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SOLIDARITY, OBJECTIVITY, AND THE
HUMAN FORM OF LIFE:
WITTGENSTEIN VS. RORTY

ABSTRACT: Reason, objectivity, and human nature are now suspect ideas. Among postmodern thinkers, Richard Rorty has advanced an especially forceful critique of these notions. Drawing partly on Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Rorty contends that objectivity is no more than a metaphysical name for intersubjective agreement, and that "human nature" is an empty category, there being nothing beneath history and culture. Wittgenstein himself, however, recognized within the world's many civilizations "the common behavior of mankind," without which Rorty's ethnocentric "solidarity" would be inconceivable. This common form of life—the life of those who speak—encompasses countless human activities that presuppose and are interwoven with the concepts of reason and objectivity.

What difference would it make in the lives of human beings if our minds could have contact with reality? This question, which gave Greek philosophy its orientation and purpose, now seems childlike to many. It lacks the self-consciousness demanded by an age that has come to doubt whether "human nature," "mind," and "reality" are still useful categories. The philosophical preoccupations of classical antiquity are not, of course, the primary targets of contemporary skepti-

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cism, which is directed instead at the surviving ideals of the Enlightenment, with its commitment to reason, to human rights, and to the idea of Man. In place of the ancient pursuit of truth and goodness, and of the modern commitment to rationality and its embodiment in universal principles of right, we are urged by our postmodern contemporaries to seek meaning in the particular texts, regions of discourse, and communities that furnish the conceptual vocabulary within which, and *only* within which, we might hope to justify our beliefs and actions.

This understanding of the postmodern condition is forcefully presented in Richard Rorty's essay, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" (1991).¹ Rorty contends that we must choose between two mutually exclusive ways of giving sense to our lives. On the one hand, we may allow ourselves to be guided by the goal of understanding the way things really are as we try to comprehend a world that we take to be independent of our beliefs. The ideal of "objectivity" governs this pursuit, and those who have chosen it will necessarily insist upon the distinction between knowledge and opinion, between mere belief and true belief. On the other hand, we may reject the possibility of a "transcultural rationality," which requires a vantage point outside the particular community to which we belong, and affirm instead the quest for agreement, or "solidarity," within it. The aim of this quest will not be a true understanding of an independent reality, but rather a broadening and deepening of our collective identity as bearers of the cultural inheritance of the West.²

Rorty is not an impartial observer of this debate, but a partisan of the solidarity camp. He rejects the premises upon which the claim of objectivity rests: a conception of reality as something independent of our language and beliefs, truth as the correspondence between our beliefs and the way things really are, and human nature as an "inner structure" that leads us to converge upon a common set of judgments. With no language-independent facts to constrain belief, and no transcendental categories of understanding to give a common form to human thought, we have no grounds on the basis of which to advance claims of reason, and so must address our arguments to those who share enough of our beliefs "to make fruitful conversation possible" (Rorty 1991, 30).³ In short, Rorty urges us to accept the ethnocentric limits of our thinking and to abandon the commitment to objectivity in favor of achieving "intersubjective agreement" among "members of our own tribe."

Given Rorty's interest in deflating metaphysical conceptions of reason, truth, and reality, it is not surprising that he turns to Wittgenstein (among others) for support in building his case against objectivity, for Wittgenstein is often read as a philosopher who derided the claims of metaphysics, turning instead to language, convention, and "forms of life" as the only matrices within which meaning and coherence are possible. On Rorty's understanding, "to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian" is to "accept the argument that since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths" (1989, 21). In this passage and elsewhere, Rorty advances an interpretation of Wittgenstein that is intended to bolster Rorty's argument that reality only bears on our thoughts as cause to effect, that reasons go no deeper than communal agreement, and that "truth" is but a "compliment" we pay to an idea (1991, 24).

Although there are Wittgensteinian resonances in some of what Rorty has to say, I do not believe Wittgenstein would have been a willing volunteer in Rorty's unconditional war against objectivity. Nor is it clear that Wittgenstein could be relied upon as a steadfast ally of Rorty's "ironic solidarity." My aim in this essay is to advance a different view of Wittgenstein's thought and its implications for "objectivity" and "solidarity," a view that sets Wittgenstein's philosophy in opposition to the main thrust of Rorty's postmodern manifesto. In reclaiming Wittgenstein from Rorty's "post-metaphysical culture," I begin by outlining a Wittgensteinian account of "solidarity" that is, at the same time, a defense of human nature as an indispensable concept for many theoretical and interpretative purposes. Next I reconstruct a conception of "objectivity" from a Wittgensteinian point of view, an effort that is intended to double as a critique of Rorty's assault on reason and truth. Finally, I offer a few summary remarks about what is essential, and what is contingent, in human experience.

I. SOLIDARITY

In developing the contrast between objectivity and solidarity, Rorty (1991, 151–61) draws on a parallel contrast between "representationalist" and "social-practice" philosophies of language. The representationalist school, which includes Frege, Russell, Tarski, and the early Wittgenstein, construes language as a medium for depicting the way the world really is and regards truth as the basic concept in a theory

of meaning. According to this view, the meaning of a proposition is equivalent to what must be the case in the world for the proposition to be true. It is the task of philosophy to set forth the logical requirements that must be satisfied if our beliefs, and the propositions that express them, are to give an accurate representation of reality.⁴

The "social-practice philosophy of language" comprises both a critique of the representationalist theory and an alternative to it. The point of departure for this view, which is developed in the later work of Wittgenstein, is an acceptance of our actual linguistic practices as being in order just as they are.⁵ In contrast to the representationalist school, Wittgenstein stressed that language is used for a great many purposes besides description. We command, cajole, and comfort, in addition to identifying, depicting, and representing. Moreover, it is only by virtue of a word's *use* within these activities, or "language-games," that it has a meaning and, hence, can be employed (along with other words) to describe a state of affairs (or express feelings, make commitments, give directions, and so forth). In this view, truth does not involve a correspondence between thought and reality, or even between sentences and states of affairs. Rather, "truth" is what can be justifiably asserted *within* a language. Philosophy can help elucidate this notion, but cannot legislate its necessary and sufficient conditions.

