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"On Not Selling Human Freedom Short:
Ramberg, Rorty, and Democratic Normativity"

# On Not Selling Human Freedom Short: Ramberg, Rorty, and Democratic Normativity

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Among Bjørn Ramberg's distinct and enduring contributions to contemporary pragmatist philosophy are his finely-grained redescriptions of Rortyan positions that, by tempering Rorty's own anti-Philosophical excesses, have helped us see what Rorty should have said without violating any of his core commitments. Ramberg's "*Revisionist Rortyanism*" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 2), his too-humble name for the "invigorated, assertive, historically self-conscious brand of pragmatist philosophical reflection" defended throughout his writings, contains kernels of wisdom that through a slow but steady process of germination, in some cases over a couple of decades, are responsible, more than any other thinker (save perhaps Richard Bernstein), for the richer, more nuanced appreciation of Rorty that has emerged in recent years.[1]

This chapter takes up what may be Ramberg's biggest preoccupation in his illuminating body of work on Rorty: addressing "the absence of a normative description of the practice of philosophy" in the neopragmatist's corpus (Ramberg, 2001, p. 27). After briefly surveying familiar critiques of Rortyan pragmatism's normative lacunae, I gather a handful of scattered insights—primarily from Ramberg, but also Robert Brandom and Joseph Margolis—that grants glimpses of a positive conception of

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[1] For a survey of this work, see Voparil (2022b).

Rortyan pragmatic normative philosophy.[2] We owe the most promising of these glimpses to Ramberg (2000), most famously in the supple exposition of Davidson's stances that spurred Rorty to acknowledge "the inescapability of the normative" and the pivotal amendments it prompted to his long-held views on realism (Rorty, 2000a). Still, as Ramberg himself has acknowledged, the Davidsonian formalist account of triangulation that Rorty came to endorse, including its attendant commitments to (semantic) truth, word-world relations, and getting things right, nevertheless leaves an interpretive gap: namely, elucidating the normative commitments— ethical and epistemic—of Rorty's pragmatism, a set of commitments that can be summed up simply as his antiauthoritarianism.[3]

My aim in this chapter is to give an account of Rortyan pragmatic normativity that fills this gap. While not systematically elaborated by Ramberg, such an account can be developed from his recognition that Rorty's pragmatism is "committed above all to the idea of philosophy as an engagement for human freedom" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 140). After establishing the key tension Ramberg identified between Rorty's Deweyan aspirations for a reconstructed practice of philosophy that intervenes in cultural politics and his reluctance to advance and defend a normative account of the practice of philosophy beyond simply "just what we philosophy professors do," I sketch what I call a notion of democratic normativity that starts with Rorty's commitments to human agency and to our ethical relations to other human beings, and outline the normative conception of pragmatic philosophy required to attain his aspirations for moral and political progress.

It is "democratic" in the sense, as Clayton Chin has put it, that Rorty calls on us to "accept the human responsibility for normativity" (Chin, 2018, p. 38), and is informed by Rorty's antiauthoritarianism, his commitment to accepting "our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow humans as our only source of guidance," in ethics and epistemology (Rorty, 1982, p. 66). That is to say, for Rorty all normative questions are a matter of the values, identities, and boundaries of particular com-

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[2] I follow Bernstein's (2010) habit of using "pragmatic" in the broad sense of the tradition's philosophical commitments.

[3] This interpretive limitation is evident in the list of commitments Rorty felt compelled to catalog as being unaffected by his concessions to the Davidsonian picture Ramberg successfully had urged upon him (see Rorty, 2000a, pp. 375–76). On the normative commitments of Rorty's antiauthoritarianism, see Brandom (2021).

munities.[4] Metaphilosophically, it is democratic in that the practice of philosophy, as Mattew Festenstein has put it, is "on all fours, epistemologically and morally speaking, with the array of other discourses that jostle for the attention of the citizenry" (Festenstein, 2003, p. 15). It prioritizes breaking free from entrenched existing vocabularies with the aim of expanding human freedom, understood primarily in terms of our agentive capacity to generate new descriptions, imagine new metaphors, and ultimately authorize new norms through modifying our practices. But it also espouses a conception of *rational* conversation that is both epistemic and ethical, oriented to listening to and understanding, rather than defeating, opponents' arguments. The result is a Rortyan normative conception of philosophy whose practice aims at promoting democratic virtues of inclusion and epistemic humility and that privileges our ethical relations to our conversation partners within the space of reasons, while at the same time endorsing reasoned normative assessment of better and worse based on practice-intrinsic standards of correctness.

## 1. Rorty's Elusive Normativity

During Rorty's lifetime, and still in many quarters today, the widely accepted view was that he abandoned "traditional normative notions such as truth and objectivity that are supposed to anchor thought to reality" (Tanesini, 2010, p. 200).[5] Rorty's work is rarely cited, let alone engaged in any substantive way, within mainstream inquiries into standard normative topics (e.g., Turner, 2010), other than as a punchline. Influential commentators within the pragmatist orbit who did examine Rorty's writings from such vantages almost uniformly found his philosophy lacking, to put it mildly. To take several noteworthy examples among many: Jürgen Habermas held that "As soon as the concept of truth is eliminated in favor of context-dependent epistemic validity-for-us, the normative reference point necessary to explain why a proponent should endeavor to seek agreement

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4 On this point see Festenstein (2003) and Chin (2018, Chapter 5). The circularity of this practice-based or inside view of normativity is of course a central feature of pragmatism: e.g., Putnam: "what we have [...] are practices, which are right or wrong depending on how they square with our standards. And our standards are right or wrong depending on how they square with our practices. This is a circle or, better, a spiral, but one [...] regarded as virtuous" (Putnam, 1990, p. 304). Or Dewey: "How, it will be asked, can inquiry which has to be evaluated by reference to a standard be itself the source of the standard?" (Dewey, 1986, p. 13).

