A Theology more Useful: Public Theology as Edification.

Abstract.

The article argues that Richard Rorty’s idea of edification should be adopted as the central approach of public theology. It begins by outlining Rorty’s definition of edification before exploring the argument in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* which led to this definition. Various critical responses are then explored, especially the critique by Roy Bhaskar that Rorty’s approach is politically frivolous. However it is suggested that the criticism that Rorty is either relativist or unconcerned with ethical agency is unfair. Instead, rather than being concerned with different types of speaking Truth to power, public theologians should be focused on producing novel, unique and eye-catching redescriptions of social and political phenomena.

Key Words.

Edification; pragmatism; Richard Rorty; relativism; agency; Truth, Rowan Williams; Roy Bhaskar, critical realism.

In his classic book ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’ the American pragmatist Richard Rorty developed the idea ‘edification’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rorty proposes edification as a new approach for philosophy, one that will replace epistemology. In this article I want to argue that the revolution Rorty had in mind for philosophy should also be a priority for public theology, that it should adopt Rorty’s edifying approach. The first part of the article will spell out what Rorty meant by edification, based on the ideas in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. [[2]](#footnote-2) The reasons why Rorty proposed edification rather than epistemology will then be presented, in particular his analysis of the importance of language games in philosophy, and the capacity of these games to change historically thereby altering the nature of the discipline. Rorty is putting forward a type of post-liberal liberalism and this seems to me to be a good alternative to the anti-liberal post-liberalism of both the radical orthodox and many virtue ethicists. There has been an enormous amount of discussion of Rorty’s work and it would be impossible to examine in appropriate detail all the major critiques of his ideas, and Rorty’s frequent responses, nor is there really a need as others have done this. So my intention is to focus on the question most pertinent to public theologians, namely was Rorty in some way politically frivolous and elitist. This is a critique offered by Roy Bhaskar, and picked up by Rowan Williams. It encompasses the issues of relativism and personal agency which are common criticisms of Rorty without merely requiring me to repeat what many others have said beforehand. It also allows us to explore the relationship between theology and the social sciences. In some ways the value, or otherwise, of public theology as edification will depend on the texts those who choose its approach produce, however before that can occur there does need to be a type of methodological proposition, a sort of prolegomena, if for no other reason than to explain why public theology should adopt a new, different, pragmatic form.

*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was written in order to rescue philosophy from its self-created exile, and, arguably, to turn the science worshiping philosopher into the literary critic; ‘Poets and novelists had (in the twentieth century) taken the place of both preachers and philosophers as the moral teachers of the youth. The result was the more “scientific” and “rigorous” philosophy became, the less it had to do with the rest of culture and the more absurd its traditional pretensions seemed’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Rorty’s solution to this cultural irrelevance is to redirect the interests of philosophers away from what he discerns as its Cartesian and Kantian captivity; ‘The aim of the book is to undermine the reader’s confidence in “the mind” as something about which one should have a “philosophical” view, in “knowledge” as something about which there ought to be a “theory” and which has “foundations”, and in “philosophy” as it has been conceived since Kant’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The first two parts of the book take us through Rorty’s discussion of why epistemology should no longer be the central topic for philosophers. The final part suggests an alternative, ‘edification’, which I argue should be the central approach adopted by public theologians.

Rorty explains what he means by ‘edification’ in the final chapter of the book. It is best to let Rorty speak for himself as much as possible here. The explanation of the idea of edification begins in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Truth and Method*, and what Rorty describes as his attempt to shift the purpose of philosophy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Gadamer, according to Rorty, did not solve traditional philosophical problems generated by a concern with epistemology, rather, he has stopped talking about them. To do this Gadamer ‘sets aside’ the ‘classic picture of human beings’; namely, that the essence of the human is ‘to discover essences’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Gadamer’s ‘book is a redescription of man (sic) which tries to place the classic picture within a larger one, and thus to “distance” the standard philosophical problematic rather than offer a set of solutions to it’.[[7]](#footnote-7) The important point at this stage is not whether people can be redescribed, or whether this falls into some sort of anthropological essentialist trap, neither of which Rorty discusses, but that questions of knowledge and Truth are to be set aside. It is perhaps an annoying device, but the response to the question of whether Gadamer’s analysis is True is to reply that it doesn’t really matter. This point then clears the ground for the substance of what is meant by edification. It is, in part, what Gadamer meant by *‘Bildung*’. Rorty argues that Gadamer’s contribution is to substitute ‘the notion of *Bildung* (education, self-formation) for that of “knowledge” as the goal of thinking.’ He continues, ‘To say that we become different people, that we “remake” ourselves as we read more, talk more, and write more, is simply a dramatic way of saying that the sentences which become true of us by virtue of such activities are often more important to us than the sentences which become true of us when we drink more, earn more, and so on.’[[8]](#footnote-8) This is Rorty’s flippant way of saying that personal self-creation is more important to the *Bildung* philosopher than a sort of pseudo scientific search for Truth. In the rest of the paragraph he interprets Gadamer as arguing that ‘getting the facts right (about atoms and the void, or about the history of Europe) is merely propaedeutic to finding a new and more interesting way of expressing ourselves, and thus coping with the world’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Following up the point he writes, ‘From the educational, as opposed to the epistemological or technological, point of view, the ways things are said is more important than the possession of truths’. All of which prepares us for the definition of edification which Rorty offers.

Since “education” sounds a bit too flat, and *Bildung* a bit too foreign, I shall use “edification’ to stand for this project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking.

