

## Transcendence over Cultural Politics, or Why I Don't Agree with Rorty

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*“To head toward a star—this only”*<sup>1</sup>

RICHARD Rorty and Hubert Dreyfus have long fostered a healthy mutual disagreement. Dreyfus reads his favorite thinkers as presenting “the way things really are,” whereas Rorty sees philosophers only as “recontextualizers—people who do not reveal the essential nature of anything, but simply tell you how things look when rearranged.”<sup>2</sup> Such contextualizations might prove purposeful or even enlightening, but Rorty insists that we do not need to choose between them. If we choose between two descriptions and elevate one to the status of “the way things really are,” then we misunderstand what we’re doing when we communicate. This position captures the essence of Rorty’s recent paper “Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God.” In his paper, Rorty argues for the ultimate conclusion that we should take our practices and beliefs for what they are—manifestations of sociopolitical aims—and quit trying to place them in a larger context that forms the background of all possible practices. Or, to put this thesis another way, cultural politics ought to replace ontology from the foundation up.

A project to replace ontology and all of its affiliated areas of study sounds suspiciously like Rudolf Carnap’s *Überwindung der Metaphysik*—a project that will have Heideggerians and other like-minded philosophers up

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry* 4.

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in arms. But Rorty's approach is surprisingly disarming. If accused of doing violence to ontology, he would probably shrug his shoulders and say that ontology, of course, has its place. That place, however, does not extend so far as to envelop and explain all other areas of philosophical discourse. Ontology is merely one contextualization among many, and anyone who claims otherwise does violence to other traditions. Like all other traditions, says Rorty, ontology boils down to cultural politics—but what does he mean when he says this and how does he come to such a controversial conclusion?

Rorty explains that “the term ‘cultural politics’ covers, among other things, arguments about what words to use.”<sup>3</sup> For instance, when the United States Supreme Court has ruled on different occasions to keep prayer, religious instruction, and other God-talk out of public schools, they were engaging in cultural politics. Ostensibly, the nation will move nearer to realizing its sociopolitical aims as embodied in the first amendment if its citizens limit certain linguistic practices. But cultural politics extends beyond mere word usage. Fundamentally, cultural politics involves the effort to eliminate entire topics of discourse. We could say that the issue doesn't ultimately center around praying in a public classroom; rather, the whole concept of believing in God and thus dividing society along seemingly arbitrary lines ought to be avoided.

At this point we hear the following objection: “It doesn't matter if you stop talking about God or religions, they still exist!” Rorty replies that the question “Should we talk about such things?” and the question “Do such things exist?” are interchangeable in the instance of religions, God, race, and other matters of cultural politics.<sup>4</sup> God and religion exist because we talk about them, not vice versa. Rorty admits that there are instances in which it seems odd to mix the question of “what is” with the question of “what we should talk about.”

The question of whether to talk about neutrons, for example, seems a strictly scientific question. That is why people who say that physicists should never have investigated radioactivity, or speculated about the possibility of splitting the atom, are accused of confusing science

<sup>2</sup> Rorty, *Heidegger*, Foreword xii.

with politics.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in a Rortian mindset, talk of God the Creator is political while talk of the Big Bang is scientific, or nonpolitical. ‘Race’ is political but ‘genes’ are not. The difference is that in the former examples, the questions “Should we talk about it?” and “Does it exist?” are interchangeable and thus matters of cultural politics, and in the latter examples these questions do not overlap.

