Richard rorty on vocabulary philosophy essay

Maybe the most important concept in Rorty's pragmatist view on knowledge is that of " vocabulary", by means of which he hopes to explain human knowledge, scientific progress and cultural change without appealing to an understanding of language as medium between us and meanings, ideas as mental items, reality, and other nonlinguistic entities.

A major factor which Rorty thinks to have supported a representational conception of language is a preferential attention given to single sentences over against vocabularies. And that is because whenever we speak about sentences, we tend to decide their correctness by relating them to ' facts' they reflect. " But it is not so easy when we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies as wholes", says Rorty. The turn towards vocabularies begins with a simple observation, namely that " all problems, topics, and distinctions are language-relative – the results of our having chosen to use a certain vocabulary". For him, the vocabulary that shapes our speech and behaviour, sometimes called ' final-vocabulary', is the first domain to be understood if we want to give a proper description of our intellectual and cultural history.

" All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's final vocabulary."

Although this notion of vocabulary is considered by some authors as a development of T. Kuhn's conception of " normal discourse", whereby a particular group agrees on a specific " paradigm" or " disciplinary matrix", that is, standardized and widely accepted texts and formulations, a sense of what is real, questions about what is worth asking, what answer make sense, and what criteria of assessment are to be used, shared practices and skills, the general impression is that Rorty, while often including these elements in his accounts of cultural or scientific dynamics, lays the emphasis on the function certain words have in creating this dynamics. Relating to Heidegger's thought, Rorty writes:

" His [Heidegger's] answer is that there would have to be certain " elementary words" – words which have " force" apart from their use by what he calls " the common understanding". The common understanding is what a language-game theory catches."

For Rorty, as for his Heidegger too, a vocabulary has not to be confused with a language game that presupposes certain ways of using these words. What counts first of all are not sentences and discourses, but the single words we use within these sentences and discourses. " Heidegger is telling us that the words do matter: that we are, above all, the people who have used those words."

The distinction between vocabulary and sentences or beliefs is an important one for a shift from the hermeneutical pattern I presented in the first part of this paper. Such a shift would be facilitated by a favouring the image of beliefs and sentences as epiphenomena of a vocabulary instead of one of

vocabulary as epiphenomenon of thoughts, realities, or ideas. "[W]hat matters in the end are changes in the vocabulary then changes in belief." The nondeterministic relation between vocabulary and beliefs, the fact that choosing a vocabulary does not imply choosing a given set of beliefs, is explained by J. Rouse as follows: " The introduction of new terminology cannot reliably compel the inferences we endorse or prohibit those we reject, for the introduction of the terms cannot determine their subsequent use." For Rorty, not only that more important then the inferences and the beliefs we intend to assess are the words we use to formulate our arguments, moral principles, etc., but all our beliefs are to be perceived as functions of a vocabulary. "[E]very specific theory view comes to be seen as one more vocabulary, one more description, one more way of speaking".

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very complex nature of European cultural expressions, differences between various traditions, political systems. Take, for ex., democracy – various forms, no clear definition, jsut commonalities between various usages.

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Another important observation is that vocabularies are, as products of particular communities, contingent, and not imposed by any sort of reality. To remind the previous discussion, vocabularies are always contextual. This contingency is, for Rorty, an inclusive one, embracing all areas of humanity. But, in his opinion, he is not alone in subscribing to such a radical view.

" The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer

worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance.”

This contingency comes as a natural consequence of the fact that language is not a medium, and, thus, not determined by that which it would be a medium for. Our vocabulary is not a logical necessity, a decision based on our reasoning or discoveries.

“ Europe did not decide to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.”

Not being a decision we make, the conclusion is that, at a cultural level, we just happen to speak a vocabulary. But loosing the habit of using certain words for that of using others is, nonetheless, not a chaotic act, as we will see later.

For the moment I will focus on what Rorty calls ‘ final vocabularies’. According to him, a final vocabulary “ is one which we cannot help using, for when we reach it, our spade is turned. We cannot undercut it because we have no metavocabulary in which to phrase criticism of it.”. Or, put otherwise,

"[i]t is final in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as we can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or resort to force."

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democracy, freedom, person, human dignity, … – final vocabulary

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Rorty refers to two kinds of terms that constitute a final vocabulary. Among the first ones, he mentions such " thin, flexible, and ubiquitous" words as " true", " good", " right", and " beautiful". Among the second kind are " thicker, more rigid, and more parochial" terms like " Christ", " England", " professional standards", " decency", " rigorous", or " creative". These last words are, in his view, the most decisive ones.