For Rorty (1991, 14), the devastating import of the social-practice philosophy of language for the ideal of "objectivity" is found in its critical implications for "the notion of 'language-independent determinate reality.'" The world does not present itself to us in ready-made pieces, but is divided up by language in ways that depend on our purposes. There is the physicist's world of subatomic particles and the ordinary world of tables and chairs. Because different "vocabularies" are used for different purposes, it is pointless to ask which is more "real" than the other. To claim that a particular vocabulary or scheme of concepts is superior only means that it is more "useful for coping with the environment" (*ibid.*, 5). It cannot be shown that one scheme provides a closer representation of reality because we cannot break out of "our language and our beliefs and [test] them against something known without their aid" (*ibid.*, 6).⁶

In Rorty's hands, the social-practice philosophy of language is forged into a weapon with which to bludgeon "universalistic notions like 'the nature of the self' or 'our essential humanity,'" which, despite their transcendental pretensions, are the product of historical, and

therefore contingent, vocabularies (Rorty 1991, 14). Rorty (1989, xiii) embraces a thoroughgoing historicism, insisting that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down—that there is nothing 'beneath' socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human." In short, there are no natural categories, no "natural cut in the spectrum of similarities and differences . . . which marks the end of the rational beings and the beginning of the nonrational ones" (ibid., 192).

In dismissing both the notion of human nature and the conception of reality as something independent of the words used to describe it, Rorty removes the essential premises sustaining the claim of objectivity. All that remains following this deconstruction of humanity and world, reason and reality, the subject and object of belief, is belief itself—the lineament and sinew of solidarity. According to Rorty, neither the world nor our nature constrains belief; the only thing that can counter a belief is another belief (1982, 160–75; 1991, 126–61). No legitimate argument may appeal to the essences of things, nor can any claim be compelling that presupposes the notion of a "trans-historical" or "trans-cultural reason." In fact, there can be no appeal to anything "save the way *we* live now, what *we* do now, how *we* talk now—anything beyond *our* own little moment of world-history" (Rorty 1991, 158, original emphasis).

Before outlining some Wittgensteinian reservations about the reasoning that leads Rorty to this conclusion, I need to say something more about Rorty's characterization of language. To begin with, Rorty (1991, 15) urges us not to think of language as "a medium between self and reality but simply as a flag which signals the desirability of using a certain vocabulary when trying to cope with certain kinds of organisms." To say that a particular organism "is a language user is just to say that pairing off the marks and noises it makes with those we make will prove a useful tactic in predicting and controlling its future behavior" (Rorty 1989, 15). Rorty claims that "this Wittgensteinian attitude . . . naturalizes mind and language by making all questions about the relation of either to the rest of the universe *causal* questions, as opposed to questions about adequacy of representation or expression" (ibid., 15, original emphasis). Thus, while the world does not supply us with reasons for holding beliefs (because "the world does not speak"), once we have "programmed ourselves with a language, the world can cause us to hold beliefs" (ibid., 16). Rorty does not explain how this linguistic programming is ac-

complished, but if we take seriously his point about language having only a causal relation to the world, then language learning, like the formation of belief, must also be the product of cause and effect. Once we have successfully programmed ourselves with a language, Rorty insists that there is no extralinguistic vantage point from which to assess and modify our linguistic software. We have no "skyhook" with which to free ourselves "from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were" (1991, 13). Instead, we inherit a vocabulary that opens certain possibilities for us and forecloses others, a circumstance Rorty sums up with Heidegger's aphorism: "Language speaks man" (*ibid.*, 13).

If we take this affirmation of Heidegger's maxim as a convenient shorthand for much of the reasoning that leads Rorty to embrace solidarity, then the upshot of the interpretation of Wittgenstein I wish to advance can be summarized by turning the maxim on its head. It is human beings who speak. My aim in the rest of this section is to bring out the importance of human nature in Wittgenstein's understanding of language and, thereby, to reconstruct the subject who speaks (as well as believes, knows, and theorizes).

We can begin to bring out the differences between Rorty and Wittgenstein by comparing their divergent accounts of the process of "acculturation." For Wittgenstein, learning a language is a complicated business because language belongs to, and is constitutive of, countless activities and practices. To learn the meaning of a word is at the same time to learn about, and to learn to take part in, these activities and practices. To understand the meaning of "obey," for example, a person must develop an understanding of the practice of command and obedience, become familiar with what sorts of people may issue commands in which sorts of circumstances, recognize what constitutes "an order," "obeying an order," and so on. Because the practice of command and obedience overlaps with other practices, an understanding of "obedience" also requires a corresponding understanding of "authority," "rights," and "disobedience," to mention just a few closely related concepts.

I do not think Rorty would disagree with this brief characterization of what is involved in learning a language, because it is central to the "social-practice philosophy" he endorses. The trouble is rather that Rorty does not appreciate the nature of the task involved in learning how to speak when the meaning of words is intertwined with activities that often have no precise boundary, with practices and

conventions that criss-cross and overlap in different ways, and with human intentions that shade off into one another with the slightest change in tone or facial expression. To characterize this learning process as "programming ourselves with a language," which suggests the straightforward application of well-defined rules, is to miss the complex judgment involved in calling a particular piece of behavior an "act of obedience." I am going to say more about this shortly, but the point I am leading up to is that *our nature* plays an important role in making this kind of judgment possible, a role that Rorty overlooks because he thinks such judgments are *caused* by the world as it impinges upon our linguistic programs.

