Philosophy as Socially Contingent and Objectively True?

Examining a Pragmatic Use of Objective Truth Claims

“We have to give up on the idea that there are unconditional, transcultural moral obligations, obligations rooted in an unchanging, ahistorical human nature. This attempt to put aside both Plato and Kant is the bond which links the post-Nietzschean tradition in European philosophy with the pragmatic tradition in American philosophy.” -Richard Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope

“A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law...so I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.” -Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”

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It has been the postmodern insight that we cannot actually reach objective truth, knowledge about how the world is independent or transcendent of human practice. This awareness of the ultimate human contingency\(^1\) of our claims is not, however, the cumulative failure of our objective truth-seeking projects. Rather it is the product of stepping back and reexamining those projects themselves. It is a collapse initiated by the self-reflexive move of contemplating the impossibility of that project. Indeed, to suppose that we, as politically motivated and historically contingent beings, can derive universal human truths that will prove unanimously applicable is not only impossible, but seems arrogant as well. I hope, however, to illustrate that recognizing the contingency of our claims is not the alternative to continuing to make objective truth claims, but only the alternative to not recognizing that contingency. Is there a power and a practical advantage to the fruitless striving itself? If we can understand the claims as more than our unattainable goal but also as a vital part of human practice, they become far less easy to dismiss.

We should be careful, along with Rorty, however, to distance ourselves from the accusation of cultural relativism. In the eyes of those who still seek universal truths, this denial of the final goal of the project clearly seems like a form of cultural relativism. Yet

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\(^1\) I’ll be using \emph{contingent} to describe philosophical truth claims not in the sense that these claims are unnecessary, but rather in the sense that they rely upon and cannot escape the political taint of their social origin and ramifications. Thus I’m using contingent in the same way that I take Rorty to use it, as a non-pejorative alternative to \emph{cultural relativism}, the idea that one cannot fully comprehend my understanding of God, for instance, without investigating the human and political motivations and ramifications of that understanding. I’ll discuss below why it is that Rorty wishes to distinguish himself from the pejorative term of relativism.
for those who agree that attaining final universal truth is impossible, the view doesn’t seem to be claiming relativism at all, but merely repudiating the hubris of proposed universal insight. Thus for Rorty, this is not cultural relativism, but is rather anti-foundationalism; it isn’t relativistic at all, but rather it is pragmatic.

This continual difficulty of each side of the issue (objective truth seekers and so-called cultural relativists) to acknowledge or clearly comprehend the explanation of the other side is indicative of the larger distinction between the views, that of the language and priorities within which the views are situated for each camp. Each understanding of the possibility of objective truth claims involves a larger framing of the question within one’s final vocabulary or ontological beliefs. Rorty describes a final vocabulary as the most basic political and social views that we ultimately cannot justify but towards which we can only refer. Each side is unable to step outside of their final vocabularies, of their ontological theories, and so the language of metaphysicians and foundationalists will automatically exclude any positive understanding of Rorty’s pragmatic view. Those who hold that objective truth claims are possible will obviously regard their rejection as relativistic. Likewise, Rorty’s pragmatic view, for all its supposed advantages of a more encompassing multi-culturalism, allowing room for the many already existent perspectives often shuffled aside in favor of a single objective truth, still remains exclusive of one possibility, the very one of the foundationalist.

I hope to argue that this single remaining exclusion of Rorty’s pragmatism is ultimately hypocritical and dangerous to the project Rorty proposes, and that it is not in fact a necessary one. Rorty posits that the truth of a claim relies on its practical usefulness. Many philosophers and social activists have emphasized the human
usefulness of making objective truth claims, even if the claims themselves remain
ultimately unproven or even incapable of proof. I would like to propose a way to
understand certain objective truth claims as acknowledged within the contingency of
human practice and as still useful in our pragmatic endeavor, and thus not ultimately
incompatible with Rorty’s goals.

In order to do so, we must understand that Rorty takes issue with objective truth
claims only for their negative pragmatic use, not for any kind of substantive or inherent
characteristic of the claims themselves. Indeed, he could never make the assertion that
objective truth claims simply are not objectively true, as his final vocabulary understands
truth only as usefulness, and so this claim would be self-defeating. Any pragmatic
critique of making these claims must rather be centered on their harmful effects upon
human life. Indeed most criticism of objective truth claims emphasizes that their focus
on a transcendent existence deprives the human world of our energy and attention.

Is there a way to retain a use of objective truth claims that is pragmatically
beneficial, that attends to rather than detracts from our human goals, while safeguarding
the claims from that negative use? I’d like to offer the possibility of expanding Rorty’s
politically contingent multiplism to even encompass a version of the very
foundationalism he rejects, newly embedded within his proposed schema of social hope
and private irony in an attempt to do so. I hope to propose this duality as a possible way
to ensure the proper usage of these claims, that is their usage to enhance and not detract
from our pragmatic focus on human life. By doing so I wish to eliminate the hypocrisy
of dismissing these sometimes quite useful claims within our pragmatic understanding of
truth as usefulness. If awareness of contingency proves not completely incompatible
with making these objective truth claims, and utilizing the claims offers a benefit we
could not achieve without them, I hope to offer the possibility that we can allow their use
within Rorty’s pragmatic auspices. So long as they remain embedded within our focus
on human practice and a contingent understanding of the world I see no reason why their
power cannot be employed to accomplish Rorty’s very goals, of decreasing humiliation
and human suffering.

I. Philosophy as Linguistically/Historically/Politically Contingent

"‘It is considered’ is the real ‘it is,’ the sole ‘this is’.” -Nietzsche, *Will to Power*

Philosophy as a discipline offers an interesting difficulty and confusion for a
contingent understanding of knowledge. Philosophy has traditionally focused upon a
transcendent definition of knowledge and truth. In the Platonic view, that truth was not
presumed to be contingent on language. A Platonic truth was not inherently related to the
historical situation during which it was examined. Rather, it appeared to have no
relevance to the political motivations for examining that truth in the first place. For
philosophy, the truth meant precisely the exclusion and transcendence of all of those
human contingencies. Truth was above individual human contingency, above individual
human motivation. Truth was synonymous with transcendence of what were taken to be
human inhibitions; truth aimed at the thing-in-itself.

Yet we now clearly recognize that the seeking for overarching supra-human truth
was itself still colored by human political practice. As I quoted Nietzsche above, when
considering a thing, we can never actually reach the thing-in-itself, insofar as we can
never completely detach ourselves from the investigation itself. Indeed to suppose that
philosophy was not politically contingent, and didn’t possess individual historical
motivations and ramifications of that investigation, is absurd. Philosophy has always had political intentions, connections, and repercussions. It is the human quest to ultimately know the unknowable. Perhaps it is our mortality that drives this quest, perhaps the enigma of our existence, perhaps the desire to ground our lives in something more concrete and permanent. Whatever the reason, it is an eminently human and political one.