The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the “poetic” activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions. In either case, the activity is (despite the etymological relation between the two words) edifying without being constructive – at least if “constructive” means the sort of cooperation in the accomplishment of research programs which take place in normal discourse. For edifying discourse is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As is apparent from the rest of his works ‘edification’ as a term didn’t really catch on and in the end Rorty usually described his philosophical project as the more familiar ‘pragmatist’ and its practitioners as ‘ironists’.[[11]](#footnote-11) But the sentiments in the above quotation were foundational to his work, albeit of course over time they were tweaked and refined. In particular the edifying philosophical task has two priorities. The first is to redescribe; that is to speak or write anew of the familiar, to be ‘abnormal’ in the Kuhnian sense.[[12]](#footnote-12) Redescription is to find ways of speaking that are different, unique, novel, and then also useful (more practically valuable in Rorty’s terms). Part of Rorty’s definition of edification is suggestions for how we generate the novel and ‘abnormal’; namely the investigations of alternate cultures or disciplines. Edification could be viewed as entirely self-indulgent, novelty for novelty’s sake, or merely a mechanism to produce things to shock, but Rorty himself doesn’t mean this and neither does he do this in his work, although his commitment to freedom means he persistently allows for it.[[13]](#footnote-13) To be edifying, as either a philosopher or theologian, can take the form of a sort of ‘speaking out’, a proclamation or a preaching, a key book or a political speech, which challenges and changes the norm. Such rhetorical events are rarely created *ex nihilo*, but they can be both the markers and catalysts of change, moments of advocacy which shape future debates. Sometimes an edifying public theology will be like this. More often edifying philosophy, and public theology, will take the form of new comment, or analysis, of a social, political or cultural phenomenon. This can have two forms. It may be the edifying philosopher says here is a social, political or cultural phenomenon which I can now describe in a way that previously has not been considered. Rorty does something like this in his book *Achieving our Country* when he (re)describes the political crisis in the USA as a separation of the working class and intellectual, university based, Left; the equivalent in the UK of the separation of the trade unions and the Fabian society.[[14]](#footnote-14) Or, and this is its likely most common and significant academic form, it can be the critical analysis of the work of others demonstrating how they have spoken in novel, unique, and fruitful ways about a cultural, political or social phenomenon. It is the philosopher, or theologian, as literary critic, if we think of the texts they critique in the very broadest sense. This final type of edification is Rorty’s favourite. He creates the new through appreciating critically the original and redescriptive activities of his favourite authors, especially novelists. Orwell stands out.[[15]](#footnote-15) In Rorty’s words Orwell’s achievement was to sensitize his readers ‘to a set of excuses for cruelty which had been put into circulation by a particular group – the use of the rhetoric of “human equality” by intellectuals who had allied themselves with a spectacularly successful criminal gang’.[[16]](#footnote-16) It was *Animal Farm* and then *1984* which did the ‘job of sensitizing us to these excuses, of redescribing the post-World War II political situation by redescribing the Soviet Union’, shocking intellectuals out of their self-made complexity, so that the totalitarian could be seen anew. ‘Orwell’s tricky way, in *Animal Farm*, was to throw the incredibly complex and sophisticated character of leftist political discussion into high and absurd relief by retelling the political history of this century in terms suitable for children’.[[17]](#footnote-17) The power of Orwell’s work was its provision of an ‘alternative description’, earning from Rorty the highest praise, namely that it worked; it changed Western liberal intellectual opinion about Stalinist Russia.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is not of course to argue that the edifying public theologian needs to become a novelist, poet, or even satirist, although it might be good if more of them did, but rather to say that a criteria for the construction of a public theology, by those who will do such a thing, is to seek to redescribe, to make the familiar abnormal, to create from our common place so that we look at something afresh. But it is not only novelists that Rorty appreciates for their edifying work, he also likes some philosophers and psychotherapists; ‘When such edifying philosophers as Marx, Freud, and Satre offer new explanations of our usual patterns of justifying our actions and assertions, and when these explanations are taken up and integrated into our lives, we have striking examples of the phenomenon of reflection’s changing vocabulary and behavior’.[[19]](#footnote-19) For the public theologian, much like Rorty, thinking, writing and speaking should usually have a political purpose. They will see the woman working at home, cleaning, cooking, and raising children and state (redescribe) that this is not the given (perhaps divinely sanctioned) natural order but a potential manifestation of patriarchy; and if more people take note because it is the story of a woman we like, who is strong and resilient, possibly found in Scripture, then all the better. Likewise men lined up in factories working 12 hours a day for 6 days a week attain new political status when they are redescribed as (revolutionary) proletariat; or the strange, sickly poor become friends for whom we care when they adopt the personalities, and experience the hardships, created for them by Dickens. This is not to say that redescription on its own will bring about political change, the process is of course far more complex than that. But redescription is a fundamental aspect of political change, without it there can be no change because the currently existing social or political norm remains the only possible portrayal. Further the rhetoric of redescription is not only foundational; it plays a part in the processes of political change through its capacity to affect the nature of the abnormal as it becomes the new normal. The public theologian will, at their best, create these social, cultural and political redescriptions; theology will have the redescriptive capacity of Freudian psychology or Marxist political economy. However these intellectual moments are exceptionally rare. More likely, and this seems the most practical aim, they will be commentators, highlighting the work others have done to make the established alien and disturbing.[[20]](#footnote-20) For example, one significant type of public theology is a sort of investigative theology, taking what is known about a particular issue and re-presenting it within a theological envelope so that people who might otherwise not have considered it much (church members), or have previously thought about it according to a normal social set of values, reconsider its significance. Such public theologies may contain novel insights, but substantially the redescriptive activity is bringing an issue to a new audience. The Church of England’s *Faith in the City* report is a classic illustration of this genre; but there are many others ranging from Duncan Forrester’s *Christianity and the Future of Welfare*, to contemporary examples such as Gordon Lynch’s work on UK child migration, Susanna Synder on asylum seeking and migration, Anna Rowland’s study of detention centres, Stephen Pattison on the phenomenon of shame, or Eric Stoddart describing the surveillance society.[[21]](#footnote-21) Just as Rorty appreciates the value of investigative journalism so there is enormous value in making the case that Christians should be concerned about certain social or political issues because of their faith. Such public theology is motivational. For example, the plight of poor people in urban areas in the UK was relatively unknown to a majority of Church of England members in the mid-1980s and so by presenting this as a theological problem something new was done. Likewise Anna Rowlands reveals and highlights the suffering experienced by migrants who are detained in the UK, and then seeks to ‘listen to the conceptual and metaphysical insights that emerge *from within* the discourse of those who are detained, and to find the discoursive connections that might be made from within a specifically Augustinian Christian tradition’.[[22]](#footnote-22) This is valuable, but it is but a mild manifestation of the rhetorical impact of what Rorty is proposing as edifying philosophy, and which we are seeking to adopt for public theology.