The difficulty involved in learning to communicate can be illustrated with the help of two of Wittgenstein's most famous ideas—the notion of "family resemblances" and of what it is "to follow a rule." Wittgenstein introduces the idea of family resemblances in the course of showing that many words have no essence or common element that lies beneath their diverse uses. If we actually "*look and see*" whether there is anything common to the things we call "games," Wittgenstein insists we "will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that" (1958a, para. 66, original emphasis). Wittgenstein contends that this is also true of many other words, including "sentences," "languages," "reading," and even of the use of the word *good* (*ibid.*, paras. 77, 108, 164, and 197). Instead of a common feature, or general form, of a thing or activity, "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (*ibid.*, para. 66). Wittgenstein calls these criss-crossing similarities "family resemblances" and offers the analogy of a rope in which no single fiber runs throughout the entire length, but rather in which there is an "overlapping of many fibers" (*ibid.*, para. 67). Although Wittgenstein stresses that this lack of a common denominator does not prevent us from understanding one another when we speak of "games," "sentences," and such, the point I wish to stress is how remarkable it is that we *are* able to communicate with words that have no common element among their diverse uses, no necessary and sufficient conditions governing their employment in varied circumstances. The difficulty, to return to Rorty's metaphor, is that while it is easy to program a computer to select from a list of words all those with, say, two vowels, it would be immensely more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to program a computer to select

from, say, contemporary English literature all the things we call "games," or "sentences," or "acts of obedience," just because there is nothing common to *all* "games," nor to *all* "sentences," nor to *all* "acts of obedience."

A similar problem arises in connection with following a rule. In this case, the difficulty is not the lack of a common denominator, but the fact that rules do not interpret themselves. Thus Wittgenstein asks, "how can a rule show me what I have to do at *this* point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule" (1958a, para. 198, original emphasis). The open-ended relationship between rules and their application can be illustrated by noting that the rule of equity, which tells us to "treat like cases alike," leaves open the question of what is to count as a relevant difference between cases. An interpretation of the rule may help, but it, too, requires application. In short, there is a gap between a rule understood as a formal algorithm and the application of the rule to particular cases. Moreover, this gap cannot be bridged by a further rule or interpretation because these, too, still "hang in the air," waiting to be applied (*ibid.*, para. 198; see Wittgenstein 1967, para. 440). Although Wittgenstein emphasizes that we *are* able to act in accordance with rules despite their open-ended character, the point I wish to stress is how amazing this is in light of the diversity of circumstances in which many rules are learned (often by means of examples alone) and applied.

The gap between rules and their application, and the lack of common denominators among the diverse uses of words, provide the necessary context for understanding Wittgenstein's remark that "if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments" (1958a, para. 242). The importance of this "agreement in judgments" can be illustrated by example. Suppose there are two speakers who give the same definition of the word *obedience*, both saying, "it means doing what is ordered." Suppose, however, that these speakers do not apply the definition in the same way. One speaker uses the word only when someone responds to a command in a deferential manner, whereas the other uses the word without this qualification. These two speakers do not share a common understanding of "obedience," for despite the fact that they give the same formal definition, they evidently use the word in different ways. If they are to avoid misunderstanding, they must *agree in their judgments*, that is, they must regard the same kinds of behavior as instances of "obedience."

The points I have been anxious to make are, first, that the fuzzy nature of family resemblances and the open-ended aspect of following a rule seem to pose difficult obstacles to communication and understanding, and, second, that these obstacles are surmounted insofar as there is "agreement in judgments." What I now want to draw attention to is the depth and omnipresence of this "agreement in judgments." Although misunderstandings sometimes occur, as in the example of the speakers with different conceptions of "obedience," such disagreements among the speakers of a language are relatively uncommon. For the most part, people agree about what constitutes "obeying an order," the logical inference to be drawn in a particular case, the darker of two colors, and so forth.⁷ To appreciate what a remarkable achievement this agreement is, we need only bring to mind the variety of behavior that is called "careless," or "refined," or "thoughtful," or the way in which a word's meaning can change depending on the speed, inflection, or urgency with which it is spoken. Despite this multitude of possibilities, there is normally agreement in judgments even when the character of behavior in question turns on something as subtle as a slight change in facial expression (in faces that, themselves, exhibit endless variety!). This kind of "agreement" is not akin to a contract or a deliberate attempt to reach a mutual understanding. Nor is it like an agreement on a specific occasion or agreement from time to time. Rather, in the words of one of Wittgenstein's commentators, it is "being in agreement throughout, being in harmony," as when we agree, as a matter of course, in continuing the series, 2, 4, 6, 8, by naturally writing 10, 12, 14, 16 (Cavell 1979, 32).

Of course we do not always agree in what we regard as "obedience," "disobedience," etc. There are ambiguous cases, unusual contexts, contested concepts, and other features of our life and language that give rise to disagreement in the application of criteria. Does carrying out an order with a smirk on one's face count as "obeying the order"? It is not always easy to say. Yet the very possibility of asking the question presupposes that we agree in seeing the look on the person's face *as* a smirk and in hearing the words prior to the act *as* an order being given. It is only because we ordinarily agree in such judgments without thinking that we are able to form beliefs and communicate them to others.

Wittgenstein's notion of "agreement in judgments" should not be mistaken for Rorty's depiction of acculturation as "programming

ourselves with a language," and "making a judgment" should not be mistaken for being "caused to hold a belief." The training involved in learning a language is misconceived if it is understood in Rorty's terms, according to which we are fitted with linguistic software that blindly converts external inputs into semantic outputs by means of a causal algorithm. Learning a language does not require the installation of a mechanism, but the mastery of a technique and a way of seeing. Speakers must learn to distinguish between correct and incorrect usage, to grasp the meaning of words spoken in different contexts and in different tones of voice, to recognize a particular arrangement of things *as* an instance of something, and so forth. Such training is *possible* because human beings naturally react to many things in the same way, but the *result* of the training is not a conditioned response. Language is a normative practice and learning to use words according to the appropriate criteria—that is, learning to speak—necessarily involves learning to judge. (It is partly because Rorty has a deterministic view of language acquisition, and even of speaking itself, that he banishes "judgment" and "reason" from his post-metaphysical world. This criticism is developed in greater detail in the next section.)⁸

In the course of his discussion of "agreement in judgments," Wittgenstein imagines someone asking, "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" (1958a, para. 241). Now, while Rorty affirms "intersubjective agreement" as a measure of (or, alternatively, as a replacement for) "truth," Wittgenstein's own response to the question runs as follows: "It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (*ibid.*, original emphasis). Whether this answer lends support to Rorty's conception of solidarity obviously depends on what Wittgenstein means by the phrase, "form of life." I am going to try to elucidate the meaning and significance of this phrase in a moment, but first I will briefly outline an interpretation of these words that is favorable to Rorty's notion of solidarity.