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introduce ex. from the political language

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In fact, not only that a theory depends on its vocabulary, but criticizing this theory requires one to resort to it. But, if a vocabulary cannot be assessed by referring to meanings or realities mediated or reflected by its words, then it follows that there is no non-linguistic criterion to decide between them and that they are, from this point of view, equal.

"[N]othing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking at this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture – for persons and cultures are … incarnated vocabularies."

Unlike sentences, which can be subjected to criteria of correctness (one can think about its coherence within a system of sentences, or about grammatical rules), there are no such criteria for the final vocabularies we use.

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Europe's mission in the world. Civilizational destiny. Intrecultural dialogue.

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But to see persons and cultures as incarnated vocabularies might seem, for some of his critics, a " too bleached out" conception to be able to make sense of what people do. His ' minimalist' view is accused to make moral life into something shallow and trivial, " with the result that it becomes unintelligible how people could be motivated to risk their lives for noble or worthy causes or … could carry through on the loyalties and obligations of everyday life at all".

For example, the claim that different fundamental orientations in life can be characterized in terms of people choosing or growing up into different final vocabularies, where these are considered to be " the fundamental value

words" in terms of which they give expression to their aspirations and assessments, words like " decent", " noble", " smart", " loving", etc., is, for these critics, simply far from enabling us to grasp the core of why people risk everything to do what is right, the motivations and commitments that move them to actions. The conclusion would be that to explain everything just by saying that a person accepts a vocabulary or another means loosing " the ability to gain insight into the thick weave of moral concepts, deep commitments, and shared forms of life that make moral agency possible at all".

Nonetheless, this kind of criticism seems to ignore that, by choosing ' vocabulary' as main explanatory concept, Rorty does not rigidly identify our theories or moral principles and behavior with a vocabulary. The relation between the terminology we use and the sentences we formulate is not one of determination but one of conditioning. As we saw, a vocabulary does not compel us to certain inferences, but just makes them possible. People do not die, of course, for the " fundamental value words" they use, but their motivations, their aspirations and assessments, their core values worth dying for, are moments on paths initiated by these words. Cultures are not simply vocabularies, but vocabularies incarnated.

But, if our vocabularies cannot be compared with one another by invoking a reality or a meaning behind our words, can we decide at all among them? Can we consider for example the vocabulary used in contemporary physics as better than those used in antiquity or everything we can do is to accept a generalized form of relativism with regard to our words and sentences?

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Europe's contemporary political vocabulary vs. other vocab. (dictatorship, religious radicalism...)

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Since for Rorty nothing outside our vocabularies can decide to speak in a way or another, the latter option seems to be the natural consequence of such a theory. Still, for Rorty, we can assess a vocabulary as better than another, and such a comparison is not founded on ' Reality' or ' Meaning' itself, but on their capacity of " coping" with the reality we experience. And is precisely the notion of " coping" that which can reveal us the specificity of the rortian thinking.

As we remember from the presentation of D. Davidson view on metaphor, one of the major ideas this author puts forth is that a metaphor does not say or mean something, but does something. A metaphor has, therefore, to be placed in the domain of usage and not in that of meaning. Rorty finds this observation as particularly useful for his version of pragmatism, since doing does not require an appeal to those non-human realities mentioned before. But a more important consequence is that a metaphor does not belong to the logical space permitted by the vocabulary in use. It does not represent a completion of this space or a logical-philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. " It is a call to change one's language and one's life, rather then a proposal about how to systematize either."

Following Davidson's idea that metaphors don't have a place in a language game, and, therefore, don't have a meaning, Rorty believes that "[t]ossing a

metaphor into a text is like using italics, or illustrations, or odd punctuation or formats". Not having a place in a language game means that metaphors do not function in a familiar way and that they are parasitic vis-à-vis the vocabulary at hand.

" Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was " all metaphor" would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble. For even if we agree that languages are not media of representation or expression, they will remain media of communication, tools for social interaction, ways of tying oneself up with other human beings."

