

HOW NOT TO READ RORTY

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One often hears talk that contemporary philosophy, in the most general sense, is broadly divided into two rather adversarial camps—that of the “analytic” tradition and that of the “Continental” tradition. The former term usually refers to those philosophers concerned with logical analysis and conceptual clarity, philosophers who have inherited many of the concerns of the Vienna Circle and who continue to try and formulate a successful post-positivist epistemology. The latter term usually refers to the more speculative, metanarrative-oriented philosophers such as Heidegger and Foucault, who seek to radically historicize all human inquiry, particularly Western science and the various attempts by many philosophers to secure some form of first-order privilege for such scientific activity.

In recent years, much has been written not only about the split between analytic and Continental philosophy, but also about closely related issues such as “modernism versus postmodernism,” “objectivism versus relativism” and Richard Rorty’s schema of “foundationalism” versus “antifoundationalism,”¹ but for readers unfamiliar with the complexities of all these competing schools of philosophy, and also with the nuances that exist inside the logics and doctrines of each of the major individual thinkers, grouping such a diverse array of figures and theories under a simple “analytic/Continental” or “objectivist/relativist” dichotomy can often be more of a disservice than an elucidation.

As undergraduates becoming initiated into the rich and detailed history of, for example, epistemology, we are bound at some point to oversimplify matters. For instance, with regard to how some may interpret Rorty’s wholesale attack upon the epistemological tradition, one undergraduate philosophy instructor has remarked:

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¹ See, for instance, Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*; Hollis and Lukes; Margolis; and Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*.

Teaching Rorty is difficult. Students respond favorably, but superficially, to his critique. They consider it iconoclastic and exciting, but few of them have had the time to feel the grip of what he rejects. They may appreciate in an abstract way that it is unproductive to do epistemology but few can feel *liberated* by Rorty's critique because they have not been captives of Bernstein's "Cartesian Anxiety" (Prado: cf. Malachowski, pp. 365–6).

Depending on whatever vague and underdeveloped theoretical orientation we uphold, we may be hasty to stereotype others' theories as "Platonist" or "relativist," or we may hold a set of beliefs which in hindsight are blatantly inconsistent. It is my belief that much of the precociousness of our formative undergraduate years can be attributed to our misreadings of (and natural inability to yet adequately digest) various metanarrative "histories of philosophy"—i.e., those works which attempt to situate 2000 years of philosophy into a simple and neat framework. From Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* to Reichenbach's *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*, such texts, when read by individuals without adequate training in philosophy, are bound to receive rather perverse interpretations. And it is not just first-year philosophy undergraduates who are guilty of such interpretations. If it is, in fact, the case that many philosophy undergraduates engage in certain types of simplisms at early stages, then for obvious reasons, the same can be said for individuals in other academic disciplines who "dabble in philosophy."² For instance, the influence of Derrida in English departments and Kuhn in history departments is quite significant. My point is not whether some philosophy undergraduates are wishy-washy, but rather that we, who have noticed significant changes in our own philosophical perspectives, use the lessons we have learned about ourselves to stem similar misinterpretations by others, especially as certain philosophical doctrines with potentially radical consequences gain in popularity amongst individuals outside of professional philosophy.³

The eclectic and controversial "pragmatism" of Rorty stands as a

² See, for instance, Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*; Hollis and Lukes; Margolis; and Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*.

³ I have in mind here underdeveloped interpretations of thinkers such as

prime example of a metanarrative-oriented philosophy capable of easy misrepresentation. Cited as an authoritative philosophical source by numerous individuals in the humanities and social sciences (but also scathingly attacked by a multitude throughout academia), Rorty is arguably the most talked about philosopher in the western world.⁴ Since the publication of his landmark book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the language of Rorty's subsequent essays has become increasingly accessible. Rorty's lucid writing style, with his injections of humor and his continual abandonment of technical analytic terminology, make him increasingly readable, while his ambitious attempts to synthesize a wide range of writers, both technical and literary, give his call for the end of philosophy a certain authoritative and rhetorical, if not seductive appeal to many non-philosophers.

It has been noted by Alan Hobbs that:

The Mirror of Nature is designed as an exorcism of ghosts. For students to profit from the book, their minds must therefore first be haunted. Without suitably muscled ghosts with which to do battle, the excitement of the exorcism is missing (Hobbs: cf. Malachowski, p. 366).