In light of these distinctions we are left to ask the central question of cultural politics: How do we know when it is inappropriate to say, “We better talk about it because it exists?” How can we divide culture into areas where cultural politics is relevant and areas where it is not? Rorty marshals the support of William James and J. S. Mill in implying that the answer to these questions lies in “human happiness” and a “better world.” The point at which something hinders human happiness and doesn’t make for a better world is the point at which we should leave off conversation of that thing. Our objectors observe that the controversy should not center around happiness but around what exists—ontology, after all, precedes cultural politics. Rorty says “nonsense.” The “truth” and “reality” that we associate with ontology, God, religion, and so forth exist purely for the sake of social practice, not the other way around. This paper ultimately aims at evaluating how Rorty’s reliance on the thought of William James and Robert Brandom ultimately affects his central claim that cultural politics replaces ontology. However, now that we grasp the general meaning of Rorty’s anti-ontological claim, we must outline the arguments that he gives in its support.

## I. Replacing Ontology with Cultural Politics

### A. ROBERT BRANDOM AND THE ONTOLOGICAL PRIMACY OF THE SOCIAL

Rorty claims that Robert Brandom’s writings provide the “best weapons” for defending his pragmatic views.<sup>6</sup> “Brandom presents Heidegger as putting forward the doctrine of ‘the ontological primacy of

<sup>3</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 1.

the social.’ This primacy consists in the fact that ‘all matters of authority or privilege, in particular *epistemic* authority, are matters of social practice, and not objective matters of fact.’<sup>7</sup> To support this doctrine, Brandom divides society’s structure of authority into:

1. Supreme individual authority, as in the realm of feelings and personal thoughts.
2. Supreme nonhuman (scientific) authority, as when a lie detector determines whether an individual is guilty of some misdeed.
3. Cultural Politics, which occurs when “society does not delegate [to individual or scientific authority], but retains the right to decide for itself.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, cultural politics determines when and to what extent individual and nonhuman authority come into play.

Parceling out societal authority in this way leads us to question whether society must acknowledge any authority *beyond* itself. Brandom’s answer to this question is a resounding “no.” Rorty points out that Brandom answers “no” because authority that anyone tries to attribute to a superhuman entity can be explained sociologically. As we previously saw, the Big Bang and evolution can supplant talk of God Creator. Consensus under “ideal” communicative conditions renders obsolete parlance concerning God as a law-giver. If we recognize this, says Brandom, then we see that appeals to something beyond (e.g., reality, truth, God) “are disguised moves in the game of cultural politics. That is what they must be, because...it is the only game in town.”<sup>9</sup>

This view of cultural politics as “the only game in town” makes sense when we consider that those who appeal to something beyond always appear to be forwarding some social agenda. And there will always be people who wish to oppose such individuals’ agenda, asserting their own authority instead. Brandom and Rorty insightfully observe that,

<sup>4</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 3.

<sup>5</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 3.

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Only when the community decides to adopt one faith rather than another, or the court decides in favor of one side rather than another, or the scientific community in favor of one theory rather than another, does the idea of 'authority' become applicable. The so-called 'authority' of anything other than the community (or some person or thing or expert culture authorized by the community to make decisions in its name) can only be mere table-thumping.<sup>10</sup>

### B. THE APPEAL TO SENSORY EXPERIENCE AS AN OBJECTION TO SOCIAL PRIMACY

Empiricism, says Rorty, has the potential to throw a wrench into the works of Brandom's clean, explicable system. Empiricists claim that we can break free from society's authority and make direct contact with reality through our senses. "This view has encouraged the belief that Europe finally got in touch with reality when scientists like Galileo had the courage to believe the evidence of their senses rather than bowing to the authority of Aristotle and the Catholic Church."<sup>11</sup> Brandom views this empiricist position as misguided for two main reasons:

1. Empiricists fail to recognize that all awareness is a linguistic affair. Any perceptual report must be made in the language of some community.
2. Others in the community either believe or disbelieve given reports based on previously established expectations. Such expectations are a product of cultural politics; i.e., what society has decided it will believe.

Rorty and Brandom conclude that sensory experience provides no ground for saying what we should talk about in relation to what exists. Socially established norms determine which experiences people will believe, and thus belief in sensory experience is in the end a matter of cultural politics.

