Chapter 6
Relativism vs. Ethnocentrism: Is Rorty a Relativist?

I. Introduction:

Though it is outside the scope of this chapter to do an in-depth inquiry into the subject of relativism, yet it would be helpful to know what relativism is and who is a relativist. To begin with, relativism is, at its most basic, the view that "cognitive, moral or aesthetic norms and values are dependent on the social or conceptual systems that underpin them and consequently a neutral standpoint for evaluating them is not available to us."1 Such a simple definition however, according to Baghramian, proves to be quite inadequate since the single label 'relativism' has been used for a great variety of doctrines and positions.2

It goes without saying that the most frequent charge against relativism is that of self-refutation or inconsistency. In fact, according to Thomas Bennigson, it almost became an article of faith. He writes: "The most remarkable feature of many anti-relativist arguments is their brevity; they often consist of little more than announcing that to assert global relativism is implicitly to claim absolute truth for one's assertion, resulting in immediate self-contradiction."3

On this charge of self-contradiction, Collister feels that the relativist, "simply by asserting that relativism is true (or "the way things really are")...seems to be violating his own claim."4 As he explains, "if one is committed to the idea that truth is always relative to the perceiver and the perceived, then how can any statement be made about the universality of relativism?"5 Collister also quotes Putnam who asks, "If any point of view is as good as any other, then why isn't the point of view that relativism is false as good as any other?"6

In recent years however, it has been acknowledged though somewhat unwillingly that in spite of the arguments that have been put forward that relativism is self-refuting or that it contradicts itself, they had not really been able to deliver the death blow for which they were devised. One strategy for warding off the self-refutation argument is to modify the concept of truth used by relativists in such a way that relativistic claims would not lead to contradiction. For instance, Joseph Margolis has argued that "relativism can survive the charge of self-
contradiction, conceptual anarchy and nihilism only if it abandons the classical two-value (or ‘bipolar’) view of truth, at least within some domain of discourse, and, allows for weaker, gradated and intermediate values for the truth predicate.” Indeed what gave impetus to relativism according to Margolis is the recognition, first expressed by the Greek Sophist Protagoras, that good arguments can be found even for the opposite sides of a debate. And Margolis has suggested at least one way whereby we can accommodate this insight, which is to admit that “although no statement can be both true and false, there is scope for evaluating seemingly contradictory statements along a weaker and more nuanced continuum of truth-like values such as plausibility, reasonableness, aptness. etc.” Of course, the question that arises is, what if not truth makes such statements more plausible or reasonable or apt?

II. Kinds of Relativism:

Now there are different kinds of relativism of which the broadest and most wide-ranging categorization is that which recognizes that relativism can be either cognitive or ethical. Cognitive relativism holds that there are no universal truths about the world: “the world has no intrinsic characteristics, there are just different ways of interpreting it.” Protagoras, the first person on record to hold such a view, said, “Man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not.”

Ethical relativism, on the other hand, is the theory that there are no universally valid moral principles: “all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice.” Ethical relativism has two subtypes: The first is conventionalism according to which “moral principles are valid relative to the conventions of a given culture or society.” The other is subjectivism, which maintains that “individual choices are what determine the validity of a moral principle. Its motto is, morality lies in the eyes of the beholder.” As Ernest Hemingway quoted by Westacott wrote, “So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.” According to Baghramian, “In its broadest terms, the ethical relativist claims that moral judgments, adjudications of right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, etc., are embedded in specific cultural, historical or
conceptual backgrounds, and that their authority is restricted and relative to their context. In other words, the moral relativist denies that there is a single true morality.\textsuperscript{34}

It is to be noted that with reference to cognitive relativism, there is no general agreed upon definition though a few descriptions have been given here that give us some insight as to what cognitive relativism is all about. These are: 15

- "Reason is whatever the norms of the local culture believe it to be."\textsuperscript{16}
- "The choice between competing theories is arbitrary, since there is no such thing as objective truth."\textsuperscript{17}
- "There is no unique truth, no unique objective reality."\textsuperscript{18}
- "There is no substantive overarching framework in which radically different and alternative schemes are commensurable."\textsuperscript{19}

Without doubt, this lack of consensus about exactly what relativism affirms is one reason as to why much of the debate concerning the coherence and plausibility of relativism has been quite unsatisfactory. Another reason is that very few philosophers are willing to apply the label "relativist" to themselves. And this goes even for Richard Rorty, who on account of his own claims or statements has been regarded by a number of scholars and philosophers as one of the most articulate defenders of relativism.

Previously we have seen that for Rorty, truth is no longer the goal of inquiry though justification is. The end of inquiry, as spelled out by Rorty in his Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, is not the discovery or even the approximation of absolute truth but the formulation of beliefs that further the solidarity of the community, or "to reduce objectivity to solidarity."\textsuperscript{20} Such an inquiry can only be, in Rorty's view, a socio-historical account of how various people - using what Rorty calls "the familiar procedures of justification" that a particular society uses in one area of enquiry - have tried to reach an agreement on what to believe.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, for Rorty, the gap between truth and justification is not something to be bridged by a transcultural sort of rationality, which can be used to criticize certain cultures and praise others, but simply as the gap between the actual good and the possible better. Rorty takes what he sees as the pragmatic
approach to truth whereupon he says in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, that "objective truth" is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on. Then in "Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism" he is all for James' definition of truth, which is "true is what is good in the way of belief" where what is good to believe is determined by how well a particular belief(s) enable us to cope with the world and each other.