5 For a recent example, see Gaskill (2022)

for *'p' beyond the boundaries of her own group* is missing." "If something is 'true'," he continues, "if and only if it is recognized as justified 'by us' because it is good 'for us', there is no rational motive for expanding the circle of members" (Habermas, 2000, p. 51). Similarly, Hilary Putnam asserted that pragmatic normativity "is not simply determined by consensus, but is something that requires evaluation" (Putnam, 1992, p. 77), arguing that Rorty's pragmatism fails to "preserve our commonsense realist convictions" and any sense of normative correctness capable of providing a criterion to "distinguish a genuine reform from its opposite" (Putnam, 2000, pp. 83–5). Susan Haack likewise charged Rorty with reducing truth to agreement and making evidence irrelevant to justification such that to "justify a belief is to defend it to some audience or other" (Haack, 1998, pp. 19–20), and with embracing a "cynicism which would undermine not only epistemology, but all forms of inquiry" (Haack, 1993, p. 6). Absent a concern for truth and why it is important, we have no reason to reject "sham reasoning" (Haack, 1998, pp. 7–8).[6]

To shed greater light on Rorty's elusive normativity, two preliminary steps are needed: to nail down what we mean by normativity (this section) and then to outline the particular conception of philosophy's normative role that Rorty relies on (the final one). One way to characterize the normative project of traditional epistemology he opposed is to think of it as "articulating the conditions that beliefs must satisfy in order to be justified, leading to further recommendations concerning which beliefs we ought to hold and those we should not" by identifying criteria that make clear "our rational responsibility toward our beliefs" and thereby to facilitate self-correction or improvement (Sinclair, 2004, p. 55). Such truth-indicative criteria are ones that "normative epistemology will show we have good reason to believe point us toward the way the world is, in the way we have good reason to believe that a compass will point us toward the Magnetic North Pole" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 4).

The pragmatists' contribution to this picture is an insistence upon the primacy of practice and an unwillingness to transcend our immersion in the practical life of social and historical communities. Robert Brandom has described the chief pragmatic insight as "the idea of the relativity of values to human interests—the thought that practical norms are ultimately to be derived from the needs and wants of the desiring beings understood to be subject to those norms" (Brandom, 2021, p. xi). In Putnam's explanation,

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[6] See Ramberg (2001) for an in-depth account of Haack's critique of Rorty's inadequate commitment to philosophical method and how this critique misses its mark.

"[T]he pragmatists urged that the agent point of view, the first-person normative point of view, and the concepts indispensable to that point of view, should be taken just as seriously as the concepts indispensable to the third person descriptive point of view" (Putnam, 1995, p. 215). There is no reducing or eliminating this normative embeddedness since "our sense that utterances and thoughts can be correct or incorrect, true or false, is necessary for us to take ourselves to be talking and thinking about a shared world with others" (Putnam, 1983, p. 246).[7]

Where Rorty diverged from Habermas and others is in explicitly rejecting the idea defended by Putnam that a belief-independent standard of truth or correctness can be secured amid our practical normative embeddedness in the world. He recognized the normativity inherent in our "endorsing" use of truth (see Rorty, 2010). Yet because he understood that normativity to be a function of and inextricable from our practices, a decontextualized notion of truth projected as an independent goal or standard could never be more than an "empty compliment" (Rorty, 1991, p. 6) we pay to beliefs to which we already are committed in practice. Rorty was unyielding on this point: "I cannot give any content to the idea of non-local correctness of assertion" (Rorty, 1998, p. 60). As Brandom elaborates Rorty's stance: "just as we should be antiauthoritarian in ethics in rejecting the authority of God over the correctness of what we do, we should be antiauthoritarian in epistemology by rejecting the authority of objective reality over the correctness of what we believe" (Brandom, 2021, p. xi).

This reading is insightful as far as it goes. But it captures only the negative normative impulse in Rorty, without yet characterizing his positive conception. Since Rorty himself never offered a systematic elaboration, let us turn to three of the most promising takes on pragmatic normativity to evaluate them for adequacy to Rorty's project: those of Brandom, Ramberg, and Joseph Margolis. The first is Brandom's account of "pragmatism about norms." "Only in the context of a set of social practices—within a vocabulary," he writes, "can anything have authority, induce responsibility, or in general have normative significance for us" (Brandom, 2000, p. 161). Brandom is particularly illuminating about what he has called Rorty's "social practice theory of normativity in general" (Brandom, 2021,

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[7] I should acknowledge the oversimplification in this paragraph given the different conceptions of practice that exist among pragmatists. For our purposes here, it is enough to underscore James Liszka's point that classical pragmatism and neopragmatism share a recognition that our normative practices work best "in a moral landscape with a certain topology" of habits and "the *right sort of community*" (Liszka, 2013, p. 59).

p. xvɪ). The distinctive Rortyan move, on this view, emerges with his claim all normative statuses are social statuses, establishing what Brandom dubs the "social status of unoverridability":

> The authority of sincere, contemporaneous first-person reports of whether one is in pain or of what one is currently thinking [...] cannot be overridden by any evidence available to other subjects [...] That authority [...] should be understood as consisting just in how such reports are taken or treated by other practitioners.                   Brandom, 2021, p. xvɪɪ

Brandom no doubt has pinpointed a signal element of Rorty's thinking around normativity here that underwrites key epistemic and ethical commitments.[8] Yet the "origin story" Brandom tells about Rorty's pragmatism explicates this normative stance entirely in terms of "the conceptual background" of Rorty's thought, as an expression of his early eliminative materialism.[9] As a result, while this elaboration yields surprising insights into the implicit Kantian residue in Rorty's thinking about normativity, the full consequences of Rorty's social-practical account of normativity for "our fellow humans as our only source of guidance," as well as the Deweyan influence on his view of what philosophy is good for, his priority of democracy to philosophy, and so on are nowhere accounted for.

