

Making Tomorrow Better Than Today: Rorty's Dismissal of Lévinasian Ethics

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In a 1996 exchange with Simon Critchley about deconstruction and ethics, Richard Rorty writes: "I ... agree with Critchley that if 'one understands ethics in the particular and radical sense given to that word' by Lévinas, then Derrida's practice may well have 'an overriding ethical significance.' But I don't understand the word 'ethics' that way, and I don't think it useful to give that word that sense" (Mouffe 1996, 41). In an earlier phase of the exchange, Rorty describes ethics and politics (indistinguishably) as concerned with "reaching accommodation between competing interests" (Mouffe 1996, 17), and remarks that he simply cannot see how Lévinas's appeal to the absolute alterity of the other contributes to this practical aim. In *Achieving Our Country*, he notes that Lévinas's notion of an infinite responsibility "may be useful to some of us in our individual quests for private perfection. When we take up our public responsibilities ... the infinite and the unrepresentable are merely nuisances. Thinking of our responsibilities in these terms is as much of a stumbling-block to effective political organization as is the sense of sin" (Rorty 1998a, 97).

Rorty's neopragmatist approach is premised on the view that philosophy—"interesting philosophy" at any rate—is rarely a struggle between true and false theses, but more commonly "a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things" (Rorty 1989, 9). Moreover, though Rorty grants certain philosophies a role in our "quests for private perfection," he rejects the possibility that theory is the sort of thing called for or properly responsive to the problems of public life. As Richard Bernstein puts the point:

In Rorty's 'liberal utopia' we would all recognize that solidarity ... is not based upon Reason or Theory. Rather, it is a goal to be achieved by imagination where we become sensitive to the concrete details of the pain and humiliation of our fellow human beings. Journalists, ethnologists, and especially novelists are far more useful in achieving this goal than philosophers or social theorists (1991, 264–5).¹

At first glance, then, Rorty's rejection of Lévinas might be read as one instance of a more general rejection of theory in the practical realms of

ethics and politics.² A second look suggests that a more specific rejection of Lévinas is intended. Though Rorty excludes Derrida from the company of those whose works could (or should) have a bearing on public policy, he accepts Derrida's deconstructive readings as "useful" to the private reflections and strivings of the ironist as she "faces up to the contingency of ... her own most central beliefs and desires" (Rorty 1989, xv). Indeed, while Rorty counts Derrida among the finest ironists he reads, he draws the line at those moments in the Derridean corpus that he deems "Lévinasian."³ The Lévinasian moments, exemplified by the appeal to an absolute, unrepresentable alterity, are seemingly fit neither for the arena of public policy nor for the solitary musings of the ironist. But, why not?

In what follows, we speculate that two criticisms are central to Rorty's dismissal of Lévinas: first, Lévinas's talk of "the face of the other" represents an outmoded and unhelpful return to a foundationalism that Rorty and other pragmatists would rather do without; second, foundationalist or not, Lévinasian ethics is irreducible and unhelpfully formal, it cannot help us decide in given cases what to do. Far from suggesting that these charges are easily dispelled or simply miss the point, our sense is that they represent worries with which any reading of Lévinas must come to grips. If Lévinas's ethics cannot speak to questions of what we ought to do or how we ought to live, there is indeed reason to suspect with Rorty that this is not an ethics in the usual sense at all or (since many of Lévinas's readers would maintain that such is exactly the case), that those who remain interested in ethics in the familiar, everyday sense will have little to gain by turning to Lévinas. Further, although it has become standard practice to claim that Lévinas's philosophy is nonfoundationalist, the notion of the face has seemed to many to carry all the marks of an appeal to religious foundations.⁴

In defense of Lévinas, we argue that what a Rortian may well take for foundationalism is neither foundationalism nor antifoundationalism but an original and powerful (dare we say "useful") redescription of ethical life that makes an unsatisfied and, in principle, unsatisfiable desire for justification the central or constitutive moment of ethical experience. Like Rorty, though perhaps for different reasons and on the basis of a different experience, Lévinas refuses the twin specters of moral essentialism and moral relativism; in his view ethical life does not find a foundation in some trait shared by all human beings (e.g., reason) or all living creatures (e.g., sentience or a capacity for pain). Ethical life arises precisely where no foundation is possible. But whereas Rorty embraces the lack of ultimate justifications with a good conscience, Lévinas shows us that the *work* of justification and the *demand* for justification—even for a justification that goes "all the way down"—is constitutive of soci-

ality. It is the demand, rather than the meeting of it, that for Lévinas is constitutive of the meaning of ethics and is that without which politics would be no more than war by other means.

Rorty's Antifoundationalism

To understand Rorty's antifoundationalism it is helpful to review in brief the story he tells about the history of philosophy.⁵ Modern philosophy, on Rorty's account, is defined by a "transcendental" desire to arrive at absolute certainty regarding privileged representations of reality that would allow philosophy to critique all other areas of human society and social practice.⁶ Hence, the history of modern philosophy is a history of epistemology's transition from a philosophical subdiscipline to the driving purpose of philosophy itself. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty highlights three moments that were critical to this progression: Descartes' notion of the mind as a "separate entity in which 'processes' occur"; Locke's development of a theory of knowledge based on these same "mental processes"; and Kant's elevation of philosophy to the status of a "tribunal of pure reason" capable of "upholding or denying the claims of the rest of culture" (Rorty 1979, 3–4). What unifies these moments and these thinkers is the quest for an absolute foundation. Standing upon such a foundation, the philosopher would be able to judge the adequacy of the relationship between a representation and reality.

Crucial for such a project is the distinction between appearance and reality. Truth, as seen from this transcendental foundational position, is the correspondence between our descriptions of what appears to us and the actuality of the real itself. Hence, modern philosophy gave a priority to the language of logic and rationality, which included discussions of fundamental structures, conditions of possibility, and the immediacy of the mental as opposed to the physical. According to Rorty, epistemology thus became first philosophy precisely when philosophy became foundational for the rest of human life.