Accordingly, from Rorty's viewpoint, to say that what seems rational for us to believe now may not be true is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea. It is to say that "there is always room for improved belief, since new evidence, or new hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary may come along." Elsewhere Rorty has said that we can never tell when some audience in future might come up with a better justification for changing our vocabularies, i.e. our habits and practices, that will help us better cope with our environment.

Indeed for Rorty we have no permanent access to truth; all we have are the vocabularies we create and through them, making use at the same time the dialectic of persuasion rather than that of rational justification, we create a "better" (Rortian) future characterized by a reform of our standards and ways of thinking.

In fact, in Rorty's view, there is really no difference between the sciences and non-sciences for there is no privileged vocabulary which is in some way absolute. Science is one particular set of meanings - or vocabulary - among others and is generated by a community of meaning-creators. More than an epitome of rationality, it is in fact, a model of solidarity. It is intersubjective agreement and as a result, there is no qualitative difference between knowledge and opinion, science and non-sciences. Its only goal is, in Rorty's own words, "...to create a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have."

Despite the fact that many thinkers consider Rorty a relativist, yet on more than one occasion he has denied this charge being leveled at him. Putnam for one has contented that Rorty is a "closet relativist." Then again in Realism and Reason, Putnam says he counts Rorty as a "cultural relativist" because of his insistence that the only truth it makes sense to seek is to convince one's cultural peers. Rorty however rejects such charges saying that this truth is one that he and his group have worked out from within; it is not relative to any other truth, particularly one that is "out there" in an epistemological or metaphysical "reality."
As against relativism Rorty insists over and over again that what he is endorsing is really ethnocentrism. That is, he values the beliefs of his own ethnocentric group over and above those of other groups. He calls that group “the liberal intellectual of the secular modern West” and claims as its frame of reference, tolerance, openness, equality, justice, solidarity. So then, Rorty feels, he can only be criticized for taking his own community too seriously. In other words, he can only be criticized for ethnocentrism, not for relativism.

In this chapter, therefore, I will probe into some of the arguments brought forward by a few scholars and philosophers and find out as to whether the charge of relativism brought against Rorty is plausible or not. This will be followed by an attempt to consider carefully the claim that Rorty made that he is not a relativist but an ethnocentrist and then finally determine whether Rorty escapes being a relativist by being ethnocentrist.

III. Is Rorty a Relativist?

As mentioned before, Rorty rejects the label “relativist” for his position. He feels that that epithet is usually assigned to philosophers who do not accept the distinction between the way things are in themselves and the relation which they have to human needs and interests. But “we pragmatists,” Rorty says, “never call ourselves relativists... [we] define ourselves in negative terms.” As Rorty explains, “Pragmatists say that the traditional notion that ‘truth is correspondence to reality’ is an uncashable and outworn metaphor.” Besides, Rorty would rather be called a “constructionist” for like all other constructionists he believes that there is no language-independent truth about “reality” to get right or wrong, nothing foundation-al to inadequately interpret. Rorty explains, “I do not think that there are any plain moral facts out there in the world, nor any truths independent of language.” The issue, for social constructionists like Rorty, is of a better or worse creation of a social community with the criterion being: “What works.” Disregarding any ontological reality, Rorty focuses instead on a constructed reality thus doing away with the assumption that justification must repose on something other than social practices and human needs. That is to say, meaning or truth is always socially constructed and not discovered from the world. So then, as Swartz argues, within the language
community of the realist, constructionists may be considered relativists for their rejection of ahistorical factors in which they ground their interpretations of the world. However, Rorty feels he does not belong to this language community as he does not try to ground his interpretations on anything outside of human contingency. And because Rorty is not looking for any extra-human “hook” on which to arrange the social world, questions of relativism and absolutism become unimportant.37

Be that as it may, Rorty is called a relativist by a host of philosophers and it is not hard to see why. Rorty says, “the very notion that objects of inquiry lie outside of the observer—with ‘a context [all] its own’...should be rejected as senseless.”38 In other words, Rorty is against what he calls the God’s-eye point of view and the thing-in-itself. In line with his notion of “solidarity instead of objectivity”, Rorty believes that once contemporary philosophers stop talking about truth in terms of objectivity, “a greater liberty will be open toward the other main way reflective people make sense of their lives—namely, by telling stories of their contributions to a community and thus forming bonds we call “solidarity.”39 For such people, there is no need for a metaphysics or an epistemology. For as we’ve seen, what they consider as truth is that which they find good to believe and hence all talk about a correspondence relation between beliefs and objects is considered irrelevant. By the same token, they do not see the need for a faculty of reason “that ensures that our species is capable of entering into that relation.”40

