

# Who are we when we are ‘Us, at Our Best?’

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## Abstract

Recently, political commentators have taken to characterizing our dystopian present (or near-future) as either Huxleyan or Orwellian. This pairing can be seen as an invitation to reconsider the philosophical distinction between persuasion and force, a distinction the interrogation of which was a career-defining task for Richard Rorty. In this article, I suggest that Rorty’s interrogations, and specifically his claims regarding what it means to think of ourselves, at our best, can help us to gain a firmer grasp on the nature of the dystopian present (or near-future) we inhabit and of which contrasting pictures were offered by Huxley and Orwell.

## Keywords

Richard Rorty, persuasion, force, dystopia, Huxley, Orwell, attention economy

In recent years, political commentators have oscillated between characterizing our dystopian present (or near-future) as either Huxleyan or Orwellian. Often taking their cue from Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), some have articulated the contrast between Aldous Huxley and George Orwell in terms of pacification vs. fear (Reiff 2021), others in terms of the absence vs. the ubiquity of politics (Keen 2022) and others in terms of the contrast between distraction vs. surveillance (Benlself 2021; Illing and Beers 2024). The Huxley–Orwell pairing also can be invoked, as I will invoke it here, as an invitation to reconsider the philosophical distinction between persuasion and force. In recent years, with the rise of a so-called attention economy in which concerns about persuasion seem to have displaced concerns about coercion among critics of our dystopian present (or near-future), the Huxley–Orwell pairing has swung decidedly in Huxley’s favour. The technologies that organize the

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attention economy are taken to be about pleasure and distraction rather than power and surveillance. However, if James Williams's claim in *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (2018) that 'persuasion became industrialized' over the course of the twentieth century is correct, then it is worth revisiting this distinction between persuasion and force to determine its contemporary nature and relevance (Williams 2018, 28). In an attention economy, one dominated by digital technologies and new media, are we in the realm of persuasion or force? Are means of persuasion that have been captured and exploited by commercial interests still properly called means of 'persuasion?' In what follows, I turn to Richard Rorty, for whom interrogating the distinction between persuasion and force was a career-defining task. His interrogations provide guidance in asking and answering these questions and can help us to gain a firmer grasp on the nature of the dystopian present (or near-future) we inhabit and of which contrasting pictures were offered by Huxley and Orwell.

My appeal to Rorty in this context might seem surprising. After all, some efforts to theorize contemporary political crises, and especially their apparent post-truth features, have laid responsibility for this crisis of truth at the feet of the so-called postmodern thinkers, Rorty among them. The accusation suggests that Rorty's attack on philosophical theories of truth, and the alternative conceptions he offered – that is, his view that truth is 'what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying' (Rorty 1979, 176) or his claim that warrant is a 'sociological matter' (Rorty, 1993, 449) – renders him responsible for, or at least complicit in, the rise of post-truth politics.<sup>1</sup> Relatedly, Rorty's views have led some to contend that, because he abandons truth, he likewise abandons the idea that we can persuade the anti-democrat from her anti-democratic views.<sup>2</sup> It is, in part, Rorty's levity about the role and importance of truth in politics, these critics claim, that have led to our dystopian present (or near-future).

These critics' concerns are motivated by the fact that, with few notable exceptions, we philosophers have seen ourselves as advocates and defenders of persuasion over force. Even more than this, we have taken our task to be defining norms for and consequently adjudicating efforts at persuasion. According to Rorty, the Western philosophical tradition, extending from Plato through Descartes and Kant and to recent analytic philosophy, has had as its goal uncovering the criteria that comprise a neutral framework to be deployed in service of distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate contributions to inquiry. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty refers to the assumption serving to underwrite this goal as the 'commensuration thesis', according to which 'there is a permanent neutral framework whose "structure" philosophy can display' (Rorty 1979, 315). According to proponents, this framework can be deployed to distinguish and adjudicate among kinds: inquiry from 'mere' interpretation, fact from 'mere' opinion, reality from 'mere' appearance, justice from 'mere' loyalty and reason from 'mere' sentiment.<sup>3</sup> Whether that framework prioritizes accurate representation of a mind-independent reality or the gradual piecing together of a coherent picture of the whole, the underlying assumption has been the same: a neutral framework exists, and it is the task of the philosopher to discover and wield it.