Without "suitably muscled ghosts," the excitement may be missing but a real danger is quite present—namely, a grossly underdeveloped (or just plain wrong) interpretation of Rorty and all the unforeseen consequences that go with it. By briefly examining the core of Rorty's philosophy and by reflecting upon a few of the prevailing criticisms of his work, I hope to demonstrate (however indirectly) the potential that Rorty's mass appeal may have in inadvertently fueling naive versions of relativism and irrationalism. This concern is compounded tremendously, of course, if Rorty's philosophical position can be shown to be ultimately incoherent and unworkable, as many

Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger, Derrida, Kuhn, Rorty and various neo-Marxists. Though I focus in this paper on the philosophy of Richard Rorty, the same rule of thumb would apply equally well to, for example, Chomsky or certain sociobiologists.

⁴ For a free-market economist's total embrace of Rorty's philosophical position, see McCloskey; for a similar embrace of Rorty's philosophy by two neo-Marxist economists, see Resnick and Wolff; for an English professor's complete dismissal of Rorty's view of language, see Steinmann.

of today's most prominent philosophers maintain.

I

What turned so many heads with the 1979 publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was the pronouncement, by a very able philosopher not only trained in the rigors of contemporary analytic philosophy but also conversant with the major Continental thinkers of the day, that philosophy itself, as it has been traditionally conceived of, had run its course. As is well known, this is not the first time that someone had proclaimed the end of philosophy, but what is striking about Rorty is his status of being an "insider" to the technical arguments of cutting-edge analytic philosophy who is also sympathetic to some of the most controversial ideas that have emerged from the Continental tradition in philosophy. Rorty does not, however, see himself as "taking sides" in either the analytic/Continental or objectivist/relativist split. He is equally critical of thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic who subscribe to what he sees as an outmoded philosophical enterprise—that of "epistemological foundationalism."

Rorty applies a grid of "foundationalism versus antifoundationalism" to 2000 years of Western philosophy, and he uses this grid to divide the history of philosophy into those who believe that genuine foundations to knowledge can, in principle, be discovered or explicated, and those who believe that all knowledge (including attempts to legitimate "genuine" knowledge) is historically contingent. Under Rorty's schemata, foundationalism has been, and continues to be, all the various systematic attempts "to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art or religion" (*PMN*, p. 3). Foundationalist philosophers believe that by correctly spelling out the nature of the human mind and its relationship to what is outside the mind, we can have knowledge of reality as it exists in and of itself. Rorty characterizes foundationalist philosophers' main conviction:

To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture

up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so) (*PMN*, p. 3).

Such conviction is, according to Rorty, the central tenet that unifies all foundationalist philosophers—be they analytic or Continental. One can turn to nearly any page (if not any paragraph) of a Rorty article and hear the same leitmotif, though perhaps played in different keys: epistemology-centered philosophy goes back to the Platonic urge to find universals, and though no one still believes in Platonic ideas, we have nonetheless inherited the idea that true knowledge *can* be ascertained—that, in one form or another, language or the mind acts as a “mirror of nature.” Universality, necessity, rationality, correspondence theory, representationalism, objectivism, cognitivism, essentialism, logocentricism, structuralism, realism—all these terms (as well as others) are, if we are to follow Rorty, members of the same family, as they all presuppose the feasibility of the epistemological project.

Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey are the figures whom Rorty regards as “the three most important philosophers of our century” (*PMN*, p. 7), for each was, in his early years, a foundationalist—trying to ground knowledge systematically—but in time,

[e]ach of the three came to see his earlier effort as self-deceptive, as an attempt to retain a certain conception of philosophy after the notions needed to flush out that conception (the 17th-century notions of knowledge and mind) has been discarded. . . . Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program (*PMN*, pp. 5–6).

II

In an early favorable review of Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Bernstein notes that some readers of Rorty who

“may not be acquainted with the latest subtleties” of issues and arguments in analytic philosophy

may have felt that somehow philosophy took a wrong turn with the analytic movement. They may feel some satisfaction that Rorty has written the type of critique that could only be written by an “insider,” and that he has shown that the emperor has no clothes—or at least is scantily clad. If only Anglo-American philosophers had taken a different turn ... then we might have avoided the tangled mess which has consumed so much technical competence. But if this is the way they have read Rorty, then they have *misread* him and they have missed the real sting of his critique (PCM, pp. 38–9).