Wittgenstein's phrase, *form of life*, has been interpreted by some commentators as a shorthand for culture or way of life, which is a plausible reading given the role played by social conventions, practices, and customs in Wittgenstein's understanding of language (see Winch 1958). It may also be granted that Rorty and Wittgenstein share the view that in any explanation or argument, reasons must eventually come to an end, and that this stopping point is not the

"structure of the mind," nor a "language-independent determinate reality," but rather is somehow coupled to our life. If we now equate a "form of life" with the shared beliefs that define a particular culture or civilization, and if we also suppose that these beliefs come to be affirmed because they are shared rather than because they are "true," we are then standing at the threshold of Rortian solidarity.⁹

The trouble with this interpretation can be seen by considering its implications in connection with other things Wittgenstein says about "form of life." When he writes that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life," it follows on the foregoing interpretation that if we imagine two languages, say English and Tamil, we must then imagine two corresponding forms of life, the life of those who speak English and Tamil, respectively (1958a, para. 19). This result cannot, however, be squared with the following passage from the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein draws a distinction not between different cultures, but between the human form of life and the rest of the animal kingdom: "One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not? . . . Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life" (ibid., part II, 174). In referring to *this* "complicated form of life," Wittgenstein means the form of life that is possible for those who speak, i.e., human beings. The "phenomena of hope" are possible for us because we can speak *a* language; they do not require that we master English, or Tamil, or any other *particular* language. Moreover, in the context of this passage, "form of life" could only mean the life associated with a particular language and culture if we were prepared to imagine languages and cultures in which people do *not* hope.

Wittgenstein gave no indication that he believed there were human societies in which the "phenomena of hope" were absent. Quite the contrary, he stresses the many *common* features of human life, features that are rarely mentioned because they are so obvious. Thus, Wittgenstein characterizes the human use of language in "commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting" as being "as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (1958a, para. 25). In this passage and in others, Wittgenstein composes a portrait of the human form of life, which includes many "natural reactions" common to our species (ibid., para. 185); expressive faces that reveal "joy, indifference, interest, excitement, torpor" (1967, para. 220);

a distinctive "*rhythm of work*" (ibid., para. 102, original emphasis); the capacity to feel "ardent love or hope," but not just "for the space of one second" (1958a, para. 583); different attitudes to "what is alive" and to "what is dead" (ibid., para. 284).

It may be granted that Wittgenstein devotes more attention to exploring the differences among language-games and the activities into which they are interwoven than he does examining the similarities among them. But the different activities Wittgenstein discusses are not unique to particular cultures; they are the universal activities of differentiating between colors, measuring, counting, hoping, regretting. And when Wittgenstein does wish to bring before us something strange and alien, he does not draw examples from "exotic" cultures, but rather invents fictitious forms of life, such as a society in which speakers use language only to give orders or in which children are brought up to express no feelings of any kind (1958a, para. 19; also 1967, paras. 383 ff.).

Although speech is an essential part of the human form of life, Wittgenstein does not regard it as the only thing that differentiates us from other animals, for he also says that "if a lion could talk we could not understand him" (ibid., part II, 223).¹⁰ Wittgenstein does not explain why this might be so, but we may suppose that human beings could not understand a talking lion because there would be no "agreement in judgments" between the lion and us, no "being in harmony" between the two species. Although Wittgenstein is content to point to the fact that human speakers just *do agree* in our judgments, we may speculate that talking lions would not regard things as we do because they do not share our form of life: they do not walk upright, grow crops, eat with utensils, wear clothes, and the like. Whether we conceive of the agreement in judgments among human beings as being grounded in, or constitutive of, our form of life, the life of a talking lion would be very different from ours, and not "being in agreement throughout," the meaning of the lion's words would be opaque to us.¹¹

Interpreted in this way, Wittgenstein's conception of "forms of life" lends no support to Rorty's critique of "human nature," but rather stands in direct opposition to it. Rorty's argument for a self-conscious ethnocentrism, which rises from the rubble left by his deconstruction of "our essential humanity," flies in the face of Wittgenstein's anthropocentrism.¹² Whereas Rorty rejects human nature in favor of cultural and historical differences, Wittgenstein speaks of "the common

behavior of mankind as the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (ibid., para. 206). Whereas Rorty insists that history and socialization "go all the way down," Wittgenstein traces the origin of many universal language-games to "primitive forms of behavior" and "natural reactions" (ibid., para. 185).¹³ And whereas Rorty dismisses the notion of "a natural 'cut' in the spectrum of similarities and differences . . . between you and a dog, or you and one of Asimov's robots" (1989, 192), Wittgenstein claims that "only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious" (1958a, para. 281).

Returning to the phrase with which we began, it is fair to say that Rorty's "solidarity" is much closer to what Wittgenstein calls "agreement in opinions" than to what he means by "agreement in form of life." On Wittgenstein's account, shared belief—solidarity—is *only possible* among beings who share an "essential humanity," to use the phrase Rorty mocks. The members of a culture can only be said to share the belief that "cruelty is wrong" insofar as they agree in *what* they regard as "cruelty" and in *how* they generally react to behavior that is "wrong." This "agreement in judgments" belongs to the human form of life just as much as such general facts about our nature as our propensity to cry out in pain when badly hurt, to move forward more easily than we move backward, to have bodies that change slowly over time. Beneath the different creeds of the world's many cultures there lie commonalities of being that make culture itself possible. And while civilizations take varied forms, it is possible to recognize within each one "the common behavior of mankind."

