Chapter 6. The Nature of Predictions

Is Rorty right or wrong in his prediction of the "dark years"? In order to answer this question in the best and most honest way possible, I must attend to the nature and purpose of predictions in general. I bring Rorty's set of predictions back into the discussion when appropriate.

[A]The Nature and Purpose of Predictions

There seems to be three strategies for or types of making predictions, but most authors identify only two. The two types usually identified concern the basic dichotomy between religion and science: namely religious prophecy and scientific forecasting. The third type that I add can be understood as somewhere in between these two types, and the question that drives this section is whether Rorty's predictions fall into this third type. If so, what does that teach us about the nature and purpose of Rorty's predictions?

Admittedly, I remain uncertain what to call this third type but will take some guesses throughout this chapter. The third type shares particular characteristics of both the religious and scientific types of prediction. Importantly, the third type also comes with significant differences from both. We can gain clarity on the three types by framing their characteristics first in the metaphysical terms of past, present, and future and second through the epistemological categories of certainty, knowledge, and reason.

Religious prophecy offers a complex relationship between the past, present, and future. The characteristics of the religious type of making predictions are as follows: (a) negative judgment on the present, (b) use of past sources of the law or wisdom in order to (c) make

predictions about either a better, hopeful future or a despairing, horrible future.[1] Predictions about a better, hopeful future are based upon God's promises. These promises are found in the source of law and wisdom, which the Jewish and Christian traditions identify as divine revelation or Scripture. Predictions about a despairing, horrible future are based upon the continued actions and behavior of "God's people"—the same actions and behavior that deserve negative judgment from the prophet.[2]

In terms of the categories of certainty, knowledge, and reasoning, religious prophecy involves both divine and human reasonings. As human beings, prophets reason in the following way: prophets *critique* and *diagnose* the "sins" of the present generation, *infer* how the law and other parts of divine revelation apply to the present generation, and *predict* how divine revelation informs us about the future. Divine reasoning comes into play because God *authorizes* and *empowers* the reasoning of the prophet in the sense that the prophet's reasoning remains grounded in divine revelation. A prophet cannot predict what is contrary to the words of Scripture. Divine revelation forms the prophet and the prophet's reasoning, and the tradition—in

---

[1] For my account of the despairing, horrible future found in the Christian tradition, see my chapter "Left Behind? The New Testament and the American Evangelical Christian Justification for War in the Middle East," chapter number still unknown.

[2] In his essay on Rorty and prophecy, Sam Brody construes the relationship between past, present, and future within religious prophecy a bit different than I do here. He writes, "When prophetic politics tells negative stories about the nation's past and present, it does this without ever implying that its society is irredeemable. Such an implication, in fact, would run deeply contrary to its core mission—calling the people to turn, i.e. to re-fashion themselves as moral agents…. The future they call for is not 'like' the past in the sense of romantic nostalgia, but it does invoke the past in order to recall the people to their own past promises. This is not so different from what Rorty himself does when he invokes Lincoln, Whitman, and figures like Herbert Croly. It is true that God's forgiveness is a crucial part of the 'turning' process—prophecy necessarily imagines that at *some* point, God will get involved. However, the primary agency of *teshuva* is and must always be human. It is when this conviction slips away that prophecy ceases to emphasize freedom and turns into apocalyptic…. Finally, due to its covenantal framework, prophecy must necessarily place constraints on novel performances—but so does Rorty, who wants Americans to be inspired to continual self-creation *in the direction of justice*, rather than in just any direction whatsoever. Rorty, however, claims that he cannot offer any grounds for this preference, and that to search for such grounds is to repeat the Platonist mistake" (Brody, "The Grounds of Prophecy: Richard Rorty and the Hermeneutics of History," page number unknown).

particular, the people who participate in that specific tradition—either listens to or refuses the message of the prophet. While religious prophecy strongly connects strongly connects the present with the past and the future, the kind of certainty achieved within prophecy rests with God alone. Prophets may sound as if they possess certainty in terms of their judgments on the present and their predictions about the future, but there seems to be a theological necessity for epistemic humility because the prophet's authority and power come from God and remain with God. My claim is that the more that the role of the divine gets lifted up within prophecy, the more epistemic humility required by the prophet.