This quest for absolutely certain foundations continued into the twentieth century in the work of such figures as Edmund Husserl and Bertrand Russell, both of whom attempted to maintain the "scientific" rigor of philosophy. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, a different voice began to emerge that ran counter to this dominant legacy. In the works of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, there emerged a resistance to the idea of an absolutely privileged position. Recognizing that this position required the human subject to be located beyond (or at least outside of) the world (*sub specie*

aeternitatis), these thinkers redescribed subjectivity as immersed in and part of the world it experiences. Epistemologically, this meant the replacement of necessity with contingency, transcendental conditions with descriptive genealogies, absolute objectivity with historical contextualism, and logical foundations with social embeddedness. Describing this transition as the "de-transcendentalization" of philosophy, Rorty notes that it carries with it important shifts in the way we understand truth and justification. In the wake of these thinkers, truth can no longer be seen as "contact with reality," but instead becomes merely "what it is good for us to believe" (Rorty 1978, 99). Similarly, justification is no longer understood as the task of legitimating beliefs according to an absolute rational standard and instead becomes the process of figuring out "what society lets you say" (Rorty 1978, 98). If the classical project of philosophy was to "mirror reality," then Rorty's narrative demonstrates that in the twentieth century that mirror was decisively "shattered" (Marino 1994).

Rorty embraces pragmatic holism as the most promising way forward after the destruction of transcendent truth and absolute justification. Moving from philosophical theory to sociopolitical practice, Rorty further advocates a transition from absolute rational certainty to contingent social hope. Although there are traces of the ethico-political consequences of this transition in Rorty's early work, it has since become the major theme of his work from 1989 onward. We will return to these consequences in what follows, but first we want to focus on the way in which Rorty's account of the history of philosophy yields his own brand of antifoundationalism. After outlining his view, we will be in a better position to see why he suspects Lévinas's philosophy of being a regression to the sort of foundationalism that so many in the twentieth century have rightly left behind.

Rorty's conception of "philosophy without mirrors" can be seen as a rejection of foundationalism in at least three forms: *epistemological* foundationalism; *metaphysical* (or ontological) foundationalism; and *metaphilosophical* foundationalism.⁷ The first form of foundationalism is a narrowly defined epistemological position regarding the structure of justification, the second is a claim about the relation between truth and knowledge, and the third is a claim regarding the proper ground for all inquiry. Rorty tends to slip back and forth between these various kinds of foundationalism without alerting the reader to the difference, though this may be warranted since his view suggests that the distinctions between justification, truth, and social practice are not hard and fast.

Epistemological foundationalism, as the name suggests, classifies beliefs into two categories—beliefs that are based on other beliefs and

beliefs that are immediately accepted—and maintains that just as the walls and roof of a building are supported by the foundation, so most of our beliefs rest on a few immediately held certainties or "properly basic beliefs." What counts as properly basic? Classically there have been two contenders: beliefs that are "self-evident" and beliefs that are "incorrigible." What Rorty finds troubling in both cases is the presumption of a non-contingent, ahistorical, asocial conception of immediacy or legitimacy. What counts as immediate or immediately legitimate, Rorty contends, must itself be seen as a product of social discourse, something denied by the notion of properly basic beliefs. Appealing to Quine and Sellars, Rorty contends that the idea that there is something immediately "given" in or to consciousness is nothing but a "myth." "The Quine-Sellars attack [on the 'given']," Rorty claims, "... is not the attempt to substitute one sort of account of human knowledge for another, but an attempt to get away from the notion of 'an account of human knowledge' [altogether]" (Rorty 1978, 102).

Instead of offering a competing account, Rorty advocates an "epistemological behaviorism" according to which "nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept," and "there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence for our assertions" (Rorty 1978, 101). Rorty insists upon an epistemological holism without exception. There is never a position outside one's own language game to justify the game itself and there is no position removed from social contexts from which to produce ultimate judgments on society and its practices.⁸

It is here that the lines between epistemological and metaphysical foundationalism begin to blur. When one embraces the epistemologically antifoundationalist idea that all accounts of knowledge are socially produced and hence contingent on the practices and institutions of the societies that produce them, the appearance/reality distinction and the various forms of metaphysical foundationalism underwritten by it begin to crumble or, at the least, fall into disuse. The move from epistemological antifoundationalism to metaphysical antifoundationalism is thus, as Rorty tells the story, a necessary step.⁹

Whereas Rorty's epistemological antifoundationalism takes the form of epistemological behaviorism and makes appeal to Quine and Sellars, his concomitant metaphysical antifoundationalism comes in the form of a pragmatism whose main influences are Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Rorty's position is nicely encapsulated by the three-word title of his 1989 book: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Contingency: all truth is socially constructed and as such is justified by nothing other than agreement between members of the society itself. Irony: any account of

the real, the good, or the beautiful is itself a reflection of the context in which it is produced. Hence there is no "final vocabulary" that has the ability to trump other vocabularies on account of its inherent rationality, i.e., all positions and commitments are conditional in relation to what goals we wish to accomplish. Solidarity: the projects that we adopt and by which we define ourselves as a society should be geared towards the elimination of cruelty and the expansion of conversational diversity. If the first two are descriptive, the last aspect crosses over into the domain of normativity. Without being able to give it the consideration it merits, we might say that Rorty is a performative example of the insight that fact and value, descriptive and normative enterprises are significantly interrelated.

Metaphilosophical foundationalism, in distinction from epistemological and metaphysical foundationalism, is characterized by the claim to disciplinary priority. This can be an *interdisciplinary* concern (as when philosophy claims to serve as the ground for the sciences) or *intradisciplinary* (as, for example, when epistemology or ontology claims the status of first philosophy). What is at stake on both fronts is the idea of *first-ness*. Whether philosophy is thought to be primary in relation to scientific knowledge or epistemology is seen as first philosophy, both suppose some sort of a priori legitimacy that overlooks the pervasiveness of contingency and irony. Rorty's resistance to first-ness is not specific to a particular kind. He rejects it in all its forms.

Rorty's position on ethics is exemplary in this respect and pertinent to his rejection of Lévinas: "What matters for pragmatists," Rorty contends, "is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality.... This goal is not written in the stars, and is no more an expression of what Kant called 'pure practical reason' than it is of the Will of God. It is a goal worth dying for, but it does not require backup from supernatural forces" (Rorty 1999, xxix). Nowhere in Rorty is there an appeal to "the good" as the foundation upon which ethical life rests. Absent is any conception of a universal, ahistorical moral standard or principle to which we can appeal to adjudicate the tough questions of human existence. For Rorty, any talk of "ethics as first philosophy" would be no different (and no less suspect) than the modern notion of epistemology as *prima philosophia*. Both move in the opposite direction from the "de-transcendalization" of thinking that Rorty advocates and from his contention that the social embeddedness of knowledge, including moral knowledge, goes all the way down.¹⁰

Is the Face a Foundation?