### C. CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE LIMITS OF CULTURAL POLITICS

If sensory experience also fades into cultural politics, what about our

<sup>6</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 9.

consciousness, which corresponds to personal authority, the first of Brandom's three spheres of authority, where religious experience comes into play? We already know that cultural politics delimits the area in which personal authority has meaning, so our question must be posed as follows, "What limits the extent to which cultural politics can dictate what is appropriate to talk about with regard to our consciousness?" After all, when we consider consciousness in relation to cultural politics, our God-talk is not the only thing at stake; we also seem to risk losing talk about our trip to the store yesterday, the chair across the room, and even the ground beneath our feet. Rorty acknowledges that, "There are...limits to society's ability to talk things into or out of existence."<sup>12</sup> In response to this concern, he sets out what he considers to be three Brandomian limits:

1. Transcendental limits, which are set by the need to talk about something, especially objects.
2. Practical limits, which are determined by the transcultural need to distinguish up from down, true from false, and so forth.
3. Cultural limits that are set by society's existing norms that we mentioned previously.

Our need to talk about objects attests to Rorty's transcendental limits, as does the necessity of talking about the world in terms of space, time, and causality. Without these and other affiliated concepts, we would not function as human beings. Are the concepts of God or ontology likewise indispensable? The answer comes back again, "no." For Brandom and Rorty:

*A priori* philosophical inquiry into what exists is exhausted once the question "Why are there objects?" has been answered. Giving a transcendental argument for the existence of objects exhausts the capacity of philosophy to tell you what there just has to be. There is no further discipline called 'ontology' which can tell you what singular terms we need to have in the language—whether or not we need 'God' for example.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, cultural politics usurps primacy over ontology. To really

discuss the existence of God or the reality of a world in a way that doesn't simply boil down to cultural politics, we would have to transcend God and the world to see them from a neutral vantage point, which is impossible. So, says Rorty, "We should stop trying to put our discursive practices within a larger context, one which forms the background of all possible social practices and which contains a list of 'neutral' canonical designators that delimit the range of the existent once and for all."<sup>14</sup>

In light of this overview, we generally understand what Rorty means by saying that cultural politics ought to (and in fact does) replace ontology. In essence, he is denying the possibility of any type of transcendence, since cultural politics is "the only game in town."<sup>15</sup> It is worth stopping here to appreciate the powerful explanatory power of what Rorty proposes. The more we look at his arguments, the more we see that any phenomenon or argument for a phenomenon can be explained in terms of cultural politics. Rorty's position appears practically unassailable. However, there remains the nagging question whether cultural politics is itself merely one more contextualization among many. So we turn to our initial goal of evaluating how Rorty's endorsement of James's claims about happiness and a better world affects his central claim of cultural politics replacing ontology and overcoming transcendence.

In the final pages of "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God," Rorty reintroduces his introductory Jamesian comments in the form of a question: Even though belief in God is not necessary, do individuals and groups have the right to religious devotion, even if that devotion is completely irrational and unnecessary? He answers tentatively "yes," with the reservation that such religious devotion must be expressed both collectively and individually in ways that do not inflict social harm. Whether expressed devotion constitutes harm has been controversial from Jefferson's Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom to modern-day *laïcité* in France. "But," Rorty adds, "I would urge that debate over such concrete political questions is more useful for human happiness than debate over the existence of God."<sup>16</sup> In this comment, which contrasts "concrete political questions" against the senseless debate

<sup>7</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 9.