What Rorty aimed to do in his work was to upend this assumption. Ever the provocateur, Rorty's questions have always been: How would philosophy look if we stopped

prioritizing this task? How would our lives change, and how would our relations with others be altered, if we stopped looking for a timeless, neutral framework by which all contributions to debate could be measured and either accepted as valid or rejected as nonsense? By his own measure, Rorty was not the only nor was he the first to try to sidestep this traditional philosophical approach. Opposition to the commensuration thesis is a theme that brings together otherwise disparate thinkers whom Rorty holds up as philosophical heroes and who thus find pride of place in his own work, from James and Dewey, to Heidegger and Gadamer, Quine and Davidson, Lyotard and Derrida, and Kuhn and Feyerabend. He casts the position of such thinkers as anti-authoritarian, drawing a parallel, throughout his career, between this anti-authoritarianism in the philosophical sphere and Enlightenment anti-authoritarianism in the religious sphere.<sup>4</sup>

With this rejection comes not only a different understanding of what it means to do philosophy but also a redefinition of what it means to be rational. To be rational, for the philosophical authoritarian, is to know and correctly use the criteria, discovered by philosophy, that comprise this framework. Even more than this, it is to be answerable to these criteria. Rationality involves pointing to the relevant criteria to adjudicate any particular claim. Abandon the criteria – indeed, even the belief that such criteria exist – and one likewise abandons rational persuasion and is left only with irrational force to reach agreement. By contrast, on the anti-authoritarian view described in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as hermeneutics, ‘to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology – from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put – and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one’s own’ (Rorty 1979, 318). On this view, Rorty contends, the line between the rational and nonrational is drawn ‘sociologically (in terms of a distinction between persuasion and force) rather than methodologically (in terms of the distinction between possession and lack of explicit criteria)’ (Rorty 1991, 48).<sup>5</sup> A person is rightly called ‘rational’ when they use persuasion to get others to adopt a belief but ‘irrational’ when they resort to force to get others to adopt a belief. But ‘rational’, here, does not name something specifically metaphysical or epistemological. Rather, it is a term of approbation, it marks approval of the method a person has chosen when trying to encourage belief change in others.<sup>6</sup> In understanding the distinction between the rational and the nonrational as sociological, Rorty is claiming that the distinction raises an empirical question, the answer to which is better ascertained empirically than theoretically. This then becomes a moral question: What do we accept as a legitimate means of persuasion? Where do we, at this present time and in this particular context, draw the line between morally acceptable persuasion and morally unacceptable force? For Rorty, the question of morality is prior to the question of rationality.

This is why, on his anti-authoritarian view, hermeneutics sees speakers as ‘persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by *civility* rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground’ (Rorty 1979, 318; emphasis added). It is civility, a moral ideal or set of virtues, rather than a reason that is given shape by its allegiance to a philosophically discoverable, timeless, neutral framework for inquiry, that distinguishes persuasion from force. Civility, in turn, is embodied not only in an ‘interest in avoiding brainwashing’ but also in ‘a positive valuation of literacy, liberal education, a free press,

free universities, and genial tolerance of Socratic gadflies and Feyerabendian tricksters' (Rorty 1993, 454). These are interests and values that we have inherited as a result of our liberal history. They are contingent, but they are ours, and they are, Rorty thinks, worth defending.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the difference between rational persuasion and force is limned by these interests and values and the institutions intended to safeguard them.