Rorty's predictions about American politics contain both similarities and differences with religious prophecy. First, Rorty's predictions stem from a critique and diagnosis of the present generation; Rorty deliberately directs and limits his critique to the academic Left. Second, the problems of the academic Left do not require a theological discernment for predicting the future but seems more like a historical inevitability for Rorty. Third, Rorty draws from past sources of wisdom to correct the academic Left—namely the sources he Romanticizes as the "Reformist Left"—but *does not use these sources to make promises about the future in his predictions*; Rorty seems to desire a particular future but predicts a future different from the one he desires. However, Rorty predicts the future that he desires but only after America goes through the future that Rorty laments. Fourth, Rorty's predictions about these "dark years" strangely resemble the despairing, horrible predictions about the future found in certain parts of the Christian tradition. Like some prophecies within the Christian tradition require a lengthy time of trials and tribulations, Rorty predicts that we must go through the "dark years" prior to enjoying a time when love and sympathy become the norm within the U.S.A. The philosopher of hope sets up his readers for hopelessness—or, more accurately, a deferred hope. Fifth, do Rorty's predictions

come with epistemic humility? Do they need to come with epistemic humility since there is no role for divine reason and revelation within his predictions?[3] What does epistemic humility look like within political predictions? This set of questions will be better answered after we work through the characteristics of scientific forecasting.

Based on the methods of modern natural sciences, scientific forecasting uses simplistic connections between past, present, and future. Scientific forecasting involves the following characteristics: (a) abstracting patterns from the past, (b) making predictions about the future based upon the patterns abstracted from the past, and (c) using the present to test previous predictions made based upon the patterns of the past and then adjusting other predictions in accordance with the information gained within the present.[4] In short: *abstracting* patterns, *making* predictions, *testing* the predictions that can be tested.

From numerous options, I select two examples of scientific forecasting because these two examples aptly and clearly depict the categories of certainty, knowledge, and ways of reasoning within the natural sciences. The two examples are astronomical and meteorological. As we experience on a daily basis, meteorological predictions come with less certainty but still are mostly accurate whereas astronomical forecasting seems to achieve high levels of certainty—consider the accuracy of predicting eclipses. Scientists never miss an eclipse, either lunar or solar, and every eclipse that scientists predict turns out to be right. Predicting eclipses is an

---

[3] Scripture does play a role in his predictions about 2045-2095 but not in the same way as it does for religious prophets.

[4] I agree with Nicholas Rescher when he argues that "forecasting" serves as a better word than "predictions" for understanding the nature of predictions within the natural sciences: "It is advantageous to confine the term *forecast* to that specific sort of prediction which foretells the occurrence of nonoccurrence of a particular concrete eventuation at a particular definite time…. A *forecast* is thus a definite prediction concerned with specific and concrete events…." He continues that unlike predictions in general, forecasts are "definitely verifiable/falsifiable at some particular juncture of the ultimate course of events" (Rescher, *Predicting the Future: An Introduction to the Theory of Forecasting*, 42-43).

ancient practice,[5] but with the methods and tools of modern science we have 100% certainty with each eclipse predicted.[6] Meteorological predictions, however, rarely achieve 100% certainty. There are two basic reasons for why it seems that predictions about the weather are often wrong. First, a temporal reason: within the natural sciences, it turns out—perhaps counter-intuitively—that short-term predictions are more difficult to make than long-term predictions. Within the natural sciences, predicting an eclipse one hundred years from now contains much more certainty than predicting tomorrow's weather does. Second, a spatial reason: it might be fairer to say that predictions about the weather are not wrong but, rather, miss the mark on the map. Oftentimes, meteorologists predict the right weather but not in the right place. The reason for this is that weather patterns change in ways that are quicker than what human beings can discern. This is also why it remains important to distinguish between "climate" and "weather": climate names the macro-reality of the planet whereas weather names the micro-realities of specific regions. Predicting the future of the climate is more like predicting eclipses than like making meteorological predictions.