<sup>8</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 10.

over God's existence, we see again the undesirability of appealing to what is beyond. What is more, Rorty suggests that *more happiness* results from actions and beliefs that display a "lack of ambition for transcendence"<sup>17</sup> than from actions that grope for what is beyond. This position mirrors Rorty's introductory remark that, "[William] James agreed with John Stuart Mill that the right thing to do, and *a fortiori* the right belief to acquire, is *always* the one that will do most for human happiness.... James often comes close to saying that *all* questions...boil down to questions about what will best assist our attempts to create a better world."<sup>18</sup>

We remember Rorty echoing James in asserting that "truth and reality exist for the sake of social practices, rather than vice versa."<sup>19</sup> But if we take Rorty's endorsement of James seriously, truth and reality don't exist merely for the sake of social practice. Although social practices underlie truth and reality, James says that we ought to adopt those social practices that are designed to result in happiness and a better world. So while beliefs and social practice are not subject to theistic belief, Rorty's remarks imply that all beliefs are subjugated to social practice as dictated by happiness or a better world. If we accept that our social practices are structured by something beyond themselves, then we might very well be dealing with a manifestation of the "background of all possible practices" that Rorty wished to escape. In this way, happiness and the search for a better life might replace cultural politics, and we are left to wonder if ontology went away at all.

We do not aim to say that Rorty is wrong in his views about happiness. Thinkers since Aristotle and even before have pointed to happiness as the structuring end of social practice,<sup>20</sup> and it would be a shame to lose this way of talking about the world of our actions. However, this way of talking doesn't make sense when faced with the inconsistency that results from Rorty's claims about happiness in relation to the ontological primacy of the social. In the realm of cultural politics, happiness is nothing more than something ultimately beyond the grasp of society's ability to explain and collectively ratify. Although it appears that Rorty grounds our

<sup>9</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 11.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 13.

<sup>11</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 13.



action in happiness, cultural politics is impotent to validate such a move. This impotence raises the question of the need for transcendence. It seems that far from helping him to overcome transcendence and replace ontology, Rorty's reliance on any notion of happiness raises the question of transcendence all the more.

Rorty's reliance on Jamesian happiness raises the question of transcendence in the following way. For instance, when Emmanuel Lévinas talks about transcendence, he speaks of the relationship to the Other. The Other is transcendent because although it lies beyond our ability to fully grasp and comprehend, it is intelligible and it makes intelligibility possible. It is transcendent because it is not reducible to the ego for which it opens a horizon of intelligibility. In a similar way, when Rorty says that our actions and practices are structured by happiness, he seems to imply that there is something called 'happiness' that is independent from, irreducible to, mere social practice. If it is, in fact, reducible, then he is ultimately making the banal assertion that social practice structures social practice, and we are left to wonder why he need speak of happiness at all. To use happiness in the way he wishes, Rorty seems to require some notion of transcendence.

Rorty implicitly claims to the contrary that the ontological primacy of the social, which he grounds in Brandom's reading of Heidegger's categories in *Being and Time*, supports a "lack of ambition for transcendence."<sup>21</sup> Neither Rorty nor Brandom denies the fact that Heidegger's writings (especially his later writings) retain the transcendent, ambitious aim of uncovering ultimate phenomenological truth.<sup>22</sup> However, they both view *Being and Time* as a work which lends itself ideally to a pragmatist, anthropological reading. So on the one hand we see that Rorty's use of happiness raises the question of transcendence while on the other hand his use of Heidegger's categories results in a lack of ambition for transcendence.

In light of this discrepancy, we now further focus our aim on discovering whether *Being and Time* is, as Brandom and Rorty maintain, properly

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 23.

<sup>13</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 28.

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 40.

<sup>15</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 11.

read as a purely pragmatic work which Heidegger discarded for that very reason, or whether we ought to understand *Being and Time* as a work that can only be understood in the broader context of Heidegger's later work that dealt often and explicitly with transcendence.

