

RORTY AND BRANDOM:

PRAGMATISM AND THE ONTOLOGICAL PRIORITY OF THE SOCIAL¹

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In this essay I examine the respective positions of Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom on the ontological priority of the social. While Rorty's writings since *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* have been peppered with allusions to the work of his gifted student, Brandom's thought – specifically, his claims about the ontological primacy of the social – play a central role in Rorty's discussion of “philosophy as cultural politics” in his final collection of philosophical papers. Taking a cue from *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, where Rorty calls on philosophers to see “intervening in cultural politics” as “their principal assignment,” my approach to examining their respective positions heeds his advice that “we look at the relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in light of our hopes for cultural change.” As he describes it,

Philosophers should choose sides in those debates with an eye to the possibility of changing the course of the conversation. They should ask themselves whether taking one side rather than another will make any difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future. If it will not, it may not be worth doing. If it will, they should spell out what that difference amounts to.²

Rorty's move to locate philosophy within the frame of what he calls “cultural politics” has key implications for

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² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. ix-x.

how we understand philosophy and its role in social and political change: it is not only an attempt to make philosophy more relevant to democratic politics, but an effort to democratize philosophy itself by expanding who counts as competent audience and conversation partner in “the conversation of mankind” to include previously excluded groups.³

Interpreting the appeals of both Brandom and Rorty to the ontological priority of the social in this light, I argue that while for Rorty recognition of this social dimension is a way of eliminating the epistemological and ontological barriers to expanding the conversation to include previously excluded groups, for Brandom it is a way to solve a philosophical puzzle to yield a “rationalism that is not objectively Cartesian” that makes possible “continuing and extending the classical twentieth-century project of philosophical analysis” in a manner that retains the very barriers Rorty seeks to dismantle.⁴ For his part, Rorty tended to read Brandom in a way that downplays these differences, assimilating Brandom to his own Deweyan project – misleadingly, in my view – in order to draw distinctions between their shared recognitions of the ontological primacy of the social and the analytic philosophers who resist this move.

After examining their respective views of the ontological priority of the social more closely to tease out differences obscured by Rorty's reading of Brandom, in the second section I take a step back to establish the larger interpretive frame Rorty offers for adjudicating philosophical differences, which as a shorthand we might call, putting democratic politics first. In the final

³ See, for example, Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” in Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 1-30. For a more in-depth treatment of this topic, see Christopher J. Voparil, “Rortyan Intercultural Conversation and the Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* (forthcoming).

⁴ Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 1; *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (New York: Oxford, 2008), p. 232.

section, I take up Brandom's own attempt to evaluate classical pragmatism from the perspective of politics in "When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray." Despite Rorty's affirmative use of Brandom, I argue that there are key differences between their respective turns to the social that pragmatists should consider.

I. Cultural Politics and the Ontological Priority of the Social

Rorty left us preciously few accounts of the notion of philosophy as cultural politics that is the signal theme of his final collection of papers. This idea is discussed only in a handful of Rorty's essays and could easily have been overlooked had he not chosen it as the title and addressed it explicitly in the two-page preface. What is striking about the few discussions we have is not only that Brandom is central to them all but that Rorty treats Brandom affirmatively in all of them.⁵ Nevertheless, I argue that this apparent agreement is the result of Rorty's strategy of reading Brandom into his own Deweyan project to claim him as an ally against analytic philosophers less congenial toward his approach, like John McDowell, Michael Dummett, Michael Williams, and others.⁶ While Rorty sees Brandom, along with Donald Davidson, as opening up "wonderful new philosophical prospects,"⁷ my claim is that Rorty's own

sense of these new prospects cannot be reconciled with Brandom's understanding of Brandom, as opposed to Rorty's understanding of Brandom. A key difference here is Brandom's unwillingness to see his own turn to social ontology as just another move in the game of cultural politics.

In his earliest references to the work of his talented student, which appear in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty calls attention to Brandom's approach to truth from the perspective of a social-practice account of language use.⁸ Then in essays of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as more recent work in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, as Rorty turns more explicitly to making discussion of proposals for sociopolitical change a central topic of philosophical concern, the primary focus of his appeal to Brandom is the idea of "the ontological priority of the social."⁹

The claim I want to make here about Rorty and Brandom is twofold. Not only is Brandom's thinking around the ontological priority of the social central to the understanding of "cultural politics" that emerges in Rorty's final volume of papers, but this use of Brandom is generated through a Deweyan reading of Brandom's project that ultimately conceals important areas of disagreement between Rorty and Brandom that I will argue amount to differences that make a difference if interpreted from the vantage of Rorty's attention to spurring sociopolitical change.