Rorty's predictions about American politics contain both similarities and differences with scientific forecasting. First, Rorty does not seem to abstract patterns from history;[7] indeed, he does not follow the cyclical pattern laid out by Plato that democracies turn into tyrannies. Second, his predictions come across closer to the meteorological than the astronomical in the

---

[5] See Griggs, "We've Been Predicting Eclipses for Over 2,000 Years": https://www.popsci.com/people-have-been-able-to-predict-eclipses-for-really-long-time-heres-how

[6] Karl Popper claims: "It is a fact that we can predict solar eclipses with a high degree of precision, and for a long time ahead" (Popper, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences," 454).

[7] I concur with Patrick Baert's judgment about Rorty's thinking: "He [Rorty] laments [the] strongly held conviction that the past somehow holds the key for a glorious future, that the laws will hold tomorrow and the day after tomorrow as they have always done so in the past" (Baert, "Richard Rorty's Pragmatism and the Human Sciences," 145).

sense that the phrase "something will crack" sounds as if there is a 70% chance of rain and not the-eclipse-will-happen-on-November-16th. Third, his predictions seem to make him adjust his own *hopes* in terms of politics and society. This similarity with the natural sciences is the reason for my claim—made in the Introduction—that, after Rorty makes his predictions (in *Achieving Our Country* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*), Rorty's political and social philosophy ought to be interpreted as what he envisions for the latter half of the 21st century. In other words, the failures of the academic Left—of Rorty's own people—serve as the current reality (a.k.a. the present) that requires Rorty to adjust his political and social philosophy as his *hope* for what will become reality from 2045—2095.

Perhaps most importantly: Rorty claims neither the degree of certainty that we find in scientific forecasting nor that his predictions are authorized and empowered by the divine—which we find in religious prophecy.

[B]Predictions in Natural Sciences vs. Predictions in Social Sciences

In my judgment, one of the problems of making predictions in the social sciences concerns how the popular forms of social-scientific prediction-making claim that they can achieve as much as certainty as predictions made within the natural sciences.[8] I tend toward the skepticism of the great 20th century philosopher of science, Karl Popper, when he claims: "The fact that we predict eclipses [in the natural sciences] does not…provide a valid reason for expecting that we can predict revolutions [in the social sciences]."[9] Unlike Popper, however, I am not prepared to dismiss altogether the possibility for social scientific predictions.[10] In this

[8] The three primary authors who represent this flaw are Dan Gardner, Nate Silver, and Philip Tetlock. Silver has built a career on making social scientific predictions about American politics and the sport of baseball.

[9] Popper, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences," 457-458.

section, I borrow from Popper's skepticism but only for the purpose of clarifying the distinction between making predictions in the natural sciences and making predictions in the social sciences.

Karl Popper questions the assumed logic of social scientific predictions. Popper claims that the "fact that we can predict solar eclipses with a high degree of precision" does not serve as a premise for thinking that the "task of the social sciences is fundamentally the same as that of the natural sciences—to make predictions, and, more especially, historical predictions."[11] Popper defines historical predictions as "predictions about the social and political development of [humankind]."[12] In sum, the more that making predictions in the social sciences follow or look like making predictions in the natural sciences the less persuasive they become.

Rorty's predictions seem to qualify, in Popper's terminology, as "*predictions on a large scale*."[13] What does Popper mean by this? By "*predictions on a large scale*," Popper means "long-term predictions whose vagueness is balanced by their scope and significance."[14] Vagueness becomes, for Popper, one of the main problems with social scientific predictions—which means that making "*predictions on a large scale*" remains problematic on Popper's standards. The only positive claim made by Popper about social scientific predictions involves a contrast between achieving in-depth meaning and vagueness: "[A]lthough social science in consequence suffers from vagueness, its qualitative terms at the same time provide it with certain

---

[10] I concur with Nicholas Rescher's judgment about Popper's skepticism: "Overall, however, Popper pushes an otherwise sensible position too far." How so? "To reject a global historical dererminism…is all very well. But to say flatly that history cannot predict is plainly false" in the sense that "[m]any safe predictions can certainly be made in the human domain and many significant developments in human affairs can clearly be foretold with substantial accuracy" (Rescher, *Predicting the Future*, 206).

[11] Popper, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences," 454.

[12] Popper, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences," 455.

[13] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 33.