Yet, as Hildebrand argues, Rorty must eventually provide an account of the criteria for solidarity. Now as Rorty has asserted in Consequences of Pragmatism, solidarity—our warrant—is determined not by metaphysical appeal, but by “agreement with one’s cultural peers” i.e. “wet liberals” and who according to Rorty, “have played vocabularies off one another and have, produce[d] new and better ways of talking and acting—not better by reference to a previously known standard, but in the sense that they come to seem clearly better than their predecessors.”41 Furthermore, as Rorty has clarified, such vocabularies as have been chosen have not been done arbitrarily but by those whom he called language users whom we can recognize as better versions of ourselves.”42
Still the question remains as to whether Rorty's criteria for solidarity, the one that is established by "agreement with one's cultural peers" will not lead us into relativism. Baghramian writes: "To explicate truth in terms of intersubjective agreement is to concede to one of the key posits of relativism: that truth is dependent on local and changing norms and conceptions." Now Rorty has gone to a great length in arguing how we can make sense of the notion of objectivity only in terms of intersubjective agreement - "there is nothing to objectivity except intersubjectivity." However, as Baghramian has rightly stated, "(T)o make truth a matter of intersubjective agreement is to deny the distinction between truth and falsity, as it is usually understood. History is replete with examples of false beliefs which were accorded intersubjective agreement - were seen by a community of enquires as true and justified." Hence, one of Rorty's best critics, Hilary Putnam, feels that even though Rorty denies being a relativist, yet his "objectivity is agreement" makes it natural for everyone on first meeting this formulation to take in the relativistic spirit.

In his book *Renewing Philosophy* Putnam begins by saying that he finds Rorty's notion of agreement quite confusing. He contends that although *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* contains excellent criticisms of the kinds of metaphysics that Rorty rejects, yet according to Putnam, the way Rorty has spelled out his views is rather elliptical and incomplete. In particular, he says, "it is not clear what the notion of agreement of one's cultural peers comes to, apart from the metaphor of an algorithm," that is, a decision procedure of the kind computers carry out. Putnam's argument goes this way: "If I say to my wife "our kitchen needs painting", the only cultural peer who is aware that I think our kitchen needs painting in this case is my wife (assuming I don't discuss the matter with anyone else). In a sense, my cultural peers agree: that is, all of my cultural peers who actually know that I made the judgment agree it is true. Does that mean the judgment is true? Let us take a more extreme case. Let us suppose that I live alone and I think that my kitchen needs painting, and I don't discuss this judgment with anyone. In that case all of my cultural peers who were aware of my judgment (namely me) agree that it is true. Does that mean that it is true, on Rorty's theory?" Besides, Putnam asks, "If the truth or falsity of the statement that my kitchen needs painting depends on what my cultural peers would say, then what determine that? What determines what my cultural peers would say?"
Furthermore, according to Rorty, his “cultural peers” are really the “wet liberals” who through the process of “justification by agreement” have exchanged one set of vocabularies for another and in this way, have produced new and better ways of coping with our environment. In fact, in Rorty’s view, the belief that we can have a permanent access to truth is absurd; all we have are the vocabularies we create. To put it another way, there can be no standard adjudicating what is “true” or “good” between the various language users in a community above and beyond their own preferences as expressed in their own vocabularies. The question remains however as to how would one judge the adequacy of the vocabulary employed? For Rorty, vocabularies cannot be criticized as being better or worse in any strong sense, i.e., one that could serve as the basis for an actual involvement with or intervention into another’s practices. This is the problem. As pointed out by Putnam, “If the moral of a deconstruction is that everything can be ‘deconstructed,’ then the deconstruction has no moral.”

All right, Putnam admits, we may perhaps behave better if we became Rortyans, i.e., we’d be more tolerant, inventive, suspicious of totalitarianism. But then, Putnam argues - and here Hildebrand says, he (i.e. Putnam) sounds more like Blackburn - “a fascist could well agree with Rorty at a very abstract level—Mussolini, let us recall, supported pragmatism, claiming that it sanctions unthinking activism.” Hildebrand therefore concludes that “without some buck-stopping realist notions—like “facts”—to which arguers can appeal, there lies only relativism.”

Actually, Rorty has said it quite clear that he does not have any “fact of the matter” to appeal to when it comes to his “justification by agreement”. When Putnam questioned him as to how he can adjudicate between the world of Nazis’ racism and that of egalitarian tolerance, Rorty’s reply was that no one, not even Putnam, can 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.” Accordingly justification or warrant becomes nothing more than “a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of S’s statement by her peer’s.” And indeed, this is just what Rorty means when he says that the view he advocates is not really that of relativism but ethnocentrism. The question therefore is, what is ethnocentrism and how does it differ from relativism? In particular, what is Rorty’s ethnocentrism and can it really escape the charge of relativism?
IV. Rorty’s Claim that he is not a Relativist but an Ethnocentrist:

In “Putnam and the Relativist Menace”, Rorty tries to defend himself against Putnam’s contention that he is a relativist by first pointing out a certain agreement between him and Putnam, namely, that “Relativism, just as much as Realism, assumes that one can stand within one’s language and outside it at the same time.”