Ramberg's insightful revelations concerning what Rorty, despite his previous protestations, shares with a Davidsonian account of the inescapability of the normative run into a similar explanatory limitation as Brandom's. Ultimately, both underwrite a formal account wholly consistent with Rorty's philosophical pragmatism yet one from which no practical normative guidance falls out to explain his moral and political positions. Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi concisely explains this Davidsonian "package" conception of normativity:

> [C]ontact with the world is trivial. We always already are in touch. We cannot not be in touch. But there is no "how things really are." This does not mean that we can make just any claim. We have to "get things right" and this entails that I, my fellows, and [objects and phenomena] are a package in the process of description and redescription.
>                            Huetter-Almerigi, 2020, p. 81

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[8] See Voparil (2014).
[9] See Brandom (2013, 2021).

This picture of triangulation, as Rorty eventually recognized, is the better account of our relation to reality, word-world relations, and meaning than his earlier incomplete view with only two corners of the Davidsonian triangle. Nevertheless, Davidson himself made clear that "The norms I am concerned with here are not the norms of responsibility, obligation, or morality" but "simply a condition of understanding the thought and action and talk of thinking creatures" (Davidson, 1999, p. 599). Ramberg likewise reminded that on this Davidsonian account, "The norms of agency, those expressed by the charity of the ideal interpreter, are not norms that we can hold up before ourselves or others as directives or guides to behavior" (Ramberg, 2000, p. 362). While these background conditions are not devoid of normative content, inasmuch as they are manifestations of Wittgensteinian forms of life, we don't yet have an explicit source of ethical and political normative authority needed to realize the aims of Rorty's pragmatism.[10]

Ironically, given his visceral antipathy toward Rorty's pragmatism,[11] the closest we come to illuminating Rortyan normativity may be Margolis's notion of "*sittlich* normativity." Margolis argued that all agentive norms indeed are projected from "the contingent interests of the artifactual, second-natured creatures we take ourselves to be" (Margolis, 2021, p. 403). On this view, "the *sittlich*, as actually and pertinently *intended* within a living community, adequately determines (confers and confirms) the valid standing of some designated set of agentive norms" (Margolis, 2021, p. 404). This stance finds an ally in one of Rorty's heroes, Wilfrid Sellars, who held that "the most fundamental principles of a community, which define what is 'correct' or 'incorrect,' 'right' or 'wrong,' 'done' or 'not done,' are the most general common *intentions* of that community with respect to the behavior of members of the group" (Sellars, 1963, p. 39).

Margolis's conception of normativity as thoroughly and inescapably *sittlich* should be amenable to pragmatists who hold that there are no standards that exist wholly outside the social nature of norms.[12] Colin Koopman has dubbed this "normativity without foundations"—or, more specifically, "authority without authoritarianism": recognizing that "our practices are still deeply dependent upon conceptions of correctness and rightness" while remaining "in the midst of the critical cultural flows in

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[10] On Rorty and Wittgensteinian forms of life, see Perona (2015).
[11] See, for instance, Margolis (2000).
[12] See note 4 above.

which we find ourselves without appealing to something beyond those flows that would sponsor salvation from the outside" (Koopman, 2011a, p. 561).[13] However, disagreements emerge over the matter of securing "the validating grounds of agentive norms" (Margolis, 2021, p. 395). For example, Putnam insisted upon a normative standard of rightness or "some kind of correctness that is substantial" as an essential source of epistemic guidance in belief formation where what we take to be true is constrained by what actually is true (Putnam, 1983, p. 246). Here the contrast is the supposedly standardless cultural relativism often attributed to Rorty. Yet even those unsympathetic to Rorty, like Margolis, found Putnam's effort to secure normativity via a limit theory of truth or *Grenzbegriff* unpersuasive: "an arbitrary machine wheeled out to disallow the threat of relativism" (Margolis, 2002, p. 153).

Margolis concluded that Rorty's is the more consistent pragmatism than that of Putnam and Habermas.[14] He is clear that "the whole of our biology and cultural history fails to disclose any conceptually compelling grounds on which agentive norms (norms concerned with the exercise of what we regard as human autonomy or freedom or flourishing) may be objectively confirmed" (Margolis, 2021, p. 402). Yet unlike Rorty, Margolis is not a quietist about philosophy's normative role. For Margolis, the *sittlich* is "entitled to claim an objective function of its own, even with regard to the revision of agentive norms. Still, as thoroughly artifactual (contingent, changeable, parochial, contentious, disputed)," he continues, "it cannot be more than second best." In other words, "it can hardly be counted on to provide demonstrably privileged sources by which to validate our claims or legitimate our validative practices before any universal tribunal." We do, nevertheless, have at our disposal "some reasoned selection of the *sittlich* norms we deem promising and congenial" (Margolis, 2021, pp. 405–6).