In these examples an edifying public theology can be both redescriptive and limited, mundane and repetitive. The problem centres on the redescriptive capacity of theology, and thereby the role of the social sciences as providing redescriptions which public theologians merely adopt. The pertinent question is how is the redescription of any particular social or political situation undertaken. If the mechanism of redescription is a social science, and social scientific analysis is then in someway interacted with by theology, then the primary novelty in the rhetoric is generated by the social science. Theological thinking is not so much an analytical tool as more an intellectual umpire deciding which social scientific analysis is to be treated as the most important; or, in Rorty’s terms, which redescription achieves requisite novelty and utility. This is the point William Temple makes with his analogy of the bridge builder; ‘If a bridge is to be built, the Church may remind the engineer that it is his obligation to provide a really safe bridge; but it is not entitled to tell him whether, in fact, his design meets this requirement’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Even if we set aside the question of whether this sort of advice ever needs to be offered to civil engineers the point is, in Rorty’s terms, that really the important redescriptive work is done by the expert in the context, and the problem for theologians is that, except for bringing ideas to the attention of a new audience, they seem to do nothing novel. It is a version of the point that Pattison makes in his polemic, namely that theology offers nothing of value to other disciplines, a point especially the case for public theology because it employs the social sciences to undertake its analysis.[[24]](#footnote-24) For public theology therefore a central aspect of being an edifying theology, one which redescribes political and social phenomena, is its ability to offer a new analysis of a particular phenomenon. It is to address the question of how theology can act as an analytical tool, given we are identifying one aspect of Rorty’s notion of redescription, with the stress of novelty, with social scientific analysis. In terms of Rorty’s definition of edification noted above, a discipline, in this case theology, is brought into conversation with a phenomenon (in some way public) which is not its usual terrain, that is, it is not a doctrinal question, to see if something abnormal is created, which is then of value. And the proof is in the pudding, has it in some way ‘worked’? What should be clear, but which will be reiterated to avoid any confusion, is that edification is not about Truth, and so a public theology based on the idea of edification is not about in any way ‘speaking Truth’ to anyone, in power or not; ‘They (edifying philosophers) refuse to present themselves as having found out any objective truth (about, say, what philosophy is).’[[25]](#footnote-25) In terms of Pattison’s critique, theologians do not discover the Truth and then hope that it is engaging and relevant to other intellectuals, rather they have as their task the creation of that which is novel, unique and useful, and so appreciated, even if ultimately revised, by their scholarly peers. The question arises of whether ‘the Truth’ might be more useful than something that is novel, even if it is also of practical social or political value. Rorty’s answer is that it is not possible to discern ‘the Truth’, for reasons we shall explore in a moment, however before that we need to discuss, briefly, the second priority for the edifying philosopher.

Rorty finishes *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, it is his final sentence, by stressing the ethical point that the philosophical conversation should not stop: ‘The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers’ moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation’, meaning epistemology.[[26]](#footnote-26) This reiterates his earlier point about edifying philosophy; ‘the point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective Truth. Such Truth, in the view I am advocating, is the normal result of normal discourse. Edifying philosophy is not only abnormal but reactive, having sense only as a protest against attempts to close off conversation by proposals for universal commensuration through hypostatization of some privileged set of descriptions.’[[27]](#footnote-27) This is the heart of Rorty’s liberalism. Whilst he is most famous for his adoption of Judith Shklar’s definition of liberals as ‘the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do’, this is a definition dependent on his subsequent definition of ‘cruelty’. Stating the matter briefly here, Rorty identifies cruelty as the loss of the ability to be a free, self-creating individual.[[28]](#footnote-28) The stress is on the freedom to self-create, and it is this stress on freedom which is the fundamental aspect of Rorty’s liberalism contained in the moral priority of keeping conversations going. Ongoing talking is a skill requiring wisdom; ‘To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately’.[[29]](#footnote-29) For the public theologian the pertinent point is, as Rorty has noted elsewhere, that theology cannot think of itself as a conversation that has stopped; it has not attained a Truth which might then be somehow stated or proclaimed.[[30]](#footnote-30) Traditionally of course the theologian has thought that their hope was to end the discussion; theology aims to speak the Truth about God and salvation, it aims to be final, to end, to stop. But whilst this is the aim, the practicality has been different, to the point whereby theologians do not expect to stop conversing anytime soon. Mercifully, good theology is not literal repetition. The attempt to end and reach resolution is seemingly, certainly historically, forever just out of reach, despite the many claims to have found the end of the rainbow. And even the point that whilst it is not finished it might well have reached some important marker points which are unchanging is subject to doubt. Dennis Nineham showed how even seemingly straight-forward, permanent assertions like ‘Jesus is Lord’ are subject to such diverse interpretations that it takes a special pleading to claim the conversation about Jesus’ Lordship is anywhere near completion; that the Truth has been reached.[[31]](#footnote-31) What is different about what is proposed here is not that theology continues to be disputed, debated and in flux, while seeking to end, but rather the idea that public theology seeks to keep the conversation going as its deliberate intention, its ethical purpose. The theologian should not be the failed conversation-stopper but instead, following Rorty, the good public theologian adopts as her moral project the determination to practice continuous conversation – crucially not repetition but conversation. In other words good public theology calls forth the need for more, novel, theology, in the best traditions of eschatology, *ad infinitum*. The edifying public theologian is not aiming to speak the Truth.