⁵ Apart from the Preface and lead essay of *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God," the idea only receives a few paragraphs of attention in the entire volume. "Some American Uses of Hegel," from the same period as "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God" – roughly 2001-2003, marks the only other extended treatment. Although cultural politics is not mentioned explicitly, a precursor essay, especially for its focus on Brandom, is "What Do You Do When They Call You a 'Relativist'," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 17, no. 1 (1997): 173-177. Also important is "Universality and Truth," in *Rorty and His Critics*. While Rorty does not use the term 'cultural politics' here, referring instead to "democratic politics," all of the relevant themes and concerns are present.

⁶ See Rorty, "The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World" and "Antiskeptical Weapons" in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 142.

⁸ The early paper of Brandom's that Rorty cites most frequently in this period is "Truth and Assertibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 6 (1976): 137-149.

⁹ See for example "Representation, Social Practise, and Truth" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); "Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representations" in *Truth and Progress*; and "Cultural Politics and the Existence of God" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Prior to the publication of Brandom's *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), the essay Rorty draws on is Brandom, "Heidegger's Categories in *Being and Time*," *The Monist* 66, no. 3 (1983): 387-409.

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On Rorty's reading, the use underscored by Brandom that Heidegger makes of Hegel's category of the social results in a tripartite view of culture. He glosses Brandom as distinguishing a realm where the individual's authority is supreme (first-person reports of subjective states), a second realm where the non-human realm is supreme (the results of science), and a third realm where the social predominates. In this third realm, as Brandom puts it, "all matters of authority or privilege, in particular *epistemic* authority, are matters of social practice, and not objective matters of fact."¹⁰

Central to the interest of both Brandom and Rorty in the ontological priority of the social, then, is the issue of epistemic authority. For Rorty, Brandom's third realm can be understood as "the arena of cultural politics." By this Rorty means a sphere in which no authority other than that of society over itself, including "God, or Truth, or Reality," can trump the fruits of democratic consensus.¹¹ Brandom's understanding of our inferentially articulated normative commitments making us responsible to others offers what Rorty takes to be a sociological account of authority that locates authority firmly within the human, social realm. On Rorty's view, Brandom is "articulating a cultural-political stance by pointing to the social advantages of his account of authority." For Rorty, any attempts "to name an authority which is superior to that of society are disguised moves in the game of cultural politics." Even though Rorty himself argues that "cultural politics should replace ontology," he understands this very move itself to be "a matter of cultural politics."¹²

The problem with this reading is that it is not evident that Brandom takes himself to be offering an account of

the advantages of his social practice approach to linguistic communities. Rorty has conceded elsewhere that Brandom has not attempted to answer questions about whether his approach makes a difference practically speaking over non-pragmatic accounts.¹³ Yet Rorty tends to read Brandom through Dewey and assimilate him to a pragmatist political project justified by its ability to make us responsible to "larger and more diverse communities of human beings."¹⁴

My aim here is to examine whether there is a difference that makes a difference between their respective accounts of the ontological priority of the social. For his part, Brandom takes himself, as he explains in *Between Saying and Doing*, to be engaged in the work of "continuing and extending the classical twentieth-century project of philosophical analysis" and, for reasons we shall see, wants nothing to do with Rorty's attempt to put philosophical pragmatism in the service of democratic politics.¹⁵ The easiest way to see this is to get beyond Brandom's initial turn to the social to examine the nature of his systematic account of it.

Briefly stated, Brandom uses the ontological primary of the social to retain some of the very philosophical categories that Rorty seeks to jettison to pave the way for cultural politics. From Hegel Brandom gets the idea that "normative statuses," which include being committed and being responsible, must be understood as "*social* achievements." As he explains in a key essay on Hegel, "the core idea structuring Hegel's social understanding of selves is that they are synthesized by *mutual recognition*." Inherent in this process is a kind of

¹⁰ Brandom, "Heidegger's Categories," pp. 389-90; qtd. in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 7.