One does not have to look far to see why Lévinas's philosophy will appear foundationalist to some, despite being defended as antifoundationalist by others. It is also worth noting that Rorty is far from being the only reader to be suspicious of a certain foundationalism in Lévinas's texts. Many of those who accuse Lévinas of an unwarranted return to theology or who read his work as a thinly veiled religious ethics seem to be worried as much about the possible return to foundationalism as they are about the return of a discourse that invokes the word God. To counter the charge of foundationalism it is not sufficient to cite Lévinas's own explicit rejection of the language and project of foundationalism in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, though it is well worth remaining aware of this rejection (see GCM 141ff.). What is required is a reading of the face that acknowledges those moments of the analysis that seem foundationalist, but that shows us how to read their significance differently. Such a reading is possible if we attend to the foundationalist moments as one side of a series of tensions that structure Lévinas's account of the face.

It is perhaps easiest to see Lévinas as a metaphilosophical foundationalist; after all, his thought has become synonymous with the phrase "ethics as first philosophy." But for the reader predisposed to see it, evidence of both metaphysical and epistemological foundationalism is equally evident in his works. Consider the first lines of *Totality and Infinity*, for example, where Lévinas writes: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (Levinas 1969, 21). This suggests not only that Lévinas has a stake in morality but that he thinks it of the utmost importance to know whether the claims of morality are truly binding on us or only appear to be so. There is a "truth of the matter" about ethics, this sentence seems to say, and the author is ready to get to the bottom of it. Such a question has little urgency, however, for someone like Rorty who rejects the distinction between how things appear and how they really are. Moreover, the importance attributed to the skeptic's question may well lead such a reader to suspect that Lévinas hankers after an epistemological bedrock for ethical claims in much the way Descartes sought one for knowledge claims in general.

This suspicion is exacerbated by descriptions of the "face of the other" in *Totality and Infinity* and elsewhere that present it as immediately given. Lévinas famously explains that by the term "face" he does not mean those bodily features—the eyes, nose, mouth, brow, and cheek—by which we perceive and recognize one another. While he

nowhere denies that faces in the ordinary sense have such features or that we "know" each other by our visages, he insists that a face is unique in "overflowing" every form or "plastic image" by which it is known or represented (Lévinas 1969, 51). Unlike the tools of Heideggerian ontology, which have their meaning by virtue of their place in a system of practical assignments, a face "has meaning not by virtue of the relationships in which it is found, but out of itself" (Lévinas 1987, 20). The face, he tells us, is signification without a context (see Lévinas 1969, 206–7), "a substance, a thing in itself, *kath'auto*" (Lévinas 1987, 20), a "fixed point," a "hard and substantial" interlocutor, who is "the origin of himself," "solid and noumenal" (Lévinas 1987, 41), a "pure, conceptless experience" (Lévinas 1987, 59) which permits philosophy "finally to describe the notion of the immediate" (Lévinas 1969, 52).

All of this suggests a set of metaphysical commitments that a pragmatist like Rorty would rather do without. Indeed, a pragmatist perspective may well lead one to wonder what all of this talk of the immediate, the noumenal, and so on is meant *to do*? It is linked, no doubt, to the role of the face as a non-phenomenal source of ethical commandments. Throughout the Lévinasian corpus, from early texts to late, in philosophical and in confessional writings, the thesis is maintained: the face of the other calls me into question and commands me to an infinite work of justice. In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas writes: "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics" (Lévinas 1969, 43).

Not only does the face appear to be the foundation of ethics (a metaphysical commitment) and ethics the foundation of everything else (a metaphilosophical commitment), but like those properly basic beliefs of epistemological foundationalism, the face is an immediate given, meaningful in and of itself, outside of every practical or social context. Here the charge of foundationalism acquires its full force: echoing Nietzsche's claim that there are no facts, only interpretations, Rorty regards the attempt to postulate a given outside of social discourse as nothing less than an attempt to stand outside of one's contingent, historical situation. As the latter cannot be done, neither can the former. There is no such thing as a view *sub species aeternitatis* and likewise no absolutely immediate given. For Rorty, it may be immaterial whether Lévinas is actually an epistemological foundationalist since he seems to fall prey to the same myth of the given as his epistemological counterparts. Likewise, whether or not Lévinas's metaphysical commitments are as robust as Rorty and some others would have it, there is decidedly some bite to the charge that the ethics Lévinas offers us is, in important respects at least, presented as if it had no history and belonged to no

particular time and place but was true everywhere and always. The face appears to function not only as a ground that binds us over to particular sorts of commitments but also as a "skyhook" assuring us that ethics itself is something "real" and "substantial" rather than a cultural invention that we might one day come to cast aside as outmoded traditionalism. The aggregated sum of the worries rehearsed here is perhaps nothing more or less than the charge that at bottom Lévinas is an ethical foundationalist.

In a sense, he is. Much of the account of the face in Lévinas's early and middle works appears interested in establishing a kind of protective status for the face, presumably in the name of making its ethical demand incontestable. In "The Ego and the Totality" (1954), for example, Lévinas writes of the face as a "fixed point" (Lévinas 1987, 41) impervious to the dissimulations of language. Words are "deceptive" because they are inevitably the product of the unconscious forces of history and culture, always capable of meaning more than the speaker intended and as such subject to infinite interpretation and analysis. In "Freedom and Command," published just a year before the essay on the ego, Lévinas describes the face as that which puts an end to ideology and its powers of dissimulation: "A face is the presentation of an entity as an entity, its personal presentation. A face does not expose, nor does it conceal an entity. Over and beyond the disclosure and the dissimulation which characterize forms, a face is an expression, the existence of a substance, a thing in itself, *kath'auto*" (Lévinas 1987, 20). One year later Lévinas writes: "one can inaugurate the work of criticism only if one can begin with a fixed point. The fixed point cannot be some incontestable truth, a 'certain' statement that would always be subject to psychoanalysis; it can only be the absolute status of an interlocutor, a being, and not a truth about beings" (Lévinas 1987, 41). The face is "this presence before me of a self-identical being" who "manifests himself out of himself, and not on the basis of concepts," open to infinite interpretation and the ambiguity of double meanings (*ibid.*). The face is not a sign or a mask that gives access to or belies a signified (Lévinas 1987, 42). To be sure, Lévinas acknowledges even in these early texts that we are not always face to face with an interlocutor, or not only so. Interpersonal relationships can be duplicitous and often, out of practical necessity, we treat the other in virtue of her function or our own (we are the judge, the doctor, the teacher or the accused, the patient, the student). But in every case the face transcends the systems of meaning and use to which I reduce it. In the face-to-face relationship, I encounter a being who "breaks up the system" (Lévinas 1987, 43).