Nonetheless, he maintains, he does not see how this remark is relevant to (his) own, explicitly “ethnocentric” position. In Objectivity, Relativism and Truth, for instance, Rorty says, “there is no truth in relativism, but this much truth in ethnocentrism: we cannot justify our beliefs (in physics, ethics, or any other area) to everybody, but only to those beliefs overlap ours to some appropriate extent.”

Putnam, on the other hand, believes that truth, although neither independent of conceptual schemes nor interest-free, is transcultural. Hence he speaks in terms of what he calls a Grenzbegriff, i.e., a limit-concept of the ideal truth without which one would certainly slide into relativism. Rorty however says, “I cannot see what ‘idealized rational acceptability’ can mean except ‘acceptability to an ideal community’. Nor can I see how, given that no such community is going to have a God’s eye view, this ideal community can be anything more than us as we should like to be. Nor can I see what ‘us’ can mean here except: us educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals, the people who are always willing to hear the other side, to think out all the implications, etc.-the sort of people, in short, who both Putnam and I hope, at our best, to be. Identifying ‘idealized rational acceptability’ with ‘acceptability to us at our best’ is just what I had in mind when I said that pragmatists should be ethnocentrist rather than relativists.”

According to Mosteller, Rorty’s notion of “ethnocentrism” has its beginnings in his Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Here as well as in his subsequent works, Rorty stresses the common use of specific “vocabularies” by members of an ethnic group in their conversations which unite them and give them solidarity. Such a shared vocabulary, as Mosteller pointed out, “might be used to talk about and act on the enlarging of the ethnic group from within which it is made, or articulating what constitutes the legitimate epistemic practices of the group.” Rorty says he particularly admires those thinkers whose aim is to edify, i.e. help their readers break free from outworn vocabularies.
Rorty is aware that by linking truth to solidarity and intersubjective agreement he is courting the charges of relativism. Hence he distinguishes between three senses of “relativism” one of which is his notion of ethnocentrism. The first is the view that “every belief is as good as every other.” The second is the view that “true” is an equivocal term, having as many meanings as there are procedures of justification The third is the view that “there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – ours - uses in one or another area of enquiry.” Rorty rejects the “self-refuting” first view since he says he neither agrees with the relativist’s call for complete forbearance of all views nor for an abandonment of any substantive notion of correctness or better and worse beliefs, beliefs that are justified and those that are not. He also does not hold the “eccentric” relativism, because he feels that the word “true” plays the same role in all languages and cultures; it is a general term of commendation for the belief we consider well justified. He holds the third ethnocentric view though he thinks it should not be equated with relativism since it is not a positive theory of truth saying that “something is relative to something else.” Instead, it is “the purely negative point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs” or “those beliefs which he or she finds good to believe.” In Mosteller’s opinion, though Rorty is an anti-relativist in the first two senses, yet he can be considered to be a relativist in the third sense, i.e., only in the sense in which relativism amounts to ethnocentrism.

Guignon and Hiley have summed up Rorty’s position by saying that “Rorty is a relativist without giving up on the possibility of meaningful evaluation; he is ethnocentric with tolerance instead of dogmatism; he is a liberal relying on democracy instead of philosophy; and he is a pragmatist comfortable with contingency and solidarity instead of theories.”

It may be mentioned that Rorty’s ethnocentrism is different from the usual kind of ethnocentrism where it is mostly understood as connoting an uncritical faith in the superiority of one’s home culture’s beliefs, practices and institutions. Rorty agrees that ethnocentrism in this sense is dangerous. As Allen explains: “Ethnocentrism is supposed to be bad. No one ever calls himself ‘ethnocentric.” We reserve this term for our opponents; it is always someone else,
with whom you disagree, who is ethnocentric. But Rorty is not advocating the fallacy that anthropologists (and others) love to denounce – the colonialist assumption that unlike the savage, our way of doing things is especially favored by reason, nature, or God.\textsuperscript{65} What Rorty is advocating is, in fact, a more open and tolerant kind of an ethnocentrism in which one realizes that loyalty to one’s own practices is compatible with “openness to differences and tolerance of diversity.”\textsuperscript{66} He writes: “the liberal culture of recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantage of ethnocentrism [by being] open to encounters with other actual and possible cultures, and to make this openness central to its self-image. This...is an ethnos which prides itself on its suspicion of [narrow] ethnocentrism—on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters, rather than on its possession of truth.”\textsuperscript{67}

So then the difference between relativism and Rorty’s ethnocentrism is that, while the former advocates that there are procedures at different times and places for justifying the things people believe, the latter is the idea that “truth and knowledge [are] (only) what we agree is justified by our standards, our methods, concepts, evidence, and styles of reasoning.”\textsuperscript{68} Accordingly, Collister maintains, “Rorty would never say “This the truth to me,” because, after all, who else’s truth is there? Instead, he would say, “This is true,” but with an ironist’s awareness that what she takes to be true at a particular time is different from what she has held true in the past and what she will hold true in the future.”\textsuperscript{69} In the words of Allen, “His (i.e. Rorty’s) endorsement of ethnocentrism does not make sense without liberalism; without liberalism, ethnocentrism would be awful.”\textsuperscript{70} That is to say, Rorty does not see anything wrong objectionable about ethnocentrism as long as the ethnos at the center is a liberal democratic society where “openness to others” forms the most vital part of its self-image.\textsuperscript{71} Thus Rorty thinks his ethnocentrism is different from everybody else’s for even when “we are true to our traditions, (and are) are interested in ourselves, we are (also) interested in what is new and different, (and) happy (at our best) to accommodate and learn from it.”\textsuperscript{72}