I find Margolis's notion of *sittlich* normativity to be highly illuminative of Rorty's pragmatism. Yet where Rorty's stance seems to run aground is in the severity of his call for a "shift from epistemology to politics" (Rorty, 1989, p. 68). Rorty politicizes normativity such that there are no extra-communal sources of authority, viewing it as a function of our ethically and politically situated interestedness in the world, and claim-

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[13] Koopman develops a "conception of critical inquiry whose basic categories of critique are *problem* and *response*—as an alternative to *position* and *negation* or *truth* and *error*" (Koopman, 2011a, p. 558).

[14] See, for example, Margolis (2002, Chapter 5, 2010, Chapter 3).

ing that his pragmatism's "account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one" (Rorty, 1991, p. 24). On Ramberg's generous reading, the implication is that questions about vocabulary choice are normative, in that there is "an irreducibly practical element—in the sense that they cannot be extricated, by abstraction, from what are essentially experientially derived considerations of what we think we want to be like, what we want our practices to become" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47).

If Rortyan normativity resides precisely in the commitments implicated in who we are and what we hope to become, and how norms of better and worse are a function of our community, our traditions, our moral identity, and better versions of ourselves, the question is how on this view we can speak of any reasoned account of these norms.[15] As we know, for Haack (1995), without a clear standard for distinguishing rhetoric from genuine philosophical argument the epistemological framework for rational inquiry collapses. Similarly, for Putnam "by abandoning any notion of substantial correctness, Rorty is left without any leverage to motivate a rational change in view. Rejecting truth, as Putnam thinks, Rorty must face the consequence that nothing he says could really be an argument" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 26). A common feature of these critiques is that Rorty's over-politicized pragmatism has abandoned reason and the force of rational argument as essential philosophical contributions to inquiry and belief formation. Until Rorty's rejection of rational argumentation is overcome, his stance appears normatively toothless.[16]

## 2. Ramberg on Rorty's Normative Pragmatism

To see how Ramberg recovers a Rortyan sense of rationality, we can start with his appreciation for how Rorty's shift to politics does not leave epistemology behind entirely. Rather, Rorty reconceives epistemic normativity so that it is not isolable from our ethical and political practical embeddedness. As Ramberg notes, Rorty's pragmatism sets itself against "the regulative idea of a chief vocabulary, a scale, a hierarchy of forms of descrip-

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[15] Indeed, Margolis discerns this dimension in Rorty but writes it off on account of Rorty's lack of systematic philosophical elaboration: "Rorty falls back to *sittlich* solidarity—ethnocentricity—but not as a reasoned philosophical option" (Margolis, 2021, p. 417). See also Penelas's (2010) case for Rortyan argumentation.

[16] Brandom claims that "Far from rejecting the notion of *reason*, Rorty seeks a broader, deeper conception of it" and actually calls him "the prophet of a particular kind of emancipatory reflective reason," but, alas, does not elaborate (Brandom, 2021, pp. xxv–xxvi).

tion, a hierarchy that may be discovered, that would be independently authoritative, and final" (Ramberg, 2011, p. 143). Ramberg's key insight here is to locate this critique within an explicitly normative background of freedom and agential choice.[17]  As he writes, Rorty attacks the failure to acknowledge contingency as a reliance upon some "unexplicated notion of cognitive goodness," like "rational" or "justified" or "truth-indicating," that does "not tell us what to do in order to argue well, how to go about realizing our aim of being rational in our preferences, of holding the justi-fied view, of uncovering the truth" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 33). Moreover, this stance:

> sells freedom short by diminishing our active participation in, and thus our willingness and ability to take responsibility for, any particular rendering of our relations to the world, to each other, and to ourselves.                     Ramberg, 2011, p. 143

Put another way, any ontological or metaphysical account, whatever its merits, cannot tell us "under what aspects we should care about things." Such determinations, Ramberg continues, are normative, but "retain for pragmatists an irreducibly practical element—in the sense that they can-not be extricated, by abstraction, from what are essentially experientially derived considerations of what we think we want to be like, what we want our practices to become" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47).  Conceding normative authority to standards thusly abstracted is to abdicate our own freedom and agency.

Rather than being a flight from philosophy and a particular norma-tive conception of it, then, Rorty's stance represents a further cashing out of pragmatism's commitment to the primacy of practice that underscores its ethical dimensions.  The source of the responsibility highlighted by Ramberg resides in our *sittlich* commitments, what Margolis aptly char-acterizes as "the completely vulnerable, earthbound contingency of the concept of normativity" (Margolis, 2021, p. 391). Put bluntly, Rorty politi-cizes normativity, as Chin has argued (Chin, 2018, p. 175). Rorty himself was never that explicit.  But in an illuminating passage responding to Jaegwon Kim's criticism of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* for "socializ-ing" truth, Rorty distinguished between saying "there are no such things as truth-makers" and saying "social approval is the only truth-maker."

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[17] The recognition of an ineluctable realm of choice in which any appeal to philosophy for guidance will be necessarily circular was present since Rorty's earliest writings.  See Voparil (2020) for a full account of these early commitments and their implications.

His stance, he clarified, asserts the former, not the latter. Rather than " 'socializing' truth," he wrote, "like James and Dewey, I am trying to moralize it" (Rorty, 2020, p. 151).

Viewing truth as a species of the good, in James's sense, has two important implications for understanding Rorty's pragmatism. The first is that epistemic normativity is not abandoned entirely, only located with a particular (contingent) moral and ethical frame. The second is that the beliefs and practices of actual communities become paramount. As Festenstein explains, "Questions about all forms of authority or normativity become political, then, in the sense that they become questions about the governing values and boundaries of a specific community" (Festenstein, 2003, p. 6).

