental disposi-
tion. For if we desire to see our way out of the Platonic cave of mere
appearance and emotivist appetite, we must recognize that only the
humble make it out. With both Socrates and Aquinas, let us never
cease praying that we may be among them.

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, “A world without substances or essences,” in Philosophy and Social
2. Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press, 1982), 3.
3. Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, 49.
4. Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, xiv.
5. Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University
6. Richard Rorty, “The priority of democracy to philosophy,” in Objectivity Relativis-
ism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1991), 193.
Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 176,
italics added. While Rorty sometimes offers what look like arguments and refuta-
tions of traditional philosophical theses, he is, as we shall shortly see, perpetually
forced to retreat into a position of pragmatic disinterest to truth commitments in
order to avoid the charge of self-referential incoherence.
10. Ibid., 262.
11. “We hope to replace the reality-appearance distinction with the distinction between
the more useful and the less useful.” Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, xxii. And,
significantly, he tells us, “the rational-irrational distinction is less useful than it once
appeared.” Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 48.
12. Richard Rorty, “Inquiry as recontextualization: An anti-dualist account of interpre-
tation,” in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, 100.
15. Ibid, 190.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid, 47.
20. According to Sartre’s most famous play, the “way” out of the hell of interpersonal manipulation and emotivist preferences is “closed” (*Huis clos*), and there is no longer any Socrates to play the philosophical Heracles who can bring young souls up from the “Hades” of the corrupt and manipulative polis to the daylight of truth and virtue. Although I have no direct evidence, it is hard to believe that Sartre was not conscious of the parallelism between the infernal setting of his play and Plato’s deliberate use of underworld imagery in the *Republic*.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid, 78. See also Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiv.
31. Obviously such a critique cannot respond to “Pragmatism” as such, inasmuch as there are versions of it other than Rorty’s, some of which take exception to the unyielding thoroughness of the latter’s claims regarding irony and contingency. Hilary Putnam comes to mind. See, for example, his *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995). Nevertheless, Rorty’s formulation is, I believe, the most profitable for study precisely because of its willingness to drink the pragmatic cup to its dregs. With Rorty, I believe that Putnam is untenably trying to hold onto “the objectivity of assertoric discourse,” given his concession that “our norms and standards of warranted assertibility” are contingent and do not converge upon a “fact of the matter.” However, with Putnam, I do think that Rorty’s position is not coherently assertable. See Rorty, “Hilary Putnam and the relativist menace,” in *Truth and Progress*, 43–62.
Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 44. Stanley Rosen comments,

Rorty cannot refute traditional philosophy, whether in its Platonist or its Cartesian version, without himself becoming a traditional philosopher. His actual procedure is quite different from an attempted refutation. It consists of the continuous mockery by caricatures of traditional philosophy, by Rorty’s account a series of uninteresting or outmoded views to which no one would wish to return. It is crucial to understand from the outset that Rorty’s book contains no single instance of what professional philosophers call a genuine argument purporting to refute the traditional thesis, either in its own terms or on the basis of Rorty’s own theoretical position.


33. See Rorty’s essay on Derrida in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

34. Ibid, 137.


36. St. Thomas Aquinas, commenting on Aristotle, writes,

> It was explained previously that discourse and instruction (*sermo et doctrina*) are not effective with everyone. But, that they be effective the soul of the hearer must be prepared by many good customs to rejoice in the good and hate the evil, just as the soil must be well tilled to nourish the seed abundantly. As seed is conditioned in the earth, so admonition in the soul of the hearer. Indeed the man who lives by passion will not eagerly hear words of advice, nor even understand, so that he can judge the advice to be good. Therefore he cannot be persuaded by anyone.


38. Even asking this, of course, presupposes that the pragmatist is in some way interested in knowing whether or not he might be wrong. It also assumes that one values coherence and shuns contradiction. Many of the texts I have cited from Rorty engender some doubt about all this, although there are enough conflicting texts to create the impression of ambiguity. Regardless, there is simply no getting around the irreducible necessity of a will receptive to the claims of reality, no matter what they be.

39. Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1965), 19–20. Jacques Maritain says something quite similar when he writes, “Metaphysics demands a certain purification of the intellect; it also takes for granted a certain purification of the will and assumes that one has the courage to cling to things that have no use, to useless Truth. However, nothing is more necessary to man than this uselessness. What we need is not truth that serves us but a truth we may serve. For that truth is the food of the spirit.” *The Degrees of Knowledge* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 4. It would be hard to find an understanding of our
relationship to truth more diametrically opposed to Rorty’s “useful” pragmatism than this Thomistic formulation.