Similar themes, of course, are sounded in *Totality and Infinity*. Though the face-to-face relationship takes place in language (Lévinas 1969, 95), it is not accomplished by means of flattery or propaganda. The face-to-face is protected or abstracted from the ruses characteristic of rhetorical language; in the face-to-face relationship language "does not touch the other, even tangentially," but "reaches the other by calling upon him or by commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness [*droiture*] of these relations" (Lévinas 1969, 62). Rhetoric, by contrast, approaches the other "obliquely" (Lévinas 1969, 70); it does not treat the other as a mere thing since it is still conversation, but it is conversation whose aim is to persuade a free being to renounce its freedom. As such rhetoric "is preeminently violence" (ibid.). Justice is subsequently defined as the face-to-face approach in a conversation free of rhetorical forces (Lévinas 1969, 71).

Lévinas takes a similar tack when he discusses eros and the feminine other. Again, the face-to-face relationship is identified with an uprightness and straightforwardness that protects it from the lapses and equivocations of erotic life. "In the feminine face," Lévinas tells us, "the purity of expression is already troubled by the equivocation of the voluptuous" (Lévinas 1969, 260). This equivocation is not between two possible meanings, but between "speech and the renouncement of speech, between the signifyingness of language and the non-signifyingness of the lustful which silence yet dissimulates" (ibid.). Just as rhetoric is said to dissimulate and corrupt the straightforwardness of the face-to-face, so too voluptuousness inverts decency into indecency, expression into the inexpressible (ibid.).

In neither case is Lévinas's theory entirely entitled to the protections he claims for the face. In the case of rhetoric, especially, it is not entirely clear why he feels the protection is necessary. After all, the relation to the face is not accomplished by any particular content or statement (though the face is often described as saying "Thou shalt not kill"). Language accomplishes the relation to the face less in what it says than in what it does. All discourse, Lévinas tells us, invokes the other even as it represents or thematizes him: "The knowledge that absorbs the Other is forthwith situated within the discourse I address to him. Speaking ... solicits the Other" (Lévinas 1969, 195). Hence, discourse meant to flatter or persuade, to convince or trick, enacts this invocation just the same as the purportedly straightforward discourse of just relationships. Likewise with the stringent distinction Lévinas maintains between erotic relationships and ethical ones. While he admits something of ethics into the erotic—the erotic relationship is, after all, a relationship with a face—he nonetheless permits nothing of the erotic to tinge the ethical.

The protections that Lévinas sets up around the face-to-face relationship in both instances are seemingly attempts to protect it from what he sees as its degradation and devolution. But they inevitably strike one as unnecessary unless the worry is that without them the face no longer exhibits an incontestable ability to provoke an ethical response. In order to retain its function as that which calls me into question and puts me under an obligation incontestably or irrecusably, the face seemingly needs to be beyond the reach of all dissimulation and equivocation. It must have the status of an incorrigible foundation. It must indeed be a kind of fixed point.

There is certainly a foundationalist aspiration here that needs to be taken into account, even though it falls short of foundationalism for all the well known reasons. The fixity of the face is everywhere undermined by the terms in which it is set out—a fact already in evidence in the early works, but about which later works like *Otherwise Than Being* are increasingly self-conscious. This "fixed point," for instance, cannot be seen or represented; it is not a phenomenon. It cannot be an object of belief, but only of faith, as Lévinas says in the early essay on the ego. There is no evidence that could be invoked as "proof" of the ethical resistance encountered in the face of the other. The notion of evidence suggests participants who have already assented to rational dialogue, which means that they have left off the attempt to achieve their ends by force or duplicity and thus, in effect, are already in a face-to-face encounter. The face cannot be subject to the call for evidences or proofs since the face "is the evidence that makes evidence possible" (Lévinas 1969, 204). Invisible because formless, unrepresentable because conceptless, the face is invoked but not known, approached in desire but never reached.

The tensions that structure the account of the face in earlier works become the hallmark of the face itself in later writings. In 1961, the face is still spoken of as the "exceptional presentation of self by self" (Lévinas 1969, 202), though there are also, of course, statements that mitigate this language of direct self-presence. Immediately after *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas turns to the language of "enigma" to describe the manner in which the face of the other appears without being constituted as a phenomenon or signals itself without being trapped within the order of signification. In "Phenomena and Enigma," Lévinas rarely appeals to the word "face"—perhaps because the term is undergoing significant transformation and reconstruction in this essay—though the entire essay is devoted to a new description of the approach of the other which emphasizes precisely the tenuousness and ambiguity of the approach. The essay recalls for the reader the main points of Lévinas' reading of

