

ONE

A Metaphysics of Democracy?

It is no news that metaphysics is in disrepute. Metaphysics has been on the defensive since the advent of modernity, as has talk of ontology, teleology, and utopia. Whether one attends to the Anglo-American or Continental traditions, it is understood that respectable philosophizing should avoid metaphysics—its terms and concepts only allowed to appear under the ironic protection of inverted commas. It is also not news that liberal democracy has regularly been the foe of grand theories and ever the friend of plain, enlightened thinking. Far from being associated with speculation, as John William Miller aptly notes, democracy is considered “the triumph over such fantasies” (PC 73). The democratic cast of mind, so influential during the past three centuries, promotes individuality and autonomy while resisting totalitarian politics and the dogmatic ideologies that lend them support. Not only is metaphysics philosophically dubious but it appears to be politically dangerous as well. Nothing then could be more unlikely than offering a metaphysical account of democracy. Opposition comes on all sides.

In terms of this assessment Miller’s statement that the democratic person needs a metaphysics sounds paradoxical (MS 191). For this claim is not the weak one that a democratic polity can abide metaphysics or grant it toleration when contained to the private lives of its citizens. Miller insists on a thoroughgoing, and even practical, connection between the two:

Yet, even the democratic man must have dignity. Sovereignty, whether monarchical or democratic, needs sanction. This sanction turns on the responsibility of the sovereign, and on reverence for his pronouncements. One does not escape tyranny by multiplying irresponsible and subjective arbitrariness. Every man may be a king; but in our time a king must be a constitutional authority. (PC 73)

Any affirmation—either theoretical or practical—of the dignity of persons must address their authority and the constitution of that authority. The alternative of supposing that dignity is found in the rejection of all authority is a blind alley; once authority is dismissed arbitrariness takes its place. This recognition leads to the reaffirmation of the significance of metaphysics to the practice of liberal

democracy insofar as it provides insight into order and, thus, authority. It also draws one toward a reconsideration of conceptions of ontology, teleology, utopian thinking, and even democracy's own status as an idea—that is, a term of systematic control (PL 495).

Metaphysical language is neither a vice to be abhorred nor an accident to be avoided. On the contrary, it is inevitable (PC 30). Metaphysical concepts pervade the experience of persons. Returning to metaphysics means nothing other than coming to terms with the structure of experience. It is also the necessary manner for addressing authority and the fragility of its constitution. Miller's strong claim is that one can only find the person via metaphysics.

A brief statement cannot silence the dissonance that arises from the claim that we must unify democracy and metaphysics, the active life and the contemplative life. If anything it is heightened. This opposition, however, is instructive because it reveals important aspects of the relationship between democracy and metaphysics concealed in the habitual and unproblematic usage of these terms. It is a relationship that is worthy of exploration. This work is an essay in examining such connections, and these insights serve as a basis for reconfiguring democratic political thought so as to comport with the active life.

With these larger aims in mind, the present chapter frames the issues and concepts at play in Miller's retrieval of the active life and his attempt to forge what, following Walt Whitman, he refers to as "a metaphysics of democracy" (PC 73; cf. Whitman 1867/1982, p. 984). This is a challenging task. Addressing democracy is difficult because of its familiarity and the ubiquity of its terms. In addition there is such an immense literature, reflecting the great variety of theories of democracy, that any attempt at interpretation runs the risk of losing its way. Miller's philosophy is also a challenge for the interpreter. First there is the exacting nature of the thinking involved, thinking that resists the well-trodden paths of realism, idealism, and pragmatism. The second difficulty is that, unlike the idea of democracy, actualism is burdened by a lack of conceptual familiarity not to mention a relative paucity of scholarly literature.

It is such challenges of interpretation and presentation that recommend an unusual starting point for this work—that is, the pragmatism of Richard Rorty. Although unlikely, Rorty's thought serves as a helpful entry into and instructive foil for actualism. Because it is rooted in the American political tradition, Rorty's presentation of the political enterprise highlights not just the tradition of thought in which Miller himself stands but also stresses those particular political tendencies that actualism must address if it is to be persuasive. Moreover, despite a gap of two generations, Rorty's position within contemporary philosophical debates matches surprisingly well with Miller's own situation amid the contending forces of idealism, positivism, and pragmatism. Rorty's well-known variant of pragmatism thus serves

as a *point de repère*—it not only usefully focuses the discussion of democracy but also establishes a set of ready comparisons with Miller’s philosophy.

§1.1 SENSES OF DEMOCRACY

Prior to considering Rorty, the work of stage-setting requires a preliminary estimation of the meaning of *democracy*. As a term of philosophy, *democracy* both benefits from and is hampered by its familiarity to the contemporary mind. The benefits are obvious in that familiarity keeps it clear of abstruseness and readily assists in connecting the concept with actual practices such as deliberating, voting, and enacting the law. This familiarity can hamper a philosophic examination of democracy, however, to the extent that democracy, because of its mundane aspect and widespread acceptance, hardly seems worthy of examination, puzzlement, or speculation. Given this difficulty, it is worthwhile to devote a few paragraphs to sketching Miller’s own sense of democracy and provide a more refined description of its liberal variant that is at the center of his metaphysics of democracy.

Miller’s approach to political philosophy comes via the idealist tradition and, more precisely, British and American idealists such as Bernard Bosanquet, F. H. Bradley, T. H. Green, William Ernest Hocking, and Josiah Royce. At the root of this tradition is the influence of J. G. Fichte, G. W. F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, all of whom defined the ethical and political enterprise as a search for freedom in and through a community. Miller follows closely in this tradition insofar as he emphasizes freedom as a state of reflective and conscious control. This freedom, while it resides specifically in individual persons, is made possible by organized associations and, most effectively, the state. Just so, Miller criticizes conceptions of autonomy organized around the pursuit of desire, *laissez-faire*, and no-harm principles of action. In contrast to these popular estimations, he claims that freedom is actualized in conscious self-composure at the level of both the person and the community. “It is a great illusion to suppose that government will protect rights when actual individuals display nothing but desires in their wills, and nothing but opinions in their minds,” Miller states. “Such doctrines paralyze resolve. They are degenerate, and they invite the conqueror and the despot” (PC 73). Freedom is not merely unrestricted action. Freedom is also not something managed by democratic institutions. To Miller’s mind, freedom involves self-control, and democratic institutions function to reveal, maintain, and expand self-control. Political participation is, even if unnoted by oneself, a philosophical education.