## II. How Should We Understand Heidegger's Categories?

In his article "Heidegger's Categories in Being and Time," Robert Brandom explains that Heidegger considered Being and Time to be "merely" pragmatic and anthropological.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, Brandom's article centers around showing that Being and Time's anthropological nature is a direct result of the way that Heidegger lays out its fundamental categories: (A) *Zuhandensein*, (B) *Vorhandensein*, and (C) *Dasein*.<sup>24</sup>

### A. ZUHANDENSEIN

Brandom offers the following preliminary definition of *Zuhandensein*: "*Zuhandene* things are those which a neo-Kantian would describe as being imbued with human values and significances."<sup>25</sup> In further introductory explanation of the ways that things carry meaning and value, Brandom clarifies that to inhabit the world in a Heideggerian sense is to take or experience each object as something. Three features of *taking-as* come to light in Brandom's account:

1. "First, takings are public performances which accord with social practices."<sup>26</sup>
2. "Second, such performances are individuated as and by *responses*."<sup>27</sup>
3. "Third, the responsive dispositions which constitute the social practices are related to one another so as to satisfy a strong systematicity condition."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 43.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 19.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 5, emphasis added.

We notice from the outset that our taking objects as this or that is determined by social practice; moreover, our taking-as is a necessarily public performance.

By public performance we mean something like the following. Let's suppose that a number of United Nations aid workers currently dwell in the desert of Afghanistan with a nomadic Afghan tribe. No member of the tribe can read any language. One day as the workers are teaching effective hygiene, a B-52 flies overhead and out parachute hundreds of small food and supply packets. The workers and their Afghan friends approach the parachutes, and the Afghans stare down at the bright, never-before-seen yellow packets. Being absolutely illiterate, they cannot read the packets' intended purpose. The packets are obviously appropriate for some purposes and inappropriate for others. However, to respond appropriately to the packets requires not just that the Afghans take them as anything—e.g., building material or fuel for their fires—but that they recognize specific possibilities as having special privilege over the rest. The aid workers immediately take the foreign objects as food or medicine, and in doing so “discover” the objects by placing them in reference or assignment to other objects and events (e.g., yellow packet is placed in reference to mealtime and berries).<sup>29</sup> In doing this, the workers' taking-as is binding not only themselves but on the Afghans as well, because it is public—in the sense mentioned above—and binding on all those who witness their proper response to the packets.

Brandom clarifies along these same lines that “Heidegger should be interpreted in accord with the pragmatist thesis about authority, as taking this privilege to consist in its social recognition, that is, as a matter of how some community does or would respond to things.”<sup>30</sup> The workers in the above example are the privileged authority because they can relate how some community “does or would respond” appropriately to the packets (from a Western point of view). Brandom's previously mentioned systematicity condition comes into play when community responses toward things are all appropriately unified in accordance with Dasein's “referen-

<sup>19</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 9.

<sup>20</sup> For more about Aristotle's view on actions for the sake of happiness, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a15–19, 24–34. For commentary on Aristotle's view, see Robinson

tial totality of significance” (which we will explicate shortly).<sup>31</sup> We quickly recapitulate here that Heidegger defines *Zuhandensein* in terms of taking-as, which is further determined by social norms and practices.

#### B. *VORHANDENSEIN*

“*Vorhandene* things” defines Brandom, “are roughly the objective, person-independent, causally interacting subjects of natural scientific inquiry.”<sup>32</sup> In relation to *Zuhandensein*, we can define *Vorhandensein* as *Zuhandene* things that are responded to by a specific performance; what is more, *Vorhandene* things can *only* be appropriately responded to by the performance of assertion.<sup>33</sup>

Heidegger says that assertions are objects whose appropriate mode of disclosure or use is inference. When we assert things, we share our taking-as with others and our assertion then becomes a thing that is *Zuhandene*; in asserting we implicitly authorize reassertion. Furthermore, because words come grouped in inferential families (e.g., red→color), predication extends the authorizing dimension of asserting by allowing not only reassertion, but the ability to draw inferences that go beyond what was initially predicated (the car is red→the car has color). Brandom helpfully pulls *Zuhandene* and *Vorhandene* things together by explaining that:

The crucial point to understand here is that the move from [*Zuhandene*] equipment, fraught with socially instituted significances, to objective [*Vorhandene*] things, is not one of decontextualization, but of recontextualization... Treating something as [*Vorhandene*] is not ignoring its social significance, but attending to a special sort of significance it can have, namely significance for the correctness of assertions about it... [*Vorhandensein*] may thus be defined as what is [*Zuhandene*]... for the practice of assertion, that is, as what is responded to as such only by making a claim about it.<sup>34</sup>

99-100.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, *Cultural Politics* 19.