philosophy as an ontology of the same: philosophy is consonant with rational speech which moves "from evidence to evidence, directed to what is seen, to what shows itself," though it has known exceptional moments in which the distinction between presence and absence was by no means so "clear cut" (Lévinas 1987, 61–2). These are the moments in which philosophy sets out an idea of transcendence, of an invisibility which is not just the refusal to appear or a vague, half-formed appearing, but a disturbance that troubles the order of appearances without appearing there. The lion's share of the essay is made up of a series of primarily negative descriptions of this enigma: the enigma is not like a fact that does not fit our established scientific paradigms and thus calls for new paradigms or orders to be constructed (Lévinas 1987, 63); it is not a noumenal thing in itself of which appearances would be the signs or indications (Lévinas 1987, 65); it is not a sign of remoteness (Lévinas 1987, 65) or a hidden meaning waiting to be drawn out (Lévinas 1987, 67); it is not the irrational or the absurd (Lévinas 1987, 67) since these can be understood in light of the rational and meaningful. In all these cases, the enigma would still be in relation to and derive its significance from an established, phenomenal order; it would thus in every case be able to be roped back in and rendered in some manner intelligible. The transcendence Lévinas is after and finds in the "nakedness of a face that faces" is something that disturbs the order or appearances "in so subtle a way that unless we retain it, it has already withdrawn. It insinuates itself, withdraws before entering. It remains only for him who would like to take it up" (Lévinas 1987, 66). It does not disturb like the ringing phone that shatters a deep sleep and produces an immediate sense of foreboding; the ringing phone is altogether too undeniable. Rather, the disturbance Lévinas imagines is akin to the situation in which one awakens but does not know whether the phone rang or not. Is there something urgent that I should be attending to? One can go back to sleep, certainly, but not secure in the knowledge that all is right with one's world.

Otherwise Than Being is as much concerned with the methodological problem of how to take up this disturbance within a philosophy, that is, within rational discourse, as it is with the disturbance itself. Nonetheless, the problem is the same: how can this disturbance, this approach of the neighbor or of a face, appear as such. His well-known answer, which we hardly have the space to rehearse here, is that the unsayable betrays itself in a said which it has been the task of philosophy, at certain times, in certain figures and canons, to unsay (Lévinas 1997, 7). Concretely, the disturbance is signaled in the everyday event of my responsibility for an other (Lévinas 1997, 10). From the perspective of knowledge, respon-

sibility appears impossible: if I recognize myself under a universal principle of obligation, then this obligation loses its heteronomous character and becomes another project of my freedom or autonomy; if I cannot recognize myself as so obligated then the obligation loses its obligatory character and appears as nothing more than arbitrary custom or as the imposed desires of others masquerading as universal law (see Lévinas 1997, 13, also Lyotard 1988, 172–3). Responsibility is an exact figure for the enigma since it appears in such a way that I seem always able to decline it, either by making it the content of my own will or by thrusting it away as altogether alien to my will: "The impossibility of declining responsibility is reflected only in the scruple or remorse which precedes or follows this refusal" (Lévinas 1997, 6–7). The impossibility is not "real" but neither does that mean that responsibility is mere illusion. Like the person whose sleep has been disturbed without an identifiable cause, responsibility signals the approach of a neighbor, but does not position that approach as a certainty, ground, or foundation.

The figure of the face is the locus of an important tension in Lévinas's thought. In the first instance, it represents the impossibility of representing the alterity of the other. As such, it is of course a compromise with theory, making visible and intelligible what it claims is beyond perception and representation. In the second instance, the face is that which puts me under an obligation and commits me to the work of justice but, as we have shown, it does so without my being able to *know* or be *certain* about these obligations. The face troubles consciousness [*conscience*], but in the manner of a disturbance that does not come fully to light. This is no doubt why Lévinas speaks of the bad conscience [*mauvaise conscience*] of the ego: to have a bad conscience suggests not that I am certain I am in the wrong, but that I suspect it, that I am troubled by the possibility and perhaps that I am doing whatever I can to hide the facts of the matter from myself or from others.

The tension constitutive of the figure of the face is not resolved in Lévinas's later works but explicitly, self-consciously exacerbated. This tension is constitutive of Lévinasian ethics, that is, constitutive of his account of ethics but also, and more importantly, of ethical life or the meaning of the ethical as portrayed by that account. Lévinas is not offering us, in the guise of the face, a bedrock for specific ethical claims nor a foundationalist justification for ethics itself. The face does not produce certainty about my obligation to the other—after all, though the face says "Thou shalt not kill" the "banal" fact of the matter is that human beings do kill one another in an untold number of ways. The face, if anything (and, of course, it is not a *thing*, thus *is* not), expresses only a certain desire for certainty—a desire for a fixed point from which

critique can ensue, a desire for a world in which faces, that is to say, singular others, are visible and in which their *visage* commands absolutely. This desire is wholly different from either a need or a wish, both of which would originate in the subject and would be, as a result, merely subjective. The notion of metaphysical desire and later that of the passivity more passive than receptivity express the sense in which what is glimpsed in the face, for the one "who would like to take it up" or see it, is not pure subjective or fantastic projection nor a significance that comes from a context framed by our practical projects and comportment, but an extra-ordinary commandment, obligation, responsibility. The language of the extraordinary here is not meant to convey something mystical or otherworldly, as Lévinas reminds us time and again. Rather, it conveys only the negative sense of something that cannot be fit to the parameters or boundaries of perception, representation, or signification.

The Charge of Formalism

What does this story about the ambiguity of the face get us in the sphere of practical questions about ethical and political matters? If Rorty is right, the two classical formulations of the ethical question—What ought I to do? and What is the good life?—are unanswerable within the strict confines of Lévinasian thought. Recognizing the ineliminable contingency of human existence leads Rorty to confess that being concerned about the other person is not an imperative with which we find ourselves confronted, but instead is really just a particular sociohistorical commitment with which we choose to define ourselves as a society. There is no ontological or ethical account to explain these commitments and no need for one: "we should just thank our lucky stars," Rorty says, "that there are quite a lot of people nowadays who are pretty consistently appalled by human beings suffering unnecessarily" (Rorty 1996, 42).¹¹ Human solidarity is a goal worth fighting and perhaps even dying for, Rorty reminds us, but it does not require backup from supernatural, non-phenomenal sources (whether Gods or faces), nor explanation and clarification by philosophical theories. Justice, on Rorty's account, is best understood in terms of the "muddling through" that "judges do when deciding hard cases, and parents do when trying to figure out whether to inform the police about what their children are up to" (Rorty 1996, 42). Rorty's frustration with ethical theory has its origin in his belief that such accounts are simply unhelpful for the everyday business of ethics and politics.

That this frustration carries over in his reading of Lévinas is evident when Rorty writes:

I am unable to connect Lévinas's pathos of the infinite with ethics or politics. I see ethics and politics ... as a matter of reaching accommodation between competing interests, and as something to be deliberated about in banal, familiar terms—terms which do not need philosophical dissection and do not have philosophical presuppositions (Rorty 1996, 17).