Thus, for Rorty, things like imagined conversations and stories, rather than just inference, count as forms of rational persuasion. In a 2000 exchange with Hilary Putnam, an exchange that continues a decades-long conversation they have as friends and friendly critics of each other's work, Rorty admits he 'take[s] stories more seriously than Putnam does' because he is better able to resist the metaphysical urge for ahistorical, transcendent purposes beyond coping (Rorty 2000, 89). Sometimes, Rorty suggests these stories are constructed out of imagined conversations with others, and particularly others who we might worry have doubts about what we are doing or thinking of doing (Rorty 2000, 89). This is an experience many of us are likely familiar with – you imagine what your parents might say about a career change you're considering, or what your friends might say about a new romantic partner, or what your colleagues might say about a novel research area you're exploring. In fact, you might even imagine what a philosopher you're writing about might say about what you've written about them. Engaging in such imagined conversations, Rorty contends, gives us a way to 'reassure ourselves of our own rationality – to convince ourselves that we are not being caught up by something merely vogueish or merely self-interested' (Rorty 2000, 89).

Moreover, 'These imaginary conversations provide material for the stories we tell ourselves in order to decide whether we are progressing or regressing' (Rorty 2000, 89). Consider a politician or activist, trying to figure out whether to support or oppose a particular policy proposal. They might imagine a conversation with someone they admire, and either follow the path under consideration, because those they admire (imaginatively) approve of their choice and they see the option as progress, or abandon the path, because those they admire (imaginatively) disapprove of their choice and they see the option as regress. We tell a story in which the admiration or disappointment of our heroes partly determines what kind of story we live. All this is to say that, for Rorty, 'rational persuasion' is capacious; it captures a broader collection of the means of persuasion we language-users have at our disposal. It involves more than argumentation that appeals to neutral criteria. It involves real stories and imagined conversations as well as informal norms and the institutionalized protection of civility.

Of course, Rorty recognized the challenge presented by his recommendation to abandon belief in and the search for the framework that could permit us to distinguish appropriate and inappropriate methods of trying to encourage belief change in others. The recommended absence brings with it a vacuum, and we are tempted to rush in and fill it with something – anything – that will give us a firm ground upon which we can stand when we assert 'what you are saying is nonsense' or 'you are simply being irrational'. Feyerabendian- (and Rortyan-) style opposition to the commensuration thesis, that is, to traditional, authoritarian philosophies, is resisted, even attacked, because, in the same way that the death of a monarch can leave a vacuum that rival powers seek to exploit, abandoning faith in the existence of a neutral framework for inquiry leaves a vacuum in

which, it seems, ‘anything goes’ – even ‘mere’ stories and imagined conversations (Rorty 1979, 315). According to defenders of traditional philosophies, ‘To suggest that there is *no* such common ground seems to endanger rationality. To question the need for commensuration seems the first step toward a return to a war of all against all’ (Rorty 1979, 317). Indeed, it is just this worry that prompts the sorts of criticisms offered by critics of Rorty, noted at the outset.

Yet despite these criticisms, just as Rorty (the liberal democrat) would not want to see a new monarch ascend to the throne, Rorty (the pragmatist) does not want to see a new (supposedly) neutral framework put in place. In both cases, the search for redemption in the existence of an unassailable authority figure, like Reality or Truth or God, is understandable but misguided.<sup>8</sup> This insight – that ‘There is no wholesale, epistemological way to direct, or criticize, or underwrite, the course of inquiry’ – motivates, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty’s endorsement of hermeneutics in place of epistemology (Rorty 1980, 722). It is forwarded not as a new and better philosophy but as an approach that rejects the usefulness of searching for a timeless, neutral framework altogether.

Rorty acknowledges some of the specific risks that attend his proposal in his debate with Putnam. In ‘Putnam and the Relativist Menace’, Rorty responds to what amounts to a charge of relativism by putting a pragmatist gloss on Putnam’s conception of truth as ‘idealized rational acceptability’, suggesting that, for a thoroughgoing pragmatist, this cannot mean anything more than ‘acceptability to *us* at our best’ (Rorty 1993, 452). A person is warranted in holding a belief if that belief would be accepted by an ideal community, where an ideal community, because it cannot have a God’s eye view, can mean nothing more than ‘*us* as we should like to be’ or ‘*us* at our best’ (Rorty 1993, 451, 452). In response to the question – who is the ‘*us*’ in ‘*us* at our best?’ – Rorty returns to the moral virtue he had earlier introduced. We are ‘the people who are always willing to hear the other side, to think out all the implications, etc.’ in short, ‘educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals’ (Rorty 1993, 451–452).<sup>9</sup> We are the people who share enough beliefs to make giving and asking for reasons possible, including a belief in the importance of civility for maintaining conversation.