Ramberg's signal contribution is to discern the revised conceptions of rationality and argumentation that nevertheless remain crucial within the Rortyan picture. He clarifies that Rorty's moves do not take him as far from a conception of reason as Rorty sometimes seemed to think:

> Any gloss—or analysis—of 'rationality' represents some particular application of our cognitive practices to themselves. Whatever normative force such a particular application has, inevitably derives from attachments to aspects of our actual cognitive practices. These attachments, in turn, can be rooted nowhere but in experience, in the interaction of our creature need and interest with the environment in which we function.
> Ramberg, 2004, p. 36

Importantly, he adds: "this does not mean that these practices cannot be meaningfully criticised or reformed—it implies only that they cannot be assessed wholesale, by some standard not of our own experiential devising" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 36). This stance is just another way of "stressing the point that philosophy is reflection on *praxis*" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 45).

Ramberg fills in the details of this novel reading by offering an important corrective—namely, that Rorty's talk about vocabulary choice is misleading in a fundamental sense. As Ramberg explains, Rorty often posited an opposition between "the intravocabularic movement of rational thought and the dynamics of vocabulary change" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 30)—in other words, the difference between arguments that take place within a vocabulary or language game and arguments about the validity of competing vocabularies. Because he rejected any notion of reason as "a built-in truth-seeking faculty," Rorty advocated "giving up the idea that

intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of 'rational' which is neutral between vocabularies." Yet he also maintained that "Within a language game, within a set of agreements about what is possible and important, we can usefully distinguish reasons for belief from causes for belief which are not reasons" (Rorty, 1989, pp. 47–8).

Ramberg discerns two problems within this familiar Rortyan view. The first is that the distinction between normative judgments within language games (or vocabularies) vs. normative judgments across or between them has no practical import within actual philosophical inquiries. This is equally true of Rorty's vaunted differentiation of normal and abnormal discourse. Ramberg's account of why is helpful:

> Vocabularies of active philosophical discourse are dynamically evolving processes, changing as we work our way through them; they are therefore not the sorts of things we stand over against and select between, nor are they, a fortiori, the sorts of things to which we may be antecedently committed. As fully thematized, conventional linguistic structures, vocabularies can only emerge clearly before us as objects of reflective deliberation and decision once we have a clear sense of the experience they make possible, when we know, that is to say, how to delineate and leave them behind.          Ramberg, 2001, p. 31

If we only become aware of vocabularies in which we are enmeshed retrospectively, there is no practical norm that follows from the within-without or normal-abnormal distinctions.

The second problem is that this distinction leads Rorty to locate rationality only on the intravocabulary side. As a result, the process of moving from one vocabulary to another can only be irrational, or at least nonrational. Viewed from one angle, what Ramberg calls "Rorty's central historicist metaphilosophical point" about the nonrationality of intellectual progress is important: "there is no general method to be found here, no specification in abstracto of intellectual technique that can mitigate the sheer contingency of the kind of intellectual movement that led us from a teleological to a Galilean view of the world" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 32). Viewed from another, Rorty was mistaken to conclude from this historicist insight that argument and rationality have no bearing on intervocabulary matters.[18]

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[18] Chin makes a related argument that Rorty's implicit normative resources are aimed at the problem of "internormative engagement" within an explicitly pluralistic context of

To be clear, Ramberg affirms with Rorty that "there is no other measure for critical evaluation of what we do or want than other things we do or want; there is no critique or justification that transcends the contingencies of need and interest, contingencies that give our vocabularies their shape" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 45). The key point here is that, contra Rorty, this stance "does not force us to give up the idea that philosophy has a constitutive relation to the norms of reason." "When we invoke norms of reason," Ramberg continues, "we are drawing on interestingly distinctive explanatory resources" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 45). It is this recognition of better and worse explanatory resources that survives Rorty's critique of antirepresentationalism and that constitutes the core of Rortyan normativity, even if Rorty generally was too wary of philosophical privilege to affirm it.[19]

One must squint to see a normative conception of philosophy in the constellation of seemingly nonphilosophical motifs alluded to thus far: interests, intuitions, purposes, "people's sense of who they are and what matters to them." Nevertheless, these dimensions of practical life constitute the core of Rortyan normativity. For Rorty the only "*normative Bezugspunkt*" or reference-point he has recourse to is one grounded in his particular moral identity: "one can give the notion of 'moral obligation' a respectable, secular, non-transcendental sense by relativizing it to a historically contingent sense of moral identity"—in his case, a moral identity that is the product of "a culture which worries about the fact that Amer-

competing normativities (Chin, 2018, pp. 4–6). See also Gómez Salazar (2016) on Rorty and "normative pluralism." The Rortyan resources and "method" of internormative engagement that Chin excavates are consistent with Ramberg's account, with the caveat that their seemingly opposed stances on "method" derive from different uses of the term—one common in political theory and the other to philosophy. I don't think Chin would object to Ramberg's point that "As soon as we try to beef up the notion of argument to make it rich enough to settle what is or isn't genuine philosophy through methodological considerations, we find ourselves shuttling once again between characterizations of good argument whose terminological circularity renders them toothless, empties them of content, and conceptions that turn out to beg substantive questions at issue between opposed views, and so have significantly more bite than we are bargaining for" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 34).

[19] Stuart Rosenbaum insightfully argued that the best way to understand Rortyan rationality is to "think of it simply as the exercise of a kind of skill, as the exercise of a knowing-how which must forever escape capture in a knowing-that net." On this view, normative standards "are not independent of successful practice of the skill; and formulation of standards is a consequence of the successful practice." In other words, the "test of success is simply successful negotiation of the set of problems, obstacles, or what have you, that having the skill suits one to negotiate" (Rosenbaum, 1986, p. 97). See Voparil (2025) for a fuller account of Rosenbaum's reading and the normativity of Rortyan "muddling through."

ican black slavery and European pogroms seemed sensible and right to previous generations of white Christians" (Rorty, 2000b, p. 61).