<sup>22</sup> See Knobe; see also Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 389.

## C. DASEIN

We previously found that *Zuhandensein* is brought together by *Dasein*'s "referential totality of significance." By extension, *Vorhandensein*—because it is ultimately reducible to *Zuhandensein*—also makes sense only within *Dasein*'s referential totality. The explication of this referential totality subsumes all of Heidegger's efforts in *Being and Time*, but Brandom concentrates on what he considers to be the three most important points of Heidegger's explication. The first point that Brandom underscores is that *Dasein*'s nature is primarily social. He quotes Heidegger as saying that "so far as *Dasein* is at all, it has Being-with-one-another as its kind of Being."<sup>35</sup> The second point that Brandom highlights is that *Dasein*'s sociality is indispensable to the practical activities that are constitutive of its referential totality of significance—in other words, Being-with-others is prerequisite to *Zuhandensein*. Brandom lastly brings out Heidegger's point that we can only understand *Dasein*'s individuality within the context of its sociality."<sup>36</sup>

Not only is the distinction between the ontological categories of [*Zuhandensein*] and [*Vorhandensein*] intelligible only in terms of the sort of being that *Dasein* has, but the difference between *Dasein*'s sort of being and [*Zuhandensein*] and [*Vorhandensein*] must itself be understood in terms of *Dasein*.<sup>37</sup>

Looking at how Brandom broadly defines *Zuhandensein* as "imbued with human values and significances," *Vorhandensein* as the "objective,...causally interacting subjects of natural scientific inquiry,"<sup>38</sup> and *Dasein* as a social entity in terms of which all three are regulated and defined, we clearly see where Rorty derived his three categories of the ontological primacy of the social. Although Rorty radicalizes all three positions, stripping them of their original nuances, the categories that Brandom identifies in *Being and Time* and the categories that Rorty uses to

<sup>23</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 387. Rorty extrapolates the threefold ontological primacy of the social from this article by Brandom.

<sup>24</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 387.

<sup>25</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 387.

dissolve ontology are directly correlated. Brandom elsewhere binds *Dasein* and *Zuhandensein* even closer together, saying that they are “internally related,”<sup>39</sup> and that they “mutually presuppose one another as substructures of being-in-the-world.”<sup>40</sup>

This portrait of *Dasein*'s relation to *Zuhandensein* is quite accurate. However, in emphasizing *Dasein*'s social aspects, Brandom brings the anthropological aspect of Heidegger's early work to the fore, dissociating it from his later work which dealt more with the general problems of transcendence involved in overcoming metaphysics. By interpreting Heidegger in this way, philosophers like Rorty and Brandom open up a space in which everything can be explained purely in terms of the relation between *Dasein* and *Zuhandensein*. Everything boils down to the relation, and we are left with an ontological primacy of the social that leaves more questions than it answers.

### III. Thomas Sheehan: *Kehre* and *Ereignis*

Just as Rorty gives Brandom's writings as the “best weapons” for defending his pragmatic views, Thomas Sheehan's article “*Kehre* and *Ereignis*: A Prolegomenon to *An Introduction to Metaphysics*,” provides ample defense of the view that *Being and Time* not only can but must be seen as an integral part of Heidegger's project taken as a whole. Sheehan begins his article by explaining that readers of Heidegger often do not differentiate between “the turn” (*die Kehre*) and “the change in Heidegger's thinking” (*die Wendung im Denken*).<sup>41</sup> The former, clarifies Sheehan, is simply one of the many names that Heidegger uses to express the pervading topic of his work. More specifically, this turn is the way that *Ereignis* (appropriation) works, which will be discussed in more depth momentarily. The latter distinction, the change in Heidegger's thinking, has reference to the way that Heidegger shifted the way that he spoke about the turn.