Again:

I don't find Lévinas's Other any more useful than Heidegger's Being—both strike me as gawky, awkward, and unenlightening. I see ethics as what we have to start creating when we face a choice between two irreconcilable actions, each of which would, in other circumstances, have been equally natural and proper. Neither my child nor my country is very much like a Lévinasian Other, but when I face a choice between incriminating my child or breaking my country's laws by committing perjury, I start looking around for some ethical principles. I may not find any that help, but that is another question. My failure to do so is not satisfactorily explained by reference to an Abyss that separates me from an Other (Rorty 1996, 41).

In both passages, Rorty apparently charges Lévinas with being, as the proverbial expression goes, so heavenly-minded that he is of no earthly good. Lévinas's account of the face paradoxically appears to overlook the "real" suffering here and now of the faces we meet in our everyday lives. Further, the Lévinasian rhetoric of infinite ethical obligation provides no guidance on how to translate this ethical concern into a practical politics. Going beyond the letter of Rorty's remarks, there are two aspects of Lévinas's thought that may well give the pragmatist pause. First, the hyperbolic quality of the infinite responsibility that Lévinas discusses will not only seem like so much theoretical posturing, it may well seem like an invitation to a dangerous form of moral and political quietism. Second, Lévinas's account of the face and responsibility seems totally devoid of any recognition of the social and historical contexts in which particular obligations come to feel incumbent on those who live within those contexts. That is, Lévinas's philosophy apparently completely disregards the way in which particular obligations are locally generated.

Rorty and others may well feel that Lévinasian responsibility amounts to a recipe for moral quietism and political disengagement. In the sections of *Ethics and Infinity* that discuss his later writings on responsibility, Lévinas remarks: "I am responsible for the Other without

waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it" (Lévinas 1985, 98). This is the responsibility of a "hostage" who is responsible "for a total responsibility that answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility" (Lévinas 1985, 99). I am responsible, Lévinas claims (though he advances this last claim with great hesitation), even for "the persecutions I undergo" (Lévinas 1985, 99).¹² The pragmatist may well see in the hyperbole of Lévinas's descriptions of responsibility only a nuisance and the atheist will no doubt cringe at the religious tropes to which Lévinas appeals with increasing frequency. Such readers are bound to ask, "What is so wrong with our ordinary sense of responsibility as a duty that can be identified and fulfilled?" Doesn't Lévinas's notion of a boundless responsibility unfairly cheapen those ordinary instances of human decency and responsibility met that are our best hope for a peaceful existence together? When I fulfill my responsibilities at work or at home, as a citizen, parent, or friend, the Lévinasian view makes this seem like a nasty compromise with the real world, a second best state of affairs that pales in comparison with the saintly responsibility of the hostage. Moreover, Lévinasian responsibility for the Other seems to leave no room for justified or enlightened self-interest, that is, for duties towards oneself. If Lévinas is right and I am responsible "for all and before all," then accountability in the ordinary sense appears to lose its force. If ought no longer implies can, with the result that I will necessarily fail in my responsibilities, then why feel bound by any responsibility at all?

Rorty clearly expresses this sentiment when he claims that "Emphasizing the impossibility of meaning, or of justice ... is a temptation to Gothicize—to view democratic politics as ineffectual, because unable to cope with preternatural forces" (Rorty 1998a, 97). He insists that ethics and politics demand nothing other than specific local goals towards which we move: "It seems pointless hype to dramatize our difficulties in knowing what to do by labeling our goal 'indescribable,' 'unexperientable,' 'unintelligible,' or 'infinitely distant'" (Mouffe 1996, 42). If we want to achieve our ethical or political ends, we need to start by seeing them concretely as problems that can be worked on bit by bit with local if not global success. On Rorty's analysis, Lévinas's hyperbole fosters nothing but doubt about the status of our projects and reservations about the efficacy of our endeavors. Championing the work of such American thinkers as Jefferson, Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey, Rorty is convinced that if we want to change the world, we need to start by teaching our children that they can make a difference, rather than incapacitate them under the weight of infinite obligation.¹³

In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Lévinas admits that his primary

philosophical task "does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning" (Lévinas 1985, 90). However, Lévinas seems confident that "one could without doubt construct an ethics" according to his philosophy (Lévinas 1985, 90). It is easy to see how both of these statements might leave Rorty cold. In the first place, as we saw above, the "meaning" of ethics is, on Rorty's account, irrelevant to the actual task of ethical life. In the second, the construction of an ethics is a matter of what specific commitments and allegiances a person happens to have; appeals to transcendental language and accounts of constitutive relationality are just distractions. Rorty repeatedly insists that what actually motivate people to ethical behavior are local and determinate relational commonalities.

Although the appeal to human nature, or inalienable rights, might for some specific purpose be useful in the project of human solidarity,¹⁴ Rorty insists that "our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as 'one of us,' where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race" (Rorty 1989, 191). As the intimacy of one's connection with another person grows, so does the probability that one would be motivated to offer a hand in assistance to that person. Sharing a common nationality is nowhere near as powerful as sharing a common college, which in turn pales when compared to being members of the same church group or community soccer team. Lévinas's concentration on the global idea of an absolute obligation devoid of any historical specificity seemingly cannot be translated into the specific content that is required for ethical guidance. Lévinasian ethics, Rorty seems to conclude, may potentially explain the phenomenological background of our ethical motivations, but it can neither direct the motivations we actually have nor articulate what sort we should cultivate. Rorty's model of ethics seems to work by saying, "Tell me what you want to accomplish, and I can suggest possible ways of getting there." Infinite responsibility to the neighbor is unhelpful and uninformative because it focuses on the *human* condition, rather than dealing with the situation of Americans, or Asian-Americans, or Asian-American women in Chicago, and so on. The sort of specificity that action requires is possible, Rorty avers, only on the basis of the local.

It is easy to mitigate the formalism charge by pointing out that Rorty's writings are no more directly practical, and perhaps no less (if differently) theoretical than Lévinas's. As Richard Bernstein notes:

Rorty is frequently brilliant in calling the bluff of those who believe that their sophisticated theorizing is required for politics today. But if we apply to Rorty the same tough pragmatic standards that he

applies to others, there is very little concrete payoff. It may be inspiring and stirring to talk of limiting greed and lessening the gap between the rich and the poor. But Rorty doesn't provide us with the foggiest idea of how this is to be accomplished (Bernstein 2003, 135).