In response to the question – what can be meant by ‘best’ if there are no neutral criteria to distinguish better from worse? – Rorty points to future, ‘better versions of ourselves’ (Rorty 1993, 454). Finally, to further specify ‘better’ – and keeping in mind that there is no neutral framework to which he thinks we can appeal – Rorty returns to the distinction between persuasion and force, suggesting we recognize these better versions of ourselves as ‘people who have come to hold different beliefs from ours by a process that we, by *our present* notions of the difference between rational persuasion and force, count as rational persuasion’ (Rorty 1993, 454).<sup>10</sup> In a footnote, Rorty explains his emphasis in this passage: ‘The importance of “our present standards of what constitutes rational persuasion” is that we need to cover the possibility that the Nazis [...] have different ways of distinguishing persuasion and force than ours. *It is our ways that count* in deciding whether to apply the term “came to seem better” rather than, for example, “were brainwashed into”’ (Rorty 1993, 454n19; emphasis added). The distinction between persuasion and force in these passages aligns for Rorty with a distinction between future *versions* of our (liberal) selves and future *replacements* of our (liberal) selves. He writes,

‘If we did not build this process [an interest in avoiding brainwashing, etc.] into the picture, we should not call the result “a version of ourselves,” but something like “an unfortunate replacement for ourselves”’ (Rorty 1993, 454).

But it’s worth noting that following along with this process does not automatically guarantee that a future version of ourselves will be liberal rather than fascistic, will ultimately endorse moral persuasion over immoral force. In other words, should we end up as Nazis after all, this does not mean we didn’t become Nazis through a process of rational persuasion, understood in this capacious sense. This uncomfortable outcome is unlikely, Rorty thinks, but it is nonetheless possible. Though Rorty doesn’t explicitly state why he thinks it unlikely – choosing instead to compare its unlikelihood with the unlikelihood that we’d ‘revert to an Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology by a process of rational persuasion’ (Rorty 1993, 454n20) – I imagine it would be because the moral norms and ideals of civility do not themselves tend toward incivility. It’s likely Rorty thought – in 1993 at least – that we’d come a long way, morally speaking, since 1930s Germany. The road to a Nazi morality or back to an Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology is not entirely closed off, though the journey would be long and difficult.

But the fact that the possibility exists is why he suggests we can use the term ‘true’ in a cautionary sense to refer to the possibility that future generations might come to believe, *via appropriate means*, ‘the contradictory of what now seems unobjectionable’ (Rorty 1993, 460). If the process by which we become the future versions of ourselves is a process of rational persuasion – if civility does in fact produce incivility – then we will recognize those selves as us rather than as someone else. There will be a story to tell of how we got from here to there, and the story would be one that involves persuasion rather than force. Should the process by which we become Nazis be characterized as brainwashing rather than rational persuasion, *as we currently understand the difference*, then we can understand ourselves as having been replaced rather than as having evolved. However, if the process is one that we would call rational persuasion, then those future selves – even if they are Nazis – are *us* and, indeed, on Rorty’s account, what we would have to call *better versions of us*. They are versions of us that have emerged through processes of rational persuasion that we think are appropriate and acceptable methods for belief change, that is, morally appropriate methods of engagement. After all, if the process by which we were to become Nazis is fully captured by the generally accepted moral norms and ideals that comprise civility, then on what other grounds could our opposition stand?