An off-hand remark could be made here that though Rorty has rejected the notion of objective truth, yet his recognition that inquiry is guided by local narratives and norms of justifiable resolution or fixing of ends – in short, Rortian “final vocabularies” - can very well be reconstructed to include the notion of objectivity in his ethnocentrism. Illuminating on this John Hartmann
says, such “objectivity does not stem from correspondence to the world, but from coherence to the norms and standards that govern specific rationalities. Objects and ideas can be better and worse, true and false, to the degree that they embody or contradict the local vocabulary.”

In fact, according to Hartmann, this reconstructed model of objectivity and inquiry fits Rorty’s description of the ironist to a tee. He then added, “Ironists recognize the contingency of their particular narrative, the specificity of the norms and standards that govern the selection of possible ends within a situation. They are ‘ethnocentric’ in precisely this sense.”

Hildebrand has summed up Rorty’s ethnocentrism in this way: “As knowers we inherit a perspective that is largely conditioned by the social and historical features of our background (made up of determinate social and historical circumstances). For practical purposes, we cannot change much of this, nor attain a God’s Eye view. But we can work by our own lights—by talking with one another, inventing new vocabularies, and muddling toward the kind of world that “seems better” to us. Luckily, as liberals, we’re not enmeshed in old pernicious “ethnocentrism” largely because our way of reweaving beliefs—our ethnos—incorporates “tolerance” and “openness.” Through ideas like “tolerance” and “openness”—and not through some fixed and transcendental standard—we can continue to criticize our own beliefs and practices. In a phrase, Rortyan ethnocentrists are “acculturated but open.””

V. Rorty’s Ethnocentrism not really Relativistic:

Many scholars agree with Rorty in assuming that ethnocentrism is not really relativistic. Indeed, Forster in his article “What Is at Stake Between Putnam and Rorty?” has brought about his own arguments to show that Rory’s ethnocentrism, while it need not slide into relativism, is also the most practical thing to believe.

Referring to our beliefs and practices, Forster says, “(They) are to be understood as emerging within a particular social-epistemic tradition. It is through participation in these practices that we define ourselves in relation to those things we are not and also, thereby, give content to
conceptions of what is true (or justifiable) and of what constitutes reality. Since one cannot separate the content of beliefs from the reasons advanced to support them, any understanding of our practices will include reference to the styles of reasoning we use and the context in which they have developed, whether or not any of our current conceptions proves sustainable. This view casts doubt on the legitimacy of using Truth and Rationality to explain the presence or persistence of practices in various traditions. The question that arises however is, is it possible to form beliefs, say the Laws of Thermodynamics, out of our social practices and styles of reasoning alone without having recourse to some evidences or facts about reality?

Forster however, having presumed that all our beliefs and practices have arisen out of our own social epistemic context, feels that the appeal to the notion of truth is unwarranted. His argument goes this way: “...the claim that truth explains the success of theories adds nothing to our understanding.” Besides, “the means by which we assess truth and the means by which we determine success are identical. Thus to use truth to explain the success of theories amount to little more than saying that theories are better because they are more successful and that they are more successful because they are better.”

Forster himself has summed up his entire argument by saying that since “…there is no content to such terms as “fact” and “reason” independent of practices embedded in a tradition it follows that as situated inquirers we are able to make sense of these notions only through participation in contemporary reasoning practices.”

And according to Forster, this really is all that Rorty’s ethnocentrism involves. Rorty himself has highlighted the point that what his ethnocentrism conveys is the “purely negative point that we should drop the traditional distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs.” Thus, according to Forster, Rorty should not be seen as someone who is committed to a theory of what truth is simply on the basis of his claims about what truth is not. For rather than affirming relativism, ethnocentrism actually acknowledges the perspectival aspects of inquiry central to Putnam’s own pragmatic realism. Indeed, as Forster has argued, one reason as to why Rorty has called for abandoning
the search for timeless principles is that we have acquired rich ways of relating to our surroundings without them.\textsuperscript{81}

Irrespective of Putnam’s fear that Rorty’s ethnocentrism might collapse into relativism, Forster is convinced Rorty can still make sense of criticism, i.e., Rorty can reject the limit theory of truth and yet avoid self-refuting relativism. And he does this not by appealing to some “ideal limit” but by following what Forster calls “pragmatism without limit.” To shed light on the point he wants to make, Forster cites the example of games where each game has its own created meaning structured by normative rules. Take the game of chess for instance, where although it makes sense to talk about the merits of rule changes, yet such debates do not as a rule involve claims that a particular set of rules constitutes the real game of chess. As Forster has pointed out, “It is odd to suggest that chess was played incorrectly before the introduction of castling and en passant yet it is intelligible to debate whether it was improved by the addition of these moves. What frames such debate are conceptions (more or less widely shared and of varying degrees of generality) of the point of the game and of, what MacIntyre calls, its internal goods.”\textsuperscript{82}