¹¹ For more on this topic see Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53, no. 207 (1999): 7-20; and "Analytic and Conversational Philosophy" and "A Pragmatist View of Contemporary Analytic Philosophy" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*.

¹² Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, pp. 8, 5.

¹³ See Rorty, "Some American Uses of Hegel," p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46. This essay marks Rorty's most obvious effort to assimilate Brandom to a Deweyan project.

¹⁵ Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, p. 231. Brandom notes in the Afterword that upon reading the lectures published in this book, Rorty asked, "Why in the world would you want to extend the death throes of analytic philosophy by another decade or two?" p. 202. Brandom's most explicit treatment of the relation of pragmatism and democratic politics comes in "When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray: Irony and the Pragmatist Enlightenment," *boundary 2* 29, no. 2 (2002): 1-28.

authority: as Brandom puts it, "the authority to constitute a community by recognizing individuals as members of it."¹⁶

While the ontological origins of this authority are indeed social, in the sense that there are no transcendental appeals to anything outside of the community, for Brandom this fact does not mean an embrace of cultural politics, in Rorty's full sense. That is, even though it may be the case, as Rorty puts it, that "to say that cultural politics has the last word on these matters" means there can be "no court of appeal other than our descendants," Brandom does not seek to replace ontology with cultural politics. Nor does he seek to make the communities we constitute more inclusive. The pragmatist account of the social nature of authority he derives from Heidegger is self-adjudging, which means not only that it entails fundamental ontology, something Rorty counsels us to abandon, but that it contains an implicit normative standard of correctness that carries objective status.¹⁷ Providing an account of this status is one of Brandom's great achievements.

The contrast that exists between Rorty and Brandom can be illustrated through their accounts of the idea of answerability. As John McDowell has pointed out, Rorty draws a distinction between "making ourselves answerable to the world, as opposed to being answerable to our fellows."¹⁸ While Rorty sides squarely with the latter and suggests that Brandom's "construal of assertions as the assumption of responsibilities to other members of society"¹⁹ is consistent with this,

¹⁶ Brandom, "Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms," *European Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1999): 164-189. This essay appears as chapter 7 of Brandom's *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 210-234.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, pp. 14, 17; Brandom, "Heidegger's Categories," pp. 389-90.

¹⁸ John McDowell, "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity," in Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, pp. 110; Rorty, "Response to McDowell," *op. cit.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 7.

Brandom's account of objectivity grants the structure, though not the content, of our inferentially articulated commitments the status of a non-human constraint on us. Brandom wants to retain this distinction, but only as a matter of "perspectival *form*, rather than in a nonperspectival or cross-perspectival *content*." He continues, "What is shared by all discursive perspectives is *that* there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, not *what* it is—the structure, not the content."²⁰

When considered more closely, Brandom's novel account of this objective status in *Making It Explicit* undermines Rorty's attempt to assimilate Brandom to a Deweyan – or better, a Rortyan – project of "interpreting increasing rationality as responsibility to larger and more diverse communities of human beings."²¹ For Brandom, "Part of playing the game of giving and asking for reasons is keeping track of the commitments and entitlements of the other players, by *attributing* commitments and entitlements."²² This keeping track of commitments is the process Brandom calls "deontic scorekeeping," which is fundamentally a *social* process since the content of any utterance is intersubjectively determined – not through an "I-we" dynamic, which threatens to allow communal perspectives to trump individual ones, but an "I-thou" relation. Thus, "the broadly inferential content that *A* associates with *B*'s claim determines the significance *B*'s assertional speech act has from the point of view of *A*'s scorekeeping."²³ Importantly, for Brandom this "social metaphysics of claim-making" "does not settle which claims *are* true—that is, *correctly* taken to be true." "There is no bird's eye view," Brandom tells us, "above the fray of competing claims from which those that deserve to prevail can be identified."²⁴

²⁰ Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 600.

²¹ Rorty, "Some American Uses of Hegel," p. 46.

²² Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 185.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 601, 191.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

Nevertheless, always implicit in this scorekeeping process is the difference between “what is correct and what is merely taken to be correct.”²⁵ This distinction is precisely what Rorty takes issue with. As he puts it, “If A can explain what she is doing and why she is doing it in her own terms, what right has B got to keep on saying ‘No, what A is *really* doing is. . . ?’”²⁶ As always, the basis for Rorty’s objection here is not solely epistemological or ontological, but political. In his response to Brandom in *Rorty and His Critics*, Rorty explicitly reminds us of the “evil consequences” of “attempts to divide culture into [...] the ‘objective knowledge’ part and the other part.” Attempting to retain this distinction, on Rorty’s view, runs the risk of providing greater weapons for “the bad guys” – namely, those who do not agree that “increased freedom and richness of the Conversation is the aim of inquiry, but instead think that there is the further aim of getting Reality right” – whom Rorty calls “authoritarians.”²⁷

Rorty identifies a second problem with Brandom’s model of deontic scorekeeping as a mechanism for ensuring we always have recourse to the distinction between “what is (objectively) true and what is merely (subjectively) held true.”²⁸ Because, as Brandom holds, “Treating someone as a reliable reporter is taking the reporter’s *commitment* (to this content under these circumstances) to be sufficient for the reporter’s *entitlement* to that commitment,” for Rorty “everything depends upon what constitutes a competent audience.”²⁹ As Rorty explains, “Not any language-user who comes down the road will be treated as a member of a competent audience. On the contrary, human beings usually divide up into mutually suspicious (*not* mutually intelligible) communities of justification – mutually exclusive groups

– depending upon the presence or absence of sufficient overlap in belief and desire.” In other words, if you are not “one of us,” then “I have no reason to justify my beliefs to you, and none in finding out what alternative beliefs you may have.” Put another way, in our talk of justification and entitlement there always is, at least implicitly, a category of “people whose requests for justification we are entitled to reject.”³⁰

II. Putting Democratic Politics First

For his part, Brandom does not take up worries about whether practices of deontic scorekeeping may result in exclusion of particular groups or seem interested in examining the consequences of his philosophical perspective from the vantage of democratic politics at all. In the final section I will consider the one place where he does do this. Yet it is not clear that he necessarily should either. In this section I take a step back to articulate what I take to be the fundamental challenge presented by Rorty’s thought and suggest that this challenge, which has to do with how we understand the relation of philosophy and politics. Despite the fact that this challenge is more explicit in Rorty’s engagements with analytic philosophers than anywhere else, it is they who have most often failed to appreciate the brunt of his challenge, though they certainly are not along in this.³¹ Attending to this challenge more closely will help bring the differences between Rorty and Brandom into view.

One way to get purchase on this challenge is suggested by Brandom in his insightful introduction to *Rorty and His Critics*. Brandom offers a useful distinction between, on the one hand, the “metaphilosophical issues of grand strategy and world historical significance” that constitute the “larger frame in which Rorty has put the questions

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 10. Rorty makes this statement with both “metaphysicians” and “fellow Peircians” in mind, but it could apply to Brandom equally well.

²⁷ Rorty, “Response to Brandom,” pp. 186-7.

²⁸ Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 598.

²⁹ Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 189; Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” p. 9.

³⁰ Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” pp. 15, 27n24.

³¹ For a good account of how often Rorty’s philosophical critics use concepts and assumptions that he has explicitly abandoned against him, see Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. chapter 6.

that he asks and the claims that he makes," and, on the other, what is of greater interest to more analytically minded philosophers: the "argumentative core of his systematic philosophical vision" – that is, his treatment of truth, objectivity, and reality.³² Indeed, many of the disagreements and debates that play out in the pages of the volume involve a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, interplay between these two dimensions, with contributors evaluating dimensions of Rorty's systematic philosophical vision, usually finding them wanting, and Rorty trying in his responses, often unsuccessfully, to bring the focus back to this larger frame.