II. OBJECTIVITY

Rorty equates the ideal of "objectivity" with the desire to stand "in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality." "This relation," he continues, "is immediate in the sense that it does not derive from a relation between such a reality" and a person's "tribe," "nation," or "imagined band of comrades" (1991, 21). We already have a pretty good idea of why Rorty rejects this ideal: if the notion of a "language-independent determinate reality" is incoherent, then the possibility of standing in immediate relation to this reality also makes no sense. Drawing upon Donald Davidson's critique of "the dualism of scheme and content," Rorty dismisses any understanding of the relation between mind and

world that rests upon a "distinction between determinate realities and a set of words or concepts which may or may not be 'adequate' to them" (ibid., 10). Rather than construing beliefs as "quasi-pictures" of the world, which may be true or false, Rorty proposes that we regard them as "adaptations to the environment" (ibid.). On this view, there can be no contact between thought and reality such that features of the world provide reasons for a particular judgment or belief. Instead, Rorty insists that "we understand all there is to know about the relation of beliefs to the world when we understand their causal relations to the world" (ibid., 128).

The philosophical tradition Rorty urges us to cast aside consists mainly of reflections on a three-sided relationship between a thinking subject, a set of received beliefs, and the world in virtue of which beliefs are true or false. In Rorty's revised account, the first element of this relation—the rational subject—is swallowed up by a "socialization" process that goes "all the way down." And the third element—the world—is pushed beyond the reach of thought, where it becomes the cause, rather than the object, of belief. Having thus deconstructed the knower and the known, thereby eliminating the possibility of knowledge, Rorty suggests that we make a virtue of necessity, relinquishing our outmoded commitment to objectivity in favor of a self-conscious ethnocentrism that appeals to neither truth nor reason.

If we now turn to Wittgenstein's thinking about these questions, we face a dilemma: we can either try to deduce from Wittgenstein's general remarks about language the possibilities and limits of objectivity as a certain kind of relation between thought and reality, or we can "look and see" how objectivity and related concepts actually function in our life and language. Rorty pursues the first course, reasoning from (what he takes to be) the Wittgensteinian premise that the world provides no reasons for holding beliefs to (what he takes to be) the Davidsonian conclusion that reality only impinges on belief as cause to effect.¹⁴ I think the premise of this argument is both wrong in itself and wrong as an interpretation of what Wittgenstein says about language. But before we consider Wittgenstein's own words, it will be useful to have before us some examples of the role the concept of objectivity plays in our life and language.

To begin, we may note that the words *objective* and *objectivity* have roughly the same meaning in ordinary language as they have in philosophical argument. Consider a dictionary definition of "objective" (Webster's 1966, 1012):

1. Having to do with a known or perceived object as distinguished from something only existing in the mind of the subject, or person thinking; hence
2. Being, or regarded as being, independent of the mind; real; actual;
3. Determined by, and emphasizing, the features and characteristics of the object rather than the thoughts and feelings of the speaker, writer, artist, etc.;
4. Without bias or prejudice; detached; impersonal.

Each of these delineations stipulates or implies a distinction between the attributes of an object or state of affairs, on the one hand, and the thoughts, feelings, or opinions of a thinking subject, on the other. We appeal to this distinction, explicitly or implicitly, in a variety of language-games: in calling a peculiar sight an optical illusion, in correcting an error in measurement, in asking someone if she is color blind, in explaining to a child that unicorns are imaginary, in suggesting that someone move a few steps back in order to get a better perspective on a painting, in criticizing someone's judgment as "subjective," and so forth.¹⁵

Although the word *objective* does not appear in this brief enumeration of language-games and activities, the concept of objectivity is interwoven with each of them. It would make no sense to speak of an optical illusion unless we could conceive of an object as something separate from our perception of it. Similarly, it would be pointless to try to get a better view of something if we had no conception of things having attributes independent of a particular vantage point. Nor could we make a mistake in measurement or estimation, or criticize a judgment as "subjective," without the complementary notion of an object or state of affairs that is independent of the activities of measuring, estimating, and judging. The meaning of the distinction between appearance and reality, between something seeming so and something being so, is exhibited in these ways of speaking and acting.

Although Wittgenstein would not have put it this way, the concept of objectivity is a transcendental requirement, a precondition, of a great many language-games. Beliefs, for example, can only be *about* objects and states of affairs, *about* the height of a building or the fairness of a social arrangement, if these things are independent of the believer. This notion of something independent of the thinking subject is not an external demand imposed by a theory of perception,

belief, or judgment, but an internal requirement that belongs to our concepts of perception, belief, and judgment (albeit in different ways). Wittgenstein makes a similar point in calling the words "true" and "false" "constituent parts" of language-games involving propositions, and in distinguishing this constitutive role from the external demands of a logical calculus.¹⁶ The use of "true" and "false," he says, "*belongs* to our concept 'proposition' but does not fit it" (1958a, para. 136, original emphasis). Similarly, "objectivity" is part of our understanding of what it *means* to perceive, to describe, or to judge something.

I have been trying to show that the concept of objectivity is a constitutive element of many language-games and practices, some of which, like learning to describe objects or to measure things, are common to all of humankind, "part of our natural history," to invoke Wittgenstein's phrase. But, it may be objected, I have been discussing a very ordinary notion of objectivity, which is a distant cousin of the metaphysical-cum-epistemological conception Rorty criticizes. Granted, Rorty's criticism *is* directed against a philosophical ideal—the possibility of achieving a true representation of reality. Nonetheless, the everyday notion of objectivity, with its implicit distinction between the experience of an object and the object of experience, encompasses much (though not all) of what belongs to its philosophical counterpart. Moreover, Rorty's critique of this ideal, as well as the alternative conception he proposes in its place, are deeply at odds with the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language he claims to embrace.

Wittgenstein himself once held, and later rejected, a view similar to the "mirror of nature" conception Rorty attacks (see Wittgenstein 1961). According to Wittgenstein's early "picture theory of meaning," a proposition is a model, or picture, of how things stand in reality, and the proposition is true if things do stand thus-and-so. Although Wittgenstein ultimately abandoned this theory, he did so for reasons very different from those Rorty brings to bear against "objectivity." For Wittgenstein, the fatal flaw in the picture theory was that it failed to show *how* the picture presented in a proposition is linked to the state of affairs it purports to represent.¹⁷ In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein retraces his earlier steps, repeating his original claim that thought and world "stand in line one behind the other, each equivalent to each," but he now complains that "the language-game in which they are to be applied is missing" (1958a, para. 96). The comparison of a proposition to a state of affairs in the world re-

quires a language-game or practice to guide the comparison, in much the same way as the "translation" of a written score of music into a musical performance requires a practice or tradition.