Despite sharing this positive conception of the state, Miller is wary of the ethical and political philosophies of the idealists. Inclining either to thin abstractions from

concrete life (e.g., Kant) or veering toward all-consuming systems (e.g., Hegel, Bradley), idealism often purchases its reflective composure at too high a price. Because it sets up freedom as a regulative ideal or describes it in terms of a process where the person is effectively obliterated, idealism tends to resonate poorly with the sort of self-control sought by actual persons. Thus Miller remarked late in his life that his metaphysics required Main Street and “not some unanchored idealism” (PL 514). No metaphysics worthy of democracy can avoid the local and individual. In this respect Miller’s sense of democracy is equally rooted in the liberal, democratic tradition of the United States. Borrowing from empirical and legalistic strains in the political philosophies of Richard Hooker and John Locke, this tradition emphasizes the equal authority of persons and insists on securing rights via legal protection. The state takes on a more negative and operational aspect—that is, the state is not the source of personhood but rather the ensemble of means that persons employ to effectively establish autonomy. This principled respect for persons, ingrained in our institutions and moral sensibilities, precludes theoretical conceptions of freedom (no matter how high-minded) that do not match up with the actual lives of persons. “Respect for experience has gone too far to be recalled,” Miller notes. “At bottom it is a respect for persons” (PH 173). This is a fundamental axiom of American political consciousness wherein a concern for the private has become a public matter (MP 11:5; PL 105).

Miller’s conception of democracy runs between these two traditions of Western political thought. Freedom cannot be described in terms of a speculative ideal or located in an absolute state of affairs. Freedom also cannot be a power invested in each individual such that democratic institutions are merely the neutral medium, or *modus operandi*, for regulating relations among self-possessed individuals. Reconciling the tension between these two extremes—particularly between freedom and authority (PL 143)—is the task of actualism. Freedom must occur in what is shared among persons, in those “over-individual” elements such as laws and institutions.¹ That freedom will, however, be the property of the person and the authority will be articulated in the first person singular and plural. Personhood is that form of individuality made possible by membership in the political whole.²

The key is connecting personal will to its institutional embodiment. The formal element noted by idealism needs to be joined with the concrete actuality highlighted by empiricism. This is achieved by thematizing *action*, *symbolism*, and *history* as structural and mediating elements in this struggle between particularity and form, person and institution. Providing some flavor of his philosophical approach, Miller remarks:

We are demoralized today because we proclaim liberty but no actuality as local control and as revelation. Nothing is to be revered. There is no

eloquent presence. . . . Intellectuals have no verbs; the common man does. I am joining that common man. And if this is a free country, we'd better get ourselves a metaphysic that has respect for the man on Elm Street. As it is, he is treated with patronage and disdain. Nor does he quite know how to stand in his authority because he is there and therefore projects a world in his doing. (MS 191)

The *world* that is the basis, medium, and consequence of action is what Miller refers to as *the midworld*. It is a region composed of such human actions and fabrications as words, tools, instruments, institutions, and laws. They are objects as well as practices—that is, *functioning objects*—disclosing and articulating experience. As such, functioning objects are also vehicles for disclosing the *authoritative* person. The person and her authoritative forms are in constant and dialectical interaction. Form neither reigns over persons nor do persons stand independent of form. The process animating their mutual dependence and constitution is what Miller refers to as *history*, the basic form of the active life.

Mere idealism or simple empiricism—each for its own separate reasons—fails to reveal the authority of the person. Miller's metaphysics of democracy addresses the historical person amid the career of these acts, practices, and institutions. How then to describe these active forms of democracy? Although it owes much to its origin in Athens and development in Rome, the intervening span of historical revision must be taken into account when defining *democracy*. To this end, the state of democracy can be delimited by using C. B. Macpherson's genealogy of liberal democracy.

Setting aside Macpherson's basic, and somewhat dated, classification of types of democracy articulated in *The Real World of Democracy*, one can concentrate on three types of democracy—protective (e.g., Jeremy Bentham), developmental (e.g., John Stuart Mill and John Dewey), and equilibrium (e.g., Joseph Schumpeter). All three types have arisen since the beginning of the nineteenth century and thus coincide with the downfall of popular conceptions of democracy that decried the economic relations of capital (e.g., Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson). Each of the three types in question integrates the capitalistic mode of economic relations into its conception of democracy: Protective democracy supplements the participatory liberal marketplace with a corresponding form of political participation; developmental democracy sees economic and political participation as preeminent ways of actualizing human potential; equilibrium democracy describes politics in terms of market models and envisions government as a provider of political goods to political consumers who register their preferences with votes. Of these three, it is the equilibrium model that is both contemporaneous to and most descriptively adequate of our current state of

affairs. A cursory glance at the American political scene—for example, its use of polling, focus groups, and service-sector language—suggests the ways in which market models and marketing practices have come to determine politics.

Macpherson's genealogy shows that the significance of market relations, strong intuitions regarding the integrity and freedom of persons, and goals such as providing the conditions for full human development have for any discussion of democracy. They also suggest a strong antimetaphysical bias—that is, a predilection for the individual and concrete (action) against the general and speculative (contemplation). In adopting Macpherson's sense of liberal democracy one sees that the current practice of democracy is decidedly informed by the legalistic strains of the empirical tradition. The idealist tradition, and particularly Hegelian thought, has been clear that economic relations are, at best, a stage in the development of the person and the community as a whole. The liberal democrat, by contrast, is inclined to see market relations as the model for politics par excellence. In the degree to which Schumpeter's idea of a political marketplace reigns, politics is inevitably conceived of as a *modus operandi* by which isolated individuals maximize their personal goods. (Process and system trump action.) Politics is, in this light, not understood as a constitutional form of relations. The sense of authority that resonates most in contemporary society is that outlined by Macpherson's notion of *possessive individualism* in which economic and political terms coincide.³

This definition of the contemporary liberal variant of democracy is primarily descriptive. Quite simply: This is where one is. This description also establishes the object of the examination, criticism, and revision proposed by this book. Like Macpherson in *The Life and Times of Democracy*, Miller foresees a model of political association achievable beyond the current stage of equilibrium democracy. Yet, in Miller's case, liberal democracy properly understood cannot be construed just as a stage to be surpassed. Liberal democracy has a normative force. The most critical insight gleaned from market relations regards the autonomy of persons and their unavoidable responsibility for making their own lives. Liberal democracy is described by Miller as "a school of the will," "the only condition under which [persons] could assert a social or moral will" (PC 41). Balancing this assessment of individualism with a healthy estimation of the *form* of political association we find common authority, fairness, and the rule of law to be necessary for the development of the individual. This richer conception of liberal democracy is not just a *de facto* description of a political state of affairs but is also an outline of a regulative conception of democratic community. Miller's aim is not to overcome liberal democracy but to deepen one's understanding of what is requisite for and implied by liberal democracy—that is, the active life.

§1.2 AMERICA'S ANTIMETAPHYSICAL TRADITION

There is no doubt that the current state of democratic theory and practice is clearly antimetaphysical. Miller's philosophy of the act and his interest in clarifying liberal democratic practice runs counter to *la couleur du temps* that Jean Lyotard identified as the declining credibility of grand narratives (1988, p. 46). Following on the skeptical tradition of modernity, the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein—just to name three self-described antimetaphysicians—has thoroughly undermined metaphysics in the conceptual sphere even as liberalism has threatened it in the practical sphere. As stated earlier, opposition comes on all sides.