The problem is that focusing solely on the systematic content of Rorty's philosophical positions, in isolation from his larger "world historical" frame, as Brandom calls it, runs the risk of missing his point in a fundamental way. That is, to evaluate Rorty's philosophical stances from within the discourse of analytic philosophy as simply one systematic theory among others to be judged on the basis of standard categories fails to come to terms with the basic challenge generated by his thought. In his earliest work, Rorty articulated this challenge via a set of metaphilosophical stances: the lack of presuppositionless starting points; the absence of mutually agreed upon, neutral criteria to resolve disagreements; and the role of what he refers to in his early essays as "redefinition" and later terms "redescription" – namely, the way "each system can and does create its own private metaphilosophical criteria, designed to authenticate itself and disallow its competitors."³³ In his later work, he transfers these

metaphilosophical insights to a political context, culminating in his idea of "philosophy as cultural politics." Simply put, his challenge is that there is no way to get outside of "cultural politics." Absent privileged contexts and mutually-accepted criteria, all we can do is redescribe things and compare one redescription to another, and evaluate "alternative [...] proposals for political change" not in terms of "categories and principles" but in terms of "concrete advantages and disadvantages."³⁴ Rorty's starkest statement of the broader orientation that results comes, fittingly, in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy": "putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit."³⁵

So "how do we tell when, if ever," Rorty asks, "an issue about what exists should be discussed without reference to our sociopolitical goals?" Well, William James, for one, Rorty believed, often comes close to saying that "all questions, including questions about what exists, boil down to questions about what will help create a better world."³⁶ On this view, when we approach philosophical questions about truth and reality, "arguments about relative dangers and benefits are the only ones that matter." For Rorty, in a stance he attributes to James, "truth and reality exist for the sake of social practices, rather than vice versa." The fundamental insight that shapes his understanding of philosophy as cultural politics is the fact that cultural politics "is the only game in town." That is, there is no getting outside of this cultural-political realm to some non-social space. Recourses to metaphysics, epistemology, ontology, etc. that attempt "to name an authority which is superior to that of society," he holds, are nothing more than "disguised moves in the game of cultural politics."³⁷

³²Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, p. xix.

³³ Rorty, "The Limits of Reductionism," in I.C. Lieb (ed.), *Experience, Existence, and the Good* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), p. 110. See also Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 1-39; and early essays like, "Recent Metaphilosophy," *Review of Metaphysics* 15, no. 2 (1961): 299-318; and "Realism, Categories, and the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1962): 307-322. For a more in-depth account of this challenge, see Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (eds.),

The Rorty Reader (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 1-52.

³⁴ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 161, 168.

³⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 178.

³⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, pp. 4-5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7, 9.

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Rather than attempt to beat cultural politics, Rorty in his later work counsels philosophers to join the game and use philosophy to spur social change and advance particular “sociopolitical goals.”³⁸ Obviously, this tack is what most gives analytic philosophers pause. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that it is within his exchanges with analytic philosophers that Rorty makes the strongest case for the problem of trading “cultural significance for professional rigor.”³⁹ By this he means not only the problem of preoccupation with questions only of interest to professional philosophers, but also writing about philosophical issues as if we can do so in a way that transcends politics. Indeed, he went as far as to claim that the “only serious philosophical questions are about how human beings can find descriptions of both nature and culture that will facilitate various social projects.”⁴⁰

III. The Political Consequences of Fallibilism

In this final section I want to affirm Rorty’s approach to the ontological priority of the social by identifying three particular advantages of his account.⁴¹ Because he locates this idea in the context of his attempt to put democratic politics first and tailor a philosophy to suit, it becomes an opportunity to reflect on and address the social and political implications of our concepts and assumptions, including an opportunity to be more inclusive of previously marginalized groups. If Rorty’s stance seems too reductionist in its approach to philosophical questions as political questions, consider that Brandom takes this tack himself in his essay “When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray.” In a rare extended engagement with issues grounded in a specific social and historical context, Brandom provides an account of how to “assess the *political* consequences of pragmatist

political thought.” Citing the failure of the classical pragmatists to provide a “public critical assessment” of racial prejudice in the post-Civil War period in America, he offers a damning critique of the pragmatist philosophical orientation on the basis of the undesirable politics that results.⁴²

What I want to argue is that it is precisely Rorty’s attention to such excluded groups – his posing of the question, “*Whose* justificatory context?” – that makes his account of the ontological priority of the social, despite Brandom’s critique, more useful to pragmatists committed to democratic politics.⁴³ By contrast, Brandom uses this episode as a way to reiterate his commitment to the 20th century project of philosophical analysis as means to save us from the shortcomings of classical pragmatism. Here it is less that Brandom’s commitment to democratic politics is lacking, than his unwillingness to see philosophy as already embedded within the game of cultural politics keeps him from fully realizing that commitment.