Wittgenstein's demonstration that words can only refer to things if they already have a regular use within a language eliminates the possibility of *constructing* any kind of conceptual scheme *on the basis of* something that is given independently of language.¹⁸ Like Rorty, Wittgenstein rejects "the given" as something to which our words can, or must, correspond. But whereas Wittgenstein is content to bring the concepts of "belief" and "reality" back to their uses in our life, Rorty proposes to draw a boundary line around belief such that "reality" lies beyond the line, and the only "border crossings" permitted are one-way incursions in which parts of "reality" cause language users to hold certain beliefs. Inside the perimeter Rorty has drawn around belief, there is no order or network in the form of internal relations among the concepts that comprise a vocabulary—nothing that could justify, for example, the claim that the words *true* and *false* are "interwoven" with the concept of a proposition. In Rorty's post-metaphysical world, belief is unfettered by any rational connection to reality, or by any grammatical requirements from within language itself. Constrained by nothing, belief is no longer *about* anything (cf. Farrell 1996).

Rorty presents us with a choice between two unappealing alternatives: an incoherent appeal to "the given" as a justification of belief, and a deconstructed conception of "belief" that makes no rational contact with the world. There is, however, a third alternative, which we can elicit from some of Wittgenstein's general remarks about language, thought, and reality. To begin with, consider a passage we have already cited: "It is what people *say* that is true and false, and they agree in the language that they use." Here Wittgenstein draws a distinction Rorty fails to register, that is, the distinction between what belongs to language and what belongs to belief.¹⁹ The speakers of a language are able to form and express beliefs, which may be true or false, because they agree in their use of words, in what they call "obedience" or regard as "cruelty." But this does not mean that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words and things, or even a more general agreement between language, on the one hand, and the world, on the other. A language is not a mirror of the world, nor a theory about reality, nor even a description of reality that can be compared with what is described.²⁰ It is, rather, "our *method* of repre-

sensation"—the *way* we look at things (1958a, para. 50, emphasis added).

Language creates the conceptual space within which reality is beheld. Wittgenstein gives expression to this idea by saying, "Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is." To illustrate, he adds, "Theology as grammar" (*ibid.*, para. 373). If you are looking for God, scientific instruments will be of no use because God is not *that kind of* object. If you want to know whether someone has been negligent, your inquiry might focus on such things as what the person knew, or should have known, at the time she acted. Answers to these questions, in turn, will not be found by consulting a scientist about brain states, but by reconstructing a sequence of events (e.g., meetings, an exchange of letters, phone calls, etc.) and ascertaining what a person would have, or should have, known as a result of these exchanges. The grammar of an expression like "would have known" gives the criteria for its use, that is, the sort of circumstances in which one has reason to say, "this person would have known such-and-such."

Wittgenstein's notion of grammar has been compared to a method of measurement, such as the use of a yardstick to determine the length of things (see Hacker 1972, 163–65). The yardstick, or standard of measure, is independent of, and logically antecedent to, the thing that is being measured. Similarly, grammar is not "based on" the structure of reality (on what is being measured in this analogy); it is autonomous. Grammar cannot come into conflict with reality because the structure of reality is a projection of our grammar.²¹ Thus, Wittgenstein writes, "as long as one remains in the domain of the True-False-Game a change in grammar can only take us from one such game to another, but never from something true to something false" (quoted in *ibid.*, 164–65). If we measure the weight of an object instead of its length, we will get different results—measurements in pounds rather than inches. But this is not, of course, a movement from something true to something false; it is a shift from the grammar of length to the grammar of weight, from one aspect of reality to another.²²

This understanding of language can be pushed in the direction of cultural relativism, particularly if one thinks of cultures as unique and largely incommensurable constellations of vocabularies, grammars, and language-games, each with its own mutually exclusive projection of "reality."²³ The trouble with this line of reasoning is that it assumes what it seeks to prove, namely that the vocabularies, grammars, lan-

guage-games of different cultures *are* unique and incommensurable.²⁴ To assume such incommensurable diversity is to miss Wittgenstein's point that while language is not founded in a common reality that is antecedent to language, it *is* deeply rooted in the fact that human beings "act in such-and-such ways, e.g., *punish* certain actions, *establish* the state of affairs thus-and-so, *give orders*, render accounts, describe colors, take an interest in others' feelings" (quoted in *ibid.*, 219, original emphasis).

No doubt there are great differences between Azande witchcraft and modern science, between the grammar of magic and the grammar of physics. But alongside such differences, do not forget the common activities of human life—exchanging gifts, telling stories, forecasting the future, blaming someone. And do not overlook what is common to our nature—that we become ill, that our faces are expressive, that we must act in order to carry out plans, that we can remember some of our past but not every bit of it. In addition to the varied customs of the world's cultures, there are common activities so integral a part of human life that they usually go unmentioned. And coupled with this common form of life, there is, as a philosopher sympathetic to Wittgenstein once wrote, "a massive core of human thinking that has no history . . . categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all" (Strawson 1959, xiv).²⁵

This common core of human thought must include the concept of "objectivity" if by this we mean the acknowledgment of something independent of subjective experience. One chain of reasoning that leads to this conclusion can be briefly summarized as follows: thought presupposes language, which presupposes a distinction between the correct and incorrect use of words; the correct use of words, in turn, does not mean use that *seems* correct to the speaker, but use that is correct according to criteria that are independent of the speaker, i.e., objective criteria.²⁶ To deny that the distinction between things seeming thus-and-so and things being thus-and-so belongs to "the central core of human thinking" is to deny that there are any conditions that must be satisfied if the production of "acoustic phenomena" is to qualify as speaking a language.²⁷ If, on the other hand, the notion of objectivity is admitted to the core of necessary concepts, then many other closely related concepts must be admitted as well. These include the notion of "following a rule," the concepts of "same

and "different," the idea of "justification," and the internally related notion of "appealing to something independent" (Wittgenstein 1958a, para. 265).