[14] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 33.

richness and comprehensiveness of meaning."[15] Because of this "richness and comprehensiveness of meaning," Popper concludes this part of his analysis by saying: "if long-term forecasts are at all attainable by the social sciences, then it is fairly clear that they can only be…large-scale forecasts"—as opposed to short-term predictions.[16] With this initial conclusion, it seems that Popper provides a justification for Rorty's social-scientific based predictions. In the end, however, Popper thinks "large-scale forecasts"—within the social sciences—that turn out right are best understood as a type of political or social "miracle" that requires denying both human reason and "*the power of bringing about a more reasonable world*."[17]

We need not share Popper's final conclusion in order to learn from his analysis some clarifying distinctions between making predictions within the natural sciences vs. the social sciences. First, predictions in the natural sciences come with more certainty and clarity; predictions in the social sciences contain uncertainty and vagueness. Second, predictions in the natural sciences are more detailed-oriented whereas predictions in the social sciences seem to be directed toward developing in-depth meanings. Third, justifying making predictions in the social sciences should neither borrow from nor rely on the justifications and rationale for making

---

[15] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 33.

[16] Nicholas Rescher disagrees with Popper on this point. Instead, Rescher argues that short-term predictions are more likely. Either way, Rescher ultimately dismisses the possibility for making political predictions when he writes: "To think that we shall ever be in a position reliably to forecast next year's newspaper headlines is pie in the sky. Even routine short-term predictions in politics—election outcomes as a prime example—are hard to forecast with unqualified confidence. And the longer term is imponderable. *For elections eight or ten years down the road, we cannot say who the candidates will be, let alone which of them will win*…. [P]olitics is too volatile and chancy a process for confident prediction. It would be a foolhardy thing to place much reliance on the declarations of a seer who claimed to be able to forecast political developments in national or international affairs" (Rescher, *Predicting the Future*, 201; emphasis added). Rescher's book was published the same year as Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*, so it is unlikely that Rorty read Rescher's critique and dismissal of making political predictions. I must admit, however, that when I first read Rescher's paragraph I immediately thought: 'Rorty read this paragraph and then said, "Hold my beer".'

[17] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 45.

predictions in the natural sciences. We might achieve this distinction by shifting from a truth-based expectation found in the natural sciences to an aesthetic-based judgment—which would result in the following distinction. Predictions made within the social sciences ought to be considered as the *art of making predictions*; the language of the *science of making predictions* ought to be avoided within the social sciences.

Do Rorty's predictions align with these features for social-scientific prediction making, for the art of marking predictions? Yes, to the first feature: Rorty's predictions contain many uncertainties and remains vague. The clarity of the predictions presented in this book ought to be considered as a Peircean exercise in trying to clarify a vague argument through intellectual distinction and rational reconstruction.[18] Rorty, himself, celebrates the fact that his writings fail to achieve certainty.

Yes, to the second feature: Rorty's predictions are not detail-oriented but, rather, display his ability to paint with a broad brush in ways that develop in-depth meanings and a particular vision for "achieving our country" (James Baldwin's phrase, to be defended in the Conclusion). Yes, to the third feature as well: Rorty neither borrows from nor utilizes any aspect of the truth-based expectations found within the natural sciences.

On the one hand, Rorty's predictions seem like the kind of political and social "miracle" discussed by Karl Popper (and Popper uses this language to dismiss the possibility for calling social-scientific predictions legitimate or real *predictions*). On the other hand, the predictions found in Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* and *Philosophy and Social Hope* make sense in terms of aesthetic reasoning: because of the failures (ugliness) of the academic Left, the broader population will turn toward a "strong-man" (monster) to save them (as Trump offered and

[18] See Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," 124-140.

promised to do during the 2016 National Republican Convention). Rorty's predictions after the 2016 presidential election simply follow down an aesthetic path of how the U.S.A. will grow uglier and uglier—as described in chapter 2. The phrase "dark years," itself, can be understood as an aesthetic claim because "darkness"—in Rorty's use of it—suggests a lack of proper perception. It involves, in particular, lacking the ability to appreciate and see.[19]

In conclusion, Rorty's predictions align with the stated features of social-scientific prediction-making. If we desire a name for Rorty's type of predictions, then they can be called historical predictions—"predictions about the social and political development of [humankind]."[20]