The first advantage of Rorty’s account is that it attends more directly to challenges or contestations of the implicit normative dimension of our practices by recognizing the existence of those who fall outside of this discursive space – namely, those whom we fail to consider “conversation partners.” Indeed, a principal dimension of Rorty’s political project over the last two decades of his life was expanding the range of people we regard as “possible conversation partners.”⁴⁴ How to recognize and do justice to marginalized groups is a key dimension of Rorty’s political project; as we have seen, the aim of cultural politics is changing the conversation

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁹ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 151. See also Rorty’s various responses in *Rorty and His Critics*.

⁴⁰ Rorty, “Some American Uses of Hegel,” p. 41.

⁴¹ Although I can’t develop this claim here, the implications are that Rorty’s understanding has more in common with Hegel’s category of the social than Brandom’s.

⁴² Brandom, “When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray,” pp. 27-28.

⁴³ Rorty, “Response to Jurgen Habermas,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 58.

⁴⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 203. See also in the same volume “Solidarity or Objectivity?” where he establishes that “For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one’s community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of ‘us’ as far as we can,” p. 23.

to make it more inclusive. By “practicing cultural politics,” which involves “suggesting changes in the uses of words” and “putting new words in circulation” so as to “break through impasses and to make conversation more fruitful,” we can enlarge “our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions” to make them as inclusive as possible.⁴⁵ For Rorty, it is important that we “stay on the lookout for marginalized people – people whom we still instinctively think of as ‘they’ rather than ‘us’.”⁴⁶

Rorty’s point here – that “None of us take all audiences seriously; we all reject requests for justification from some audiences as a waste of time”⁴⁷ – raises the question of how it is possible on Brandom’s account to challenge the results of scorekeeping practices. Although I cannot adequately engage Brandom’s nuanced and insightful reading of Hegel here, Robert Pippin has argued compellingly that there is a sense of contestation or challenge in Hegel’s account that is absent in Brandom’s. On Pippin’s view, Brandom’s perspective “does not yet explain how either an external interpreter or internal participant can properly challenge the authority of the norms on the basis of which the attributions and assessments are made, or how those norms can fail to meet those challenges.”⁴⁸ More specifically, Brandom’s notion of ongoing negotiations between individuals and scorekeepers falls short of the more robust contestation affirmed by Hegel. Like Rorty, Pippin identifies as problematic the assumption that there is a “neutral” conception of negotiation to which both parties would accede. In keeping with Rorty’s understanding of cultural politics, for Pippin, most of the time “the nature of normative authority is itself up for grabs.” Any attempt to fix that authority, including Brandom’s scorekeeping of normative entitlements, should “count as an episode in that contestation, and

could not count as the general form of any such contestation.”⁴⁹ Or, to put it in Rorty’s terms, attempts “to name an authority which is superior to that of society” are nothing more than “disguised moves in the game of cultural politics.”⁵⁰

On one level, Brandom’s embrace of the ontological priority of the social does not seek to name an authority superior to that of society itself. Brandom makes important moves that get analytic pragmatism beyond representationalism, universal validity, and what he has called the “pretensions” concerning the “authoritativeness” of certain forms of theorizing.⁵¹ As we have seen, Brandom’s account is designed quite explicitly to preclude the possibility of the content of any one perspective being privileged in advance.

Yet because this stance is a response to a philosophical problem, rather than to a politics of justice that demands greater inclusion of marginalized groups, there remain too many issues relevant to the social itself in which Brandom seems uninterested.⁵² What makes this significant is the explicit turn to “politico-moral virtues” that Rorty believes is required to make the logical space for moral deliberation more inclusive of those perspectives we may feel justified in rejecting.⁵³ This appeal to moral virtues, like that of curiosity and an embrace of fallibilism, is the second advantage I wish to underscore. Again, for Rorty “everything depends on what constitutes a competent audience.” He reminds us of “the sad fact that many previous communities have betrayed their own interests by being too sure of themselves, and so failing to attend to objections raised by outsiders.” Drawing a link between democratic politics and fallibilism, he highlights the importance of

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 124.

⁴⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 196.

⁴⁷ Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” p. 27n24.

⁴⁸ Robert Pippin, “Brandom’s Hegel,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (2005), pp. 392, 398.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 9.