Although much of the contemporary skepticism and ironism regarding metaphysical terminology is owing to the work of these three Europeans, this examination looks toward another source of philosophic discontent. The dubious status of metaphysics, and one's hesitancy to link it with democracy, is most profitably understood as deriving from another, native, source: American philosophical and political theory. It is for this reason that it is Rorty who poses a truly provocative challenge to Miller's claims regarding the pertinence of metaphysics to liberal democracy. More so than any other contemporary philosopher, Rorty clearly expresses this fact: Metaphysics, understood as an overarching theory of the real, is suspect to the modern democratic mind. As much as he has been influenced by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, the roots of Rorty's thought have a deep hold in a modern and liberal American philosophical and political tradition that has always been wary of metaphysical speculation.

A keynote of this American tradition to which Rorty subscribes is its antiabsolutism. One can already note the general contours of this tendency in the ideas of Jefferson and Thomas Paine—both foes of dogmatism and enemies of those metaphysical statements propping up dogmatic authority. Jefferson is well known as a proponent of religious toleration and as the author of various documents challenging the arbitrary authority of kings. As an apologist for the revolutionary sentiment in America and France, Paine for his part warned, in *The Age of Reason*, against the “moral mischief” that “mental lying” and irrational obedience produced in society (1794/1995, p. 666). More significant than establishing any definite doctrine, Jefferson, Paine, and other figures of the American Enlightenment set a tone emphasizing the liberty of reason and the experimental character of experience. This description of our human faculties, and correspondingly of reality, resisted dogmatism in science, religion, philosophy, and politics. Each individual, relying on

his intellectual powers and without the support of royal or ecclesiastical authority, was adequate to the task of discerning truth from falsity and charting a course through the world. The founding of the American Republic was a practical enactment of those sentiments.

Although there are elements in this outlook peculiar to the early Republican period, there is no mistaking the antiabsolutist note resonating through the two centuries since that period. In the nineteenth century, particularly in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance," American antiabsolutism found articulate expression. In the twentieth century this heritage received a vital reinterpretation through the work of two philosophers from whom Rorty draws considerable support—Dewey, whom Rorty describes as his intellectual predecessor, and John Rawls.

Speaking in an idiom more familiar to the contemporary ear, Dewey criticized a pervasive form of "confused metaphysics" embodying some of the worst habits of thought (1929, p. 88). These bad habits are displayed in a tendency toward establishing hierarchies of objects and types of experience. Moreover these habits often collude in schemes that systematize experience in terms of these fixed hierarchies. Human intelligence strives to organize, Dewey recognized, and these attempts give birth to metaphysical ideas. Yet intelligence often forgets that it is, at one and the same time, describing *and* plunged into experience. Descriptions cannot stand aloof from the ongoing process of experience and its future redescription provoked by the demands of the environment and the exigencies of inquiry. In keeping with the American tradition, Dewey sensed that the greatest urgency for attacking this brand of metaphysics is not theoretical but social and political. As Jefferson and Paine believed, bad philosophy is an apologist for political, cultural, and theological absolutisms stifling social and political innovation. The very possibility of democracy, as well as social progress, demands just the opposite. Dewey's recommendation was that philosophy assist progressive tendencies in art, industry, and politics by criticizing not only absolutist philosophy but also those dogmatisms embedded in everyday practice. Speaking not just for himself but for a whole tradition, Dewey held that scientific inquiry, critical reason, and reformist politics are hallmarks of the democratic character.

What transpires in the work of Rawls—forming, in this account, the last bridge to Rorty's own philosophy—is the further abandonment of the metaphysical for a practical or political conception of the person and sociability. (Indeed a 1985 essay of Rawls's was titled "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical.") The articulation and organization of a just society is not, Rawls claimed, in any way dependent on "claims to universal truth, or claims about the essential nature and identity of persons" (1985, p. 223). Rather, as he stated describing his own position:

[S]ince justice as fairness is intended as a political conception of justice for a democratic society, it tries to draw solely upon basic intuitive ideas that are embedded in the political institutions of a constitutional democratic regime and the public traditions of their interpretation. Justice as fairness is a political conception in part because it starts from within a certain political tradition. We hope that this political conception of justice may at least be supported by what we may call an “overlapping consensus,” that is, by a consensus that includes all the opposing philosophical and religious doctrines likely to persist and to gain adherents in a more or less just constitutional democratic society. (1985, pp. 225–26)

Political practice has a distinct priority over philosophy. Indeed philosophy is ultimately trumped by the exigencies of arranging a practical consensus that fits with the basic cultural intuitions of members of a democratic society. Political practice and institutions are basically constructive and not the result of any philosophical deduction from foundational truths (Rawls, 1993). Yet, because all construction occurs according to these fundamental intuitions, the political process does not, Rawls claimed, reduce to a mere *modus vivendi*, a convenient way of getting along in life; it is a sound development of a stable and, from a practical point of view, necessary outlook. It is the stability of that outlook, however, that philosophical metaphysics continually sets in question by claiming that cultural intuitions are not sufficient guides for action. Because it insists on claiming authority over the practical, metaphysics finds itself at war with politics. Despite this basic antagonism, Rawls did not consider philosophy to be anathema. He also did not regard it as completely irrelevant. Instead Rawls stated that philosophical beliefs and principles are “too important” to be adjudicated and regulated by political institutions (1985, p. 231). Thus, like religion in the early days of the American Republic, an antiestablishment clause must now be crafted to separate metaphysics from politics. It will be tolerated as sovereign in its own sphere but rendered effectively null and void in public discourse. Only by affecting this separation, Rawls argued, does a plural and democratic society have a chance at achieving a consensus that will respect the liberty and equality of persons.

This is but a sketch of a political and philosophical tradition that is, truly, multifaceted and contentious. It remains a reasonably accurate depiction of a major tendency within American thought and a portrait of the transition from contemplation to action as fabrication (cf. Arendt, 1959). It also charts a line of philosophical descent to which Rorty proudly appends his own name. And if he is not as zealous an opponent of speculation as his intellectual forebears, Rorty certainly thinks, like Rawls, that our current form of liberal democracy can benefit from the further clarification of its unfortunate relationship to metaphysics. His work in this regard shows him to be both an inheritor of, and reformer

within, this antiabsolutist tradition. Furthermore, Rorty's pragmatism is of importance insofar as it represents what might be considered a near-culmination of the contemporary movement leading away from the contemplative life and toward the active life understood in terms of fabrication and science.

The contemporary flood of antimetaphysics represents a final assault against Plato's reversal of the order of life when, in the *Republic*, he set the philosopher up as king and made the citizenry subordinate to contemplation. In that book, the *politikos* denigrated and finally undermined politics. Since then there has been an intermittent struggle to set life back on its feet via the reestablishment of the proper relationship between action and contemplation. Contemporary philosophy (or antiphilosophy) has joined this fight with more vehemence, and perhaps success, than any previous moment of Western thought. Theory has been denigrated as dead thought or, at best, thought that arrives at the twilight. Contemporary antimetaphysicians have pointed out the incapacity of theory to organize the plurality of actuality and, indeed, its inability to control its own internal contradictions. In light of this general movement, Rorty and the other antimetaphysicians can be seen as fulfilling Jefferson's admonition that "life belongs in usufruct to the living"; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it" (1789/1984, p. 959). What will be discovered, however, is that the route of return to the active, political life is far more complex than any antimetaphysician, American or European, could foresee.