The normativity within this picture emerges from our embeddedness within the ethical relations and moral commitments of a particular community's practices, rather than from cognitive sources that exist outside of those moral communities and their practices. This is the fundamental difference between Rorty and Habermas, Putnam, Haack, et al. They locate normativity in conceptions of truth or reason that derive their corrective power from their purported neutrality and independence in relation to our practices; Rorty sees such notions as "empty compliments" and manifestations of authoritarianism to boot. As Ramberg explains, " 'rationality' and 'truth' are not notions that have substantive normative content at all independently of our concrete evaluations of particular instances of cognitive virtue, evaluations which must remain [...] interest and purpose relative" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 37). Rorty was fairly explicit about this. But his responses were taken to be further corroboration, from an outside-view of the normative, of his pragmatism's inability to transcend an ethnocentric cultural relativism.

What Ramberg helps us see is the coherence of the implicit conception of pragmatic normativity endemic to Rorty's stance. For all of Rorty's protestations against the idea of philosophical argumentation, Ramberg reveals how an "idea of philosophical argumentation as defined with reference to a normatively significant ideal of rationality" remains available and indeed central to Rorty's thinking (Ramberg, 2001, p. 40). The key is to appreciate the shift from a practice-extrinsic to a practice-intrinsic picture of normativity. Within the Rortyan frame, "any characterization of rationality or of warrant sufficiently abstract to appear philosophical will, by virtue of this fact, be normatively impotent." The reason for this, Ramberg continues, is that any such characterization "will not tell us how to acquire fewer false beliefs, or desire better things, or act more wisely" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 39). Nevertheless, there are reasoned standards for these corrections, which can be defended through argument, already implicit within our normative entanglement with our own contingent interests and practices. As Rorty wrote,

> If one drops the idea that there is a common ground called 'the evidence,' one is still far from saying the one's person's web is as good as another. One can still debate the issues on all the familiar grounds, bringing up once again [...] all the varied

> advantages and disadvantages of the two views [. . .] One will
> muddle through, hoping some reweaving will happen on both
> sides, and that some consensus may emerge.
>
> Rorty, 1991, p. 67

Transcendence of our entwinement with this particularity and contextual-
ity comes at the price of normative vacuity.

## 3. Rortyan Pragmatic Philosophy and Democratic Normativity

With Ramberg's insights in hand, we now can return to a Rortyan take on
philosophy's normative role. A key tension Ramberg identifies in his sym-
pathetically critical interpretation of Rorty's thought is the disjuncture be-
tween, on the one hand, Rorty's Deweyan aspirations for a reconstructed
practice of philosophy oriented to the social and moral problems of the
day, and on the other his reluctance to advance and defend a normative
conception of what philosophy should be and do. As Ramberg explains,
"Rorty's attempt to redescribe philosophy, to make us reconceive what we
are doing when we philosophize, is at odds with the empty tolerance that
arises from the thought that there is no right or wrong way to character-
ize philosophy" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 25). Indeed, Rorty's stance that there
is no inherent philosophical subject matter, nor perennial philosophical
questions that we are compelled to address, leads to the conclusion that
philosophy is "just what we philosophy professors do," where the only
differences between philosophical perspectives are "stylistic" (Rorty, 1982,
p. 220). The implication is that there is little more to philosophy than "hit
lists of texts and sociological reports" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 38).

Ramberg rightly perceives that this stance, which he calls Rorty's "vac-
uous pluralism" about philosophy (Ramberg, 2001, p. 29), is clearly inad-
equate to Rorty's own aims for his pragmatism: "the point of philosophy
should be to serve the human good, and that means, for a Deweyan prag-
matist, contributing to our conception of and prospects for attaining a so-
ciety of justice, equality and individual freedom" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 147).
As we have seen, there was little explicit development by Rorty of a nor-
mative conception of philosophy to advance these ends. Ramberg's contri-
bution is to cash out the details of the normative commitments implicit in
Rorty's vision, particularly in relation to notions of rationality and argu-
mentation which Rorty was so disinclined to espouse. Moreover, Ramberg
does this in ways consistent with Rorty's commitments to human agency
and our ethical relations to other human beings.

To spell this perspective out, we can outline chief candidates for the normative function of philosophy and appeals to truth:

(1)    To motivate a rational change or improvement in belief

(2)    To authorize a standard of correctness or rightness that is substantial

(3)    To distinguish between what we take to be true and what is true

(4)    To separate rhetoric from rational argument

(5)    To provide epistemic guidance in belief formation

(6)    To institute a method of reasoning that structures rational inquiry

Rorty's conception of philosophy is most directly attuned to (5). He clearly rejects (2) as well as (3), at least in the terms in which the latter typically is specified. We shall see that he need not abandon (1), (4), and (6). A full grasp of Rorty's position, however, also illustrates how the above list is normatively inadequate in the face of his Deweyan commitment to philosophy as an instrument of social change oriented to enlarging human freedom.[20]

As we know, a primary target of Rorty's critique of metaphysics and ontology is the assumption that they will reveal a rank order or hierarchy of descriptive vocabularies that is somehow foundationally justified. As Ramberg explains, not only does this "sell human freedom short," by restricting the scope of agency and choice, "we diminish our selves—our ability both to shape and to embrace our fate—by maintaining a demand for legitimization in terms of something beyond human interest" (Ramberg, 2011, p. 137). Brandom puts it this way: for Rorty, "*normative* [as opposed to causal] constraint is wholly our creature" (Brandom, 2021, p. XXII). By locating normativity within what Ramberg calls "vocabulary constituting interests," then, intellectual authoritarianism is avoided (Ramberg, 2006, p. 228). On this view, whatever philosophy does, it "cannot be construed as a matter of gauging the relative referential success of various descriptive practices. It becomes, rather, a matter of providing characterizations of the interests we have in referring to items of this or that sort" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 13).