If it did not have clear political repercussions, why would Socrates have been condemned to death? If it did not have political intentions, why would Descartes dedicate his *Meditations* to the Sorbonne? Indeed, Socrates was faced with real human political consequences of objective truth claims. Likewise, Descartes had clear political motivations for writing the *Meditations* and clear motivations for arriving at the presumed universal truths upon which he concluded! How can we take seriously his claim of throwing off all previous prejudices and beliefs when we can always take a step back and realize, in the context of his writing the meditations, in the very project itself, his larger beliefs and goals are still very much a part of his endeavor.

This is not a new insight, indeed Nietzsche has taught us well about the human manipulation and political motivation for such universal truth claims as those about ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ This does propose a unique and perplexing difficulty for philosophy, however, which by design (or at least tradition) of the very discipline seeks non-contingent truth, seeks to transcend its human origins. Can a politically charged and contingent project yield objective, non-contingent results? We must place primary importance on this question, as it seems we cannot hope to find or devise a non-politically-charged and contingent project.
We can understand this desire for non-politically-charged and contingent truth in Kantian terms. Kant outlines the third primary human faculty of Reason as beyond human understanding, situated firmly in the Noumena. Yet, Kant also recognizes the innate human desire for completion, for understanding the unknown, for finding meaning in the meaningless. Thus while Kant knows well that it can never reach truth, he does not disregard this fruitionless striving. To presume these claims could somehow rise above the contingency of their origin or escape their human repercussions is to maintain a myth and desire of transcendence, which is itself inescapably human in origin. And yet Kant still does not abandon objective truth claims! There is another value to this striving itself which Kant highly prizes. Even after acknowledging its human origin, the striving itself remains somehow pragmatically beneficial. Kant acknowledges the importance of the human desire for transcendence, even if it is not ultimately possible. “Although an absolute whole of experience is impossible, the idea of a whole of cognition according to principles in general must impart to our knowledge a peculiar kind of unity, that of a system, without which it is nothing but piecework and cannot be used for the highest purpose… I do not here refer only to the practical, but also to the highest purpose of the speculative use of reason.”

Nietzsche felt that after revealing the limits of our knowledge, still preserving the project of seeking to transcend those limits was a mistake, perhaps Kant’s most grievous one, likening him to “a fox who loses his way and goes astray back into his cage [after] it had been his strength and cleverness that had broken open the cage!” Nietzsche is therefore argued by some to represent the death knell of metaphysics, the end of looking

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beyond our world to an otherworldly Platonic/Christian Heaven for both hope and, primary to our question, for truth. He accomplished this largely by completely revealing the humanity behind our objectivity. Not only were we forever relegated to the realm of the Phenomena, as for Kant, but now even our most prized concepts of morality were shown to be constructions, founded merely in the torrent of the will to power. Now not only did our political contingency influence our intentions and the repercussions of our truth claims, but it tainted the very claims themselves. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ not only don’t refer to otherworldly normative structures, inherently imbedded in our lives, but they are in fact social creations, creations intended to influence and manipulate this world we inhabit, the only world for Nietzsche. “What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding.”

Nietzsche was not a nihilist, however, nor a pessimist. He did not seek to reveal this genealogy for the purpose of throwing our world into amoral anarchy. Quite the contrary, Nietzsche firmly believed that he was saving the world from this fable of otherworldly morality, and that by damming the flow of human energy from its escape into the otherworldly, the reservoir of humanity in this world would rise. “Perhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to flow out into a god.” Nietzsche’s insight is more than just to reveal the genealogy of human-constructed truths. Rather, Nietzsche hopes we will embrace our contingency, will embrace the human-quality of all thought,

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hope, and belief, and will quit our otherworldly searching altogether. Richard Rorty joins Nietzsche in this, examining not only the contingent nature of objective truth seeking, but its harmful, manipulative effects as well. For both Nietzsche and Rorty, contra Plato and Kant, to attempt to transcend human inhibitions and contingency was a mistake. When we finally acknowledge the contingency of all our supposed objective truths, the claims that are simply not useful will fall by the wayside without their Noumenal ground to stand upon. The ones with which we are left, their pretense dissolved, will simply serve us pragmatically as tools to be utilized for practical benefit and nothing more.

But have we done ourselves a grave disservice by eliminating the possible practical benefit of that objective truth pretense? Did we lose something helpful and powerful when we swept out Kant’s fruitionless searching for the sake of searching? One of the largest difficulties and seeming contradictions in Nietzsche’s thought is that while at the same time he reprimands Kant for returning to the cage of metaphysics after so carefully finding the door, Nietzsche himself invokes a metaphysical scheme. The formulation of the eternal recurrence of the same, which I’ll discuss later, offers a metaphysical striving in order to further Nietzsche’s will to life goal. Here, it seems, even Nietzsche has found a respect for the power of the pretense of objective truth. We could easily question his consistency of thought, and accuse him of being the pot calling the Kant black. However, perhaps we would do better to examine this tendency to utilize objective truth claims to create human good and find a new respect for its power to do so. And perhaps we can ultimately reconcile ourselves with some objective truth claims if we can find a way to ensure their Nietzschean pragmatic, human focus.
II. Richard Rorty as the Second Wave of Nietzsche’s Madman

“The great Western philosophers should be read as therapeutic rather than as constructive...”
-Richard Rorty, Truth and Progress

Has our post-Nietzschean attention been successfully refocused onto the worldly? The world is undoubtedly more secular. But I don’t believe Nietzsche would be entirely happy. Nietzsche believed that the Platonic, and then Christian, otherworldly devotion cast a much deeper shadow into Western belief than simply religion. It is a debate about this deeper shadow’s penetration of science and reason that has characterized philosophical discussion for the last hundred years.

Is science moving towards an objective reality? Are we somehow progressing with each consecutive paradigm shift of scientific reconceptualization? Is there a fundamental ahistorical human reality that we are slowly but surely revealing? Should our definition of an idea’s truth rely on its correspondence to that reality? These are the post-Nietzschean questions with which we’ve struggled.

Rorty would answer them all: no. In the same way that Nietzsche revealed that there is no fundamental definition of ‘good’ or ‘evil,’ that their very nature as human constructions precludes their objectivity, Rorty hopes to reveal that progress towards objective truth is a myth, by definition.

Rorty is not saying that something can’t be true, that the word ‘true’ has no value. On the contrary, many things can be and are true. Rorty is disagreeing with the definition of what makes them true. For Rorty, statements are not true insofar as they correspond to some objective truth, some fundamental reality that it is our task to discover. He instead
sides with William James in saying that truth is synonymous with usefulness, or justification, or betterness-to-believe.

Rorty is also not saying that we should disregard scientific or moral rigor, that when there is no absolute right and wrong, good and evil, only competing goods, that we will lose all perspective of morality and scientific methodology. Instead, Rorty firmly believes, with Nietzsche, that humankind will in fact benefit from this revelation and not suffer. Not only are these appearance/reality, subjective/objective, correspondence theory of truth ideas non-essential to science or morality, but they are in fact harmful and repressive, or at the very least, wastes of philosophical energy. Indeed this is why Rorty wishes to abandon these claims, because he believes they are not useful.