All of which brings us to the main question raised by *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, namely why does Rorty give up on the idea that philosophers can find the Truth; why is epistemology no longer the main task of philosophy? In part, as we have already seen, Rorty’s engagement with the problem is motivated by questions of relevance, the best young minds are turning to literature for moral guidance. It was also a form of therapy for Rorty, as he explains in the preface.[[32]](#footnote-32) But the main task of the book is to ask what would philosophy look like if, following ‘Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey’ analytic philosophy was subject to an ‘anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian’ critique.[[33]](#footnote-33) Why should it be subject to such a critique? It is because ‘the notion of knowledge as accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned’.[[34]](#footnote-34) This is not because all the problems of a philosophy of the mind or of theories of representation have been solved but because they can safely be set aside as belonging to a specific period of the history of philosophy when certain questions were important, but are not anymore. In other words philosophy is not the repeated attempt to find better answers to perennial questions, rather it is a historical discipline; that is, particular ways of thinking belong to particular times in human history. The first chapter of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* seeks to demonstrate this historicity; Descartes introduced a new way of thinking about how we know things which was significantly different from the ways in which classical and medieval thinkers had addressed the same problem. Descartes did this by inventing the notion of the mental, the mind, which had its own activities. Rorty argues that, ‘Whereas previous philosophers had more or less followed Plato in thinking that only the eternal was known with certainty, Descartes was substituting “clear and distinct perception” – that is, the sort of unconfused knowledge gained by going through a process of analysis – for “indubitability” as a mark of eternal truths. *This left indubitability free to serve as a criterion of the mental*’.[[35]](#footnote-35) What Rorty is arguing is that Descartes opened the door to empiricism, a door Locke barged open and second generation Cartesians charged through.

Once such second-generation Cartesians, who viewed Descartes himself as having one foot still implanted in the scholastic mud, had purified and “normalized” Cartesian doctrine, we got the full-fledged version of the “‘idea’ idea,” the one which made it possible for Berkeley to think of extended substance as a hypothesis of which we had no need. This thought could never have occurred to a pre-Cartesian bishop, struggling with the flesh rather than with intellectual confusion. With this full-fledged “‘idea’ idea” there came the possibility of philosophy as a discipline which centered around, of all things, epistemology, rather than around God and morality.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In other words, in the history Rorty is writing, philosophy changed subject matter and methodology. ‘The Cartesian change from mind-as-reason to mind-as-inner-arena was not the triumph of the prideful individual subject freed from scholastic shackles so much as the quest for certainty over the quest for reason’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Science became the dominant intellectual paradigm, the philosopher being someone who sought to attain either ‘the rigor of the mathematician or the mathematical physicist, or to explain the appearance of rigor in these fields’.[[38]](#footnote-38) It was not the role of the philosopher, anymore, ‘to help people attain peace of mind’. This was because ‘Science, rather than living, became philosophy’s subject, and epistemology its center’.[[39]](#footnote-39) In Michael Williams words Rorty ‘makes the startling claim that epistemology is a *modern* subject’.[[40]](#footnote-40) Rorty’s most important point is to argue that the current questions and issues of philosophy are the product of one historical period, they do not transcend history as some sort of ontologically eternal problematic. As such they can be cast aside if philosophers decide that history has moved on, the times have changed, and that it would be far more fruitful to talk about something else. This is not to argue that there is one account of the history of philosophy that is true, i.e., the one presented by Rorty, and then others that are false. Rather it is to say that we no longer need to think that philosophy has to be concerned with epistemology because of its history, there is no Whiggish story of progress to a type of science which needs to be assumed. It can be, if people find that useful, but it does not have to be; philosophers can just move on to other topics. And if the suspicion is left that Rorty would quite like to return to the good old days when philosophers discussed how to live well then this is probably justified.

There is no need to discuss in detail the whole of Rorty’s book. It has been subject to extensive critical examination some of which we will mention below. The points to make that are reiterated, and perhaps even repeated, by Rorty are: (i) that philosophy does not have merely one problem which it has addressed progressively since Plato; and (ii) it is legitimate to say we can set previous problems aside, not resolve them, merely move on to things that are more interesting or useful. Chapter two makes these points in relation to the ‘problem of consciousness’. Rorty engages in a brilliant thought experiment when he imagines people who have no concept of the mind or mental states, they have not constructed that sort of Cartesian-Kantian language game.[[41]](#footnote-41) He calls these alternate humans ‘antipodeans’. The point about them is that if they have never conceived of the mind then they have never encountered the problem of consciousness or of the relationship between the mind and the body, or the mental and physical. Antipodeans do not have the language (game) of the mind or the mental and so talk about everything as full-blown materialists. Rorty’s point is that issues of the mental arise from an historical context and therefore can be left behind: ‘These so-called ontological categories (the mental and the physical) are simply ways of packaging rather heterogenous notions, from rather diverse historical sources, which were convenient for Descartes’ own purposes. But his purposes are not ours. Philosophers should not think of his artificial conglomerate as if it were a discovery of something preexistent – a discovery which because “intuitive” or “conceptual” or “categorical” sets permanent parameters for science and philosophy’.[[42]](#footnote-42) There are no permanent parameters. This bringing of historical consciousness to philosophy is made entirely explicit in Part II of the book which offers a narrative explaining how the questions and issues which dominate the discipline have emerged.[[43]](#footnote-43) For the non-specialist like myself the history is fascinating and represents an education in philosophy, albeit Rorty has fewer pretentions about what he is doing: ‘the full story of the splendors and miseries of phenomenology and analytic philosophy is, obviously, far beyond the scope of this book’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Rorty ends up at the place he wishes to leave behind, namely distinguishing in any way between the history of science and say the history of poetry. We (Western bourgeois intellectuals) tend to think we should be able to decide between Aristotelian and Newtonian science, with one being correct and the other false. This is what Rorty has been challenging: ‘The reason we think that there should be determinate answers here is, at first approximation, that we think that the history of the pursuit of truth should be different from the history of poetry or politics or clothes’.[[45]](#footnote-45) His point being that it isn’t. The reason it is not is well-known; there is no ‘over-arching permanent neutral matrix within which to “place” and criticize past and future inquiry’.[[46]](#footnote-46) The work of people like Quine, Kuhn (especially) and Feyerabend resulted in the fear that a crucial distinction between sciences and humanities would be lost, ‘For if we once admitted that Newton was better than Aristotle not because his words better corresponded with reality but simply because Newton made us better able to cope, there would be nothing to distinguish science from religion or politics’.[[47]](#footnote-47) A scenario possibly as fearsome for the theologian as the scientist! But not that worrying for Rorty. He seems almost relieved that philosophers can now leave the worries of Truth, epistemology and philosophy of language, understood as science, behind. If philosophy is a form of literary criticism, albeit the type encompassed by the notion of edification, then he is content; he can cease trying to be pseudo-scientific and return to some of the social and political concerns which first animated his intellectual interests. Likewise the public theologian; there is no need to be truthful in any philosophically legitimate sense. This is not only a point about doctrine, although it is that. More significantly for the public theologian it is a point about employing social scientific analysis. But it is a double edged point. There is nothing to be gained for the theologian as theologian from undertaking social scientific analysis because it is not going to reveal the reality or truth of a particular phenomenon. Social scientific analysis is one, frequently helpful, story that can be told about a phenomenon. Theologians as theologians might be able to provide another; the loss of epistemology means they can stand alongside each other vying for usefulness. But, whilst this might be liberating, at the same moment the public theologian, versed in social scientific ways, loses the interpretative authority that comes from presenting the social scientific truthfulness of the matter as the final Truth. They are under pressure; they can tell a story but it is a story that is easily ignored unless it is very good. So far, with some notable exceptions, theologians have not been winning prizes for their dynamic story telling, in the broadest, redescriptive sense.[[48]](#footnote-48) Edifying public theologians must ask themselves; can they produce redescriptions of phenomena that rival natural and social scientists, as well as novelists and poets, by employing their theology in ways that are novel and valuable; can they produce a theology more useful?