To see metaphor as the unfamiliar use of familiar words will bring about, among many others, three important consequences. The first one is that metaphors are not discovered but invented. A metaphor is not the result of a logical analysis, of inferences or of empirical observation. In fact, Rorty suggests us that it doesn't really matter how did Saint Paul get to the metaphorical use of agape, Aristotle to that of ousia, or Newton to that of gravitas. The only thing for us to care is that the trick was done. " There had never been such things before." A second consequence is that metaphors are not reasons but causes for our changes of beliefs and desires. Not having a place in the logical space of a language in use, metaphors cannot serve as justifications for the introduction of new beliefs but just as causes for reweaving our beliefs. They make possible novel theories, leading to our ability to do lots of things, e. g., " be more sophisticated and interesting people, emancipate ourselves from tradition, transvalue our values, gain or

lose religious faith". A third consequence is that metaphors are the means by which a language and the semantic areas belonging to it are extended. Rorty relates here the davidsonian idea that ' metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use' to Quine's belief that metaphor governs both the growth of language and our acquisition of it, giving thus to metaphor the main generative role behind our use of language.

These consequences, and especially the last one, reveal the reasons Rorty has for claiming that metaphors make possible knowledge and not, as some would think, expresses it. Because, if metaphors pertain to the domain of use and, in the same time, are responsible for the renewal of our linguistic practices, then they should be discussed primarily in terms of effects upon our thinking in general, and knowledge, in particular. But what is the nature of these affects? We should remember at this point that Rorty considers inference and empirical observation as occurring within the logical space of our language, whereas using old words in new ways leads to decisive changes of this language, that is, to changes of the logical space that traces the contours of our inferential and observational possibilities. A new vocabulary becomes, thus, the starting point for new language games, new inferences, new approaches to reality. For Rorty, then, Galileo, Hegel and Yeats are " people in whose minds new vocabularies developed, thereby equipping them with tools for doing things which could not even have been envisaged before these tools were available". But a new vocabulary not only helps us doing new things, it also permits noticing new and unpredictable within the old language events. The great thinkers are, therefore, the most idiosyncratic, and metaphoric redescriptions are the mark of genius and of

revolutionary leaps forward. Hence, the process of knowledge and the most substantial paradigmatic changes will be perceived as generating in linguistic innovations or in the process of inventing a new language. The poet becomes, then, the central character of history. " A sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species"

But not any linguistic innovation, metaphorical redescriptions or vocabulary change can cause knowledge and revolutionary leaps forward. These concepts are not by themselves sufficient to give a plausible account of the latter. Consequently, Rorty brings into discussion two additional issues, namely those of utility and of literalization. I will refer to them shortly.

The first issue, that of the utility of the newly introduced metaphors, helps Rorty to avoid ascribing to any linguistic change or innovation an epistemological role, and, at the same time, to strengthen his pragmatist orientation.

"[W]hen some private obsession produces a metaphor which we can find a use for, we speak of genius, rather than of eccentricity… The difference between genius and fantasy is not the difference between impresses which lock on to something universal, some antecedent reality out there in the world or deep within the self, and those which do not. Rather, it is the difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people – happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given

time. … To sum up, poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need."

Here again, Rorty draws heavily from Davidson's argument that metaphors do not express but just do something. For the former, the linguistic idiosyncrasies are useful in so far as they can fit the need of the speaker in producing the intended effect in the listener's mind. Once a community perceives a new metaphor as suited for its practical, theoretical, political, etc., purposes, that metaphor will become part of the vocabulary in use, the consequences of this dynamic being either a widening of the latter, or a modification of it by making other metaphors useless or even misleading. In K. Kolenda's words, " a metaphor will introduce a new bit of vocabulary into a language, thus contributing to its growth or change". This aspect of Rorty's philosophy will become clearer, however, within the discussion on vocabulary comparison and on possible criteria of choosing among two or more such vocabularies.

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EU and the rest of the world.

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Nevertheless, in order to have a place in the logical space of a language, that is, to function as reason, and not only as cause, of changing beliefs and to be accepted as valid term of an inferential judgment with epistemological status, a metaphor needs more than just being perceived as useful by a linguistic community. It needs, in Rorty's opinion, to die, i. e. to become

literalised. And that requirement comes from the fact that, not having a place in the logical space of a language, a metaphorical sentence cannot be a truth-value candidate. Such a sentence cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed, argued for or against. To use Rorty's plastic vocabulary, ' one can only savour it or spit it out'. Still, a metaphorical expression, or rather a sentence that is formed by means of such expressions, is not doomed to remain so.

" If it is savoured rather than spat out, the sentence may be repeated, caught up, bandied about. Then it will gradually require a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game. It will thereby cease to be a metaphor – or, if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. It will be just one more, literally true or literally false, sentence of the language."