For Rorty, any proposed universal, categorical theory of human rights, or similarly any theory about human nature, does more harm than good. It is the practical benefit or lack thereof that determines the truth of a claim. Devoid of pragmatic utility, the claim has no foundation at all upon which to stand. “If the activities of those who attempt to achieve this sort of knowledge [about the nature of human beings] seem of little use in actualizing this utopia, that is a reason to think there is no such knowledge.”6

Finally, Rorty cannot agree that he is a relativist. He insists that his destruction of objective truth language cannot be portrayed in that very language, and doing so is precisely the source of the claim of his relativism. Preferring to refer to his philosophy in negation terms, anti-fundamentalist, anti-metaphysical, etc., he attempts to illustrate that this is simply all there is, as far as we are concerned. The edges of the world we inhabit should be the edges of the world we are concerned with, and by positing another world,

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we detract energy and resources from our own. I don’t believe he would disagree with Kant that there is limitation to our knowledge, that all we can know is appearance, our human relationship to the world. He would disagree that our world is somehow less real or less important than the Noumenal world. In fact, the very theorizing and questioning about a Noumenal world is nonsensical for Rorty, whose fundamental question about theory comes down to: how useful is it for our practice. If it’s not useful, or even proves to be harmful, discard it. For Rorty, this isn’t relativism, just pragmatism.

Thus for Rorty, philosophy is not only politically contingent (the discussion of so-called universal truth is still influenced and located within the determinants of the historical time-period and political climate), but also solely important for its political repercussions. Any claims cannot be relegated to academia and scholarship. Rather, the truth-value of philosophical claims must be determined within the historical time-period and political climate itself. So, when Rorty takes issue with a philosophical claim of universal human rights, as he does in his “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” essay, he is not disputing the academic logical integrity of the arguments, but rather the day-to-day and ultimate uses and misuses of those claims. He already takes for granted that theorizing about human nature is politically contingent. His issue with the Platonic/Kantian tradition is then the failure, in his view, of that theorizing to diminish suffering and humiliation in the world.

III. Unintended Political Misuses as Philosophically Important?

“It is unfortunate, I think, that many people hope for a tighter link between philosophy and politics than there is or can be. In particular, people on the left keep hoping for a philosophical view which cannot be used by the political right, one which will lend itself only to good causes. But there never will be such a view; any philosophical view is a tool which can be used by many different hands.” —Richard Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope
We can certainly agree with Rorty that objective truth claims, claims about human nature and claims about universal human rights, have been put to use in creating suffering and humiliation. It is not difficult to think of numerous examples of this. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, religious imperialism and indoctrination are only a few instances of the persecution and suffering enacted in the name of certain universal religious doctrines.

However, unintended political misuses of philosophy are not unique to the Platonic/Kantian/Christian objective truth claiming tradition. Indeed, Nietzsche’s philosophy, some of Rorty’s own personal favorite, was put to use in the Nazi war machine to horrific ends. Can we fault Nietzsche or his philosophy for that misuse? Can we even easily label it a misuse, as though it is an easy dichotomy, and the philosophy itself was originally intended for one and only one application? Could we then fault the objective truth claims of Christianity for the millions killed and enslaved in its name?

Ultimately I don’t think we can completely devalue the theories or claims on those counts of misuse, any more than we can fault free speech rights for the obscenity sometimes produced within that freedom. Indeed, Rorty, as I quoted above, says that we can never hope for any kind of theory or philosophical tool that will not be susceptible to misuse and abuse. It is the very nature of philosophy, as a tool, that it is malleable and interchangeable between different hands.

Yet, how can we reconcile this view about inescapable misuses with Rorty’s earlier and larger thesis that what matters about a claim is not some kind of objective truth standard to which it must be responsible, some kind of approximation of an ultimate reality outside of the human political realm, but rather its practical utility. If we did hold
the first view, we could simply say ‘we can’t abandon Christian objective truth claims because they’re true, regardless of their misuse.’ Or, ‘we can’t abandon Nietzschean claims because they’re true, regardless of their misuse.’ However, the second is obviously self-contradictory; to hold up Nietzschean claims to some kind of objective truth standard is to disregard what those very claims entail, namely the nonsensical nature of that objective truth standard itself.\(^7\)

Rorty, in line with Nietzsche, instead focuses on the pragmatic utility of a claim in order to assess its value, usually its utility in decreasing human suffering and humiliation. However, that is not an individual assessment or an immediate one. For Rorty, the individual misuses of Christian views are not the reason we should abandon them, any more than the individual misuses of Nietzschean views would be a reason to abandon them. The question becomes: which is more useful? Which has been more manipulated and misused into creating suffering and humiliation? We have no power over those who seek to misuse philosophical claims except insofar as we can create counter speech using the claims as we see fit, and ultimately deciding whether the claim is more useful to us or to those who instead seek to use it to achieve suffering and humiliation, or who do so consequently to their use of it.\(^8\)

Thus, Rorty maintains an important consistency in his theory by not breaking down and saying that we should abandon objective truth claims because they’re simply not objectively true, which would obviously be circular and self-defeating. Rather, he

\(^7\) An unfortunately similar piece of reasoning was recently used in political circles, destroying certain central tenets of democracy in the name of defending democracy, itself.

\(^8\) This should also serve to answer the oft-heard question that goes something like, ‘if philosophy is usefulness, who is it useful for? What’s useful for me may not be useful for someone else; it entirely depends on what it is you’re using it for!’ I take Rorty to be concerned with an understanding of philosophy’s usefulness insofar as it’s useful in decreasing humiliation and human suffering, obviously an ultimately cryptic term as well, but certainly more clearly understood than simply ‘usefulness.’
makes the only claim that his pragmatism will allow in favor of abandoning that search for objective truth. “I agree that whether it is more useful to hold a correspondence theory of truth (in which moral judgments correspond to the Will of God, or the Deliverances of Reason, or something) is a practical question, and one that is rather difficult to decide. Certainly holding such a view has been useful to many people at many times--first in the religious form and later in the secular, Kantian form. But my hunch is that in the long run it will be more useful to a just and human society to drop the Kantian form as well as the religious one--to give up rationalist surrogates for God as well as giving up God. I haven't got any special arguments to back up this hunch, however.”⁹ Not due to individual misuses, but over time in the long run, Rorty believes it to be more useful to abandon objective truth claims in favor of his call to awareness of contingency.

But must we give up one in sole favor of the other? Are the two really ultimately incompatible in every way? Either we have objective truth claims or we abandon them? For if we completely abandon, with Rorty, that religious faith, faith in overarching principles of human morality and of an objective truth, we lose not only those hateful instances, but also the useful application of those like Martin Luther King, and many other love-seeking religious and philosophical figures. From a merely pragmatic view, objective truth claims can still certainly be useful, as Kant, and I would argue even Nietzsche, realized. Rorty’s view is that his claims are simply more useful.