The rub is how to characterize the normativity of these "vocabulary constituting interests." In the previous section we established how Rorty's

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[20]  See Voparil (2022a, Chapter 3).

effort to "moralize" truth entails situating it within the moral and ethical commitments of a particular community. Rorty's claim that cooperative human inquiry has "only an ethical base, not an epistemological or meta-physical one" (Rorty, 1991, p. 24) means that "questions of what sort of predictive vocabulary to apply when, and to what—or whom, are questions that by their nature will not be contained within the scope of theoretical criteria of theory-choice" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47). The normative grounds for such choices, therefore, are furnished by the ethical base of our community of inquiry. Rather than starkly opposing this ethical base to the epistemological and metaphysical, though, as Rorty sometimes suggested, we can hold, following Margolis, that our philosophical commitments are inseparable from "the entrenched habits of interpreted history, prudential interests, and envisioned possibilities of human intervention and evolving experience" (Margolis, 2021, p. 396). Any epistemology and metaphysics severed from this practical normativity cannot tell us "under what aspects we should care about things" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47), since for Rorty there is no "*normative Bezugspunkt*" other than our "historically contingent sense of moral identity" (Rorty, 2000b, p. 61).

To illuminate the conception of reasoned discourse that Rorty's pragmatism requires, Ramberg turns to Gadamer to outline a conception of argumentation that aims not at producing agreement but understanding. He makes vivid the difference between seeking to defeat an opponent and claim victory vs. seeking self-critical examination that expands the available discursive space and opens new imaginative pathways. What results is "a conception of philosophical rationality that is a moral stance rather than a methodological notion" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 37) and more in keeping with Rorty's own emphases on generating new vocabularies and on recognizing the moral or ethical background of dialogical engagement—specifically, the nature and extent of our ethical relations to our conversation partners, including those whom we exclude or ignore.[21]

Returning to our list of chief candidates, thanks to Ramberg we can appreciate how a Rortyan perspective need not deny that improvements in belief can be rational (1), that rational argument has utility (4), and that there are forms of reasoning conducive to inquiry (6), as long as these philosophical tools are recalibrated in moral and ethical rather than methodologically-privileged ways. This means abandoning "the misleading contrast between rational argument and creative, vocabulary-innova-

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[21] Huetter-Almerigi and Ramberg (2023) refer to this as "expansive solidarity."

tive reflection" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 41). Instead of scuttling truth, it means cultivating "an improved ability to see competing truths in perspective, to weigh their relative significance anew. To do so, we need to stretch, alter, and renew our vocabularies" (Kraugerud & Ramberg, 2010, p. 65). It means that argument aims not primarily at agreement but at understanding, not at defeating an opponent but achieving illumination, and that it proceeds not only via logic but by appealing to sentiment. And it means putting non-transcendendable contingency at the forefront and recognizing the full significance of keeping the conversation going: "neither the significance nor indeed even the content of what we say is settled as long as people continue to talk in response" (Ramberg, 2001, pp. 35–7).

For Ramberg, the Rortyan normative conception of philosophy demands a willingness to listen to others. To quote Ramberg, "For Rorty, intellectual authoritarianism is the impulse to short-circuit the effort to seek a communicative resolution of differences of views and interests, by invoking a justification to act on, or against, or in spite of, others, without conversing with them" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 148).[22] Central to challenging authoritarianism—in Rorty's jargon, subordinating ourselves to nonhuman authority—is "to counteract theoretical impulses that threaten to reduce our willingness or ability to listen to others, to listen in that [Gadamerian] hermeneutical sense" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 148). On this view, the normative thrust of Rorty's pragmatism resides in the "effort to philosophically strengthen our capacity and willingness to listen to those who think and speak differently from ourselves" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 148).[23]

While Ramberg doesn't make this connection explicitly, his reading confers normative significance on Rorty's frequent allusions to our assessment of whom we regard as "conversation partners." Implicit here is a standard of normative assessment that gives Rorty a (local) version of candidate #2. As Koopman has explained, "the correctness of the employment of a concept, which of course can change over time as we reapply the concept in novel situations by coming up with new usages of words, hinges not on the way in which our words track something ultimate in reality itself but rather merely on the extent to which we use our words in

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[22] While I don't have the space to pursue it here, a very interesting related perspective is Carl Sach's account of Rorty's aversion to "normative violence." Relating it to Miranda Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice, Sachs explains that "normative violence generally involves positioning oneself as enjoying cognitively privileged access to ontology, hence as exempting oneself from the flux and contingency of cultural politics" (Sachs, 2017, p. 287).

[23] See also Voparil (2020).

ways that our conversation partners themselves endorse in the context of conversations" (Koopman, 2011b, p. 72).