[B]Predictions in Social Sciences vs. Predictions in Theology

If Rorty's predictions cannot be 'scientific', then why not give into the usual dichotomy between religion and science and label Rorty's predictions as *prophetic*? This certainly is tempting, especially given that I have argued elsewhere that Rorty's neo-pragmatism can be considered a "weak" version of *prophetic* pragmatism.[21]

Another reason to affirm this question concerns the label of historical predictions, which we concluded fit Rorty's set of predictions. In a different book (*The Poverty of Historicism*) than the one discussed previously, Popper furthers his discussion of historical predictions by developing a critique of historical prophecy. The definition of historical prophecy builds from the definition of historical predictions: "the prophecy of social, political, and institutional

[19] Traditionally, "seeing" serves as the perception that helps us making better and more refined aesthetic judgments about ourselves and the world.

[20] Popper, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences," 455.

[21] See Goodson, *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism*, chapter 8.

developments."[22] Popper says "prophecy" involves any "case we are told about an event which we can do nothing to prevent…. Its practical value lies in our being warned of the predicted event, so that we can side-step it or meet it prepared."[23]

Elsewhere (*The Open Society and Its Enemies*), however, Popper argues that side-stepping a "predicted event" becomes nearly impossible because of the religious nature of prophecy. According to Popper, religious prophecies help bring about their own predictions. For Popper, this means that if such predictions turn out right it should not lead to the judgment that religious prophecy has some kind of "scientific character." Rather, in Popper's words, "[i]t may…be a consequence of its religious character and a proof of the force of the religious faith which it has been able to inspire in [humanity]."[24] Historical prophecies look "scientific" because they are often right; however, they are not right in any "scientific" sense because their rightness cannot be separated from their "religious character." Their "religious character" leads history and humanity in such a way that it ensures the prediction come true. Similar to his dismissal of historical predictions as legitimate and real predictions, Popper concludes that historical prophecies—because of their "religious character"—fail the standards of legitimate and real predictions. The difference between his two judgments concerns how historical predictions are illegitimate despite borrowing from and relying on making predictions in the natural sciences whereas historical prophecies ought to be deemed illegitimate despite the fact that they often come true—predictions coming true occurs with predictions made within the natural sciences.

---

[22] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 40.

[23] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 38.

[24] Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 401-402.

With the exception of the "Second Great Depression," Rorty's predictions about 2014—2020 have come true. Does this mean that Rorty's predictions take on a "religious character"? This question leads to a better and deeper understanding of Rorty's predictions because in no way do Rorty's predictions have the kind of "religious character" described by Popper. Rorty has neither the authority nor the community of followers that worked to ensure that his predictions come true. Rorty did not spend his energy, after 1999, doing whatever it takes to bring us closer to his predictions. If we remain with Popper's terms, then Rorty's predictions can be categorized either as historical predictions or historical prophecies. If making predictions and working to bring about such predictions are required for prophecy, however, then Rorty's predictions do not qualify as historical prophecies.

Nevertheless, this conclusion does not mean that I am relinquishing the argument made in *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism*—namely that Rorty's neo-pragmatism can be considered a "weak" version of prophetic pragmatism. In that book, I write:

> **[EXT]**To call Rorty's version of prophetic pragmatism "weak" simply means that Rorty calls for cultural and political changes but with foundations neither for critiquing culture and politics nor a strong sense of where justice leads us into the future…. Rorty's neo-pragmatism can be considered a version of prophetic pragmatism because he rejects the status quo and hopes that love becomes "the only law."[25]**[/EXT]**

I can maintain that description of Rorty's prophetic pragmatism *and* claim now—without contradiction—that Rorty's predictions about "the future" are not prophetic because prophetic pragmatism is as much about critiquing the present as it is about predicting the future. Rorty critiques the present plenty, even if his criticisms are neither as "deep" nor as "strong" as others.[26]

---

[25] Goodson, *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism*, chapter 8.

[26] In *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism*, I differentiate Rorty's "weak" version of prophetic pragmatism from Cornel West's "strong" version of prophetic pragmatism and Peter Ochs's "deep" version of prophetic pragmatism.

Furthermore, Rorty's predictions about the years between 2045—2095 fit better with the predictive nature of prophetic pragmatism because those set of predictions made by Rorty are *hopeful*. Rorty's predictions concerning thirty years of darkness are not hopeful but despairing. More on this in the Conclusion.