41. Let me be clear that I am not making the bald assertion that one must profess the moral commitments that Thomists praise in order to see the truth and goodness of reality, nor am I saying that everyone with objectivist moral beliefs is morally virtuous or philosophically insightful. There are many realists who more or less merely repeat the names of concepts, principles, and virtues like actors who have learned their lines. Indeed, most of us assent to descriptions of the good, of which our souls have more or less only a tenuous grasp and an even more tenuous fidelity. No one escapes the moral drama of which I speak, and some of the most vociferous public advocates of objective truth and moral realism have come out on the losing end of this struggle. Conversely, there are many theoretically confused postmodern antirealists who have admirable moral habits, but whose cognitive dissonance is manifest in their strident denunciations of the injustices of cruelty, discrimination, greed, and exploitation. Thus, I am not here assigning praise and blame but merely pointing out that the very nature of intelligibility itself entails that only certain existential and moral dispositions render one’s intellect fully open and thereby potentially adequate to its form. Being human, most antirealists partake of these dispositions and thus, despite their incoherent denials, recognize and act on the truth that certain things contradict the proper acts and ends of human nature.


43. Ibid, 9.

44. “The best argument we partisans of solidarity have against the realistic partisans of objectivity is Nietzsche’s argument that traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits isn’t working anymore. It isn’t doing its job. It has become as transparent a device as the postulation of deities who turn out, by a happy coincidence, to have chosen us as their people.” Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, 33. It should be noted that what Rorty means here by “isn’t doing its job” cannot, on his own terms, signify “has been shown to be false,” otherwise Rorty is back in the traditional philosophy business. It can only mean, as he says in numerous other places, that it is no longer useful for what we pragmatic aesthetes are into these days. But this is hardly noteworthy, for there are few things more obvious.

45. Rorty, “Pragmatism without method,” 75.

46. Ibid.

47. Alasdair MacIntyre is to the point: “Enquiry into the nature of the virtues and of human good more generally is on this Socratic view therefore bound to be sterile if disinterested. . . . From the standpoint of the Gorgias and Republic the enquirer has to learn how to make him or herself into a particular kind of person if he or she is to move towards a knowledge of the truth about his or her good and about the human good.” Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 60–61.
48. I am using Plato here in order to respond to Rorty’s stated assumption. However, numerous texts from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* could also be introduced here that make the same point about the relationship between good and bad habits (i.e., virtues and vices) and the capacity of our intellect to see the “principles” of moral truth, that is, the proper acts, ends, and goods of human nature. For example, Aristotle writes in book VI of that work, “But whatever the true end be, only a good man can judge it correctly. For wickedness distorts and causes us to be completely mistaken about the fundamental principles of action. Hence it is clear that a man cannot have prudence unless he is good.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a34–37, and see also 1108b20–25, 1113a30–35, 1140b15–20, 1144a34–37, 1151a15–20, 1173b20–30, and 1176a15–22. That there are noticeable differences between Plato and Aristotle on important questions should not distract us from their profound agreements.


50. C. D. C. Reeve comments on the Platonic understanding of philosophical education: “Because intelligence may be the same in people of different psychological types, but is focused on achieving different goals by the different sorts of desires which rule in their psyches [i.e. pleasure-loving, money-loving, honor-loving, or wisdom loving], Platonic education is aimed primarily not at the transmission of information or at the inculcation of intellectual skills, but at the removal or moderation of as many of a person’s unnecessary desires as his nature permits.” *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato’s Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 50.

51. John Rist similarly writes, “In the *Republic* . . . Plato makes the subtler point that demagogues fall victim to their own propaganda. In deceiving others, they cannot but diminish their identity by being themselves deceived. . . . Plato rehearses the degeneration of society from the rule of aristocrats holding office to serve others and lead them towards the Good to that of the ‘tyrannical’ man whose only aim is to use others to promote what he takes to be his own advantage. Plato holds that the tyrant is the last person to know what that advantage is.” *Real Ethics: Reconsidering the Foundations of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

52. I have been making the Platonic point that our moral habits influence our capacity for theoretical understanding. It should be pointed out, however, that the reverse is also true. Our theoretical commitments can also influence the development of our moral character. Plato makes the point that if, through disordered education and poor intellectual development, one were to cease viewing the world as having a natural moral order, there would no longer be any reasonable countervailing principle by which one would be disposed to resist the pull of one’s appetites and desires. In *Republic VII*, Plato describes the fate of the young dialectician who is not “orderly and steady by nature” (539d) when he deconstructs the unexamined moral *dogmata* of his community:
“By refuting him often and in many places, [the argument] shakes him from his convictions, and makes him believe that the fine is no more fine than shameful, and the same with the just, the good, and the things he honored most. What do you think his attitude will be then to honoring and obeying his earlier convictions? “Of necessity he won’t honor or obey them in the same way.” “Then, when he no longer honors and obeys those convictions and can’t discover true ones, will he be likely to adopt any other way of life than that which flatters him?” “No, he won’t.” “And so, I suppose, from being law-abiding he becomes lawless” (538d—539a).