There is not space within the confines of this article to examine in detail the different criticisms that are made of Rorty, and especially his idea of edification. Instead what we can do is focus on those most likely to trouble the public theologian tempted by the idea of edification as a methodology. There are two problems that stand out, both of which have been identified by Rowan Williams, but discussed in more detail by others. The first is the question of relativism, which is related to questions of realism, and the second is the issue of personal, political agency. It is to the discussion of these issues that we now turn.

In different ways one repeated critique of Rorty is that his philosophical arguments lead to any one of a number of forms of ethical relativism. Jean Bethke Elshtain condemns Rorty arguing that the fact that ‘anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed *is* genuinely troubling – ethically and politically’.[[49]](#footnote-49) She goes on to cite a story told by Camus about a German officer in WWII who makes a mother chose one of her three sons to save from execution. Bethke Elshtain asks the question, ‘How might this story be redescribed in order to make it “look good”?’.[[50]](#footnote-50) She goes on, ‘I will put the point in stronger terms: He (Rorty) *requires* this possibility in order to sustain his larger argument about the utter contingency and arbitrariness of our characterizations’.[[51]](#footnote-51) For Bethke Elshtain what Rorty lacks is an ethical system which can be employed to condemn certain acts as cruel. She is also concerned that Rorty is suggesting that liberal society just emerged, almost accidentally, and then people decided not to be cruel. Bethke Elshtain argues that it ‘didn’t just happen’; instead, ‘Liberal society and democratic possibility are the heirs of a very strong account – a Hebrew-Christian story – of why cruelty is sinful and must be stopped, beginning with the Roman games and the exposing of children’.[[52]](#footnote-52) Rorty could well accept Bethke Elshtain’s historical account as accurate without damaging his case. Further his point would be that relativism belongs to a language game that edifying philosophers no longer wish to speak. In other words there are multiple ethical systems which employ categories which are sometimes significantly incommensurate; but that one discourse identifies another as being immoral does not resolve the dilemma that the accused discourse can either ignore the accusation or return the favour. Rorty’s point is that we can stop trading accusations and think about politics in a different way, without these sorts of categories. A similar response can be offered to the critique raised by Guignon and Hiley in their clear and helpful discussion of Rorty’s ideas.[[53]](#footnote-53) They argue that a ‘culture dedicated to aestheticist self-enlargement may well come to drop the concerns of morality altogether’.[[54]](#footnote-54) They suggest morality works because it gives us ‘meaningful tools for moral assessment only because terms like “magnanimous” and “a true Christian” come to us already tagged with their normal moral import. But it is not clear why they should continue to have this import, or why the “moral/immoral” distinction should continue to have any special significance for us, in a fully aestheticized culture’, such as the one proposed by Rorty.[[55]](#footnote-55) Rorty would probably reply that they shouldn’t, and that the ethical distinction no longer functions very well. In other words Rorty is arguing that it is possible to do the things that we, liberal bourgeois intellectuals, have traditionally thought of as good without embarking on elaborate scholarly ethical justifications. For edifying philosophers and public theologians redescription can do this work.