Rorty, after all, is formulating his ideas within the tradition of analytic philosophy—using the techniques and arguments of analytic philosophers to buttress his metanarrative hopes. (Whether his moves are valid is, of course, an entirely different issue). Rorty describes the antifoundationalist “therapy” he is offering as “parasitic upon the constructive efforts of the very analytic philosophers whose frame of reference I am trying to put in question” (*PMN*, p. 7). Hence, most of Rorty’s particular criticisms of various attempts at foundationalism⁴ are, in a sense, borrowed from various analytic philosophers such as Quine and Davidson:

I am as much indebted to these philosophers for the means I employ as I am to Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey for the ends to which these means are put. I hope to convince the reader that the dialectic within analytic philosophy ... needs to be carried a few steps further. These additional steps will, I think, put us in a position to criticize the notion of “analytic philosophy” and indeed of “philosophy” itself as it has been understood since the time of Kant (*PMN*, pp. 7–8).

⁴For Rorty, the foundationalist urge took its distinctively modern turn with Locke, Descartes and especially Kant. See “The World Well Lost.”

The question we must ask ourselves is precisely how many “steps further” we have license to take without becoming incoherent. Rorty’s radical antifoundationalism leaves absolutely no room whatsoever for even a trace of the idea that “the world,” in some way and to some degree, “determines” our knowledge. According to Rorty, any such hope can only be Kant’s “noumena” dressed up in modern garb. “If you start out with Kant’s epistemology,” writes Rorty, “in short, you will wind up with Kant’s transcendental metaphysics” (WWL, p. 16). Rorty sees Kant’s attempt to find *a priori* principles and structures (that Kant believed were presupposed for genuine knowledge—especially with regard to the success of science) as the immediate forerunner of analytic philosophy and the general form of its traditional concern with epistemological foundations. Rorty is prepared to classify today’s sophisticated versions of scientific realism⁵ as no more than latent Kantianism, pure and simple. Adopting an argument of Davidson’s, Rorty writes:

All that can be done with the claim that “only the *world* determines truth” is to point out the equivocation in the realists’ own use of ‘world.’ In the sense in which “the world” is just whatever that vast majority of our beliefs not currently in question are currently thought to be about, there is of course no argument ... The notion of “the world” as used in a phrase like “different conceptual schemes carve up the world differently” must be the notion of something *completely* unspecified and unspecifiable—the thing-in-itself, in fact (WWL, p. 14).

Hence, everything from the more explicit versions of scientific realism to Quine’s “naturalized epistemology” (which reserves a special determinate role for stimuli-triggered “observation statements”) depends ultimately on what amounts to a Kantian defense. As with most philosophers he characterizes as “foundationalist,” Rorty portrays Quine in a pejorative manner, arguing that

⁵ For leading defenses of scientific realism, see for instance, the work of Richard Boyd, Larry Laudan, Ernan McMullin and Clark Glymour. Rorty’s most direct address to these and other realists is his essay, “Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?”

other philosophers followed Quine in falling back into dogmatic metaphysics, decreeing that the vocabulary of the physical sciences "limns the true and ultimate structure of reality." It is significant that Quine concluded that "the unit of empirical inquiry is the whole of science," when one might have expected, given the drift of his argument, "the whole of culture." Quine, and many other holists, persisted in the belief that the science–nonscience distinction somehow cuts culture at a philosophically significant joint (NS, pp. 46–7).

One can still, however, subscribe to a holism that *does* regard "the unit of empirical inquiry" as "the whole of culture" and yet not be forced to accept Rorty's conclusions. One such holism is that of Davidson,⁶ who notes his point of departure from Rorty:

Where we differ, if we do, is on whether there remains a question how, given that we cannot "get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence", we nevertheless can have knowledge of, and talk about, an objective public world which is not of our own making. I think this question does remain, while I suspect that Rorty doesn't think so (Davidson, p. 123).