Is there a third possibility, however? Is there a way to maintain an understanding of the contingency of our beliefs while still utilizing the powerful pragmatic benefit of the pretense of objective truth claims? At first it seems that the two, objective truth claims

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⁹ Richard Rorty. Personal correspondence. 2/17/02.
and knowledge of contingency, cannot be reconciled. How can we believe in the objectivity of a claim if we are aware of its origin as political and contingent? For several philosophers this possibility is quite real, however. William James believes it is not only possible, but even a moral imperative, to will belief, to choose to believe in a truth claim because of its practical benefit. This is the first vital step in offering a possible third alternative. For certainly if we will them, we are aware of the political and pragmatic contingency of those claims, and yet we still may be able to will objective truth claims, beliefs about how the world is transcendent of the human contingency that is our very motivation for willing them. As we’ll see, it’s especially possible and even imperative to do this with claims we can never completely verify. If we can prove it to be possible, acceptable, and perhaps even necessary to will belief about objective truth claims, then we have only to ask if this third possibility, of a simultaneous awareness of contingency and willed belief in objective truth claims, is more useful than completely abandoning them in sole favor of Rorty’s anti-foundationalism.

IV. Betterness-to-Believe Theory of Truth as Self-Deception: Is it Possible/Acceptable/Necessary?

“It is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again.”
-William James, “The Will to Believe”

In having done away with the correspondence theory of truth, of looking to some truth/reality outside of human knowledge as an existent objectivity towards which our claims should correspond, have we painted ourselves into a corner? How can we justify our betterness-to-believe theory of truth, considering the nature of truth, itself? We don’t ordinarily take truth to be something that we can will. The very definition of truth is that it is beyond our individual understanding and control; what is true is not just true for me,
but should hold true for everyone, otherwise it’s not actually true, but is instead
individual wishful thinking! How can we examine what is true merely as what I choose
to believe? How could we define truth that way, without fundamentally destroying what
we take truth to be?

For my endeavor at least, I think the answer lies in understanding that we’re not
talking about things that we can ever know for certain. We’re not talking about whether
the fact that Jack jumped over the candlestick is true; we’re talking about whether the
hypothesis that God exists is true. As we’ll see with James, there is a special obligation
to will belief in these unverifiable situations. As, rather than reserving judgment, James
understands maintaining indecision in these cases as already a passional decision to
negate. For James, these cases of metaphysical truth, unverifiable understandings about
God, etc., are not the types of things about which we can simply reserve judgment.

I think that eventually we’ll want to move with Rorty into actually fundamentally
reworking our understanding of what it means to call anything true. Here the argument is
often rehearsed that without the grounding of truth/reality, we can make any claim that
may be useful for us, and hold it to be true. Of course this is not the case at all, but is at
the root of much fear about losing the correspondence theory of truth, or any kind of
Realism. It is still quite possible to exclude fantasy claims about what is real and unreal
without returning to that Realism, however. For instance, I may wish to hold that Jack in
fact did not jump over the candlestick, as making that claim will be more useful for me
since I made a bet that he would not be able to succeed. However, usefulness is not
measured only in immediate effects, but rather in long-term benefits. So, for instance, if
Jill and I saw Jack jump over the candlestick and I claim he did not, since that claim is
useful for me, I’d quickly lose credence with Jill, as my opinion and hers differ, quickly making the useful claim no longer so useful. Or if Jill was my bookie and threatened to break my legs if I didn’t pay her for my loss, again it would be less useful for me to maintain that Jack did not indeed make it over the candlestick. A simpler example is that I needn’t investigate any correspondence, or lack thereof, to reality to know that the claim ‘I can fly’ will not ultimately be a useful one for me. However, for my purposes at present, it is helpful to focus on the more limited case of metaphysical truth, truth we can never be certain of, by definition, that we cannot decide upon based on intellectual grounds. As I said, this is the important case that William James takes up as he proposes the possibility and even imperative to will belief.

We could propose that these are irrelevant questions, or that we can merely postpone judgment about them indefinitely to avoid dealing with them. James fundamentally disagrees, however. “Our pasfional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.”¹⁰ To leave off questions about the existence of God, for example, is not to postpone them, leaving the questions unanswered; but indecision is itself the passional decision to negate.

But even if we’re discussing the limited case of application of our betterness-to-believe definition of truth to inherently unascertainable truths, does that mean that it’s

possible to will what we choose to believe? This is precisely the topic of James’
discussion in *The Will to Believe*, and he gives a qualified response of yes.

Under the presuppositions of James that we are empiricists, and that our
hypothesis is a live option for us, then we are quite able, and even impelled to will our
belief. The first presupposition concerns our relationship to this knowledge.
“Empiricists think that although we may attain truth, we cannot infallibly know when.”\(^\text{11}\)
Our relationship to metaphysical truth is certainly of this intellectually unverifiable type.
However, James holds that this is not a reason to disregard our search for truth, but in
fact, by avoiding the question we have made our decision, as I tried to illustrate above.

The second presupposition is that the hypothesis in which we hope to believe is
not dead for us. We cannot will to believe something that we have already unequivocally
shut ourselves off towards. Yet, that we have dead hypotheses is itself an illustration of
the possibility of our will to believe. “What has made them dead for us is for the most
part a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind...all such factors of
belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the
circumpressure of our caste and set.”\(^\text{12}\) So, notwithstanding the hypotheses that our own
volition or our individual historical/cultural circumstances have irrevocably closed
ourselves off towards, it seems that we can will to believe whatever is useful to us, at
least in regards to metaphysical truths that could never attain complete veracity.

In fact, James argues, there is great reason to will this belief, as in the case in
which “faith in a fact can help create the fact.”\(^\text{13}\) The very act of willing to believe, of
taking a metaphysical leap of faith in judgments that fundamentally lack the possibility of

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
\(^{12}\) Ibid, 169.
certainty, can better our human condition. This seems reminiscent of Kant’s moral theory, which also holds the view that the very act of faith can help create the good of that faith. There is an important distinction in James, however. The will to believe escapes Nietzsche’s scathing critique of Kant’s moral maxim. “It is selfish to experience one’s own judgment as a universal law; and this selfishness is blind, petty, and frugal....”14 However, James does not claim to know what is best for everyone, but merely proposes that we act upon what will do the greatest good for the most people, based in our own actions, not in a categorical system that assumes that that action should be universally applied.

To those who question the incommensurability of objective truth claims and awareness of their contingency, James offers the understanding that even a negative belief about that objective truth claim is still itself an objective truth claim. For James, we cannot step outside of the question or reserve judgment. Insofar as we reserve judgment about metaphysical truth, we have already made a decision to negate, and so we already have willed an objective truth belief.

There is a level of self-deception involved not insofar as we will things we know to be false, but as we instead will a positive belief about metaphysical truth, we will a belief about something that is unverifiable, that we know we’re willing for pragmatic purposes. But James is trying to illustrate that positing that belief is not incompatible with understanding why we’re positing it. By acknowledging disbelief as also a passional choice, James illustrates that we’re already simultaneously willing a belief, a non-belief, and maintaining awareness of our conscious choice.