Thus, a purely instrumental rationality can act like an acid upon one’s moral principles. Two things need to be said here for the purpose of our discussion. First, there is still a kind of primacy of moral character at work here, for Plato is speaking of souls for whom it is dangerous to learn dialectic because their characters are not sufficiently “ordered and stable.” Second, the Rortian ironist position conscientiously asserts the causal priority of desire over theoretical belief. As we cited earlier, for the pragmatic ironist “the only point of having beliefs in the first place is to gratify desires” (see n. 25). This would seem to indicate a priority of appetite over inquiry in the way one chooses to describe the world. Regardless, no matter how one has reached such a position, Plato’s point still stands that one cannot transcend it without the moral reformation of one’s habitual desires opening the door to the life of reason.

53. It also needs to be said that there are many factors that go into shaping our theoretical assumptions, no matter what they are. One can obviously come to hold anti-realist commitments other than through the absence of rectified appetite. Plato’s references to the powerful influence upon a soul of “the many” in the assembly praising and blaming certain things suggests how false intellectual customs and (mis) educational indoctrination can instill beliefs that do not arise from a hardened will or unrectified appetite.

55. See, for example, Rorty, “Daniel Dennett on Intrinsicality,” 98–121.
56. Charles De Konnick writes, “If an organism has no purpose, it is no organism at all: it is not a body equipped with tools making possible the fulfillment of needs, but simply a mass in which appear a number of functionless appendages. Whether this last description makes sense need not concern us for the moment; the point is that there is no avoiding it when purpose is denied.” *The Hollow Universe* (Québec: Les Presses de L’Université Laval, 1964), 97–98.
61. *ST*, I, Q. 82, a. 4, ad 1.

62. David Schindler has aptly commented on this relationship, “In the concrete order of existing there is a circle always operative in understanding: the intellect is in operation precisely to the extent that the will wills it to be in operation i.e., the intellect knows precisely to the extent that the will is immanent to it in the order of exercise. . . . In sum, in the concrete order of existing, the problem is never one of either-or; it is always one of both-and: simultaneously and with equal necessity of both an act of willing and an act of ‘intellecting.’ “History, Objectivity, and Moral Conversion,” *The Thomist* 37 (July 1973), 582.

63. Once again, Schindler writes, “In every discussion which bears upon the meaning of human existence—e.g., questions regarding God, life, death, the nature and destiny of man, etc.,—and to the precise extent that it does so, one necessarily comes to the discussion already disposed toward an answer. One never confronts the subject matter in a ‘neutral’ fashion: *not being neutral* is synonymous with *having lived.*” Ibid, 584. Italics in the original.

64. MacIntyre reminds us of “what Augustine had affirmed, that it is only through the transformation of the will from a state of pride to one of humility that the intelligence can be rightly directed. Will is more fundamental than intelligence and thinking undirected by a will informed by humility will always be apt to go astray.” *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 91.


68. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 110. On this point MacIntyre writes that a Thomistic genealogy of Neitzsche should begin with what Aquinas says about the roots of intellectual blindness in moral error, with the misdirection of the intellect by the will and with the corruption of the will by the sin of pride. . . . Where Nietzsche saw the individual will as a fiction, as part of a mistaken psychology which conceals from view the impersonal will to power, the Thomist can elaborate out of materials provided in the *Summa* an account of the will to power as an intellectual fiction disguising the corruption of the will. The activity of unmasking is itself to be understood from the Thomistic standpoint as a mask for pride. *Three Rival Versions*, 147.

69. See Josef Pieper, *Theoria* requires a specific relation to the world, a relation prior to any conscious construction and foundation. We can only be theoretical in the full sense of the word (where it means a receptive vision untouched by the smallest intention to alter things, and even a complete readiness to make the will’s consent
or dissent dependent upon the reality we perceive through the recognition of which we give our yea or our nay)—we can only be “theoretical” in this undiluted sense, so long as the world is something other (and something more) than a field for human activity, its material, or even its raw material.


70. ST II–II, q. 15, a. 3.
71. Aquinas, Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo, 15, 4 (my translation).
72. Ibid.
73. Aquinas, In Sententia, 4, d. 33, q. 3, a. 3 (my translation).
74. Ibid.
75. MacIntyre echoes this point when discussing the Thomistic conception of education: “Progress in genuine understanding cannot be independent of moral progress. And moral progress is not to be confused with progress in moral philosophy. . . . Metaphysics is not, as in much contemporary philosophy, one more specialized sub-discipline, but that without which other types of understanding remain incomplete. And part of what we learn from moral and political philosophy is the indispensability of the moral virtues and especially prudence in achieving such completed metaphysical understanding.” “Aquinas’ Critique of Education: Against His Own Age, Against Ours,” in Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 104, 5.
77. Ibid, 155.
78. Rorty, Truth and Progress, 63.
79. Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, 76.
80. Ibid.