§1.3 RORTY'S CHALLENGE

For Rorty, democratic politics is a process of creative coping in an often hostile, and always uncertain, environment. The political process is established to attain those aims that a community sets for itself. It is the intersubjective exercise of prudence. Liberal democracies distinguish themselves from other communities by their effective desire for the reduction of suffering and humiliation (Rorty, 1991, p. 91). The prudential calculations of liberal democracies are crafted with these goals in mind.

This is far from a lofty pronouncement. Yet, as Rorty states in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," it is the "light-mindedness" of this version of democracy that recommends it (1991, p. 193). In this regard Rorty's position is in line with a tradition reluctant to engage in metaphysical speculation (understood as "a search for theories that will get at real essence" [1990, p. 88])⁴ and wary of philosophical hubris. This understanding of democratic practice still differs, however, from its predecessors in two important ways. First it does not, contra the Enlightenment, justify itself in terms of some conception of Nature, Divinity, or human essence. Second it does not, contra Dewey, seek the perfec-

tion of either the individual or the community. The recognition of suffering and humiliation requires neither metaphysical postulates nor ideal goals. These phenomena define, Rorty claims, the atheoretical and experiential substrate of contemporary democratic societies that Rawls suggested is the appropriate ground on which to base political practice. Because of this, the reduction of suffering and humiliation can be undertaken quite competently by a conception of pragmatic politics emphasizing “instrumental reasoning”:

Some of our ancestors may have required such an account [of the nature of human being], just as others of our ancestors required such an account of their relation to their Creator. But we—we heirs of the Enlightenment for whom justice has become the first virtue—need neither. As citizens and as social theorists, we can be as indifferent to philosophical disagreements about the nature of the self as Jefferson was to theological differences about the nature of God. (Rorty, 1991, p. 182)

Rorty claims that contemporary liberal democrats can live perfectly well without theories of reality and concepts of human nature. Similarly we can set aside any belief that science or politics tracks the truth of the cosmos and, thereby, is an engine of progress toward a perfected state of affairs. Eschewing grounds of any sort fosters the sense of autonomy, and here liberal democracy approaches its limit. Politics, life, and action seemingly break the bonds tying (and thus subordinating) them to metaphysical ideas.

Such a dephilosophized form of politics, for all its spareness, makes a strong claim for being suited to the task of organizing the public sphere. In Rorty’s estimation communities are already sufficiently joined by a sense of solidarity that arises from “a lot of small contingent facts” and the exigencies of living in common (1991, p. 188). Liberal democracies, communities concerned with justice and the elimination of suffering, need not go beyond contingency toward metaphysics in seeking their justification. The rise of modern democracy is itself dependent on a set of historical circumstances that has made us “more afraid of being cruel than anything else” and thus has moved us in “the direction of greater human solidarity” (1991, p. 192). The pressing need is not to found a community on philosophical bases—a claim that disingenuously suggests that there is not already an existing pragmatic community. The need is for making existing communities work better. The cash value of *working better* would be a real decrease in suffering and humiliation.

In sum: For Rorty metaphysics is passé. It is unneeded for the work of justice or, secondarily, for making sense of democracy.

This way of putting the matter both captures Rorty's style and shows the real innovation of his work within the American democratic tradition. Unlike Jefferson and Paine, Rorty does not think that bad metaphysics threatens the existence of democratic communities. Supposing that metaphysics, as such, could be a threat of this magnitude only grants it an exaggerated significance. If politics is enveloped in the language of metaphysics, it remains politics that is guiding metaphysics; philosophical vocabularies, as Nietzsche long ago suggested, are covers for expressions of value. What must be resisted are those *practices* that our community finds pernicious. Thus, like Rawls, Rorty is interested in supporting practices and institutions that prevent or adjudicate conflict. Toward this end, however, there is little point to metaphysical disputes. This is perhaps Rorty's main difference from Dewey. Rorty is not arguing that democratic society needs an improved form of metaphysics. (Dewey, on the other hand, was.) The whole way of talking that pertains to metaphysical discourse—even Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics of dynamic experience—is not useful. According to Rorty, philosophical metaphysics at its best can only serve a secondary role in the public sphere. And when it does, it is acting primarily as a form of literature and not as *prima philosophia*. In its average mediocrity, or worse, metaphysics appears to be of no pertinence whatsoever. If one is concerned with political reform or social justice (i.e., being edifying), then it would be better to be a journalist or novelist.

Rorty's stance is that contemporary liberal democratic society has outgrown metaphysics. It is no longer necessary to lean upon it as a crutch or attack it as if it were a dire threat. Metaphysics is not as important as Rawls suggested; it more likely a source of personal pleasure or confusion than a cause of social conflict. Rorty agrees with Rawls, although for different reasons, that metaphysics should not be abolished. Echoing Jefferson's position regarding religion and following Rawls, Rorty holds that in a liberal democratic society metaphysics can and even should be tolerated. Yet Rorty breaks from Rawls by describing metaphysics as primarily a pastime; it is an activity limited to the private lives of citizens, and whereby a person can seek individual perfection if she so chooses. It is important to note, however, that even while liberal democracy makes space for such private pursuits they are neither requisite for nor dangerous to democratic politics. In this sense, philosophical metaphysics has not been abolished but, rather, democratic politics (i.e., pragmatic coping) has been placed prior to philosophy (i.e., metaphysical theory). The value of philosophy—positive or negative—is of vanishing significance to public life.

If he has made a point of giving up the game of justification and argument, Rorty's adaptation of the American antiabsolutist tradition is not unprincipled. Rorty's gen-

eral trend of thought is both coherent and well-reasoned. That trend is thoroughly historicist: Experience is an interpretative process in which one makes determinations (e.g., of truth, goodness, right) via history's interpretative legacy as well as by comparison to the interpretations of other past, present, and possible future individuals or communities. A historicist of Rorty's stripe believes that experience is primarily hermeneutic, or "conversational," in the sense that the legitimacy of anything he might say can only be assessed in relationship to a possible, and historically situated, community of conversation partners (Rorty, 1979, pp. 315–56). In summarizing this outlook, three important claims can be noted. For present purposes, these claims provide an outline of this version of historicism and a clear basis for comparison with Miller's actualism.

First Rorty claims that for too long philosophy, and Western culture more generally, has been caught in the metaphor of the mind being a mirror of the world. Knowledge, as opposed to opinion, encompasses those allegedly accurate mental representations that present the world as it is independent of the knower. Rorty rejects representationalism and its assumption of a polar relationship between a knowing subject and a known object. He replaces it with a "holistic" approach to knowledge—and experience more generally—emphasizing that knowledge claims cannot escape certain historical and hermeneutic conditions. The very first of these conditions is that an individual cannot get outside of his experience to affirm the claim (basic to dualism and realism) that there are such discrete entities as *subject* and *world* interacting in the epistemological terms of *knower* and *known*. The world representational philosophy sought to mirror, standing independent of opinion and history, is what Rorty refers to as "the world well lost" (1982, pp. 3–18).