14 Nietzsche. Gay Science, 265.
Even if we can will to believe, is that self-deception acceptable? For, clearly we are still deceiving ourselves on a certain level. We are willing a belief in something without proof, not to assert some sort of truth, but instead for pragmatic ends. Wasn’t this precisely the methodology we revealed when we acknowledged the human-contingency and political nature of all philosophical and religious truth seeking? Won’t we eventually sink back into the unawareness of that contingency that characterized our pre-Nietzschean yearnings for completion? Won’t we lose sight of our conscious choice to will this belief, and once again solidify these metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms into monoliths that direct our action rather than willed beliefs that we ourselves can dictate, as Nietzsche revealed?

Yet Nietzsche himself, after doing away with metaphysics, proceeds to create his own metaphysical construction: the eternal recurrence of the same. If a demon came to you in the night proclaiming you would repeat your life and choices endlessly, would you curse him, or would you proclaim him a god? It is fascinating to realize that Nietzsche himself still respects the power of belief in an objective truth claim, a belief about how we’d like to picture the true reality of the world utilized as a moral imperative to our actions in the world. Nietzsche is constructing a theoretical reality that would necessitate our action not in order to will our strict conformity to that reality, but as a thought experiment utilized to awaken us through a poetic, metaphorical story that can affect us in ways he could not achieve otherwise. “Philosophy makes progress not by becoming more rigorous but by becoming more imaginative.”15 It is metaphorical insofar as it is offered as a thought experiment and not a proven intellectual or scientific doctrine. However, the experiment still clearly derives its specific power by positing an objective
truth claim; it is the pretense of objectivity, asking what we would do if the world were actually this way, that forms the basis for the question’s moral imperative.

Yet isn’t this unavoidably the type of religious construction, a positing of objective truth, which we fought so hard with Nietzsche to escape. Haven’t we seen to what limits this social action through metaphysical construction can be pushed, even and especially as it begins merely as a hypothetical story? Nietzsche’s point has been how easily these stories become solidified and reified and become themselves contrary to a focus on human life. Is it then ultimately not the metaphysical construction of religious doctrine with which we had issue, but only the way in which it was utilized to detract from our human pragmatic endeavor? Could we then reconcile our differences with an objective truth claim, not on the level of its ontological existence but at least on the level of its pragmatic application, by somehow ensuring the proper use of the theory in the future (i.e. not for religious or racial persecution)?

We have seen that it is psychologically possible to will to believe, at least in cases in which we could fundamentally never be certain on intellectual grounds, allowing us an understanding of the compatibility of objective truth claims and contingent awareness. We’ve also seen that it’s our imperative to will to believe in those cases, insofar as the very act of belief can create good in the world. Even for Nietzsche this self-deception seems acceptable, at least on a certain consciously metaphorical level.

How deep must that consciousness permeate? We must be truly deceived so that we accept our willed beliefs if they are to have the pragmatic effects we intend. We also must be conscious of the willing self-deception so that the willed beliefs maintain their

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pragmatic application and never become fodder for an otherworldly or truth devotion, but keep human-contingency as primary importance.

Plato draws us a model of this simultaneous consciousness/unconsciousness on a larger, societal level in *The Republic*. The Republic is by no means egalitarian. The social strata are clearly delineated and are metaphorically referred to as Gold, Silver, and Bronze in the Myth of the Metals. The myth includes intentionally unconscious segments of the population, who need not understand the complete truth. Instead the truth, along with the political power, is vested only in certain people, the Philosopher Kings. Indeed self-deception for Plato is not only possible and acceptable, but on a societal level it seems necessary. Even for someone who prized truth above all else, here Plato allows the dissemination of a willed metaphysical belief, a myth, and the reserving of complete knowledge to a vested few, all for political and pragmatic benefit.

Plato, it seems, is likewise aware of the powerful pretense of objective truth claims, the unique ability of those claims to move us and influence our action in the world. However, Plato is also well aware of the despotic tendency of aristocratic rule, especially when it involves the specialization of truth-access. This is precisely why Plato attempts to safeguard the Republic with *Philosopher Kings*, attempting to simultaneously attend the necessary self-deception *and* the prevention from the possible (and likely) tyranny of that self-deception, within the same state figure. Proclaiming the myth of the metals allocates a powerful faith in the societal structure, but Plato intends his Philosopher Kings to resist the tendency towards corruption by virtue of their background and training *as* philosophers, and by their knowledge of the ultimate contingency and pragmatic use of claims like the myth of the metals within the Republic. It is only this
dual system of social hope and continual private questioning that allows the Republic to escape the same fate as other objective truth claiming states and institutions which lose (intentionally or unconsciously) an understanding of the contingent origin of those truth claims, their original pragmatic intentions, and instead begin to revere and trust them unflinchingly, prizing them above their human consequences.

I believe it is ultimately this unchecked form of objective truth claims with which Rorty and other social constructionists have issue. However, if we can conceive of a perhaps more egalitarian way of maintaining that safeguard questioning and ensuring the pragmatic use of objective truth claims, just as Plato intended his Philosopher Kings to ensure, I see no reason why we must abandon the often powerful and very helpful pragmatic benefit of those objective claims. Is there a way we can, with Nietzsche, recognize the non-fixed, non-canonical, non-binding nature of truth claims, while on another level, benefiting from the pragmatic value of willing those very objective beliefs?

V. Betterness-to-Believe Theory of Truth: A Paradox

“According to many historians, the Civil Rights movement made more gains in the thirteen years of King’s leadership than in the previous one hundred years.” - Joe Mannath, “The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.”

We’ve arrived at the conclusion that it is possible to will belief, at least for James, who is part of the tradition upon which Rorty primarily draws. We can allow ourselves the luxury of trusting in truths that have not been nor could not be proven. James in fact says it is not only psychologically possible, but it is also ethically sound; for James it even takes the form of a moral maxim.

For Nietzsche, the master of political-contingency revelation, this objective truth self-deception seems likewise acceptable and useful, so long as it’s kept in check. We
can believe in the eternal recurrence of the same as though it was truth in order to benefit from its pragmatic call to life. For Plato, on a societal level the self-deception seems even a necessary and inevitable construction in maintaining the Republic.

So we arrive at an important dilemma and paradox when we ponder the importance that all of these philosophers seem to place on the pretense of objective truth to create human good. Especially considering the usual focus that Plato places on reaching truth and that Nietzsche places on revealing contingency, it becomes quite striking to consider both of their constructions as relying on the pretense of objectivity to create human good, despite the acknowledged mythical and metaphorical nature of those constructions. Indeed, what if it is better-to-believe in the objectivity of these claims? What if it is more useful to will a belief that truth is not usefulness? Can we find usefulness in doing away with the personal or societal conscience that maintains our awareness of the politically contingent nature of our belief, returning to an objective truth understanding of our belief, if we discover that doing so will prove more useful? It seems that by expanding our definition of truth to all multiplicity of usefulness, we still exclude one possibility, this absolutist view of truth from which we initially escaped.

Yet, I don’t think we’re prepared to answer by saying that the correspondence theory of truth is simply never useful, and that we’re glad to be rid of it altogether. Is the answer simply, “the benefits of modern astronomy and of space travel outweigh the advantages of Christian fundamentalism?”\(^\text{16}\) On the contrary, it is quite easy to discover an instance of very useful objective truth claims and its correlate universal human rights claims.