By changing its status within a language from metaphorical use to literality, an expression changes in fact its function, from cause of various thoughts to reason for them. In this latter case, the dead metaphor will be able to transmit information, like any other literal expressions. It becomes, thus, part of our argumentative discourse. For Rorty, most of our language, be it cultural, philosophical, sociological or political language, originates in this kind of literalization of metaphorical innovations. Once a metaphor dies, it will serve as contrasting background for new emerging metaphors.

But Rorty does not deplore the death of the metaphors. The birth of a metaphor, when coincides with a public need that makes it active, is indeed a happy moment, a significant step forward. Yet, the great thinkers provided

not only useful metaphors, but also instruments of knowledge, linguistic innovations that became, in time, essential elements in our epistemic behaviour. The pragmatist, in this case Rorty himself, thinks that exploring the newly suggested paths of thought initiated by idiosyncratic language of the great thinkers is the basic pay-off from the philosopher's work.

" He thinks of the thinker as serving the community, and of his thinking as futile unless it is followed up by a reweaving of the community's web of belief. The reweaving will assimilate, by gradually literalizing, the new metaphors which the thinker has provided. The proper honour to pay to new, vibrantly alive metaphors, is to help them become dead metaphors as quickly as possible, to rapidly reduce them to the status of tools of social progress."

Some important questions, though, concern the actual relation between vocabularies, the reasons they succeed or confront one another, the possibility of assessing one vocabulary as better then another. Linked to these questions is the problem of radical epistemological scepticism as a consequence of the assumption that there are no external criteria to decide among vocabularies. Next, I will try to outline the main ideas advanced by Rorty, which could shed a better light on these issues.

As I mentioned before, Rorty is a naturalist and, as such, he sometimes borrows images from the natural sciences, as he does when explaining how vocabularies succeed, coexist or eliminate one another. Bringing his own interpretation of the authors he admires, Rorty considers that, while language is seen by positivist history of culture as gradually shaping itself

around the contours of the physical world and by romantic history of culture as gradually bringing Spirit to self-consciousness, " Nietzschean history of culture, and Davidsonian philosophy of language, see language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms – not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly". This evolutionary image of history relies on an evolutionary image of human products: they are merely tools for helping us to cope with the world. Against a view of words and beliefs that gain steadily in representing power, Rorty puts forth the picture of human beings that do their best to cope with the environment, to develop tools which will enable them to adapt better to this environment, tools among which we can name beliefs, words, and languages. Rorty's ideal is to become fully Darwinian in his thinking, that is, " to stop thinking of words as representations and to start thinking of them as nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment".

Seen as tools, as means of adaptation to the environment, our vocabularies are to be discussed not in terms of representing power but in those of suitability for various purposes. Our words help us interact with the world and with each other. They help us live better, control better, carry out our tasks, achieve our goals. Looking back at the history of human culture, Rorty agrees with Heidegger that there are words with special power, power to reveal realities, events, truths that cannot be revealed otherwise. But, unlike the German thinker, he does not ground them metaphysically, but pragmatically. Consequently, terms ' efficiency', ' successfulness', and ' profitability' occupy a central place in his philosophy, a better vocabulary meaning, for Rorty, a more efficient or profitable vocabulary.

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European cultural vocabulary: democracy, person, human rights, etc.

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For Rorty, when a change in language allows better descriptions, that help us predict and control more phenomena so far baffling or unnoticed, then the vocabularies that help us bring this change about are to be welcomed as truth-revealing. Thus, the vocabularies used by Newton and Galileo helped to predict the world easier that the one used by Aristotle. And that not because the words of Galileo, for example, fit the world better, but because they happen to work better than any previous tools. " Once we found out what could be done with a Galilean vocabulary, nobody was much interested in doing the things which used to be done (and which Thomists thought should still be done) with an Aristotelian vocabulary." And the same could be said about the vocabulary of the latter Yeats compared with the vocabulary of Rossetti, or of that of Freud compared with the Greek one.

" For terms like " infantile" or " sadistic" or " obsessional" or " paranoid",…, enable us to sketch a narrative of our own development, our idiosyncratic moral struggle, which is far more finely textured, far more custom tailored to our individual case, then the moral vocabulary which the philosophical tradition offered us."