Rorty thinks that what (currently) distinguishes us from the Nazis is our belief in and commitment to civility, to the notion that our methods of engagement and persuasion are shaped and limned by moral norms and ideals. If those moral norms and ideals go, then so too does the possibility of understanding of ourselves as better than Nazis. Of course, critics of anti-authoritarian views like Rorty’s worry that civility is not enough to keep our community together, is not a firm enough ground from which to stand against Nazis. They worry that, without the neutral framework Rorty abjures, we are left with little ammunition to fight against the Nazis we might become. But in fact, this is precisely the lesson Rorty tries to teach us in his own reading of Orwell’s *1984*, in which he focuses primarily on the lessons to be learned from the character of O’Brien, the member of the

Inner Party who ultimately captures and tortures the protagonist, Winston: ‘the last third of *1984* is about O’Brien, not Winston – about torturing, not about being tortured’ (Rorty 1989, 180). O’Brien is a warning, Rorty claims, that a possible world where anyone can inflict pain and humiliation on another person is only a few, contingent possibilities away. As he puts it, ‘O’Brien, the well-informed, well-placed, well-adjusted, intelligent, sensitive, educated member of the Inner Party, is more than just alarming. He is as terrifying a character as we are likely to meet in a book’. The reason he is so terrifying is that Orwell managed ‘to convince us that O’Brien is a plausible character-type of a possible future society’ (Rorty 1989, 183).<sup>11</sup>

Rorty, in response, suggests that all we have – all we’ve ever really had, despite theoretical efforts to the contrary – is the ideal of civility and the various norms and institutions that define and secure it. Accordingly, it is these norms and institutions that we must defend if we are to avoid succumbing to Nazis – or, even more terrifying, to avoid becoming Nazis ourselves, and seeing that version of ourselves as ‘us at our best’. Becoming Nazis, whether through persuasion or force, is not inevitable. We need not acquiesce to a possible future in which Nazis are the better version of us. But, if this possible future is seen as undesirable, to us here and now, then we must remain vigilant about maintaining and strengthening the norms and institutions that distinguish persuasion from force. It is to morality rather than to truth, to civility rather than to reason, that we must attend. And, against critics who lay the problems of ‘post-truth’ at his feet, Rorty believes that a focus on morality and civility is enough in the fight against Nazis, whether they are others or ourselves. Indeed, this is the ‘fundamental premise’ of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989): ‘a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance’ (Rorty 1989, 189).

Critics of the attention economy tend to set Orwell’s focus on power and coercion aside to make way for Huxley’s focus on pleasure and distraction. Yet what Rorty shows us is that the distinction between Huxley and Orwell, and thus the distinction between persuasion and force, is not so clear after all. Moreover, it is a distinction that is made rather than found, constructed rather than discovered, and then maintained through conscious and determined effort. And despite its blurriness, it is a distinction that can regulate action and may call upon us to fight and even die. Yet when fighting and dying are called for is likewise unclear. It is up to us, individually and collectively, to decide whether and when the norms and institutions that distinguish persuasion and force are at such risk that it is time to take a stand. At this point, philosophical analysis in search of a clear distinction is beside the point, at best. As Rorty puts it, invoking Martin Luther, ‘[n]one of these notions should be analyzed, for they are all ways of saying, “Here I stand: I can do no other”’ (Rorty 1999, 84).

The attention economy is, in many ways, a practical manifestation of Rorty’s philosophy. It similarly demands that we reckon with the blurriness of the distinction between persuasion and force. The import of using the term ‘attention economy’, after all, is to highlight the economization of attention. Attention has become a scarce commodity and the tools of ‘industrialized persuasion’ have given commercial interests leave to ‘open a door directly onto our attentional faculties’ (Williams 2018, 87). Our ‘desires, actions,

decisions, and ultimately lives' have been 'captured and exploited' by commercial interests and we have become 'attentional serfs' (Williams 2018, 88–89, 33). In such an economy, what counts as persuasion is determined by profit margins rather than by any norms of morality or civility we have agreed to hold each other to.