Hilary Putnam's "internal realism," which he backs up with the notion of a transcendental rationality, is another holistic line we can take that is very different from Rorty's. As a causal theory of reference, it is one of the last foreseeable defenses of the very notion of "reference" (that there is some determinate linkage between "our world" and "the world"). Putnam counts Rorty as a "cultural relativ-

⁶ Davidson's philosophy rests heavily on Quine's theory of meaning. If Quine's indeterminacy of translation thesis ultimately has no empirical explanatory power (since different translation manuals, or different "conceptual frameworks," all square with the stimuli of "the world") then Davidson's argument against "the very idea of a conceptual scheme" has even less empirical explanatory power, and consequently (and in a rather paradoxical way) seems to square ever more so with common-sense realism (ala Tarski). One then wonders how Rorty feels he has the license to deny (or at least qualify in a very strange way) the primary roles of "reference" and "truth" and the concept of reason they *presuppose* (PFD).

ist" because of Rorty's insistence that convincing one's peers is all there is to the game of "truth." In the Peircean tradition, Putnam writes:

What I am saying is that the "standards" accepted by a culture or a subculture, either explicitly or implicitly, cannot *define* what reason is, even in context, because they *presuppose* reason (reasonableness) for their interpretation. ... Reason is ... both immanent (not to be found outside of concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of *all* activities and institutions) (Putnam, p. 234).

According to Rorty, using the term "reason" (with its implicit notion of an ideal convergence point of "truth") is really no more than convincing others to accept your assertions—there is no role being played by "the world," as the term is really just a confusion with language. Putnam, however, stresses that we cannot appeal to a consensus definition of reason "because consensus among grown-ups *presupposes* reason rather than defining it (Putnam, p. 240). Reason, as Putnam describes it, is normative. Ascribing to it a transcendental nature *can* be viewed as a Kantian move, but so what? One will only see this as something "bad" if one subscribes to Rortyism, which (given the ideals, scientific achievements and "foundationalist" accounts of the Enlightenment) certainly must bear the burden of proof.

III

This brings us to the issue of whether Rorty is a relativist. But first we must be clear about what we mean by the term "relativist."

In its most ancient form, relativism is Protagoreanism, the self-contradictory view that accompanies a statement such as, "there is no truth." How are we to judge such a statement? For if it were true that "there is no truth," we would have a reflexive paradox—as there would be at least one true statement, namely, that "there is no truth."⁷

⁷ For a nice introduction to the self-referential problem and discussion of how it affects the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, see Lawson.

Responding to anticipated charges that he subscribes to this type of naive relativism, Rorty writes:

“Relativism” is the view that every belief on a certain topic or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other. No one holds this view. Except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good. ... If there *were* any relativists, they would, of course, be easy to refute. One would merely use some variant of the self-referential arguments Socrates used against Protagoras. But such neat little dialectical strategies only work against lightly-sketched fictional characters. The relativist who says that we can break ties among serious and incompatible candidates for belief only by “nonrational” or “noncognitive” considerations is just one of the Platonist or Kantian philosopher’s imaginary playmates, inhabiting the same realm of fantasy as the solipsist, the skeptic and the moral nihilist (PRI, pp. 166–7).

But if naive Protagorean relativism⁸ is an “imaginary playmate” for “Platonist or Kantian philosophers,” cannot we turn the tables on Rorty, arguing that “naive Platonism” (as Rorty often seems to caricature most of Western philosophy) is Rorty’s own imaginary playmate? Charles Taylor writes of the

certain suppositions [that] seem to be made in the various invocations of [Rorty’s] argument: that the only candidate for a general account of truth is in terms of correspondence; that correspondence is to be understood in a rather simple minded way, approaching at times a picture theory; that believers in the correspondence theory are Raving Platonists. Underlying all of this is a continuing imprisonment in the

⁸ Joseph Margolis warns us that, “relativism should not be construed as, or as reducible to, any form of skepticism, cynicism, nihilism, irrationalism, anarchism or the like, although it may be that a well-defended relativism would lend comfort to doctrines of these sorts” (67).

model basic to the whole epistemological tradition which understands thinking in terms of representation. ... By Raving Platonism, I mean the view that Rorty often invokes to ridicule his adversaries, such as that “the final vocabulary of a future physics will somehow be Nature’s Own,” or “that a vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world.” We should consider this just as a rhetorical flourish. Rorty can’t really believe that hard-faced scientific realists who think that mechanistic materialism is literally true, subscribe to Raving Platonism (Taylor, pp. 268–9).