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Rorty maintains that a call to universal human rights, while usually born of the most benign intention, can in turn lead to more and not less human suffering. As a theory about human nature, it leaves open the possibility of proclaiming certain populations as simply outside that categorization. Indeed, he believes that nearly every genocide and attack on a religious, racial, or other specific population group has at its foundation the understanding of that group as inhuman, as outside the very category. And, as the group is now situated outside of the category, the majority group need not cede them any rights or privileges of the category. We need not worry about universal human rights applying to non-humans, in other words. Any universal human rights claim is simply the secularized version of a religious claim about the universal nature of all human beings, which has likewise been put to severe misuse by leaving unwelcome groups outside of those God-granted rights and God-granted nature.

However, what about groups that have co-opted this detrimental and vengeful use of objective truth claims? For instance, African-Americans, long understood as Rorty describes, as outside of universal human rights or God-granted nature and therefore not privy to those rights as they were seen as inhuman, have quite often reversed the use of those objective truth claims to their advantage. After all, as Rorty has said, a philosophical claim is merely a tool that can be used by many hands, its political affiliation is not fixed. Many have offered counter speech using those same objective truth claims for precisely the opposite purpose, for pragmatically grounding the understanding of African-Americans as human. Mustn’t we examine not just the immediate instance of misuse in this case, but also the entire field of use and misuse of these objective truth claims before we decide on their pragmatic utility?
Martin Luther King attempts to ground his conception of just and unjust laws in precisely these objective truth claims in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. King is attempting to explain to us how his views of non-violent action can be seen as non-hypocritical. How can he purport to support certain laws (the laws of desegregation of schools), but also use non-violent resistance such as boycotts, marches, sit-ins, etc. to refute other laws? Granted it is in addition to several other formulations, but King rests the solution largely on the shoulders of objective truth claims. A just law of man corresponds to the law of God; an unjust law does not. Positing the objective truth of the claim allows Martin Luther King a quite useful pragmatic application and justification of his views and action. They allow us to act on certain but not on other human laws.

Here we must acknowledge the usefulness of Martin Luther King’s formulation, at least in some instances and for some people. He has granted us an objective truth claim expressly to achieve pragmatic benefit; he hopes to allow for the non-violent resistance of laws with which he disagrees, but still hopes to benefit from the power of the state to enact laws with which he agrees. In order not to seem hypocritical, this formulation offers a clear justification for that acceptable practice by referencing a higher law, God’s law. Whether or not you agree with his agenda or his methods, it is clear that Martin Luther King’s tactics were *useful* in decreasing human pain and humiliation by allowing this justification for passive resistance to unjust laws and avoiding the seeming hypocrisy of then demanding others to obey just laws.

This is not, however, meant to prove that the usefulness of King’s formulation, by utilizing objective truth claims, is a reason to abandon our understanding of truth as usefulness. Rather, I had hoped to raise this paradox to clearly illustrate that our
understanding of truth as usefulness is still incomplete if we cannot find a way to incorporate some of these objective truth claims, as Rorty’s own criterion for truth, usefulness, has necessitated them. And, as we’ve seen, for many philosophers and political activists they are indeed quite useful. My earlier endeavor had been to begin to illustrate that the two, objective truth claims and awareness of contingency, are not indeed necessarily incompatible. What remains is to examine further how we can understand an individual to both hold and maintain criticism of a belief simultaneously. We must also then examine if the King type example offers a usefulness of religious faith that cannot be achieved otherwise, for if so then we clearly must take the paradox more seriously. That is, what if it’s more useful to assume that everything is not politically subjective, but that at least some objective truth claims are possible? Finally, we should turn to the possibility of safeguarding those objective truth claims from returning to the reified truth Nietzsche helped us to acknowledge, and rather focus on maintaining their place of pragmatic usefulness.

VI. Truth as a Social Conception

“We shall call ‘true’ or ‘good’ whatever is the outcome of free discussion – that if we take care of political freedom, truth and goodness will take care of themselves.” -Richard Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”

Rorty directly addresses the dilemma of simultaneous belief and questioning of that belief in “Private Irony and Liberal Hope.” Here he emphasizes the twofold nature of a modern democratic society. There must indeed be a submission to a consensus view of truth, a will to believe in the process of political freedom. He does not, however, dismiss the importance of a private irony, the type of questioning of universal morality epitomized by Nietzsche. Within this private irony there is a stern awareness of the
impossibility of objective truth, a firm understanding that all we can do is establish ways to deal with more and more problems. Philosophy is merely a set of ever-changing tools in this process, but is in no way arriving upon any kind of suprahuman reality.

Extending this irony, this skeptical mistrust of universal epithets, beyond the private sphere can be harmful, however. On the social level, we must maintain our faith and our hope. Rorty has answered the question of a seeming incongruity between a Jamesean will to believe and a Nietzschean skepticism. We can maintain that willed belief in a social sphere, so long as we have the checks and balances of our private ironic skepticism. This skepticism cannot become nihilism, however, if we are to maintain our democratic community. For Rorty, maintaining a social cohesion and trust is paramount. “A nation cannot reform itself unless it takes pride in itself – unless it has an identity, rejoices in it, reflects upon it and tries to live up to it.”

Nietzsche himself, as I emphasized above, is not a nihilist, and does not desire his skepticism to destroy all possibility of belief. He formulated a similar desire to Rorty’s, in fact, for a continued questioning of that belief, of a private irony, at the end of the first book of Thus Spoke Zarathustra. “You had not yet sought yourselves when you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all belief is of so little account. Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have all denied me will I return to you.”

Nietzsche is not destroying all possibility of belief, but only unexamined belief. It is this private irony, the plucking at Nietzsche’s laurels, that allows the blind faith to become an informed and willed pragmatic belief. Only through the social embodiment of our belief

structure can our truth seeking be simultaneously pragmatically useful as well as continually skeptically questioned.

Isn’t this in fact what Martin Luther King was doing himself, through continual social action? King also felt very strongly about the importance of a social, democratic community. However, only through continual questioning, continual private irony with regards to the proposed human law he was protesting could social progression continue.

But there is a clear difference, however. Martin Luther King still accomplished his goals of private irony by an appeal to a correspondence theory of truth, to objective truth claims of his own. Indeed, he did not question the objective truth of the individual human segregation laws by revealing, in a Nietzschean turn, the non-objectivity of those laws, the origin of their political motivation and the racial fear at the root of their legitimized oppression. King questioned the laws, instead, by contrasting them with what he firmly believed were objectively true laws, the laws of God. He maintained the same devotion to the democratic experiment and the necessary continual ironic questioning of that experiment as Rorty, but he certainly took a significantly different route to achieve that questioning.