In 'Who Are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage' (1996), Rorty notes that conditions of scarcity make civility difficult to impossible: 'an answer to the question "who are we?" which is to have any moral significance, has to be one which takes money into account' (Rorty 1996, 14).<sup>12</sup> In an attention economy, we have to take not only money into account but attention as well. Civility will be difficult to impossible if our scarce attention is being 'captured and exploited'. And if the moral norms that distinguish persuasion from force – contingent though they are – can be sloughed off, then we need to face the possibility that we might not like the answer to the question 'who are we?'. If we are not simply replaced, the version of ourselves that will evolve out of the present moment will be the better version, and – to use a phrase Rorty borrows from Sartre – so much the worse for us.

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## Notes

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1. See, for example, Forstenzer (2018), Brecher (2020) and Dennett and Cadwalladr (2017).
2. See, for example, Misak (2000) and Talisse (2001).
3. See Showler and Dieleman (2022), where the authors show that one of Rorty's redescriptive strategies throughout his work is to show that the contrastive force some thinker presumes exists, such as between reason and sentiment, and disappears when we move from a metaphysical to a pragmatist language game. It is terms like 'just' (as in 'you are just appealing to sentiment') and 'mere' (as in 'all that remains is mere sentiment') that betray a metaphysical urge on the part of the thinker who uses the term.
4. The similarity Rorty sees between religious and philosophical impulses is expanded in 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy', where he recommends privatizing philosophical pursuits just as liberal politics privatized religious pursuits. See Rorty (1991, 2000).
5. This is why Rorty notes, in his debate with Putnam, that there is a 'fact of the matter' about whether someone is warranted in asserting something, but this fact of the matter has to do with ascertaining whether or not one's peers think one is so warranted.
6. See Rorty (2022), where his disambiguation of the term 'rational' connects with his disambiguation of term 'emancipation'. He writes, 'Sometimes it [emancipation] means freedom from hunger, toil, cruelty, and humiliation. In other contexts, it means being released from subjugation to mistaken ideas, emerging from intellectual darkness into intellectual light – a process often described as "becoming more rational"' (209). Rorty suggests that progress in the

sense of reducing oppression of the weak by the strong need not be bound to progress in the sense of coming to better know the true nature of things. It is possible, he thinks, to see the Enlightenment as valuable for beginning ‘a movement toward human equality that is still worth fighting and dying for’ at the same time as seeing, with postmodernist thinkers, the rationalism it endorsed as ‘philosophically indefensible’ (210). As a result, it is ‘practical ingenuity’ (213) that will enable progress, not greater rationalism. It is not the philosophers who will be able to tell us whether such progress is likely but rather ‘economists, political analysts, and demographers’ (211).

7. See [Curtis \(2015\)](#) for an expanded treatment of Rorty’s ‘virtue liberalism’.
8. See [Llanera \(2020\)](#) for an expanded treatment of Rorty’s views on redemption.
9. ‘Wet’ here derives from labels used during the Prime Ministership of Margaret Thatcher, where those in the party on the left, who were opposed to the government’s neo-conservative policies, were referred to as ‘wets’, and those endorsing such policies were referred to as ‘dries’.
10. Rorty accuses Putnam of taking up the side of critics like Misak, worrying that he has nothing to say to the Nazi. Rorty writes, ‘Putnam sees me as relativistic because I can appeal to no “fact of the matter” to adjudicate between the possible world in which the Nazis won, inhabited by people for whom the Nazis’ racism seems common sense and our egalitarian tolerance crazy, and the world in which we won and the Nazis’ racism seems crazy. I cannot, indeed, appeal to such a “fact of the matter,” any more than a species of animal that is in danger of losing its ecological niche to another species, and thus faces extinction, can find a “fact of the matter” to settle the question of which species has the right to the niche in question. But neither, as far as I can see, can Putnam’ ([Rorty 1993](#), 451).
11. See also [Dieleman \(2021\)](#) for an exploration of Rorty’s reading of Orwell from Winston’s perspective rather than O’Brien’s.
12. See also [Dieleman \(2019\)](#) for an extended treatment of Rorty’s views on the connections between fighting selfishness (class politics) and fighting sadism (cultural politics).

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