On setting aside the mirror metaphor, there is a second and equally urgent need for getting rid of the host of distinctions it makes possible. Most important, the distinctions between *knowledge* and *opinion*, *science* and *prudence*, and *fact* and *value* must be discarded. The first term of all of these relations is taken to be that which is real and accurately represents the world. The second term is taken to be that which neither conforms nor does not conform to the world but rather is based entirely on relative determinations lacking in truth-value. Instead of cutting up things in this manner, Rorty suggests considering that "there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational constraints—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers" (1982, p. 165). In science, as in politics, there is no original truth to be tracked; there are no a priori limitations. Each hypothesis or policy is to be assessed only in relationship to a relevant community of speakers and inquirers. In other words, instead of it being a second-class epistemological citizen, prudence should be recognized as basic to all statements and intentional actions. The language of *practice* replaces that of *knowledge*.

Third is the claim that, although the world of the realist is lost and there are no a priori constraints on one's claims and actions, everything does not dissolve into a facile relativism. What sort of justification is possible once the mirror metaphor is abandoned? Prudential or, as Rorty phrases it, "ethnocentric" justifications (1991, *passim*). That is, a person commends or condemns, affirms as true or false, from the relatively stable outlook and set of aims made possible by her historical community. This is a route between simple relativism and metaphysically founded objectivity. Far from a recommendation for chauvinism, ethnocentricism is nothing other than a confession of human finitude: There is no objective, atemporal position against which to contrast the ethnocentric outlook. To Rorty's mind, this does this foreclose the possibility of being self-critical and open to a cosmopolitan appreciation of different cultures and practices. What it shows are the limits of justification and philosophy.

§1.4 MILLER'S ANTIMETAPHYSICAL SYMPATHIES

Rorty's challenge to metaphysics owes its strength to its basis in the American tradition and its persuasive development of three key claims (outlined above). In his pragmatism the political life apparently regains prominence over the theoretical life. The further suggestion (epitomized in the trivialization of metaphysics) is that the political life can *only* be reestablished at the expense of the contemplative life. What makes this challenge all the more arresting is that many of Rorty's claims, not to mention his sympathies, are held in common with Miller. Yet Miller, working from the same material, is adamant about the *relevance* of metaphysics to democracy.

In order to clarify this seemingly paradoxical disagreement between Rorty and Miller, it is appropriate first to pay heed to the ground they hold in common. The extent of *agreement* that exists between Miller and Rorty is considerable and derives from their common struggle against the dogmatic empiricism of logical positivism. Their most basic point of agreement, and an obvious way of resisting positivism, is the assertion of the importance of history. According to Miller, our ideals and theories have been in continual retreat from history (PC 130–60). How can one speak of possessing knowledge when it is only a temporary hold on experience? How can a person chart his course through life if there are no fixed posts in the moral landscape? How can we hold our ideals in proper esteem if they are not independent of the vicissitudes of history? A preferred way of staving off the skepticism and nihilism suggested by these questions is through an alliance with ahistoric principles. Thinking of Parmenides and quoting José Ortega y Gasset, Miller refers to this contemplative tendency as the *Eleatic temper of thought* (PC 135; cf. Ortega, 1961, p. 192). Miller claims, contra ahistoricism in general and positivism in particular, that "our relations with [historical] time are total and constitutive" (PH 54). The tenuousness

suggested by skeptical questions is not precisely a *problem* of knowledge or ontology—that is, something to be solved and set aside. Rather it is a testament to the finite and risky character of historical experience.

The Eleatic temper, the basis of so much of Western thought, depends on an implicit corollary: One can, at least in certain instances and via certain methods, see things as they really are. That is to say, contextual contingencies and perspectival limitations can be completely escaped. This corollary has its complement in the claim that we know that there are definite things independent of human experience and that we can know precisely what they are independent of human experience. This is the objective world that thought aims to represent. Miller is inclined to agree with Rorty when he says that “the realistic true believer’s notion of the world is an obsession rather than an intuition” (Rorty, 1982, p. 13), and that the realist’s gesture to things totally independent of experience is incoherent (FI 262–65). The language of the realist brings forth all the traditional problems of epistemology and makes *representation* a synonym for *skepticism*. If Miller has a bit more of a taste for these problems—in that he sees them as “necessary” and even revelatory (PC 68–72, 112; see §2.1)—he agrees with Rorty that there is no reason for remaining stuck in the perplexities of cognitive representation.

More generally, both Miller and Rorty take issue with the spectator model of experience. As an alternative, both propose that any conception of experience is closely linked with vocabularies of action (TO 399–400). In this vein Miller writes:

Perception is never direct. It is something more than a combination of sense data plus the psychological functions of memory and imagination. An object with a name is consolidated. It possesses a unity lacking in passive perception. It acquires that unity through the factor of action. Names are our deeds. (PC 121)

The order of priority between theory and practice is reversed. Action, according to the spectator model, is guided by universals or essential facts discerned by either rational intuition or direct empirical observation. Action has no bearing on such universals or facts; they have a bearing on action. But what if this traditional formulation is disrupted? Miller describes the alteration that occurs on the dismissal of the spectator model: “The universal in all its forms loses its nonhumanity when contemplated through the motives which operated to produce it. . . . The universal lies in the line of action and of function” (AH 268). Human deeds are deeply entwined with, and are revelatory of, the facts and universals guiding action. This sparks the recognition that when a person speaks of acting in light of certain facts, or according to limits marked out by universal principles, she is in fact talking

about the dialectical relation of individual actions and generalized forms of action embodied in symbols such as instruments and institutions.

Both Miller and Rorty want to overcome the debilitating humility and corresponding irresponsibility arising from severing the intrinsic connection between human action and the world. Thus near the close of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty writes that it should be urged “that we try *not* to want something which stands beyond history and institutions” (p. 189). Miller could not be more in agreement. Yet, for Rorty, turning to history and institutions signals the end of metaphysics and the diminished import of philosophy. Miller by contrast believes that it is with this recognition that *good metaphysics* begins and philosophy finds its proper function. Contrary to current understandings, the retrieval of the political life need not result in the denigration of the contemplative life. The retrieval of the political life must, however, lead to the *revision* of the contemplative life.

§1.5 REVISIONS OF METAPHYSICS AND HISTORY

Given the significance of what they agree on, the differences existing between Miller and Rorty must have something to do with what each means by *metaphysics* and *history*. And each one does mean something quite different when he uses these words. It is only by clarifying Miller’s sense of these terms that a case can begin to be made for the plausibility of a metaphysics of democracy. On this basis further considerations regarding the practice of criticism and its relationship to autonomy will be addressed in an effort to strengthen Miller’s position against Rorty’s antimetaphysics (see §1.6).