Rorty's attention to the ethical dimension evaluates our judgments about who counts as a competent member of our community of justification (e.g., Rorty, 2000b, p. 15). Without intentional efforts to expand both our community and the logical space of moral deliberation, those whom we have ignored will remain unacknowledged and, as a result, our beliefs unimproved. It is captured by Chin's insight that for Rorty "*rationality is an ethical relation among groups*—a disposition toward new and existing conversation partners that frames their engagement in reflexive equality" (Chin, 2018, p. 217).[24] This gloss helps make sense of Rorty's claim that "being rational and acquiring a larger loyalty are two descriptions of the same activity" (Rorty, 2007, p. 53). Taking other human beings seriously, to use one of Rorty's hallmark phrases, "prioritizes our ethical relations to other groups in the game of giving and asking for reasons" (Chin, 2018, p. 186). On this view, Rorty's objection to Habermas's privileging of the force of the better argument is that it ignores the ethical dimension of rationality that manifests as "a willingness to engage in intersubjective construction, in deeper, reflexive relations with others" (Chin, 2018, pp. 185–86). As Chin sums it up, on a Rortyan view "rational justification always involves the ethical choice of which terms and vocabularies to employ and whom to speak to" (Chin, 2018, pp. 219–20).

Recognizing the primacy of the ethical translates into a clear directive for philosophers to attend to our concrete relations to and reliance upon other human beings within the space of reasons. As Ramberg explains, "Philosophical rationality cannot be methodologized because it is fundamentally a moral response to the essential incompleteness of our discursive efforts, the dependence of all our thinking on what others will do or not do in response to the words we offer" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 38). That is, "No descriptive strategy or technique, no method, no decision to change topics, subject, or style can make what we say less dependent on the living indeterminacy of the contributions of those who keep making it possible for us to say it" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 41).

If we listen ethically and practice epistemic humility, *pace* Habermas, then remaining within "*the boundaries of her own group*" need not be rela-

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[24] For Calcaterra, human vulnerability to humiliation and suffering can be seen as the only "universal" ethical criterion in Rorty's pragmatism, "provided that it is not a universality based on reason but on the functional unity of the affective and the 'rational' spheres" (Calcaterra, 2019, p. 121).

tivistic or without motivating force for the improvement of belief. Instead
of implying a rudderless relativism in need of an external compass to
keep it from "anything goes," Rortyan ethnocentrism recognizes that our
culture and tradition confer normativity. These normative ties to others
are ethical *and* epistemic in that they "demand of us a willingness to put
our thoughts in the hands of others, and to be willing to stand, in some
measure, refuted" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 38). Keeping the conversation go-
ing in Rorty's sense is to recognize "the shared effort which relates the
remarks of one interlocutor to those of another, however much they dis-
agree" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 39).

    This Rortyan reconstruction of rationality along ethical lines offers
pragmatists a stronger account of how our community can be expanded
to excluded others than Habermas's appeal to a "rational motive" for in-
clusion. As Festenstein explains, "the excluded group needs some pur-
chase on the moral imagination of the dominant, and this in turn means
that the latter must to some degree view the former as part of the same
community, 'one of us'" (Festenstein, 2003, p. 12). This is why Rorty in-
sisted upon the value for social movements and intellectual revolutions
of "*un*warranted" assertions that become warranted only as our norms
and standards evolve: "pragmatism allows for the possibility of expand-
ing logical space, and thereby for an appeal to courage and imagination
rather than to putatively neutral criteria" (Rorty, 1998, pp. 59, 218). As
Festenstein puts it: "Rorty's point is that criticism has no normative grip,
in the sense of latching on to the specific reasons, beliefs and dispositions
of an agent, as a matter of anything but contingent acculturation and
persuasion" (Festenstein, 2003, p. 13). There are no neutral standards or
transcendental norms outside of the community's beliefs and values that
motivate the improvement of belief besides those of another community,
real or imagined, to which we recognize ethical relations of responsibility.
Correcting or replacing existing norms nevertheless always is possible via
envisioning a new sense of community.

    While we may not have at our disposal noncircular reasons or a knock-
down argument to convince the Nazi or the segregationist they are wrong,
Rortyan pragmatists are not without normative resources: "From within
the perspective of [Rorty's] ethnocentric liberalism [...] the segregation-
ist is vile and should be overthrown. But it also recognizes that there is
no sense in which the segregator is rationally compelled to acknowledge
this himself, by the lights of *his* identity or community" (Festenstein, 2003,
pp. 12–13). Such persuasion demands narratives—"sad and sentimental

stories" (Rorty, 1998, p. 172)—and other ways of remaking moral identities and hence the norms to which our community practices.

The account of Rortyan democratic normativity I have sought to develop enables Rorty to achieve his Deweyan aspirations for the practice of philosophy by highlighting the normative force of his familiar calls for novel vocabularies and imaginative redescriptions. The key Rambergian insight I have built on is that these calls are not novelty for novelty's sake, nor outside or an alternative to rationality, but themselves a reasoned philosophical operation. On this conception, rather than jettisoning philosophical rationality the Rortyan perspective reconceives it as moral rather than methodological, ethical rather than solely epistemological. That is, the normative thrust of Rortyan pragmatic philosophy resides not in privileged philosophical safeguards, be it a standard of correctness or distinct method of inquiry, but in the nature and extent of ethical relations and practices that comprise its use. As Ramberg writes, "for Rorty, it is a moral imperative, not a philosophical one, to engage in anti-authoritarian metaphilosophical criticism, and to provide ways of describing human practice that foster democratic attitudes, the art of listening" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 149).

The epistemic and ethical dimensions of democratic normativity underscore what Ramberg takes to be Rorty's profound effort to elucidate "the moral nakedness of our decisions to include and exclude voices from the conversation"—in other words, to deny that any philosophical standards and commitments which result in the exclusion of others as conversation partners are "groundable in anything but expedience" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 40). As both Rorty and Ramberg fundamentally grasped, to our great benefit, to think or do otherwise is to sell human freedom short.

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