In a nutshell, what lies behind Rorty’s ethnocentrism is his rejection of a transcendental point of view from which to judge ultimate authority. Yet there is nothing about this view that rules out the critical (re)assessment of beliefs and standards. In fact, Forster argues, “(the) pragmatist need only insist that critical conversation proceeds by comparing the practical, concrete advantages of various alternatives under consideration. Such debate can only take place against a backdrop of more or less widely shared beliefs, habits and interests which are themselves defensible only in terms of more beliefs, habits and interests (and by further comparisons with alternatives). There is no fixed, determinate or permanent content to “better” and “worse”, no normative vocabulary that may not itself be implicated in the disputes it attempts to resolve, and thus no ideal perspective (not even a human one) from which to adjudicate disputes.”\textsuperscript{83} Indeed according to Forster, Rorty’s ethnocentrism is not only not relativistic but also the most practical thing to believe for it switches the emphasis from ‘knowing’ to practices that help us cope with reality.
One question remains which is, are there only better and worse beliefs? From our everyday experiences we know there are countless beliefs that are not just better because of the practical and concrete advantages they offer but have been proved to be true and will remain to be so not just for a brief period of time but all the time. In the same way there are not just worse beliefs but those that are blatantly false. How does Rorty account for such beliefs? It seems then that Rorty's ethnocentrism is quite limited when it comes to its scope of application.

VI. Rorty's Ethnocentrism Still Relativistic:

In spite of the various arguments that have been offered in support of Rorty’s ethnocentrism that it is not relativistic, yet there are still a number of scholars who perceive in Rorty’s ethnocentrism a moral menace that merits the indictment of relativism. To cite two instances:

“Rorty makes a helpful distinction between relativism and ethnocentrism, and disavows relativism…Ethnocentrism is the insistence that we speak from the midst of historically and culturally local practices; it amounts to a rejection of the illusory transcendence involved in the image of trying to climb outside of our own minds. But in refusing to allow the in fact perfectly innocent thought that in speaking from the midst of the practices of our ethnos, we make ourselves answerable to the world itself (for instance, to how things stand with respect to cold fusion), Rorty makes a move whose effect is to collapse his own helpful distinction. The thesis that “justification is relative to an audience” is, as explicitly stated, relativistic, not just ethnocentric…”

“True, Rorty does not say that what is true, what is good, and what is right is relative to some particular ethnos, and so in that sense he is no relativist. But the worry about relativism, that it leaves us with no rational way to adjudicate conflict, seems to apply equally to Rorty’s ethnocentric view.”

We have seen how Rorty has defended several times his claim that his ethnocentrism cannot be accused of relativism since the metanarrative, the central questions, and the distinctions which the anti-relativist uses to show the self-defeating nature of relativism are the very things
which Rorty abandons. He has simply left them aside and changed the subject to talk about something else entirely, namely, “solidarity” and “ethnocentrism.”

As we’ve seen, what Rorty’s ethnocentrism means is that “given the lack of any transcendent human nature, we can justify political systems only in a circular way, by saying that our practices are good for us because they are our practices. In other words, we judge our political system by standards which are—and which can only be—relative to our society.”

But as Cruickshank observes, such an ethnocentrism would hinder communication between different societies as every community would not be able to understand, let alone judge, other societies, because they had different standards. In other words, “the lack of some universal norm would seem to result in hermetically sealed communities.” This view, though, is not accepted by Rorty who, as we shall see later in his defense of his ethnocentrism, believes his community, the “wet liberals” is actually open to encounters with other cultures.

Now then one may say, it’s all right to abandon the notion of a universal norm or truth as long as there are some local norms that justify a particular society’s practices. Yet one cannot help but ask, can Rorty appeal to such liberal notions as “rights” and “justice” which are not necessarily reducible to the contingent social norms, without an absolute point reference to appeal to? What if he cannot find members in his community who could agree with him “intersubjectively” on such notions as “rights” or “justice”? Then again as Geras has argued, “if we lose truth, then we lose the notion of injustice, which means that as regards morality and politics, ‘anything goes’.” To explain, given that we cannot make truth claims, then instead of appealing to some notion of “rights”, or “justice”, which are not necessarily reducible to the contingent prevailing social norms, all we can do is turn to rhetorical maneuvering. As Cruickshank has illustrated: “Instead of criticizing racism, for instance, by saying that racism is false...or criticizing the use of torture by saying that it violates universal human rights, we can ‘criticize’ by seeking to offer an alternative way of going on.” Such criticism would not rest on truth claims but will try to make an alternative course of action, say by using poetic redescription, appear better. Perhaps such poetic redescriptions may be in favour of universal human rights or they may alternatively be in favour of racism and fascism. It seems as though Rorty’s pragmatic ethnocentrism could not offer any defense of liberal democracy if, for some reasons,
he fails to justify its practices to those who feel their own norms and practices are the ones which are really helping them to cope better with reality.  