Returning to my question—if Rorty's predictions cannot be 'scientific', then why not give into the usual religion-science dichotomy and label Rorty's predictions as *prophetic*?—my final answer builds from the discussion in the previous section. Because Rorty's predictions align with the stated features of social-scientific prediction making, these features must be distinguished also from making predictions based upon theological reasoning. Rorty relies on neither divine promises nor divine revelation for making and thinking through his predictions. Although his predictions oddly sound like the trials and tribulations predicted by some American Evangelical Christians, his source for the "dark years" is not the final book of the New Testament—the *Book of Revelation*—as it is for them.[27] Rorty's predictions may sound prophetic, especially his prediction concerning the election of a "strongman" in the presidential election, but calling them prophetic in the end miscategorizes Rorty's ways of reasoning found in his set of predictions.

[B]Historical Predictions, Religious Prophecy, Scientific Forecasting

My preferred terms for the three strategies or types of predictions are scientific forecasting, religious prophecy, and historical predictions. I remain content with Karl Popper's label of historical predictions for what it means to make predictions within the social sciences—which is what Rorty does in *Achieving Our Country* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*. I differ

[27] Interestingly enough, the source of the trials and tribulations for American Evangelical Christians is not always The Book of Revelation but the fictional series known as *Left Behind* (see Goodson, "Left Behind?")

from Popper on what to call the other two types of predictions, and I propose my own description of the three types of predictions.

[EXT]

Scientific Forecasting
Natural Sciences
Uses the present to test previous predictions
Views the past as the exhibition of patterns in the natural world
Degrees of certainty in relation to the type of prediction made
(our examples: predicting eclipses vs. predicting the weather)
Inferences made on the basis of the scientific method

Religious Prophecy
Theology
Offers negative judgments on the present
Views the past in terms of its sources of wisdom
Certainty remains with the divine; prophets must maintain epistemic humility
Inferences made on the basis of divine promises and divine revelation

Historical Predictions
Social Sciences
Offers negative judgments on the present
Views the past as the exhibition of patterns in the social world
No degree of certainty; those who make predictions must maintain epistemic humility
Bases for inferences vary depending on methodologies within social scientific discipline

[/EXT]

With the clarity achieved in this chart, I now focus more intently on the category of historical predictions.

[A]Enlightenment Philosophy and Historical Predictions

In his philosophical study concerning the nature of predictions, Nicholas Rescher outlines "the four major sorts of views" relating to the possible "structural trends and tendencies of history":

> **[EXT]**
> "*progressive*: matters are moving to a new a totally different—and better—order of things…."

> "*retrogressive*: matters are in a state of decay moving back to a simpler, cruder, and more primitive order of things…."
>
> "*stabilitarian*: fundamentally, things remain pretty much the same over the course of time…."
>
> "*cyclic*: there is ongoing change; it does not have a fixed direction but moves in repetitive pattern of ebbs and flows…."[28]**[/EXT]**

We noted earlier that Rorty denies the "cyclic" view, and his predictions reveal to us that he does not hold to any type of stabilitarianism. Rorty boldly defends a notion of moral progress.[29] Because of his belief in moral progress, and because of his predictions concerning the "dark years," Rorty's predictions fit into the first two of the categories identified by Rescher: progressive and retrogressive.

His prediction concerning thirty years of darkness fits with the "retrogressive" view, and his prediction that solidarity and sympathy rule our political and social relationships from 2045—2095 fits with progressivism. Rorty explicitly defends the progressive view toward the end of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*—published in 1989. Because of the retrogressivism of his predicted "dark years," overly simplistic claims—such as this one found in Ronald Kuipers's *Solidarity and the Stranger*, "Rorty thinks we can only look back at our past and compare the ways in which our present culture is more inclusive"—are not warranted.[30]

Rescher identifies philosophical schools of thought with each of the categories.[31] He mentions "Enlightenment thinkers" with the "progressive" view, and he names "Fin de siècle

---

[28] Rescher, *Predicting the Future*, 203.

[29] "[T]here is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity…. [I]t is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (Rorty, CIS, 192).

[30] Kuipers, SS, 74.

theorists" with the "retrogressive" view. What does it mean that Rorty mixes these two views, and what does it tell us about the nature and problems of Rorty's predictions?