Related criticisms are also made by Bhaskar, some of which are repeated by Williams whom he influences significantly.[[56]](#footnote-56) Before we get to the critical comment it is worth noting that there is considerable overlap between what Rorty argues and what Bhaskar believes. Bhaskar writes that, ‘Rorty’s sustained polemic against foundationalism in PMN (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) (and elsewhere) is accompanied by a vigorous assault on its attendant ocular metaphors, mirror imagery and overseer conception of philosophy. Most of this I wholeheartedly endorse.’[[57]](#footnote-57) But, and it is a significant but, Bhaskar clearly resists what he discerns as Rorty’s political elitism and complacency, and it is this he seeks to dismantle. Bhaskar’s key point of disagreement is about the reality of the world, to what extent can we decide for ourselves what the world is like. This has a political dimension. Bhaskar suggests that Rorty is arguing that individuals can freely chose the language games to which they subscribe, be it Aristotleian or Newtonian physics, or liberal or fascist political ideology. Bhaskar disagrees with this argument; ‘In particular, we are not free to believe what we choose if we are to attain the sort of objectives Rorty mentions in his books: freedom from the scarcity of food and the secret police (PMN, p359), or the reduction of suffering, and especially cruelty, and the achievement of private perfection, (CIS passim)’.[[58]](#footnote-58) Bhaskar’s point being that there is a reality, a world, about which people will say, and may have already said, True things and it is this possibility of Truthful statements about reality which allows for the criticism which underpins political ideology, and commitment, and makes social and political change possible. ‘This kind of freedom (the freedom Bhaskar believes Rorty desires) … depends, I am going to argue, upon the explanatory – emancipatory critical human sciences’.[[59]](#footnote-59) He goes on, stating that for the freedom he and Rorty would like, ‘The existence of objective social structures (from languages to family or kinship systems to economic or state forms) dependent on the reproductive and transformative agency of human beings, must be granted. Such structures are not created by human beings – for they pre-exist us and their existence is a necessary condition for any intentional act’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Given the existence of social reality in this sort of way, for Bhaskar, redescription can never be enough. ‘But the identification of the *source* of an experienced injustice in social reality, necessary for changing or remedying it, involves much more than redescription, even if it depends on that too centrally. It is a matter of finding and disentangling webs of relations in social life, and engaging explanatory critiques of the practices that sustain them’.[[61]](#footnote-61) Agents need to be involved in analyzing and then also transforming through political action the oppressive structures that prevent all types of social and political freedom. If not they are effectively establishment figures, the culmination of Bhaskar’s critique of Rorty. So by chapter 5 of his book, when discussing Rorty’s ideas in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Bhaskar is arguing that ‘Rorty’s privatized narcissistic conception of the radical has the consequence that both culture and theory get depoliticized’.[[62]](#footnote-62) If Bhaskar was sympathetic to some of the claims in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* such sympathy has evaporated in his reading of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Again the point is made that Rorty’s political agenda is anti-revolutionary; ‘All politics is liberal politics; all theory is private. In any event, by dichotomizing private and public, singular individual and bourgeois community, Rorty cuts the ground from the possibility of radical transformative – putatively emancipatory – democratic politics (cf AM p316)’.[[63]](#footnote-63) What Rorty is resisting, as Bhaskar correctly notes, is a type of politics which insists that its Truth about the world, discerned by the sciences, become the basis for deciding what constitutes legitimate political action. For Bhaskar political choices are to be categorised by the confines of what can be analysed as real. There are revolutionary and emancipatory (finally True) analyses or bourgeois, oppressive (finally false) analyses, some of which, whilst false, are capable of shaping consciousness. Bhaskar will not sanction a philosophy which leads finally to a position in which the Truth of oppression cannot be identified and critiqued. He believes that in the end ‘Rorty provides an ideology for a leisured elite – intellectual yuppies – neither racked by pain nor immersed in toil – whose lives may be devoted to the practice of aesthetic enhancement, and in particular to generating self, other and genealogical descriptions.’[[64]](#footnote-64)

Some aspects of Bhaskar’s critique are unfair to Rorty. Rorty does not argue that we are free to believe what we choose, if anything he has a strong notion that people are inevitably formed and shaped by the language games, the societies and cultures, in which they grow up. Humans possess a certain ethnocentricity which will shape how they engage in public life. Edification begins from this premise and then asks what strategies might be employed to broaden our horizons, to make us aware of other social, political and cultural options. But where Bhaskar is correct is in his analysis that Rorty believes the moral project is to keep the conversation going whereas for Bhaskar political seriousness require moments of finality, a definite statement of the Truth of the injustice. It is not clear why this would normally be in the discourses of the social sciences, rather than literary forms, except that often they are, or, at least, political policy is couched in this sort of linguistic framework. This is not the main question. Rather it is whether we can be politically serious without telling the Truth about a particular phenomenon, or whether notions of telling ‘the Truth’ about something are but one strategy for effecting political change.[[65]](#footnote-65) Rorty addresses this question in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* when responding to a point made by Michael Sandel that people will not make great personal sacrifices for ideas or values that are only relative.[[66]](#footnote-66) His response is to suggest that the question is phrased within the confines of a language game that assumes relative and absolute validity exist, the sort of language game Rorty has been arguing we should leave behind. This discourse of absolute and relative validity, or Truth and Error in the Cartesian-Kantian sense, assumes a neutral, somehow objective standpoint from which the subject may judge the issue in question. Rorty’s point is that no such standpoint exists.[[67]](#footnote-67) And he is correct, as Bhaskar would admit; we have fundamental social, political, cultural and religious difference in society and no agreed upon methodology for resolving the differences. And this relativity has yet to undermine people’s political passion, even if it is a commitment to a view Bhaskar rejects. For Bhaskar the moral project is to accept the provisionality of the answers we have currently, and work to find the Truth; for Rorty this is to be captured by the discourse of a historical moment, one that doesn’t work very well and can safely be left behind. And what is the case for philosophers is, I suggest, equally the case for public theologians, namely the discourse of Truth can safely be left behind.