⁵¹ See Italo Testa, “Hegelian Pragmatism and Social Emancipation: Interview with Robert Brandom,” *Constellations* 10, no. 4 (2003), p. 561.

⁵² Pippin identifies such a gap or lacuna “that Brandom obviously feels comfortable leaving unfilled.” See “Brandom’s Hegel,” p. 394 and *passim*.

⁵³ Rorty, “What Do You Do When They Call You a Relativist?,” p. 176.

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“People who are brought up to bethink themselves that they might be mistaken: that there are people out there who might disagree with them, and whose disagreements need to be taken into account.” As a result, in Rorty’s view philosophy should concern itself most fundamentally with the question of “how to persuade people to broaden the size of the audience they take to be competent, to increase the size of the relevant community of justification.”⁵⁴

One of the ways Rorty illustrates the difference that makes a difference here is via the distinction between the view “You cannot use language without invoking a consensus within a community of other language-users” and “You cannot use language consistently without enlarging that community to include all users of language.” With respect to Brandom, an ontology of deontic scorekeeping, even if social, cannot get us from the former to the latter. Rather, what is needed on Rorty’s view is a moral virtue like curiosity.⁵⁵ Things like “curiosity,” “the urge to expand one’s horizons of inquiry,” and “being interested in what people believe, not because we want to measure their beliefs against what they purport to represent, but because we want to deal with these people,” for Rorty are necessary to move the conversation beyond the West and make it a conversation that engages excluded voices. Philosophical categories alone cannot accomplish this.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” pp. 4-5, 9.

⁵⁵ As Rorty continues, “The more curiosity you have, the more interest you will have in talking to foreigners, infidels, and anybody else who claims to know something you do not know, to have some ideas you have not yet had,” *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ Rorty, “Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representations,” in *Truth and Progress*, p. 129. In his response to Habermas in *Rorty and His Critics*, he puts this in terms of “fallibility” – “our sense of the desirability of comparing one’s habits of actions with those of others in order to see whether one might develop some new habits,” p. 57. Rorty is especially attuned to the way in which community is constituted through exclusion, and to what he calls the “borderline cases” – individuals or groups that we exclude from “true humanity.” In “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” he treats what he calls “enemies of liberal democracy,” like Nietzsche and Loyola, who are deemed “crazy” or “mad” because “the limits of sanity are set by

The way in which Rorty’s affirmation of the priority of the social expands the discursive space beyond the West has not gone unnoticed. Nigerian philosopher Amaechi Udefi has argued that “Rorty’s anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist and pragmatist view of justification, knowledge, truth, and rationality” makes possible “an escalation of horizons for other discourses to sprout.” One such discourse, according to Udefi, is African epistemology.⁵⁷ If we accept, in Brandom’s words, that “all matters of authority or privilege, in particular *epistemic* authority, are matters of social practice, and not matters of objective fact,” then, to take just one example, we must consider Udefi’s point that “if the community is the source of epistemic authority and rationality, as Rorty has submitted, then, it makes sense to talk of African epistemology because Africans have their own way of conceptualizing events or reality.”⁵⁸ Judged from the perspective of democratic politics, using appeals to ontology to undermine this vantage in favor of what ought to be believed or what they really mean, seems problematic.

The third advantage I want to underscore is Rorty’s understanding of the need to give up the hope that philosophy can somehow stand above politics. On his view, when it comes to concepts like truth, rationality, and maturity, “The only thing that matters is which way of reshaping them will, in the long run, make them more useful for democratic politics.”⁵⁹ Brandom accounts for what he identifies as the failure of the classical pragmatists to challenge biological justifications of

what we can take seriously,” *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 187-8. “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” deals with victims of ethnic cleansing and “Feminism and Pragmatism” takes up marginalized and oppressed groups (both essays are in *Truth and Progress*).

⁵⁷ Amaechi Udefi, “Rorty’s Neopragmatism and the Imperative of the Discourse of African Epistemology,” *Human Affairs* 19 (2009), p. 84.

⁵⁸ For his part, Rorty has stated: “I think that the rhetoric we Westerners use in trying to get everyone to be more like us would be improved if we were more frankly ethnocentric, and less professedly universalist,” *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 55.