Sheehan emphasizes that misunderstanding in regard to either of these matters—to think, for instance, that the turn was a shift from an

<sup>26</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 391.

<sup>27</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 391.

<sup>28</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 391.

anthropological emphasis to a more broadly ontological one—“can be disastrous for understanding Heidegger... [The turn] is emphatically not an alteration in Heidegger’s thinking, not an episode that could be dated to a period in his philosophical career.”<sup>42</sup> The turn is the focus of Heidegger’s career from beginning to end. The “change in thinking” simply means that Heidegger’s attempts to express the turn differed from the “transcendental-horizonal” approach of *Being and Time* to the approach that characterized the rest of his career and that he most often expressed as *Ereignis*.<sup>43</sup> To see why a “merely anthropological” reading of *Being and Time* does not take account of the turn that characterized the whole of Heidegger’s thinking, we will use Sheehan to identify the turn and locate the abiding aspect of Heidegger’s writings.

In his account of *Being and Time*, Brandom highlights what Sheehan calls “one of Heidegger’s major achievements.”<sup>44</sup> This watershed achievement results from Heidegger’s success in moving the meaning of entity from the traditional “being-out-there,” to the phenomenologically transformed “appearing-as.”<sup>45</sup> This development leads to our understanding of *Dasein* in what Brandom calls its “referential totality of significance.”<sup>46</sup> Sheehan affirms with Brandom that, “This change is visible in Heidegger’s reinterpretation of *Sein* (an entity’s being) as *Anwesen* (an entity’s givenness to possible human engagement), in keeping with the principle ‘Being as the givenness of entities concerns *Dasein*.’”<sup>47</sup> This reinterpretation of *Dasein* as givenness to human engagement is prerequisite to Heidegger and Brandom’s talk of *Dasein*’s “Being-with-others.” The engagement of *Dasein* with entities in the world also allows the “taking-as” that Brandom rightly locates as the key to understanding *Zuhandensein*. “Nonetheless,” stresses Sheehan, “being as the givenness and availability of entities was not Heidegger’s fundamental topic.”<sup>48</sup>

The givenness and availability of entities, Being-with-others, and taking-as do not constitute the turn always operative in Heidegger’s thought

<sup>29</sup> See Brandom, *Heidegger’s Categories* 392.

<sup>30</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger’s Categories* 391.

<sup>31</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger’s Categories* 395.

<sup>32</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger’s Categories* 387.

because all of these issues lie within the explanatory power of metaphysics, which Heidegger desired to overcome. A close reading of *Being and Time* reveals Heidegger's desire to surpass the explanatory power of metaphysics and the metaphysical worldview. Heidegger suggests in a number of places in *Being and Time* that metaphysics obscures the inner turn of *Ereignis*, which he then expressed as the "question of the meaning of Being."<sup>49</sup> But how did Heidegger intend to surpass metaphysics, and what was he trying to say by talking about the question of the meaning of being?

Sheehan reveals that the question that Heidegger used to propel himself past metaphysics into the realm of transcendence was: "What brings about Being as the givenness or availability of entities?"<sup>50</sup> In other words, Heidegger did not simply desire to answer the questions, "What is givenness?" and "What are the effects of understanding 'being' as 'Anwesen'?" (which is the level at which Brandom leaves Heidegger's interest as expressed in *Being and Time*). Instead, Heidegger wanted to probe the fundamental questions of, "What produces givenness?" and "What enables being as *Anwesen* to be given at all?"<sup>51</sup> In the answer to these questions, suggests Sheehan, we find the "star" that guided Heidegger's thought in *Being and Time* and all of his works. Initially Heidegger answers these question by saying that there is a "*tertium quid* over and above both being as an entity's givenness and the dative of that givenness."<sup>52</sup> In the end, Heidegger comes to equate this *tertium quid*, or "enabling power," with *Dasein*, *Lichtung*, openness, *Ereignis*, and many other terms that we associate with the later Heidegger's attempts to think about transcendence in terms of the power that enables givenness.