Beginning with *metaphysics*, it can be said that Rorty’s conception of the word is narrow. The general tone of Rorty’s discussion shows that the word *metaphysics* designates those hubristic philosophical enterprises that claim to have justified (or must justify) all knowledge, discerned ahistoric principles, and systematized the cosmos. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he defines metaphysics as “a search for theories which will get at real essence” (p. 88). (Essence in this case could be either purely material or intellectual; the key thing is that essence would be absolutely determinate—that is, a solid building block.) At two other moments in the same book Rorty expands on the sense of this definition—at one point linking the metaphysician with the Platonic theory of recollection and at another affirming that he uses *metaphysics* in the “pejorative sense” employed by Heidegger and “popularized” by Jacques Derrida as *la métaphysique de la présence* (Rorty, 1990, pp. 76, 111; cf. Derrida, 1967/1973). Thus it would seem that in doing metaphysics one must be searching for the ahistorical data of the empirical world or the eternal Ideas in the mind of God.

Miller, in contrast, considers himself a metaphysician who is *allied* with the contingent, historical, and individual. The sense of Miller's assertion supposes three distinct claims. The first claim develops a phenomenological point about the character of experience. The second suggests a broader understanding of metaphysics in which history has status as a category. The third elaborates the connection between autonomy and historical metaphysics understood as a reflective apprehension of "the conditions of our own endeavors" (PH 149). Taken together, these three claims not only disentangle the theoretical life from Plato's attack on the political life but they deflect Rorty's strike against the contemplative life. The result is a simple but strong basis on which to recompose both the contemplative life and the active life.

First, the employment of universals and metaphysical categories is a compulsive—that is, constitutional—aspect of human experience (PC 30). If one can agree with Rorty, as Miller does, that individual metaphysical vocabularies are formed around contingencies, there is still the question of the contingency of metaphysics itself. Criticizing metaphysics as Rorty does—suggesting that it is *passé*—supposes that it is optional. Miller disagrees:

We need not take too seriously the current objections to metaphysics. Anyone who looks farther than his nose may find himself wondering what lies over the horizon. No one takes satisfaction in the narrowness of his outlook nor could he appear to do so without a disguised pretentiousness like that of Antisthenes the Cynic, to whom Socrates commented that his pride showed through the holes of his ostentatious rags. We like to inhabit a world, and indeed are sure to do so if we enjoy so much as a local habitation and a name. (AH 237)

There are unavoidable practical questions for which only metaphysical answers are appropriate. Another way of putting the matter is to say that metaphysics is part and parcel of practical assurance and insofar as assurance is a necessary ingredient in experience then metaphysics is itself a constitutional aspect of experience. It is not an exaggeration to say that even in one's most mundane and immediately practical activities metaphysics is always involved. For metaphysics in its barest sense is equivalent with the presence of order (MP 4:1). Over the course of the day, for example, one might make a measurement, tell the time, appear in court, and play billiards, all the while thinking himself an ordinary person and by no means a metaphysician. Yet what is the status of *time*, *space*, *law*, and *causality* operative in the foregoing endeavors? Indeed, what is the status of the *self* who is said to have done all of these things? As David Hume demonstrated, they are not empirical and cannot be established, as G. E. Moore challenged, by some form of ostensive reference. Rather they are all testimonies to and assertions of order. Which is only to

say, along with Miller, that a person does “inhabit a world,” and because he inhabits a world and is not a mere fragment of consciousness metaphysics is inevitable (PC 174–92). Far from evading personhood and immediacy, then, this inchoate metaphysics establishes them (AH 239).

Moving to the second point, it can be said that metaphysics is by no means antithetical to a fine-grained appreciation of history. Platonism may reduce history to a function of the ahistorical.⁵ And, unquestionably, metaphysical categories and entities have become suspect because they carry Eleatic assumptions. Yet a metaphysics of the act, and its categories, need not be ruled out of court by a historical sensibility. This is because, as Miller affirms, these metaphysical categories have their origin *in history*. Moreover these categories disallow the sort of simplicity and cognitive self-evidence characteristic of the *metaphysics of presence* that Rorty rejects. Given this, is it still beyond the pale for philosophy to claim that causality and law are thoroughly historical concepts that have metaphysical status? Must philosophy be either Eleatic or nothing at all? What Miller’s philosophy suggests is that one can be a metaphysician without evading history. The trick is making history—emphasizing contingency, individuality, finitude, and action—a constitutional mode of experience and thereby making it a metaphysical concept (PC 107). One cannot be a good metaphysician without also being a historian.

Finally, metaphysics is a practice that maintains autonomy in its democratic sense. Metaphysical discourse is primarily *self-maintaining discourse*. This assessment draws on the point made in the first argument for the legitimacy of metaphysics—that is, metaphysical categories are operative throughout experience. Universals articulate a person’s world and self-conception, and thus provide the conditions through which she acts with control in that world. Universals are not the matter of mere speculation but rather “the sole evidence of our self-possessed finitude” (AH 259). Metaphysical examination is a way of bringing those conditions of action to light.⁶

The point of a metaphysics of democracy is not to demonstrate the truth of democratic principles or practices. (Miller is himself skeptical as to the force of argument regarding fundamental matters [PH 10].) Rather, as Rawls and Rorty recommend, what is sought is *clarification* from the inside of engaged and historical practice. Via such clarification autonomy is glimpsed, and it may be achieved and further maintained in the responsible engagement with the conditions of one’s endeavors. Metaphysics supports democratic individuality and autonomy (see MS 189–92; PC 72–74).

Given these three claims why would one assert that our current liberal democracies have outgrown metaphysics? In Rorty’s case this insistence is justified by an uncharacteristic reliance on the authority of Heidegger’s use of the

term. By making *Platonism* and *positivism* synonymous with *metaphysics*, Rorty has stacked the philosophical deck—by offering a plausible but quite narrow definition of what is truly a vague and unruly human tendency he enables himself, *tout court*, to dismiss everything associated with metaphysics. There is no question that in Platonism, say, there is a compulsive drive for organizing experience in terms of an abstract framework as well as an exaggerated insistence on the permanence of the resulting organizational systems. Is it fair or adequate, however, to go on to say that Platonism defines metaphysics? Assenting to this would be difficult. Yet Rorty remains obsessed with Plato and Platonism.⁷ If Plato was too extreme in attacking the political life, Rorty and his fellow antimetaphysicians respond with an equal excess of vehemence by making philosophy into a mere parlor game or opting for a principled “aesthetic pluralism” or “nominalist historicism” (Hall, pp. 5, 66 ff.). They are anguished by and angered with Plato for not fulfilling certain promises—promises that, incidentally, Plato never actually made. The antimetaphysicians are then the true Platonists, only they now disavow the theoretical insignia and preach philosophical repentance. The unfortunate result of current antimetaphysics is that it impoverishes our fund of conceptual resources and narrows our range of critical thought.