As suggested in this passage, we can speak of some vocabularies as not so efficient or profitable as others. Examples of unprofitable terminology are: ' the nature of truth', ' the nature of human being', ' the nature of God', ' essence', ' accident', ' substance', ' form'. Such a terminology proved to

create unsolvable questions and unprofitable themes, to complicate our understanding of the world, even to generate harmful social practices. Rorty urges us to try eliminating this kind of expressions and to see how we manage without them. He perceives the history of human culture as a succession of vocabularies, as a process of passing from a vocabulary that proves inefficient or nonprofitable to a better one. What we are always doing is to create a new historical situated vocabulary and to react against the one already in place. What we, or rather the great thinkers, did was to come with an alternative, with a proposal: ' Let's see what happens if we try it this way.' It's a proposal to change a vocabulary that creates more problems than solves with one that ' promises great things'. To avoid a possible misunderstanding and watery version of changing vocabularies, Rorty underlines that he does not say that something should be called y and not x, but, when the case requires it, we should stop using those language games that employ x and y. Once we change a vocabulary, we change the questions to be asked. We drop old questions, as no more interesting, with new ones, which seem more interesting. It could be said that we choose vocabularies as we choose our friends and heroes. We are always receptive to that which incite admiration, help us dealing with the world, offers us solutions, is relevant for our situation, and is beneficial for us, for our purposes and projects.

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avoiding a vocabulary that organizes the world in terms of destiny (leads to wars), race, religion, God, sins, truth

European history is the history of a vocabulary.

how we can understand human rights: not as a description of a reality (this would be a very week argument) but as a concept that is best suited for our interests and that leads to less cruelty, more consideration for the human life, to a tolerant society, etc.

The contingency of our (European) vocabulary, culture, political view.

The European vocabulary is not above the other vocabularies, does not understand them, does not explain them. But it works differently and it works towards a better society.

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Since for Rorty there is no metalanguage, no criteria beyond particular vocabularies, criticism is just a matter of looking at one vocabulary, then at the other, comparing them with one another, and not by invoking an absolute language. The progress, both for individuals and for communities, consists in arguing using new words, in replacing a way of talking with another.

" What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather then for arguing well, is the chief instrument for cultural change. What political utopians since the French Revolution have sensed is not that an enduring, substratal human nature has been suppressed or repressed by " unnatural" or " irrational" social institutions but rather that changing languages and other social practices may produce human beings of a sort that had never before existed."

Consequently, Rorty recommends us to see every specific theoretical view as yet one more vocabulary, one more description, one more way of speaking, and all the great thinkers as abbreviations for a certain final vocabulary and for the sorts of beliefs and desires typical of its users.

Not only vocabularies are seen by Rorty as tools for coping with things, means of adaptation to the environment, but beliefs and theories too. Consequently, much of what have been said about the former can also be held about the latter. And that especially with regard to their dynamics throughout history of human culture.

" The pragmatist thinks that the tradition needs to be utilized, as one utilizes a bag of tools. Some of these tools, these ' conceptual instruments' – including some which continue to have undeserved prestige – will turn out no longer to have a use, and can just be tossed out. Others can be refurbished. Sometimes new tools may have to be invented on the spot."

Through his pragmatist conception on vocabulary changes and intellectual progress, Rorty takes distance from any image that depicts human cultural or epistemological behaviour by using metaphors of finding, rather then of making. Opposing geography to geology, redescription to gradually grasping the nature of things, and choosing the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species, he tries to abandon the spatial terminology of ' depths' and ' heights' with regard to words, beliefs and inquiry, for a more human one, of producing, creating, and coping, and to favour diversification and novelty instead of agreement with what is considered to be already given, with the antecedently present.

" The lesson derived from studying philosophy and its subdisciplines in this historicist way will be the realization that our present views on what the world is like and what we want our societies to be are amenable to changes, corrections, and departures that are not the result of finding but of making. […] Rorty's humanistic pragmatism is moved by the hope that humanity can keep bringing into being values that will help us cope with life intelligently and effectively."

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Critical theorists and international relations

Rorty's thought can have deep implications for critical thinking within international relations. Thus, in his anti-foundationalism many international relations theorists have found a productive resource to engage with human rights debates and the divide between cosmopolitanism and communitarism. Authors like J. Brasset, M. Cochran, R. Bernstein, N. Geras and C. Mouffe, to

name but a few, draw the attention on the contribution Rorty can bring to

the critical approach in international relations and to the discussion of

subjects such as t