Wittgenstein elaborates the notion of criteria primarily in connection with words used to describe mental states and dispositions. One of the important themes of these investigations is the directness or immediacy of our perception of reality, of the nexus between our thoughts and the world. For example, Wittgenstein describes the relationship between an expectation and its fulfillment in the following way: "I want to say: 'If someone could see the mental process of expectation, he would necessarily be seeing *what* was expected' . . . he would not have to *infer* it from the process he perceived" (ibid., para. 452-53; also 1967, para. 56). Of course we sometimes do infer from our experience a further fact. Seeing dark clouds, we conclude it is going to rain. Oftentimes, however, we apprehend something directly, without induction. We catch a glimpse of someone and recognize an old friend, without inferring this from the person's appearance.

Wittgenstein's account of the internal relation between a word or expression and the criteria for its use rearranges the conceptual topography Rorty has urged upon us. "When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this-is-so*" (ibid., para. 95, original emphasis).²⁸ Wittgenstein's claim is not that a true proposition corresponds to a reality that is given independently of language, but that there is no conceptual gap between the sort of thing that can be thought (or said) and the sort of thing that can be the case in the world.²⁹ That things are thus-and-so is both the content of experience *and* (if we are not mistaken) an aspect of the world. Thought can, of course, go awry, as when we articulate a belief that is false. But there is no necessary gap between thought as such and things being thus-and-so in reality.

What follows from the difference between Rorty's claim that there is no external vantage point from which to verify the correspondence between a belief and a "language-independent determinate reality" and Wittgenstein's view that thought and reality meet in language? Just this: in Rorty's conception, the world is absorbed into a kind of communal solipsism that allows only a causal nexus between thought and reality, whereas in Wittgenstein's account, what can be thought (or said) lies within the same conceptual space that encompasses what can be the case, so that the content of an experience can become a

reason for holding a particular belief. To illustrate the difference: on Rorty's account, the sound of a person screaming can cause the hearer to believe someone nearby is in trouble; whereas on Wittgenstein's view, the sound of someone screaming is a reason for thinking someone is in trouble. This experience—hearing the scream of someone in trouble—is possible because, in learning a language, we are educated in a technique *and* in a way of seeing. In other words, we are brought up in such a way that the world comes into view just insofar as we learn the criteria for recognizing such things as “a person nearby being in trouble.”

I began this section by characterizing the concept of objectivity as a way of marking the distinction between the experience of an object and the object of experience. I now want to conclude the section by taking note of the fact that this distinction is drawn *within* the boundaries of what it makes sense to say. “The scream of someone in trouble” is independent of the hearer's thinking, but it is not external to what can be thought (or said). And it is because the world impinges on our experience in this way, from within the boundaries of the thinkable, that reality can be both independent of our experience and rationally related to it. Rorty is right to say that “Wittgenstein naturalizes language,” but wrong to equate Wittgenstein's naturalism with a causal account of belief. Giving reasons for holding a belief takes us outside the realm of nature if by “nature” we mean the domain of law-like generalizations. But it does not take us into the supernatural. Rather, we are taught the criteria for recognizing states of affairs in the world, criteria for what counts as a reason to believe that things are thus-and-so. Having been educated in *this* “way of seeing,” we come to dwell in the space of reasons, and this form of life becomes “second nature” to us.

III. THIS COMPLICATED FORM OF LIFE

Rorty divides schools of philosophy into two types: those that give primacy to the relation among members of a particular community (solidarity) and those that give primacy to the relation between thought and reality (objectivity). Philosophers preoccupied with the latter relation have often been in search of an independent measure, or vantage point, from which local custom and opinion could be judged.³⁰ Rorty thinks this quest is no longer open to us and that it is time to acknowledge history and culture, in lieu of reason and na-

ture, as the only "foundations" possible for our beliefs. Many of us resist this substitution of solidarity for objectivity, according to Rorty, because to accept "intersubjective agreement" in place of knowledge, the particular in place of the universal, would also require us to acknowledge the contingency of even our deepest convictions.

My response to Rorty's argument has been twofold. First, I have tried to show that solidarity, which affirms the shared beliefs of "a particular collection of human beings," *itself* presupposes a deeper agreement in the way human beings naturally react to things. Without what Wittgenstein calls "the common behavior of mankind," there could be no "agreement in judgments," no "going on in the same way," and, hence, no "agreement in opinions." We are able to form beliefs, to communicate them to others, and to determine whether we share the same belief only insofar as we agree in what we regard as "a belief," as "a belief about such and such," and as "an agreement in belief." To the extent that this "agreement in judgments" flows from a deeper "agreement in form of life," then, Rorty's claim to the contrary notwithstanding, there *is* something "'beneath' socialization [and] prior to history which is definatory of the human" (1989, viii).

The second part of my brief against Rorty's postmodern manifesto is that the human form of life—the life of those who speak a language—both presupposes and exhibits the distinction between things seeming thus-and-so and things being thus-and-so. This claim, like the one just summarized, rests in part on a transcendental argument, that is, an argument that begins with something we take for granted and then shows what is indispensable to this undoubted object or experience. In particular, I have tried to show that both language itself and such language-games as correcting an error in measurement, or criticizing a judgment as "subjective," presuppose the concept of objectivity. The speakers of a language must be able to draw a distinction between what seems to be the case and what is the case, between the use of a word according to a rule and the mere appearance of such use, if they are going to qualify as *speakers of a language*.

These two claims—that the shared beliefs of a particular community depend on a deeper agreement in form of life, and that the concept of objectivity is necessary to language—define the intelligible limits of "difference." Insofar as arguments against objectivity must be articulated in a language, they are self-refuting, for the notion of objectivity is not only necessary to language itself, it is also interwoven

with the linguistic practices in which "making an argument" gets its sense: practices such as giving reasons, appealing to criteria, justifying conclusions. Those who dismiss the idea of human nature in favor of a thoroughgoing historicism must be able to show either that "agreement in judgments" is not essential to language or that such agreement is possible without "agreement in form of life." Rorty (1989, 15) is able to avoid these conclusions, but only because he is willing to regard the people of other cultures, not as human beings who speak a language, but as "certain kinds of organisms" in relation to which we find it advantageous to "pair off," or correlate, the "marks and noises" they make with "those we make."