This last point will taken up again when it can be more fruitfully explored in light of a discussion of criticism. Before doing so, however, one can note in summary that the three-pronged constructive argument sketched does a fair job of reestablishing the plausibility of metaphysics. If one connects having a metaphysics with having a world—a conception that, because of his indebtedness to Dewey and Heidegger, Rorty cannot discard—then metaphysics is a long way toward being rehabilitated. If one further admits that the grotesque pride of some metaphysicians has unwittingly been mirrored in the pretensions of those who wish to get beyond metaphysics and cease doing philosophy altogether, then surely there is good reason for giving a more modest, historical sense of metaphysics a fair hearing. Finally if the very concepts of *autonomy* and *personhood* are bound up with metaphysics, metaphysics can hardly be inimical to democracy. Metaphysics or philosophical contemplation once again takes its appropriate place and exhibits its necessity. As important as it is to take our finitude seriously (as Rorty would agree), one must recognize what both supports and is at stake in finitude.

Finding a synthetic and dialectic alternative to Rorty’s all-or-nothing formulations is Miller’s express purpose. The option is not between a concrete nominalism (i.e., positivistic Platonism) and a speculative universalism that theoretically organizes the concrete (i.e., the Eleatic ideal). Rather one begins with history—that is, finite temporality and conscious action—as the process generating appearances and consequences. History is not the playing out of one absolute order. It is the

provision of orders, systems, and logics in all their fragility, plurality, and tenacity. Once one begins counting, telling time, or making systematic judgments consequences follow (MS 19). Yet because each of these orders is fully historical its course is both tenuous and unpredictable (PH 29); any necessity, because it plays itself out in and through human acts, undergoes what all that is mortal must undergo—birth, growth, decay, even death.

Miller gives this broad account of his sense of history:

We cannot escape history, and we cannot escape the study of history. Nor is there any history at all apart from the thrust of present meanings into their yesterdays. History is a category because it is a necessary condition of the present. In history time is efficacious. . . . In summary: history avoids finality, establishes finitude, defines the relatively static, emerges from commitment and conflict, allies us with evil, and presents the universal as self-revision in terms of the necessary. . . . It is the most concrete of all categories, and one of the latest to emerge. (PC 92)

History is neither fact nor abstraction. It is a *constitutional process* whereby the very shape of the world is developed. History provides the conditions in which chance, accident, and the unique can appear but is not reducible to any of these three. It is where the universal and absolute arise but simultaneously lose their pretension to ahistoric sovereignty. It is the source and field of the relationship between the poles of nominalism and universalism with which thought has preoccupied itself—for example, the ongoing battles between the Ionians and the Eleatics. History is the category of all other metaphysical categories (see §4.1).

Historical thinking is the reorientation of how one attends to concrete experience. Rorty is still touched by the legacy of Hume's skeptical reversal of Platonism that assumed that the discrete was real and the universal mere superstition. This empiricism is as ahistoric as is Platonism—neither the forms nor the qualia of sensation are in historical time. (In this respect, the following statement by Miller might well apply to Rorty: "How often we have heard that man is finite, that he dwells in time and is subject to its limitations. We have heard this, but we have not believed it" [MP 17:5].) Miller rejects the Eleatic ideal but also cuts off the empiricists by proposing that "history is radical empiricism" (PC 94).⁸ Historical experience does not reveal a plethora of discrete entities but rather fragile continuities and orderly forms of finitude. Miller makes a case for an empiricism that addresses the *conditions* of the empirical, factual, and discrete. Miller's empiricism concerns itself with action as well as the media or vehicles of order—that is, symbols (see §§3.2 and 3.3). A symbol can be an object (e.g., a yardstick, scale, building), practice (e.g., swearing oaths, keeping promises), or formal law (e.g., the United States Constitution, rules of grammar, the Laws of Thermodynamics). These objects,

practices, or laws appear discrete; they are particular in the sense that one can either identify them through ostensive reference or distinguish them in a historical moment (MS 43). Yet such symbols are as universal and structural as they are particular. They are elements of what Miller refers to as the midworld, that *actuality* that discloses and organizes the subjective and objective, the real and the apparent (see MS 13). Without the particular object and its employment, without the specific deed, the universal falls out of sight. Similarly, lacking universals the particular cannot be distinguished (see §2.2). The mutual dependence of the particular and the universal is embodied in the symbol. The relationship is basically dialectical; it appears in action and nowhere else.

Rorty's considerations strongly suggest that the disrepute that metaphysics has fallen into is primarily a function of a limited conception of what metaphysics can mean. This limited conception is based on a narrow empiricism that dismisses all form and universality as mere illusion. There is more discontent and, indeed, philosophical resentment here than good thinking. It would be foolish to foreclose the possibility of a historical form of metaphysics. What the foregoing examination also suggests is that the contest between the contemplative life and the active life has been cast in misleadingly antithetical terms. The strict division of theory and politics—exploited by both sides in the contest—results from what Miller would argue is a misunderstanding of the form and import of history. Any project aiming at the recuperation of a philosophical life amenable to politics—not to mention a political life amenable to philosophy—necessarily leads through history.

§1.6 REINVIGORATING CRITICISM

Miller is fully in agreement with Rorty when he urges “that we try *not* to want something which stands beyond history and institutions.” Yet Miller offers a *metaphysical* way of maintaining and fortifying this relationship with our actual institutions and practices. The challenge to metaphysics must be pursued one final step further, however. As noted at the outset, democracy is grounded in an estimation of the integrity of personal experience. Metaphysics, by contrast, is assumed to move away from the individual and toward the universal in a manner that ultimately compromises personhood. With this in mind, can it not be asked if Miller's rejection of simple empiricism and his affirmation of historical universals and overindividual elements that structure experience amounts to some loss of nerve, some fleeing from finitude? Stated in other terms: Does not the appeal to these environing, symbolic conditions result in a loss of self-control or autonomy?

In this vein, Rorty can be seen as announcing a final warning when, in his essay “Pragmatism Without Method,” he speaks against “philosophical depth”:

The idea of “philosophical depth” is in the air once again, and this means, inevitably, a trip back to the Continent. This trip is by no means a bad thing in itself, but it has become associated with the idea that liberalism is both intellectually lightweight and in need of being “diagnosed.” So we now have the dismal spectacle of what [Sidney] Hook used to call “knee-jerk liberalism” (i.e., trying to figure out how to blame anything bad that happens on American ruling circles) combining with specifically philosophical *Tiefsinnigkeit* in the claim that we need “new philosophical foundations” for criticism of “contemporary bourgeois society” (i.e., the surviving parliamentary democracies). (1991, pp. 76–77)

Encouraging such deep thinking on the matter of democracy, Rorty holds, betrays not just an adherence to the sort of philosophical fantasies diagnosed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; it also reveals a profound lack of confidence in one’s local community. The search for principles and foundations could be just a sophisticated way of testifying to one’s distrust of finitude. And even if this self-styled metaphysician of democracy is not retreating all the way back to the Eleatic ideal, it is plausible to wonder whether history and institutions are, in the end, not enough for Miller.

Rorty recommends the cultivation of a certain “light-mindedness” as an antidote to metaphysics. Instead of becoming engrossed in metaphysical speculation about transcendent structures of experience, the light-minded are more pragmatic, more tolerant, and more liberal. Light-mindedness promotes action not contemplation, democratic solidarity and not metaphysical unity. Light-mindedness is autonomy taken to its limit; it is the final blow dealt to metaphysics, contemplation, and absolutism.