Full explication of Heidegger's resolution to the questions that he poses in overcoming metaphysics belongs to a future analysis. I wish here to simply underscore that understanding Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* requires us to recognize his desire to overcome metaphysics, which he eventually accomplishes by revealing *Ereignis* as an enabling power that stands both over and above an entity's givenness to possible human

<sup>33</sup> See Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 399–401.

<sup>34</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 403–04.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time* 125. Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 397. All references to *Being and Time* are given using the original pagination from *Sein und Zeit*.



engagement. A power that stands prerequisite to any entity's givenness to possible human engagement accords perfectly with Heidegger's desire to uncover the ground of ultimate phenomenological truth, or, as Rorty would say, the background of all possible practices.

#### IV. Conclusion

We set out to evaluate how Rorty's reliance on William James and Robert Brandom would ultimately affect his central claim that cultural politics replaces ontology and makes any talk of transcendence futile. In relying on James, Rorty ran into the problem that explaining our actions in terms of happiness and a better world does not square with the requirements laid out in the ontological primacy of the social. The ontological primacy of the social, as we recall, is Rorty's appropriation of Brandom's reading of *Being and Time*, which they both interpret in a pragmatist way. Rorty and Brandom wish to omit from their reading of *Being and Time* the aspect that lies at its core; namely, a deep and abiding desire for transcendence that Heidegger expresses as the "question of the meaning of Being."<sup>53</sup> Although Rorty and Brandom formulate systems from Heidegger's categories in *Being and Time* that allow their adherents to foster a lack of ambition for transcendence, such a lack of ambition runs contrary to the spirit in which Heidegger wrote all his works, including his earliest.

So Rorty's arguments against transcendence fall apart in two crucial ways. First, he cannot omit a background of all possible social practices and still say, as James says, that all our actions ought to be for the sake of happiness or a better world. Following James seems to imply that happiness acts as some kind of background that ought to give structure to all action and belief. Second, as Rorty depends on Brandom's interpretation of Heidegger in formulating the ontological primacy of the social, he falls victim to the same problems that Brandom does. Although Brandom's explication of *Being and Time* is lucid at a local level, the way that he situates his interpretation in the wider array of

<sup>36</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 397.

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- <sup>37</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 389.
- <sup>38</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 387.
- <sup>39</sup> Brandom, *Dasein* 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Brandom, *Dasein* 5.
- <sup>41</sup> Sheehan 3.
- <sup>42</sup> Sheehan 3.
- <sup>43</sup> See Sheehan 4.
- <sup>44</sup> Sheehan 6.
- <sup>45</sup> Sheehan 6.
- <sup>46</sup> Brandom, *Heidegger's Categories* 395.
- <sup>47</sup> Sheehan 6.
- <sup>48</sup> Sheehan 7.
- <sup>49</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time* 21. See also 56, 59, 248, 293, 401.
- <sup>50</sup> Sheehan 7.
- <sup>51</sup> Sheehan 7.
- <sup>52</sup> Sheehan 7.
- <sup>53</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time* 2.

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Heidegger's work is myopic. Thomas Sheehan shows us that any reading of Heidegger's work must take account of not only the *Anwesen* that makes possible the three categories that Brandom identifies, but also of the *Ereignis* that makes the *Anwesen* possible. Inasmuch as Rorty's arguments rely on Brandom's interpretation of Heidegger, we would be wise to conclude that there is a *tertium quid* that underlies his primacy of the social.

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