Perhaps we can resolve these two different approaches to private irony by finally asking the very question Rorty holds up to us: how useful are they? Can Martin Luther King’s appeal to his own objective truth claims accomplish social good that Rorty’s ironic skepticism and social contingency revelations cannot?
VII. Problems with Rorty’s Solution

“Producing generations of nice, tolerant, well-off, secure, other-respecting students of this sort in all parts of the world is just what is needed – indeed, all that is needed – to achieve an Enlightenment utopia.”  
-Richard Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality”

Rorty firmly believes that Martin Luther King’s solution of appealing to objective truth is unnecessary. Putting aside the question of whether King’s argument can at least sometimes be useful, which would ascribe to it some validity in our pragmatic definition of truth, let’s see if we can bypass that question by seeing whether Rorty’s solution is simply more useful. Rorty believes that the only solution to suffering and humiliation in the world lies not in a philosophical expounding of universal human nature and rights; instead, Rorty believes that novels, poetry, and other emotional catalysts are what is necessary. When liberal members of a democratic society are politically and financially secure, they will naturally respond to these calls of distress. We have merely to 1) help create and communicate these emotionally provocative tools to those comfortable people, and 2) help others on the road to becoming likewise politically and financially secure.

I locate three fundamental problems with Rorty’s formulation. The first problem is that by telling us not just how rich Western democracies will act when convenienced and secure, but in fact how all peoples will, Rorty sounds like he’s explaining a point about universal human nature. Yet, this is precisely what he’s been fighting against. By proposing that we should rely on the natural inclination of convenienced liberals to act in a way to alleviate suffering and humiliation, we seem to be hypothesizing a fact about our intrinsic nature: that when it is convenient, we will act in a way that creates the most good for the most people. Whether we agree with this fact or not is another question, that Rorty supposes it is a universal law is clearly incongruent with his entire philosophy of no objective truth/reality/human nature, as I quoted above. “We have to give up on the
idea that there are unconditional, transcultural moral obligations, obligations rooted in an unchanging, ahistorical human nature.”

This objection seems similar to a very common objection to Rorty’s larger point of truth as usefulness. Rorty, as we’ve seen, attempts to dismantle the firm foundationalism understanding of truth: that there is an extra-human reality which we are attempting to ‘get right,’ or approximate. Truth-value under this theory is measured in the subsequent correspondence to that reality. In other words, we are eternally attempting to transcend our human perspective, our epistemology, and achieve objectivity, to reach ontology. This is nonsensical for Rorty, who with Nietzsche hopes to do away with this attempt to transcend our humanity by two chief arguments. First, our humanity is not something we could transcend. As human agents, our striving towards an ontology will always be colored by epistemology; the very desire for achieving the thing-in-itself free from human perspective is indicative of that perspective, insofar as it is the product of a human desire. Secondly, what is the importance of ontology when it is free of epistemology, even if we could somehow reach this thing-in-itself reality? Why should we, as humans, care about what the universe would look like without humanity, especially when the very searching, in Rorty’s opinion, is quite detrimental to humanity?

To some, this seems like a circular and self-negating argument. As we proclaim that truth is not a transcendent suprahuman entity, but is contingent, isn’t that claim self-referential? That is, doesn’t the claim that truth is contingent destroy itself, as we can’t take its claim to be universalizable, precisely because it is contingent? It seems that in the same breath we are claiming the impossibility of a universal epistemology and
claiming that opinion as a universal epistemology. “Perspectivism reduces to a kind of collective autism: everyone has a perspective, no one has the truth; but perspectivism as an epistemology is supposedly true…and the philosophical immolation continues.”19

However, I don’t believe that this argument is ultimately circular and self-destructive, as many have claimed. As I discussed earlier, if Rorty had disregarded objective truth claims because they weren’t true, preferring contingency because it is the objective truth, that certainly would have been circular. However, Rorty never falls prey to that hypocrisy; he maintains instead that there are indeed no special arguments why we should prefer awareness of contingency over objective truth claims, save that he believes it will ultimately prove more beneficial, more useful. Indeed, “Rorty would not argue that he can demonstrate the truth of his view. He is expressing a viewpoint which seems true to him and he is inviting his readers to agree with him…he surely has no illusions about proving his thesis...only if he takes such a burden upon himself does he risk an unpleasant appearance of incoherence or self-contradiction.”20 His argument is not that this is an objectively true way to look at truth, but only that this way of understanding truth is more useful, a clearly internally consistent claim.

I believe Rorty’s prescriptions about what is needed to form a just Enlightenment utopia does not likewise escape this critique, however. Here there is an internal contradiction in what Rorty is attempting to prove. He has told us that we must stop looking and hoping for an ahistorical human nature; all is contingent. However, I can fathom no contingent understanding of his proclamation that all that is necessary in order to arrive at this utopia is to create convenienced, secure liberal students like those in

current Western democracies. Perhaps if he had said that all that is needed now are these types of people, so long as the present conditions remain the same, or something to that effect, it would seem consistent. But, to presume that the situation is universalizable is to presume that it is more than the current climate that allows this certain population this benevolent tendency, but that it is somehow their nature, an ahistorical nature, to act a certain way.

My second objection to Rorty’s solution concerns whether we in fact do agree that charity is a natural inclination of convenienced liberal people. I find this proposition highly problematic considering the current trend of extolling the inconveniencing of people. Does Rorty disagree with the popular notion that suffering and humiliation are somehow a function of ivory tower, armchair philanthropy, of that very convenience? “‘What this boy has done will not influence my relations with the Negro people. Why only today I sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boys’ Club…’”21 Mr. Dalton exclaims in Native Son about all his philanthropic do-gooding, while he also controls the high rent prices and poor housing conditions of Bigger and his family, as well as large parts of the Black population of Chicago. Mr. Dalton’s philanthropy may be born of simple guilt, or it may be born of honest good intentions; regardless, it is clear that ping-pong tables are not what is needed by the suffering and humiliated Black population of Chicago. On another level, Mr. Dalton is in fact supporting and profiting from that suffering and humiliation. At least in Mr. Dalton’s case there are clearly other forces at work in the human nature of a convenienced and secure liberal person (economics and maintenance of the social status quo to name a few). While it would be

an easy task to find many more examples of how convenience and security do not automatically create sympathy and correct action towards suffering and humiliation, this one should do, in order to repudiate Rorty’s claim that the connection is natural, automatic, and universal for conveined, secure members of a liberal democracy.

In fact, Rorty seems to have fallen into one of the most fundamental errors of the twentieth century, the assumption that the ‘Negro problem’ has only ‘Negroes’ at its source, and that it can be solved only through attending to those ‘Negroes.’ We must begin to question the prejudice, intolerance, and fear that created slavery. We must question Mr. Dalton’s fear and dread manifested both in his continual oppression and his bland attempts to remove his guilt, attempts laden with good intentions, but barren of the crucial insight into ‘the other’ that Rorty demands. Yet, Rorty continues to miss this crucial step of inward-examination without which our convenience will continue to produce merely good-intentioned, insufficient solutions to suffering and humiliation.