Does actualism fall prey to these criticisms? Is actualism, finally, at odds with itself? The response must be negative. Yet actualism is liable to this misunderstanding. For, as stated earlier, the key to Miller’s philosophical approach is finding a middle route between Parmenides’s Eleaticism and Heraclitus’s Ionianism. This *via media* is, of course, attacked from both sides—that is, the Eleatics will see actualism as succumbing to relativism while the Ionians will judge it as unduly wedded to the absolute. Rorty’s assessment of *Tiefsinnigkeit* only attacks a misinterpretation of actualism. An interest in universals and formal structures is not necessarily contrary to the democratic impulse toward autonomy. It is rather the flight from universals and formal structures that undermines the search for autonomy. This is an interesting and paradoxical turn—those laboring to reestablish the dignity of the active, political life have actually compromised politics by ridding it of all elements of contemplation.

In Rorty’s case this wayward search for autonomy has led him to latch onto a largely instrumental conception of reason in which action is a mode of fabrication and calculation.⁹ Organized around the key metaphors of *copying* and *web*

weaving, this version of pragmatism reduces all reason to calculation and makes all imperatives hypothetical in character. Life is a continual process of dissolving confusions toward the end of increasing local-control and decreasing psychic confusion. Once present difficulties are resolved, instrumental reason has fulfilled its task and thought remains at rest until presented with a new difficulty. What this suggests is that all problems, and thus all instances of reasoning, are essentially accidental—that is, contingent upon conditions of one’s environment and the demands of one’s hypothetical plans of action. Rorty’s approach is that of a person who wants to get *beyond* a problem rather than one who realizes that she must live intelligently and responsibly *with* a problem. Miller proposes, by contrast, that certain problems are *constitutional*—that is, a condition of having a world and an identity. And even those problems that are not in themselves necessary are still important ingredients in the structure that articulates a given person’s sense of self. Problems are then critical—and subject to thoughtful criticism—in that they are part of the very contour of one’s ordered experience. Each person must not only find the instrumental means for addressing the problems that life tosses her way. She must also find the philosophical resources to compose and reflect on her inherently problematic identity and world.

Miller would of course concur with Rorty in his insistence about staying on the surface *so long as* the contrast is with the sort of philosophical depth promoted by Platonism. Autonomy requires a modicum of control over both self and environment. Instrumental reasoning may serve well to establish *local-control* via the construction and continual repair of the means of facilitating plans and attaining goods. Yet instrumental reasoning falls considerably short of maintaining *self-control* because it refuses to recognize those symbolic and quasitranscendental forms constituting individual identities. As Miller notes, without a sense of the quasitranscendent—that is, symbolic modes of order—ethics devolves to the management of accidental experience (MP 4:1).

For Miller *criticism* is the activity by which persons attain local- as well as self-control. Criticism is not the rearrangement of certain states of affairs so as to better suit plans of action. It addresses and revises the very form of one’s world—that is, authoritative symbolic modes of the midworld. Criticism moves toward that form of freedom wherein “we see the awful, but responsible, spectacle of man’s reinterpretations of himself and nature, and reassessment of our heritage” (PC 103–4). In order to participate in this liberating and responsible form of activity one must be prepared to engage in metaphysics. For metaphysics in Miller’s sense of the term is not mere speculation. It is a mode of inquiry that, in the vein of transcendental philosophy, seeks after the conditions of one’s experience and action (PH 19–20 1952–53, 27).

Philosophy in its best sense is always a mode of criticism (FI 265–67). Criticism, in turn, is always practical. The pretension to criticism without metaphysics

does not attain to the level of autonomy in which Miller is interested. Criticism that does not take the form of experience into account is little more than rearranging the pieces that one is given to play with using (although perhaps not cognizant of) the established rules. The stronger sense of criticism means that attention is directed toward the very rules of the game and not a play to be made within the game. Criticism may be revolutionary; coping can never be. Even when it is not revolutionary, and only connotes a reflective maintenance of the conditions of endeavor, criticism still suggests a level of responsibility to which coping cannot attain.

The language of instrumental reasoning is, finally, too blithe to account for those “dark emergencies which are the occasion of desperate attempts to maintain civic order and personal integrity” (PC 123). Democracy requires metaphysical categories and a metaphysical vocabulary:

It is a great illusion to suppose that government will protect rights when actual individuals display nothing but desires in their wills, and nothing but opinions in their minds. Such doctrines paralyze resolve. They are degenerate, and they invite the conqueror and the despot. What shows men to be free is their capacity to recognize and revise the grounds of their choices and of their opinions. (PC 73)

What Kant proposed was the capacity of thought to police itself. He did not carry out that idea. Since then it has grown. . . . The idealism of the future will be a philosophy of history, of action, or a self-generating, lawful finitude. Such are the conditions of a metaphysics of democracy. (PC 74)

Becoming aware of, and taking responsibility for, the conditions of one’s endeavors—that is, the ideals, principles, and laws guiding action—requires a retrieval of metaphysics. The sense of metaphysics corresponding to this call for responsibility has already been articulated above—that is, the apprehension of the conditions of our own endeavors that Miller terms “the moral universe” (EC 1; see §5.1). It is in terms of a moral universe that action and autonomy make sense, and it is to the midworld and its history that we must look in order to ascertain what such a universe looks like.

§1.7 CONCLUSION

Elucidating Miller’s position vis-à-vis Rorty’s has been more than a simple exercise of refuting antimetaphysical claims. It has been an opportunity for criticizing and revising the very sense of *metaphysics*. For there is good reason for democrats to be wary of metaphysics and to guard their principal interests with care. The history of philosophy, not to mention the history of political institutions, provides ample evidence of how metaphysical assumptions can be antagonistic to democratic

practice. Setting democratic principles against traditional forms of metaphysics proves useful for fostering a reappraisal of the significance of metaphysics. In this manner the question *A metaphysics of democracy?* reanimates metaphysics by saving it from both those absolutely assured of its importance as well as those absolutely assured of its insignificance.

Miller's sense of the pertinence of metaphysics is in line with the democratic concern for the integrity of individual experience, the autonomy of persons, and democratic solidarity. The primary aim of actualism is *not* providing a description of all that is (i.e., a *theory* of the real). The key is the *practical* question of authority. Miller's actualism is guided by the concern for putting persons and political communities in touch with the conditions of their own actions, institutions, and ideals (DT 11, 155). Moreover this assessment suggests that democratic understandings of autonomy require the contemplative life once again be joined with the active life. Considered in its fullest sense as the life of an authoritative and reflective person, the political must be united with the contemplative. Politics gains nothing by rejecting the philosophical inheritance of twenty-five centuries. Rather one must see how philosophy and politics are mutually constitutive: Philosophy is of political significance insofar as it is the activity of criticism and, thus, concerns the conduct of public life, while politics is of philosophical import in that it models and provides a vehicle for criticism.