We have also noted how Rorty's notion of "ethnocentrism" allows members of a particular community to be united through the use of "common vocabularies" in their conversations. These vocabularies have been created by the members of that group coming into agreement on what really constitutes their legitimate epistemic practices. As Mosteller explains, "(A) person's "final vocabulary" are those linguistic entities consisting of a person's vocabulary that a person has a right to believe given the current standards (i.e. the practices exemplified in our community) of the participants of the conversation." But even if a person has the right to believe what the standards of her group allow her to believe, the question remains as to what in turn validates her culture's standards, her culture's final vocabulary?

Rorty emphasizes that the advocate of ethnocentrism will maintain that "there is nothing which validates a person's or a culture's final vocabulary." According to Mosteller, there are at least three ways to interpret this idea: "First, it could mean that it is only through "vocabulary" that we have access to the world through the vocabulary we use. Second, it could mean that a view "apart from" any vocabulary is impossible. Third, it could mean that when considering the content of one's final vocabulary (i.e. that which the vocabulary is about), there is nothing "out there in the world" which matches up with or exists independently of particular vocabularies. I think that Rorty means all three of these things." Mosteller therefore concludes that Rorty, notwithstanding his persistent denial that he is not a relativist, cannot avoid being one. He asks, "If there are only final vocabularies, different conversations edifying different groups, then does his not amount to relativism?"

Even Baghramian in her investigation of Rorty's ethnocentrism says it is a form of relativism. In fact, Baghramian has given three reasons as to why Rorty's ethnocentrism is a relativistic doctrine. First, all relativists are, at the end of the day, ethnocentric. The relativist through his claim that truth and justification and the criteria for right and wrong are relative to their socio-cultural background, embraces a type of determinism that makes ethnocentrism inevitable. To put it simply, if what decides what is true are the local norms and standards of a culture, then according to Baghramian, "we are condemned to believe what our culture tells
us to be true.99 Sure, the relativist will argue saying that that even members of other cultures are
trapped by their own cognitive and ethical norms, but that acknowledgment does not free the
relativist from the bind of ethnocentrism.100

Second, by equating truth with justification and making the latter audience and context-
dependent, Rorty embraces a relativistic position. Actually Rorty is quite emphatic when he
says that “justification is relative to an audience “and that we cannot give “any content to the
idea of non-local correctness of assertion.”101

Third, and most importantly, Rorty wishes to distance himself from relativism as he
has, time and again, reiterated that what he is endorsing is not the belief that every point of view
is as good as every other. Rather, what his ethnocentrism advocates is that we must, in practice,
privilege our own group, even though there can be no non-circular justification for doing do.
As Baghramian pointed out however, it is not exactly clear how Rorty’s ethnocentrism would
achieve this goal. For one thing, who would decide who the relevant and significant “we” is. As
we’ve seen before, even Rorty’s ethnocentric “we”, i.e., the “wet liberal intellectuals” is not a
homogeneous grouping. With too many different and conflicting viewpoints it will make it not
just difficult but also quite implausible to decide which “we” has the best idea? Baghramian
therefore concludes, unless we presume “either that there is always a consensus on what the
best idea is for an explanation at any given time or in any given society, or that there is a method
of grading various explanations, we are left with divergent and conflicting community-dependent
“truths” and hence relativism.”102

The point is, how do we adjudicate between explanations or vocabularies that vary
from one another? Rorty maintains that what he is advocating is not a subjective criteria for
choosing between the various explanations or vocabularies; rather, that there are no criteria for
changing one explanation or vocabulary for another. Nonetheless, if this were the case, how
would we then make of such phrases as “the best idea for explanation” or “what is good to
believe”?

To go back to Rorty’s argument, it is that in the process of playing vocabularies and
cultures off against each other that we produce new and better ways of talking and acting – not
better by reference to a previously known standard, but just better in the sense that they come
to seem clearly better “to us” than their predecessors. Still Baghramian is not sure what to
make of this passage. She asks: "Does he mean, as the passage tends to suggest, that all new ideas seem to be better than old ones?" Furthermore, she argues, it seems Rorty is identifying being better with seeming better, which makes it impossible to distinguish between mistaken and correct judgments of evaluation as it turns all our judgments into correct ones. 

Indeed what Baghramian fears most as a result of Rorty's ethnocentrism, a feature it shares with relativism, is the one that Putnam has brought out before that where "a neofascist tendency wins out, and people cope better in the sense that it comes to seem to them that they are coping better by dealing savagely with those terrible Jews, foreigners, and communists; while if the forces of good win out it will also be the case that people cope better in the sense that it come to them that they are." Baghramian says she agrees with Putnam in saying that the concept of coping better as used by Rorty is not "the concept of there being better and worse norms and standards at all." The point rather is, "how do we choose between societies that exemplify toleration, free inquiry and the quest for undistorted communication, and societies that do not have these habits?" Rorty’s answer to this is that anyone who has experienced both would prefer the former to the latter. For Baghramian however, Rorty is being somewhat too optimistic in his assessment. There could arise a situation where members of a particular group might opt for the latter for the simple reason that it is the most "workable" solution to their existing problems.