Although I have stressed the transcendental aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy, the conception of human beings that emerges from this reading should not be confused with the Enlightenment subject who, stripped naked of custom and prejudice, is able to comprehend necessary truths in the floodlight of pure reason. There is something contingent at the core of human experience—but it lies deeper than history and culture. Our concepts and their grammar, and, hence, "the possibilities of phenomena," bear the marks of our *life*. Hearing someone scream can belong to the criteria for believing a person nearby is in trouble because the range of human hearing extends just so far, because we have a capacity for fear, for sympathy, for surprise. If the human voice were not expressive, if we had telepathic powers, if we could fly like birds, or if we were invulnerable to harm, then our concepts would be different, and there might not be such things as "a person nearby in trouble."

NOTES

1. Many of the themes Rorty develops in this essay also figure prominently in his other works. See especially Rorty 1979, 1982, and 1989.
2. Rorty's reference to "our" cultural inheritance is consistent with his self-conscious ethnocentrism.
3. This acknowledgment of our ethnocentric limits comes easily for Rorty not only because he has deconstructed the (metaphysical) subject and object of knowledge—the knower and the known—but also because, as a self-proclaimed pragmatist, Rorty is not interested in whether our beliefs are true "absolutely," but only in whether holding certain beliefs produces good consequences for us. See Rorty 1982 and 1991, 126–50.
4. This understanding of philosophy's burden is criticized in Rorty 1979.

5. See especially Wittgenstein 1958a, 1958b, 1967, and 1980.
6. See Rorty 1991, 126–50; Rorty 1982, 160–75; and Rorty 1979, ch. 6.
7. Wittgenstein says, “It is of the greatest importance that hardly ever does a quarrel arise between human beings, over whether the colour of this object is the same as the colour of that one, the length of this stick the same as the length of that one, etc.” Quoted in Malcolm 1995, 149.
8. Cf. Putnam 1995, 32–38.
9. It may be noted that Wittgenstein was aware that his stress on “agreement in judgments” would be subject to misinterpretation, for he goes on to say that this “seems to abolish logic but does not do so” (1958a, para. 242). We misunderstand Wittgenstein if, like Rorty, we take “intersubjective agreement” as the criterion of “following a rule correctly.” This view conflates the normative concept of following a rule with the empirical question of how many people, or what proportion of the community, act in such-and-such a way. The behavior that accords with a rule, such as writing 2, 4, 6, 8 when asked to write a series of even numbers, is *internally* related to the rule itself, and does not *logically* depend on how others respond. That virtually everyone regards 2, 4, 6, 8 as a series of even numbers shows that we are playing the same game, but it is the series, 2, 4, 6, 8, which is in accord with *this* rule and *not* the fact that virtually everyone agrees that this is a series of even numbers. See Baker and Hacker 1984.
10. See also 1967, para. 102 ff., where Wittgenstein allows for the possibility of our being able to understand creatures who do not talk, but resemble human beings in other ways.
11. Further considerations in favor of this understanding of “form of life,” which stresses the notion of a distinctively *human* form of life and which emphasizes Wittgenstein’s concern with a form of *life* in which the natural and social are fused, can be found in Cavell 1979 and 1989, 40–74; Pears 1969, ch. 9; Malcolm 1986; and Garver 1994.
12. Although Rorty finds much of Wittgenstein’s philosophy congenial to his own conception of ethnocentric solidarity, Rorty recognizes that Wittgenstein’s anthropocentrism poses a threat to this conception (see Rorty 1982). In responding to this challenge, Rorty is led to dismiss other aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, such as his notion of internal relations. Defending Wittgenstein against Rorty’s critique is beyond the scope of this paper, except to note that the main objection Rorty brings to bear against those aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy he rejects is the question-begging complaint that they extend the life of controversies that have preoccupied Western philosophy since Descartes, but which Rorty no longer finds compelling.
13. See also Wittgenstein 1967, paras. 222–25, 350–55, 390, and 594; Wittgenstein 1980, 31; and Wittgenstein 1958b, 103.
14. See Davidson’s own reaction to Rorty’s reading in 1990, 120–38.
15. See Wittgenstein’s discussion of the difference between seeing and imagining in 1967, para. 627 ff.

16. Here Wittgenstein rejects his own earlier view, set forth in 1961.
17. This is an overstatement. For a detailed account of the reasoning that led Wittgenstein from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*, see Hacker 1972, 86–111.
18. This is one of the implications of Wittgenstein's famous "private language argument."
19. Rorty does not register this distinction, perhaps because he subscribes to Quine's view that there are no such things as analytical truths. See 1991, 126–61.
20. If it were such a description, a metalanguage would be necessary to guide the comparison between the descriptive language and the reality it describes, which leaves us where we started.
21. One consequence of this view is that a scientific description of the world has no logical priority over any other kind of description, a point on which Wittgenstein and Rorty agree.
22. Wittgenstein's account of grammar has important affinities with Putnam's "internal realism." See Putnam 1990 and 1994.
23. It should be noted that Rorty resists being called a cultural relativist (1991, 24 ff.). The charge is levelled in Putnam 1995, 74–75.
24. Complete incommensurability would make translation impossible. See Putnam 1981, 114–17.
25. Putnam makes a similar point, arguing that "we share a huge fund of assumptions and beliefs about what is reasonable with even the most bizarre culture we can succeed in interpreting at all" (1981, 119).
26. I cannot here defend the claim that thought presupposes language, except to say that Wittgenstein's private language argument raises serious doubts about the possibility of thinking without language.
27. The phrase *acoustic phenomena*, is Jerry Fodor's, quoted in Hunter 1973, 148.
28. It may be noted that, in writing these words, Wittgenstein seems to be feigning the awe he once felt in contemplating "'this queer thing, thought'" (1958a, para. 428). But his aim is not to dismiss the possibility of catching reality "in our net," but to restore this notion to "the form of a truism" (*ibid.*, para. 95).
29. Wittgenstein says, "the object of our thought is not a shadow of the fact" (1958b, 32). I am here drawing upon McDowell 1994.
30. For a recent defense of this quest, see Nagel 1997.

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