Finally, how can we expect others to gain this important level of security and comfort through moral means, when we ourselves did not? How can we espouse the example of Western democracies as the epitome of convenience we should help other peoples achieve, when we obtained that convenience largely through a creation of suffering and humiliation! It is certainly convenient for us to turn around now, in our financial security, and speak about inconvenience as the root of suffering and humiliation. But, how can we then expect other peoples to obtain that same level of security and comfort without the very means by which we achieved our own?

Some may question whether it is even possible to achieve comfort and wealth by moral means. Was it not merely accidental, but in fact necessary and instrumental to our

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freedom to have the ‘other’ who was defined as ‘unfree?’ “The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery.”

At any rate, whether or not there is a possible process by which to obtain comfort and security by moral means, we certainly don’t offer ourselves as a shining beacon exemplifying that process, but merely as the hypocritical end result by precisely the opposite means.

If we continue to trust in Rorty’s pragmatic definition of truth as usefulness, his formulation that all we need is a comfortable, convenienced, well-meaning society to conquer suffering and humiliation seems patently untrue. Could Martin Luther King’s reliance upon objective truth claims better accomplish Rorty’s goals? Perhaps we must agree with Rorty, that the long-term utility remains to be seen; what is clear is that we cannot so easily dismiss King’s formulation as not useful and untrue in sole favor of Rorty’s reformulation.

VIII. Reexamining Rorty’s Private Irony

“The limits of justification would be the limits of language, but language (like imagination) has no limits.”

-Richard Rorty, Truth and Progress

We’ve already seen that belief in objective truth is sometimes useful (for Martin Luther King), and can sometimes be misused (the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, Slavery, etc.). However, we’ve also seen that atheist, non-correspondence theory views can likewise be abused (the Nazi use of Nietzsche’s philosophy, etc.). We certainly can’t dismiss our objective truth theory solely on the grounds of its possible misuse if our betterness-to-believe theory can be held equally accountable to that critique. Rorty has

no final argument for his “hunch” that ultimately abandoning the objective truth claims will prove more useful, but in line with his pragmatism, simply believes it will prove more beneficial in the end. However, is the possibility we’ve been proposing a viable alternative to this abandonment that will prove even more pragmatically beneficial?

Can we allow Martin Luther King’s correspondence theory explanation to accomplish precisely the job of private irony, without an internal contradiction? Thereby, can we create a new possibility that maintains the usefulness of these objective truth claims within Rorty’s awareness of contingency, a new third option? Rorty himself answers this question as he discusses how we can simultaneously have a critical Nietzschean private irony as well as a Jamesean model of social hope. It is possible and even necessary to have both of these at once for Rorty, if for no other reason than: “ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.”

If the two are not mutually exclusive, but in fact interdependent, I see no reason why that willed belief in an objective truth claim can’t act, rather than in the public sphere half of the equation, as the foundation of the private sphere irony itself, as for Martin Luther King. For King that private irony isn’t the realization of public sphere contingency, but is instead itself an objective truth claim, a moral law, God’s law, which accomplishes Rorty’s work of scathing political critique as well as, if not better than, Rorty’s atheist non-objective truth private irony, itself. Rorty outlines three principle conditions that an ironist should fulfill.

1992, 38.
(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.24

If we view Martin Luther King as within the democratic social enterprise, within which he preferred to be placed, we can read his objective truth claim critique as commensurate with Rorty’s definition of private irony.

Martin Luther King was a preacher and to use Rorty’s language, a foundationalist and a metaphysician. However, Martin Luther King was also someone who “[took] up the form of a yearning to live up to the nation’s professed ideals,”25 as Rorty himself describes him. I think it is this key democratic national identity towards which King strives that allows him simultaneously to be a metaphysician and an ironist. In this way, King’s final vocabulary26, what Rorty outlines as the fundamental origin and limitation of our moral knowledge, is not the final vocabulary of metaphysics, of God’s moral law, but rather the final vocabulary of democratic freedom of speech and discussion, the specific proposed endeavor of the United States of America.27 Thus, King satisfies Rorty’s first qualification of an ironist, as the moral law to which he appeals is not his current final

24 Ibid, 73.
26 “All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives…they are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives” (Richard Rorty. “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” 73).
27 I single out the United States of America here since both Martin Luther King and Richard Rorty are particularly relevant to, and frequently discuss, this specific and often unique perspective. I do so under no delusions that this is in any way a superior or objective perspective. Quite the contrary, I’ve specified the United States precisely because I have no desire to say that my points are simply universalizable, as that would fly in the face of my own understanding of political and historical contingency. On the other hand, I certainly believe that Rorty is aware and not at all ashamed of his focus on the United States and other ‘Western’ cultures as superior and in some spheres a model to be followed, just as I referred earlier to his desire to create similarly convenienced and wealthy people and nations elsewhere. I make no presumptions as to apologize for Rorty on this point, but hope instead that my critique of the larger embodiment of this
vocabulary, but rather the “vocabularies taken as final by people or books [s]he has encountered” by which he’s been impressed.

King also recognized that the dilemmas of racial prejudice were seen as justified by other speakers of his current final vocabulary of democracy. Only by appealing to that outside vocabulary of God’s law could he remedy those internally irresolvable arguments, Rorty’s second qualification.

Rorty’s third qualification strikes to the very heart of our questioning. Insofar as King’s final vocabulary is the vocabulary of the democratic social endeavor, he does not view that vocabulary to be somehow in a closer relation than others with reality. However, he obviously does view this outside vocabulary to which he refers, God’s law, as somehow closer to that reality. The truly interesting, and I believe redeeming, quality of King’s formulation is that he doesn’t then abandon the final vocabulary of democratic social process for that more perfect outside vocabulary of God’s moral law. Instead, King utilizes that moral law to critique and to steer that democratic final vocabulary, not towards an ultimate correspondence with that reality, but as a guide in dealing with the practical dilemmas of that social endeavor, precisely what Rorty desires of his ironists.

King’s objective truth claims are utilized for private irony critique; his belief is still fundamentally grounded in the pragmatic social experiment of the democratic process. He certainly truly believes in the cosmological validity of his faith. However, he uses it within Rorty’s social critique framework, as a supplement and guide to our human practical endeavor, not as a replacement of it. So we are able to read his objective

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strange form of cultural elitism in the last section (that he makes no account for the pain and humiliation that helped these ‘Western’ cultures achieve their own wealth and convenience) will suffice.
truth claims as the kind of willed belief that we saw was possible earlier with William James.

Finally, here is a pragmatically useful application of a willed objective truth claim. We now see the way in which objective truth claims can still be utilized within the betterness-to-believe theory of truth and a pragmatic, contingent understanding of human knowledge. This leaves new room for Rorty’s pragmatism to include a version of the original foundationalism once thought incommensurate. No longer incompatible, this frees Rorty’s pragmatism of its paradoxical and hypocritical discarding of often useful claims within an understanding of truth as usefulness. If King’s objective truth private irony can achieve pragmatic human good that Rorty’s atheist private irony cannot, so long as it is always grounded within the social practical endeavor, I see no reason why Rorty should not accept a genuine faith in objective truth as another possible useful means to his proposed ends: decreasing humiliation and human suffering.\(^\text{28}\)

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