I have three quick answers to the first question. First, the retrogressivism nuances—but does not cancel out—Rorty's progressivism. Although Rorty defends liberal and moral progressivism, the reterogressivism means that his progressivism cannot be interpreted on the standards of the caricature of liberal and moral progressivism. Second, Rorty makes his "social hope" (progressivism) dependent upon a time of despair—a stage when we move "back to a simpler, cruder, and more primitive order."[32] (This dependence is what I seek to continually challenge throughout the present book.) Third, Rorty's prediction found in the "something will crack" passage reveals that—at least, philosophically-speaking—the slogan "Make America Great Again" ought to be judged as unapologetically "retrogressive."

The second question, what does it tell us about the nature and problems of Rorty's predictions, cannot be answered so quickly. To initiate an answer to it, I begin from Rescher's identification of progressivism with Enlightenment philosophy and develop what such a connection means for the social-scientifically based type of predictions I have labeled as historical predictions. With the help of Elizabeth Rottenberg's *Inheriting the Future* (2005), Rorty's liberal and moral progressivism can be connected with the conception of the "future" found within the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy. Rorty tends to deny his indebtedness to this tradition,[33] but his liberal and moral progressivism places him squarely within this tradition.

---

[31] See Rescher, *Predicting the Future*, 203.

[32] Rescher, *Predicting the Future*, 203.

[33] See Rorty, "The Continuity between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'," 19-37.

Within the Enlightenment philosophical tradition, conceptions of the future are tied to the categories of humanity and inhumanity. In other words, Enlightenment thinkers use their conceptions of the future to judge the rationality of humanity. Rorty tells his readers over and over, however, that he does not fit into the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy preceisely because of these types of judgments—the Enlightenment emphasis on rationality and reason. According to the philosophical story told by Elizabeth Rottenberg, however, Enlightenment thinkers do not always acknowledge how categories beyond reason come into play in their strong defenses of rationality and reason.

The primary thinkers within Rottenberg's philosophical story are Immanuel Kant and Sigmund Freud. She argues that Kant allows for both the faculty of the imagination and the faculty of reason to play a role within his conceptions of the future. In his essay, "What Is Enlightenment?" he employs only the faculty of reason to judge humanity—both in the present and in the future.

Freud follows Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" more strictly—which means that Freud explicitly allows only the faculty of reason to play a role within his conception of the future. Rottenberg writes:

> **[EXT]**For Freud, our best hope is that the intellect—"or let us call it by the name that is familiar to us, reason"—may in time establish "a *dictatorship* in the mental life of man…." The powers of reason must dispel…illusions…in order to lay the foundation of a new community—a community bound by reason."[34]**[/EXT]**

For Freud, we should place our "hope" in human rationality and reason—to the point in which reason fully dictates "the mental life" of all humanity. Ultimately, our "hope" concerns "a new

---

[34] Rottenberg, IF, 20. In chapter 5, we learn that the "illusions" referenced here concern "the illusions of religion."

community—a community bound by reason" alone. This "hope" for a new community "bound by reason" depicts Freud's version of progressivism.

Rottenberg argues, however, that Freud downplays a crucial element that must be part of his conception of the future—an element that is beyond reason. (Hence my use of the word "explicitly" in the paragraph above.) She calls it the "binding" or the "bond" that holds together this "new community": "a community *bound* by reason." This "binding" must be beyond reason because Freud thinks of human sociality in terms of destruction, impulsiveness, and violence. With a witty turn of phrase, Rottenberg claims that a "community bound by reason owes its binding force…to an energy…unbound."[35] Rottenberg's interpretation of Freud's role within the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy is exactly right, and my claim is that *Rorty fits into this tradition concerning a progressive conception of the future when it comes to light that there are aspects that go beyond relying-on-reason-alone within this tradition*.

She concludes that both thinkers (Kant and Freud) use their conception of the future to ground their judgments about humanity—humanity in the past, in the present, and in the future. What does she mean by this, and how does it relate to Rorty's predictions? She means that the future we inherit will teach us either that we, in the present, are either *human* or *inhuman*. If we qualify as *human* now, on the terms of Enlightenment philosophy, then the future we inherit will be one of progress: a future deemed rational and reasonable on the standards of Enlightenment philosophy. If it turns out that we are *inhuman* now, then the future we inherit will be of our own making: "acts of cruelty, wanton violence, [and] those things we condemn—or monstrosize—as 'inhuman'."[36] She continues,

---

[35] Rottenberg, IF, 20.