Surely, then, when Rorty chides Lévinas for being unable to contribute to making tomorrow better than today, he heaps coals on his own head in the process. Any claim that Rorty's thought is more practical than the theoretical speculations of Lévinas would seem due to a difference in style rather than substance since Rorty is just as unhelpful when it comes to specific content.

Although Rorty is right when he claims that Lévinas does not give us anything akin to an algorithm for ethical decision making, his own inability to do so should give us pause in embracing his very narrow idea of what it means to be "helpful" for the political project. It may be that Rorty's unwillingness to see Lévinas as instructive for public policy is because he is wrong to think that ethics should be about such instruction. The only "instruction" to be found in Lévinas is that ethics is more about keeping the tension between conflicting obligations alive—even though we must act—rather than trying to eliminate the tension by viewing the obligations themselves as contingent and ironic, as does Rorty.

The problem with irony is that it is so serious. If Rorty is to be at all consistent, he must be willing to be ironic about his own liberalism. But this is precisely what he should not do—and it is here that Lévinas can be read as a critic of Rorty. Rorty may be able to describe the obligations that we are conflicted about, but he is unable to give any account of why these obligations are actually obligatory—except to say that they are a product of the society in which we find ourselves. However, Rorty's own position serves to contest that this is a sufficient reason to be committed to something. It is at this point that Rorty's thinking becomes paradoxical: he is torn between the local and the global. On the one hand, Rorty claims that only those commitments which are nearest to us, i.e., local, can move us to action, but on the other hand, he insists that all of our commitments must be held ironically—including our commitment to the local. This paradox is anything but a productive tension.

In her essay, "Interrupting the Conversation: Notes on Rorty," Rebecca Comay persuasively argues this same point. Noting that Rorty's "post-modernist bourgeois liberalism" is simply "the modernist cheerfulness minus the modernist faith" (Comay 1987, 84), she claims that the entire goal of Rorty's thought is to keep the human conversation going. Following from Rorty's claim that "We do not know what 'success' would

mean except simply 'continuance'" (Rorty 1982, 172), Comay rightly points out that with this move he has effectively eliminated the possibility of social criticism and political interrogation. "'Hope'—cured of its histrionic fervor—becomes," she concludes, "the happy desire that we keep on going just the way we are" (Comay 1987, 89). Rorty's politics is nothing other than an argument for the status quo. For Comay, what this amounts to is a "neutralization" of concrete history *"in the name of history itself"* (Comay 1987, 90). Hence, she concludes:

... precisely where Rorty's hermeneutic pragmatism, if pursued rigorously, could and should have led philosophy in the direction of a general social and political critical project, Rorty shrinks back from the potentially subversive or utopian implications of his own undertaking and retreats to safer ground (Comay 1987, 90).

Rorty's liberalism is really another name for keeping things consistently moving along their current path. Without being able to realize the political import of his own commitment to reducing cruelty, Rorty is guilty of ignoring the historical and cultural context in which his own commitments take shape. By eliminating any real idea of progress and criticism, Rorty's insistence on actually being concerned about the specific needs of other people loses its critical bite. Hence, the soft underbelly of Rorty's ironic liberalism is its complacency.

Because the true goal of Rorty's democratic politics is to keep things going as they are, his thought is not troubled by the stranger who persistently knocks at the gate of the city. Rorty's own interpretation of the language of hospitality is very telling: "To say that God wills us to welcome the stranger within our gates is to say that hospitality is one of the virtues upon which *our* community most prides itself" (Rorty 1999, 85). When we ask "*Why* should our community pride itself in this way?" the weakness of Rorty's conception of "social hope" becomes apparent. Whereas Lévinas speaks of offering hospitality to other communities,¹⁵ Rorty consistently speaks about enlarging his "own." While Derrida, Lévinas, and Rorty all extend their hands in invitation, Rorty's is always reinscribed into a movement of self-return and assimilation. Ironically, we can now see how the specter of quietism actually haunts Rorty's thought rather than that of Lévinas. If we are happy about the way things are and convinced that the *current manifestations* of liberal democracy in North America and Western Europe are the best possible options of political structures, then the impetus to social critique and political activity evaporates.

Moreover, Rorty's liberal utopia loses its utopian quality when he

indicates that it is for the most part already realized. Rorty almost admits of the complacent, quietist tendencies of his thinking when he comments that, "Lévinas's pathos of the infinite chimes with radical, revolutionary politics, but not with reformist, democratic politics—which is, I think, the only sort of politics needed in rich constitutional democracies such as Britain, France, and the U.S." (Mouffe 1996, 17). Returning to the idea of hyperbole, we can see that Rorty's charge of quietism runs up against his own words here. If Lévinas eliminates political activism due to his constant discussion of infinity, inexpressibility, and transcendence, it seems odd that Rorty would now claim that such hyperbolic rhetoric "chimes with radical, revolutionary politics." Surely a quietist revolutionary is a strange idea. It now seems as if Rorty's true worry is not that Lévinas is too theoretical, but too political, i.e., it serves constantly to contest the comfortable position of "we" who inhabit Rorty's political universe. While complacency is the constant threat for Lévinasian ethics, it is simply the *modus operandi* for the inhabitants of Rorty's "rich constitutional democracies." As Richard Bernstein rightly notes, "Rorty never really faces up to the (contingent) slide from irony to ruthless cynicism—a cynism which corrupts liberal democracy" (1991, 283).