In a similar vein, Richard Bernstein (whose criticisms of Rorty have become harsher and more pointed over the years) writes:

Why does Rorty think that philosophy (or “Philosophy”) amounts to little more than the worn-out vocabulary of “bad” foundational discourse? So much of his recent writing falls into the genre of the “God that failed” discourse. There seems to be something almost oedipal—a form of patricide—in Rorty’s obsessive attacks on the father figures of philosophy and metaphysics (OSF, p. 557).

It certainly does seem that Rorty paints far too much of a human face on the West’s apparent predisposition to engage in epistemological foundationalism. Rorty is an intellectual historian and, as such, he is prone to “lay the blame” of our foundationalist urges (if not explicitly, then implicitly) on Kant, and before him, Descartes, going all the way back to Plato.⁹

Rorty’s characterization of how we arrived at our present modes of scientific and philosophical inquiry appears much more black and white than Peirce’s “cable versus chain” account of knowledge, where instead of picturing our reasoning as a linear and isomorphic “chain” from, say, “facts” to “states-of-affairs-in-the-world,” we instead picture our fallible knowledge, at any given moment, as the many different types of evidence, modes of argumentation, hunches,

⁹ Cornel West believes that Rorty’s “thin historicism rests content with intellectual historical narratives and distrusts social historical narratives ... his narrative needs a more subtle historical and sociological perspective” (West, p. 270).

etc., that, individually, are only weak strands, but, collectively, form a strong cable. We never have knowledge that perfectly corresponds to “the world,” but “the world” does guide, in a certain determinate sense, where our inquiry moves. Of Rorty’s caricature of Western philosophy as being simply a series of illusory “chain” pictures, Bernstein echoes Taylor:

According to this story, the real villain is Plato—at least the Plato identified (mythologized) by Platonism ... I want to maintain that this narrative is itself rapidly becoming a blinding prejudice that obscures more than it illuminates. What was once a stinging critique is becoming a bland, boring cliché. One begins to wonder if there ever was a “foundationalist” thinker—at least one who fits the description of what Rorty calls “foundationalism.” Even Plato—the Plato of the Dialogues—fails to fit this description ... Rorty’s characterization and caricature of the history of philosophy is rapidly running itself into the ground ... what is now needed is to demythologize this narrative of the invidious fallenness of Platonism. For it is only to the extent that we still accept some version of Rorty’s mythologizing about what philosophy and metaphysics are, and what “philosophic justification” *must* be that his playful skepticism has any sting. ... It is time that Rorty himself should appropriate the lesson of Peirce, “Do not block the road to inquiry ...” (OSF, pp. 558–60).

Bernstein, like Rorty, believes it is time to go “beyond objectivism and relativism,” that for too long we have been suffering from “Cartesian Anxiety”—i.e., the fear that unless we emerge from our Cartesian skepticism with some kind of secure and objective Archimedean point for our knowledge, we will be in a state of epistemological nihilism, having no objective reasons for the beliefs we hold to be true and perhaps not even knowing what to believe. Bernstein sees traditional epistemology as offering us a false dichotomy, a false “Either/Or,” to choose from—in which we either believe in objective and stable bedrock foundations for our knowledge, or else everything is relative. But Bernstein sees in Rorty yet

another grand and equally untenable Either/Or—that of foundationalism versus antifoundationalism.

It is, after all, only a grid, only one of the many possible ways to quickly summarize 2000 years of human inquiry. As a metanarrative, it is hard to see how Rorty's philosophy can escape relativism and, ultimately, a forced position of irrationalism. And, as Steinmann notes, "the intellectual price of accepting it is far too high, and, worst, it is incoherent ... Why should we renounce the Enlightenment and its (still quick) heirs for unspecified benefits" (Steinmann, p. 47)?

Despite the controversies, counterarguments and uncertainties that surround Rortyism, he seems to be gaining in popularity, particularly with disciplines outside of professional philosophy and with the lay public. Any philosophy student who, at one time or another, found him or herself uncritically swallowing (hook, line and sinker) a doctrine such as Rorty's (and I count myself as one) must take it upon him or herself to engage others in exercises that will sufficiently muscle their ghosts and haunt their minds.

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