The second probable cause of concern for public theologians is the seeming loss of personal political agency entailed by Rorty’s ideas, a point highlighted by Williams and examined in more detail by Bhaskar. In his 2013 Gifford Lectures Rowan Williams discusses Rorty’s materialist and determinist ideas.[[68]](#footnote-68) Williams describes Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, as both ‘brillant and influential’. He also suggests that Rorty’s strong determinism is ‘morally unsettling’, as well as somewhat under discussed, with the partial exception of a critique by Roy Bhaskar.[[69]](#footnote-69) In particular Williams is concerned about the implications for personal freedom and for political criticism of Rorty’s work, his point being that Rorty cannot be the liberal Rorty wants to be without there being a limit on how our actions, including our speech, are materially determined; neither can he offer the sort of critique of capitalism that Bhaskar and Williams would like if there is no actually existing social reality which can be identified as oppressive.[[70]](#footnote-70) Rorty’s offending point comes towards the end of his book and is almost a throw away remark, intended, as Rorty often intends, to shock and provoke as much as prop up a substantial part of the argument. The argument Rorty is making primarily is that the normal distinction made between natural science and anything hermeneutical is a result of the coincidences of philosophical history; a history which left a majority of philosophers, especially analytic philosophers, over concerned with epistemology. But there is no need for philosophers to be so concerned, they can chose to talk about other things, things that do not presume a mind-body distinction as has been traditionally conceived. As an aside to this full-bodied materialism Rorty writes that, ‘Physicalism is probably right in saying that we shall someday be able, “in principle,” to predict every movement of a person’s body (including those of his larynx and his writing hand) by reference to microstructures within his body’.[[71]](#footnote-71) For this to be the case one would have to imagine some, by our standards, vast artificial intelligence which could map all neural activity in all creatures that come into contact with each other and have experiences, so that on the basis of all that has happened one could predict what would happen next.[[72]](#footnote-72) Rorty states that this is such a complex task that it doesn’t really threaten human freedom because it will not be realistic to undertake it very often. Bhaskar is horrified by this assertion, stating that it ‘is disastrous. Freedom cannot be grounded in ignorance.’[[73]](#footnote-73) But this seems to confuse the assertion of a principle, namely, what are the proper grounds for human freedom, with a practical point, that the complexity of predicting human behaviour is so overwhelming that we probably don’t need to worry about it for a while. Bhaskar, and Williams following him, also want to argue that ‘a person’s neurophysiology, or more generally physical microstructure, cannot constitute a closed system’.[[74]](#footnote-74) In other words they are saying that people’s behavior cannot be predicted because there is no way to control the ways in which other people interact with them. But Rorty does not argue that the system must be closed; it is not clear he has thought that much about predicting behaviour, but if he had then Bhaskar’s point could be addressed simply by the proposal that predicting behavior entailed examining the neurophysiology of everyone an individual was going to encounter. A very complex task, as Rorty notes, and so not one really to worry about at the moment. Rorty then goes on to make another point that provokes Bhaskar and Williams. Rorty states that, ‘The intuition behind the traditional distinction between nature and spirit, and behind romanticism, is that we can predict what noises will come from someone’s mouth without knowing what they mean. Thus even if we could predict the sounds made by the community of scientific inquirers of the year 4000, we should not yet be in a position to join in their conversation. This intuition is quite correct’.[[75]](#footnote-75) For Rorty this is a point about language games, and that if we are not competent in the particular language game then we will not be able to understand what is being said. Bhaskar agrees with this point but disagrees that the consequence of it is that human agency, as traditionally understood, is removed.[[76]](#footnote-76) In essence it is human beings who make conversations and who form language games; and, most importantly for Bhaskar, it is human beings who construct oppressive political orders and it is revolutionaries who resist them. Without agency, in the way Rorty seems to suggest, there is no politics, in the way Bhaskar deems necessary. Williams has the same worry about this loss of agency. He argues that, ‘What Rorty’s scheme does not help us with is how we make a difference to the material circumstances we find ourselves in – our purposive interaction with the environment, our restless adjustments of social relationship and power’. Williams believes the way out of this political crisis, the absence of agency inherent in determinism, is to demonstrate that Rorty contradicts himself, and to accuse him of the worst of all crimes, in Williams’s view, a lack of ‘struggle’ with the ‘*difficulty*’ of language.[[77]](#footnote-77) There are two problems with Bhaskar and Williams’ critique. The first is temporal, namely Rorty is not very much concerned with the issues Bhaskar and Williams raise; he no more thinks total predictability is an imminent problem than anyone is that bothered about how the land will be divided between different peoples when we colonise Mars. It may be we need to think about the appropriate distribution at some point but for the time being we can make political decisions without taking into account any future allocations on Mars. In other words the contradictory dualism identified by Williams is better understood as Rorty’s temporal dualism; full prediction is not around the corner however full-bloodied our materialism is today. So, whilst eventually full prediction is a possibility, for the time being we can continue to talk effectively as though we had political choices and agency. And reading Williams one is left with a concern that Rorty’s more substantial point, that how we speak of the mind-body dualism is historically conditioned, problematic, and best left behind so good politics can be done via redescription, is not properly explored. Williams critique of Rorty rests on Bhaskar’s assertion that Rorty believes we can choose what we think is True, an assertion that is not fair to Rorty.

An edifying public theology is one that seeks to redescribe phenomena. It may be a rhetorical event. Or, more likely, it may be a redescription of a social or political phenomena, or, most likely of all, a redescription of the redescriptive activities of other skillful commentators. Its ambition is to be novel, unique, (sometimes provocative) and transformative. It can draw on traditional theological ideas of Church, on the wealth of resource within Scripture, and from the insights of doctrine. A public theologian trained in these topics will naturally be drawn to them as places to go for abnormal insights. But an edifying public theology steps aside from questions of the True or the Real, as parts of a discourse which emerged for good reason in an historical epoch but which has run out of steam. It can be accused of being either relativist or of undermining political agency. But such accusations are unfair, bringing to bear discursive norms which properly belong to the left behind norms. Finally it aims to be publicly valuable, of pragmatic worth, and as such it should be judged.

1. Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The focus of the article is on *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* because this book is foundational to Rorty’s subsequent work, a point made by Brandom in ‘Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism, in in Brandon, Robert B., (ed), *Rorty and His Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000 pp156-183 especially p157-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p5. At which point the theologian thinks only ‘physician heal thyself’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p357. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p357. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p358. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p359. Rorty acknowledges that the ‘us’ in this sentence refers to ‘relatively leisured intellectuals, inhabiting a stable and prosperous part of the world’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p359. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p360. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is Rorty’s attempt to illustrate his edifying philosophy, a point made by Malachowski in Malachowski, Alan, *Richard Rorty*, Cheshum: Acumen Publishing, p98. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a biographical account of the emergence of ‘redescription’ as the central task of philosophy for Rorty see Malachowski, Alan, *Richard Rorty*, Cheshum: Acumen Publishing, p27/8. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. His autobiographical essay makes this abundantly clear, ‘Trotsky and the Wild Orchids’, 1992, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin Books, 1999, pp3-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rorty, Richard, *Achieving our Country. Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. James Conant suggests that Rorty has misread Orwell arguing that Orwell was far more of a realist than Rorty allows; Conant, James, ‘Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell’ in Brandon, Robert B., (ed), *Rorty and His Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, pp286-342 and especially p279. Rorty responds in the same volume, pp342-350, agreeing that Orwell was more of a realist than he was but that this was not his point, p344. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p171. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p174. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p174. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p386. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. So much of recent popular theology has done just this, without the need for prior methodological justification. I am thinking of liberation theology, as well as feminist theology, black theology, queer theology, disability theology, minjung theology, dahlit theology and so forth. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ACCUPA, *Faith in the City. A Call for Action by Church and* Nation, London: Church House Publishing, 1985; Forrester, Duncan, *Christianity and the Future of* Welfare, London: Epworth Press, 1985; for Lynch’s work see the list athttps://www.kent.ac.uk/secl/thrs/staff/lynch.html; Synder, Susanna, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012; for an overview of Rowlands see ‘Against the Manichees: Immigration Detention and the Shaping of the Theo-political Immagination’ in Schmiedel, U., & Smith, G., *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp163-186; Pattison, Stephen, *Shame. Theory, Therapy, Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Stoddart, Eric, *Theological Perspectives on a Surveillance Society: Watching and Being Watched*, London: Routledge, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rowlands, Anna, ‘Against the Manichees: Immigration Detention and the Shaping of the Theo-Political Imagination’, p165-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Temple, William, *Christianity and Social Order*, 1976 ed., London: Shepheard-Walwyn, [1942], p58 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Pattison, Stephen, ‘Pattison Stephen, ‘Public Theology: A Polemical Epilogue’ in *Political Theology*, issue 2, May 2000, pp57-75 and reproduced in Pattison, Stephen, *The Challenge of Practical Theology. Selected Essays*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p370. The first brackets are for clarification and the second set found in the original quotation. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p394. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p377. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Rorty explores what is meant by ‘cruelty’ in his chapters on Nabokov and Orwell in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. According to Rorty the form of cruelty ‘about which Nabokov worried most was – incuriosity’, p 158 and see also p160; in relation to Orwell the cruelty inflicted by O’Brien on Winston was to convince him (Winston) that he has become ‘incoherent’, that ‘he is no longer able to use language or be a self’, p179. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p378. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rorty, Richard, ‘Religion as Conversation-stopper’ in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp168-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Nineham, Dennis, *Christianity Medieval and Modern*, London: SCM Press, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p6&7. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p6. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p58. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p60. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p61. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p61. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p61. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Williams, Michael, ‘Epistemology and the Mirror of Nature’ in Brandom, Robert B. (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, p191. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, especially pp70-77 but then throughout the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p125. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. A point argued by Malachowski in Malachowski, Alan, *Richard Rorty*, Cheshum: Acumen Publishing, especially p44-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p168. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p267. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p266. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p269. The point is debated by Sorell, Tom, ‘The World from its Own Point of View’ in Malachowski, Alan, (ed.), *Reading Rorty*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp11-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. John Milbank’s success in *Theology and Social Theory* was his ability to offer a new narrative of secularism and the social sciences, that is, to redescribe in an interesting, novel manner Christian history. In a very different, more personal, way Heather Walton also redescribes in the extracts in her book, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Bethke Elshtain, Jean, ‘Don’t be Cruel: Reflections on Rortyian Liberalism’ in Guignon, Charles, and Hiley, David R., (eds.), *Richard* Rorty, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p146. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The answer is that it is ‘good’ for a German Nazi. If one accepts the superiority and historical importance of Nazi political ideology then torturing those who seek to resist or overthrow it in order to prevent further resistance is a good action, however abhorrent and inconceivable such a rationale might be to people like Bethke Elshtain. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Bethke Elshtain, ‘Don’t be Cruel: Reflections on Rortyian Liberalism’, p147. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Bethke Elshtain, ‘Don’t be Cruel: Reflections on Rortyian Liberalism’, p152. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Albeit, as will become apparent, I don’t share all their conclusions. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Guignon, Charles B., and Hiley, David, R., ‘Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality’ in Malachowski, Alan, (ed.), *Reading Rorty*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990, p358. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Guignon and Hiley, ‘Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality’, p358. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. My focus here is on *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* however Bhaskar has written a shorter essay in Malachowski’s collection making many of the same points. Bhaskar, Roy, ‘Rorty, Realism and the Idea of Freedom’ in Malachowski, Alan, (ed.) *Reading Rorty*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1990, pp198-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p31/32. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p38. This dismissal of our freedom to chose is a point repeated on a number of occasions by Wiiliams. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p70. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p71. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p72. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p91 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p91. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p135. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Duncan Forrester complicates the matter for public theologians by suggesting that Truth can be fragmentary, that is tradition bound rather than an agreed statement from within the dominant metanarrative, see Forrester, Duncan, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Such Truthful statements can then challenge oppressive political norms. Although this idea of Truth differs from the one Rorty is critiquing in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* it still functions in the same way as the idea of Truth Rorty is critiquing. In other words what might be said in response to Bhaskar would apply equally as well to Forrester, namely it would be a good idea to stop talking about Truth, whole or fragmentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,p46-56 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,p48. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Williams, R., *The Edge of Words. God and the Habits of Language*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, especially chapter 2, ‘Can We Say What We Like? Language, Freedom and Determinism, pp37-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Williams, R., *The Edge of Words*, p37 & p38. Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. Bhaskar’s book is, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Williams focuses on *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* which was also the book critiqued by Bhaskar, rather than any later works. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p354. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. This is the stuff of science fiction of course. But the fiction has been written as the recent Netflix show ‘Travelers’ illustrates, with the concurrent ethical dilemmas. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p50. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p48; Williams, *The Edge of Words*, p39. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p355. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p48 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Williams, *The Edge of Words*, p41. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)