Conclusion

The political efficacy of Lévinasian ethics is not found in its being able to adjudicate between our obligations according to some absolute standard, but instead is located in its refusal to allow us to see ethical decision as just a matter of personal whim. Although we might want to follow Emerson's advice and write "whim" above our doors, it cannot be the complete account of ethical life without eliminating the ethical aspect of life itself. Hence, Lévinasian ethics is politically relevant in the same way Socrates was. It is the gadfly sting to the supposition that we can afford to be less than diligent in our concern for other people.¹⁶ Lévinas thus serves as a counter to whichever direction Rorty wants to go. When Rorty goes local, Lévinas goes infinite and appeals to the face of the Other. When Rorty goes global with his irony, Lévinas goes local and protests that one cannot be global about one's irony because it serves to eliminate obligation itself. Just as Lévinas contests the complacency of Rorty, Rorty should continue to contest the potential abstraction and hyperbole of Lévinas. The productive tension we need to maintain is not found simply *within* Lévinasian philosophy, but *between* Lévinas and Rorty. If Lévinas is right, then Rorty's critique continues to resound in our ears because of the infinity of our responsibility itself (and hence the need for a certain amount of hyperbole). If Rorty is right, then Lévinas

must continue to be called to the table of practice and local action.

To the question, "Where does Lévinas get us?" we answer that he forces us to rethink where we expect ethics to get us. In the end, Rorty closes off the question of normativity in the name of ironic redescription (which sneaks complacency in the back door), while Lévinas keeps it open by continually redescribing the question *itself* as ethical (refusing to be ironic about obligation). Ethics is alive not because we can provide an answer to this question, but because our asking it defines us as ethical.

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Notes

1. Compare the following passage from *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*: "In my utopia, human solidarity ... is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.... This process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of

detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like" (Rorty 1989, 198).

2. Rorty distinguishes his own thought from Bernstein's on precisely this point. "My basic disagreement with Bernstein," he writes, "is about the utility of theory ... in thinking about the present political situation, as opposed to its utility in imagining a liberal utopia" (1987, 569). Of course, Rorty does not reject *all* philosophy or theory since his own works are philosophical theories at least in the sense of being the productions of someone trained in a philosophy department. Moreover, he draws on the theories of an array of philosophers from John Dewey to John Rawls and Michael Walzer. It is notable, however, that the latter are purportedly theories of a directly practical kind, intended as social criticism rather than as pure or abstract theory per se. From the perspective of a general rejection of abstract theory, Lévinas would fare no better, but also no worse, than a host of would-be social and political philosophers, Derrida among them. For a consideration of Rorty as a "political theorist," see Voparil (2004).

3. As Rorty writes in "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism": "Because I read my favorite Derridean texts in this way [as privately ironic], I have trouble with the specifically Lévinasian strains in his thought" (Mouffe 1996, 17). Although the literature on Rorty and Lévinas individually is vast, there have only been a handful of articles written that consider them together. Especially helpful is Simon Critchley's essay in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (Mouffe 1996), to which there is a response by Rorty. Other essays treating Rorty's reading of the Lévinasian moments in Derrida include Dooley (2001) and Kuipers (1997). For a critique of Lévinas with an eye toward Rorty, see Visker (1997).

4. See Visker (1997) and Dooley (2001).

5. The accuracy of this history is contestable. Susan Haack notes that Rorty's story is ambiguous in its details and ultimately problematic in its characterizations (1993). For an excellent retelling of Rorty's story that includes an attempt to strengthen its weak spots, see Gutting (1999).

6. In "Epistemological Behaviorism and the De-Transcendentalization of Analytic Philosophy," Rorty explicitly offers three marks of what he calls "transcendental philosophy": (a) "the attempt to group philosophy together with mathematics and logic as 'apodictic' and non-empirical"; (b) "the notion that there is something called 'the nature of human knowledge'

which is capable of being known by some specifically philosophical, and thus non-empirical, means"; (c) the claim that philosophical truths about the nature of human knowledge can be used to divide culture into areas according to the legitimacy of the knowledge-claims made therein" (Rorty 1978, 90).

7. Susan Haack articulates a similar set of distinctions (1993). In her critique of Rorty's "vulgar pragmatism," she differentiates between foundationalism (as a theory of justification), *foundationalism* (as a conception of first philosophy), and FOUNDATIONALISM (as a claim about the objective grounding of truth claims).

8. Consider Rorty's Wittgensteinian claim that "Behaviorism claims that if you understand the rules of a language-game, you understand all that there is to understand about why moves in that language-game are made" (Rorty 1978, 98).

9. Though the point need not be contested for our purposes here, it seems to run into obvious practical difficulties. Namely, if epistemological foundationalism is a theory of justification while metaphysical foundationalism is a theory about the relationship between beliefs and the real (i.e., an account of truth), then it seems perfectly possible for someone to be a metaphysical realist and also an epistemological coherentist. Or to go the other direction, a view that justification requires first order beliefs may be entirely consistent with a view that embraces radical contingency regarding the truth of the real. For an extended consideration of the relationship between these positions and how Rorty navigates the rough waters between epistemological foundationalism and metaphysical realism, see Rockmore (2004) and Vaden House (1994).

10. Some have claimed that with this move Rorty moves from being a proponent of contingency and irony and unwittingly lands in full-blown skepticism. See Williams (2003) and Rockmore (2004). Alternatively, on how Rorty's epistemological commitments affect his ethics, see Bernstein (1985, 1991, and 2003). In agreement with much of Bernstein's thought, although coming from a different philosophical direction, Susan Haack argues that Rorty's "conversationalism" ultimately amounts to a dangerous form of "tribalism" (Haack 1993).

11. This claim echoes Rorty's definition of a liberal, which he borrows from Judith Shklar, as someone who believes that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (Rorty 1989, xv).

12. He adds immediately: "But only me! My 'close relations' or 'my people' are already the others and, for them, I demand justice" (1985, 99). Paul Ricoeur famously remarks that this is the most scandalous moment in Lévinas's thought (1992).

13. For this reason, Rorty advocates the "inspirational value of great works of literature." The inspirational value is for him intrinsically political and contributes to the betterment of society. For Rorty's views on education see, "Education as Socialization and as Individualization" (Rorty 1999).

14. See Rorty's essay "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" (Rorty 1998b).

15. Lévinas does occasionally make comments that can seem problematic to this pervasive hospitality. For example, see his comments on the Palestinians in an interview entitled "Ethics and Politics" (Lévinas 1989).

16. Bernstein says the same of Rorty: "Rorty helps to accomplish for our time what that other great ironist, Socrates, did in his historical context. Like Socrates, Rorty also has a knack for annoying, joshing, stinging—being a gadfly to his fellow citizens by forcing them to confront challenges about their polis and the 'justification' of their basic beliefs" (1991, 291).