⁵⁹ Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” pp. 23, 25.

racism and the resulting softening of their principled opposition to slavery as a case where “politics may have trumped philosophy.”⁶⁰ In other words, fallibilism and their embrace of democratic politics over abstract philosophical commitments did them in. So the very philosophical orientation that Udefi affirms as opening the door to a more just, more inclusive, and more tolerant set of practices is for Brandom the cause of pragmatism’s failure to promote justice. The idea that “flexibility and experimentation are the essence of rationality, not the discovery of truths or principles one can hold on to,” in Brandom’s view, deprives us of a basis for judging what views “we *ought* to endorse.” As a result, lacking philosophical warrant that would justify appeal to “abstract principles of justice” rather than just “discussion among citizens of differing opinions” as “the only way to settle disputes” – basically what Rorty calls “cultural politics” – Brandom holds, the pragmatists’ opposition to racism was traded in for a weak accommodationist meliorism.⁶¹ Brandom’s remedy for this shortcoming is an appeal to more recent work in philosophical semantics, which he takes to have yielded with greater clarity “criteria of adequacy” that would help us identify the weaknesses of the classical pragmatists’ philosophical assumptions, as well as to redouble the “appropriate application of abstract principles of justice” to countermand their political failings.⁶²

Leaving aside other weaknesses of this account, one might observe here that Brandom seems to cling to what over three decades ago Rorty called the hope of the Enlightenment.⁶³ What he meant by this is “the hope that by forming the *right* conceptions of reason, of science, of thought, of knowledge, of morality [...] we shall have a shield against irrationalist resentment and

hatred.”⁶⁴ What Rorty’s account calls attention to, on the contrary, is how philosophical guarantees of objectivity and correctness have functioned more to perpetuate injustice and exclusion than to counteract it. Politics will always trump philosophy. Unless we follow Rorty’s advice and become willing to trade in “professional rigor” for cultural and political significance, and to intervene in cultural politics by “look[ing] at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in light of our hopes for cultural change,” “choos[ing] sides in those debates with an eye to the possibility of changing the course of the conversation,” philosophy will be irrelevant to, and have no role in, cultural change.

While we might want to agree that the classical pragmatists could have done more to challenge the discursive constellations marshaled to justify racial hierarchies, the notion that greater clarity in our philosophical concepts would have saved them or will save us from such shortcomings seems wrongheaded, especially given our awareness of the kinds of “evil consequences” to which Rorty has called attention. Rather than reading their efforts as a failure to “apply their theories of the contents of concepts to offer a public critical assessment,” we might instead work to better their attempt to abandon a dichotomy of theory and practice to engage the norms inherent in our democratic practices that, in Brandom’s terms, tended toward fanaticism rather than fallibilism, and enter the fray of cultural politics ourselves.⁶⁵

In conclusion, for Brandom, the ontological priority of the social is just that: an ontology. By contrast, for Rorty it marks an opportunity to reconceive philosophy so that its priority becomes improving our social

⁶⁰ Brandom, “When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray,” p. 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 27.

⁶³ For example, Brandom concedes that Dewey was the sole exception to this critique and builds his case against classical pragmatism on the positions of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. See *ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶⁴ Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 171.

⁶⁵ Brandom, “When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray,” pp. 27, 14. For a rich account of Hegel’s arguments as the means by which “philosophy burst out of the confines of academic theory and became a commentary on the history of the world,” see Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 821-865.

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practices to make them more tolerant, more open, and more just. Undoubtedly, there will be failures in this endeavor, from which we must learn, rather than convince ourselves in advance we shall avoid. As we have seen, Rorty's account of the ontological priority of the social amounts to a replacement of ontology by "cultural politics." On this view, the implication of recognizing the ontological priority of the social is to replace ontology altogether; for Rorty this is the only way to ensure that no perspectives or conversation partners will be ruled out for reasons other than pragmatic considerations about how far they advance our sociopolitical goals. Whether Brandom will make this a priority remains to be seen.

At the end of the day, how we judge the differences between Rorty's and Brandom's accounts of the ontological priority of the social is itself a question of cultural politics. There are no philosophical moves that are not moves in the game of cultural politics. If one believes that the point of reading and writing philosophy is to create a better future, then this seems like all the ontology one needs.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 169.