To conclude, Rorty’s ethnocentrism, no matter how fluent and persuasive one may be in making it the preferred choice, lacks a firm foundation for it cannot guarantee that it will not be replaced by a better justified "vocabulary" that will help people not just cope better with their lives but live better lives. Contrary to his claim that he is not a relativist, Rorty’s view of truth does have relativist consequences and this makes him a relativist or can we say an "ethnocentric relativist?"
Notes and References:

2 Ibid., p. 1.
3 Ibid., p. 136.

4 Caitlin McCollister, “Richard Rorty’s Ironic Liberalism, the Charge of Relativism, and the Priority of Pragmatism,” p. 28. http://www.sewanee.edu/
5 Ibid., p. 28.
6 Ibid., p. 29.
7 Baghramian, Relativism, p. 137.
8 Ibid., p. 137.

10 Ibid., webpage.
11 Ibid., webpage.
12 Ibid., webpage.
13 Ibid., webpage.

14 Baghramian, Relativism, p. 270.


18 Ernest Gellner, Relativism and the Social Sciences (Cambridge, 1985), p. 84.


21 Ibid., p. 24.


24 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 23.


27 Caitlin McCollister, “Rorty’s Pragmatism and Putnam’s Charge of Relativism” (Senior Thesis Proposal) (Philosophy Dept. at the University of Sewanee) 2005, webpage: http://www.sewanee.edu/philosophy

28 Putnam, Realism and Reason, p. 235.


30 Ibid., p. 30.

31 David L. Hildebrand, “Neopragmatism and the Relativist Menace” (University of Colorado, Denver) 2003, p. 6 (http://davidhildebrand.org) (See also Richard Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, New York: Penguin, 2000, p. xvi.)

32 Ibid., p. 6. (See also Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, p. xvi.)

33 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 79.


36 Swartz, “A Pragmatist Response to Joseph Petraglia,”

37 Ibid.

38 Hildebrand, “Neopragmatism and the Relativist Menace” p. 7. (See also Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 96.)

39 Ibid., p. 7. (See also Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 22.)

40 Ibid., p. 8 (See also Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 22.)

41 Ibid., p. 8 (See also, Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (1982), p. xxxvii.)


43 Baghramian, Relativism, p. 148.

44 Ibid., p. 148.


46 Ibid., p. 68.

47 Ibid., p. 69.

48 Hildebrand, “Neopragmatism and the Relativist Menace,” p. 10 (See also Putnam, Renewing Philosophy, p. 200)


50 Ibid., p. 10.


52 Putnam, “Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification,” p. 84.
53 Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," p.51 (See also Putnam, Realism with a Human Face, p. 23.)

54 Ibid., p. 51.

55 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 30, fn. 13 (See also Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," p. 51, fn. 26.)


59 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 23. (See also Baghramian, Relativism, p.147.)

60 Baghramian, Relativism, p. 147.

61 Ibid., p.147.

62 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, pp. 23-24. (See also Baghramian, Relativism, p. 147 and Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, p. 134.)

63 Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, p. 134.


66 Guignon & Hiley, Richard Rorty, p.28.

67 Hildebrand, “Neopragmatism and the Relativist Menace,” pp. 8-9 (See also Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 2.)

68 McCollister, “Rorty’s Ironic Liberalism, the Charge of Relativism, and the Priority of Pragmatism,” p. 38.

69 Ibid., p. 38.

70 Allen, “What was Epistemology?” p. 224.

71 Ibid., p. 224 (See Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 204 where Rorty talks of his own liberal culture as a culture that prides itself on “constantly adding on more windows, constantly enlarging its sympathies. It is a form of life which is constantly extending pseudopods and adapting itself to what it encounters. Its sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity.”)

72 Ibid., p. 224.


74 Ibid., p. 8.


76 Forster, “What is at Stake between Putnam and Rorty?” p. 589.

77 Ibid., p. 589.
78 Ibid., p. 590.
79 Ibid., p. 590.
80 Ibid., p. 590.
81 Ibid., p. 590.
82 Ibid., p. 594.
83 Ibid., p. 601.
84 Hildebrand, “Neopragmatism and the Relativist Menace,” p. 10.
87 Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, p. 130.
89 Ibid., p. 6.
90 Ibid., p. 7.
91 Ibid., p. 7.
92 Ibid., p. 7.
93 Ibid., p. 8.
94 Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, p. 133.
95 Ibid., p. 133. (See Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, p. 197)
96 Ibid., p. 133.
97 Ibid., p. 133.
98 Ibid., p. 149.
99 Ibid., p. 149.
100 Ibid., p. 149.
101 Ibid., p. 149 (See Rorty, Truth and Freedom, p. 22 & p.60.)
102 Ibid., p. 149.
103 Ibid., p. 150.
104 Ibid., p. 150.
105 Ibid., p. 150. (See Putnam, “Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification,” p. 85.)
106 Ibid., p. 150. (See Putnam, “Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification,” p. 85.)