[36] Rottenbrg, IF, 124.

> **[EXT]**[T]hese inhuman elements simultaneously bequeath to us a future insofar as they promise us possibility beyond the possibilities of cognition. The inhuman is our future, I argue, not because we must learn to tolerate violence and atrocity but because the future would have no life without the risk of a certain inhumanity.[37]**[/EXT]**

This paragraph represents another way to describe what Rorty calls the "dark years" of American politics and society: a period of American history that will be characterized by atrocity, cruelty, and violence. While Rottenberg places the blame universally, on all of us, my claim is that Rorty places the blame more locally—specifically on the academic Left. In relation to Rottenberg's argument, Rorty wants to have it both ways: both the progressive future (2045—2095) and the inhuman future (2014—2044). Rorty uses the future to judge us now, and he uses the future to tell us "everything will be okay."

What does it mean that Rorty boldly predicts the politics of the 21st century—from 2014 through 2095? In my judgment, such bold predictions place Rorty in a philosophical tradition that makes him uncomfortable—the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy. If I am wrong and it's not that tradition, then it seems that the other option (since Rorty clearly is not a scientific forecaster) is where Brad Elliott Stone places Rorty's thinking: in the tradition of the Hebrew Prophets.[38] Either way, *Rorty's predictions about the 21st century leave him in the company he sought to avoid throughout the entirety of his career: either Enlightenment philosophers, who place too much faith in reason, or religious prophets, who put too much faith in faith*.

[A]The Problem of Rorty's Predictions

The problem of these predictions is what it means to say that Rorty might be *right*. On the one hand, it seems remarkable that Rorty identified how the 2016 presidential election would go

---

[37] Rottenbrg, IF, 124.

[38] See Stone, "Can There be Hope without Prophecy?" chapter 8.

and the proliferation of gun violence—which we are currently experiencing. On the other hand, why would anyone—much less a philosopher and professor—predict events that become so lamentable and tragic?

Rorty predicts deep tragedies within American life. Why make predictions that we ought to wish not come to fruition? Philosophically, this involves an epistemological dilemma: claiming to know future events that we cannot know and, furthermore, wishing that we did not know. Of course, Rorty spent a career debunking such philosophical approaches to knowledge. What is more pertinent, however, from Rorty's writing career involves his understanding of the future. For Rorty, the future is made by us; the future is not out there waiting for us to enter into it. There is no future to know independent of the future that we make for ourselves. Why is this the future that Rorty knows, in the sense of predicts, when there is no future yet to know?

Well, it must mean that Rorty's predictions are not claims of knowledge about what awaits us. Rather, Rorty's predictions concern what he thinks we are making ourselves. We bring about the "dark years"; we *make* the thirty years of darkness.

In this way, Rorty is not necessarily making predictions but performing diagnostic work on the future we make for ourselves as Americans. In other words, Rorty's seeming predictions demonstrate the peak of his pragmatism (as a branch of consequentialism, pragmatism emphasizes the consequences of beliefs and concepts): judging the present based upon the formulation of hypotheses about the consequences of the present. These consequences comprise what we consider the future, and perhaps the logic of pragmatism changes the way we ought to think about what we mean by the future. The future is not out there waiting for us to arrive in it. Instead, the future becomes the consequences—both intended and unintended—of the present. In this sense, Rorty spells out the consequences of the behavior and choices of the academic Left

more so than making predictions about the future. However, we may continue to call them predictions so long as we understand them as taking guesses about the consequences of the present. Within pragmatism, we ought to re-define the practice of making predictions as a form of hypotheses-making about the consequences of actual and present events.

Nevertheless, Rorty's predictions remain problematic from a pragmatist perspective.[39] My final claim for this chapter is that *it does not matter if Rorty's predictions are right or wrong*. What matters is the pragmatist judgment about the *usefulness* of Rorty's predictions. What's the use of predicting thirty years of darkness and then fifty years of love and sympathy on a global scale?

[39] I further develop this argument in the Conclusion.