

1

Introduction

Richard Rorty and Contemporary Philosophy

CHARLES GUIGNON AND DAVID R. HILEY

1. INTRODUCTION

Richard Rorty has been a lightning rod for conflicting currents in recent philosophy. No American philosopher in the second half of the twentieth century generated such an intense mixture of consternation, enthusiasm, hostility, and confusion. His controversial positions in debates about the nature of mind, language, knowledge, truth, science, ethics, and politics have been regarded by some as opening fresh new possibilities for thought and by others as undermining the very possibility of meaningful inquiry. His more recent praise of American democratic culture and 1930s progressivism is seen by some as a needed antidote to the academic left and by others as politically naïve.

While Rorty is arguably the most controversial American philosopher within the discipline of philosophy itself, he has also been the most influential American philosopher since John Dewey in other areas of inquiry. At a time when the discipline of philosophy has become increasingly professionalized, technical, and remote from the rest of culture, Rorty's work has moved freely in and influenced such areas as literary theory, law, historiography, psychotherapy, education, and social theory. He writes regularly for the popular press, and he is a frequent lecturer and symposium participant in events drawing nonphilosophical audiences on a wide range of culturally important issues. He has reestablished the philosopher as public intellectual and has been no less controversial in that role.

Rorty's influence outside of philosophy is not accidental. It follows from the very reason he is so controversial to traditional philosophers. For three decades Rorty has been attacking the concept of philosophy that has been responsible for both its remoteness and its increasing professionalization. In the Introduction to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the book that launched Rorty's reputation as contemporary philosophy's chief

gadfly, he characterized the traditional view of philosophy in the following way:

Philosophers usually think of their discipline as one which discusses perennial, eternal problems – problems which arise as soon as one reflects. Some of these concern the difference between human beings and other beings, and are crystallized in questions concerning the relation between the mind and the body. Other problems concern the legitimation of claims to know, and are crystallized in questions concerning the “foundations” of knowledge. To discover these foundations is to discover something about the mind, and conversely. Philosophy as a discipline thus sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and mind. Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is an assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. (PMN 3)

Rorty captures the source of this view of philosophy – a view extending from Plato through Kant and into our own day – in the metaphor that forms the title of his book. “The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of mind as a great mirror containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods” (PMN 12). Philosophy’s task is to use its special methods in order to secure the relationship between the mind’s representations and the world represented. On such a view, philosophy is foundational for culture because it is the tribunal of reason before which all other areas of inquiry are to be judged. Rorty believes that philosophy’s remoteness from the rest of culture follows from this privileged and special self-understanding – “the cultural overseer who knows everyone’s common ground . . . who knows what everybody else is really doing whether *they* know it or not, because [philosophy] knows about the ultimate context . . . within which they are doing it” (PMN 317–18).

For the past three decades, Rorty has sought to dispel the image of the mirror of nature and the view of philosophy proper to it. In its place he has championed the view of the philosopher as “the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary” (PMN 318) between various forms of inquiry. This is the role Rorty himself has occupied. And he has occupied it fearlessly and with considerable panache. This too explains why he has been so widely read outside of the discipline of philosophy. Few philosophers are so engaging to read. He writes with self-effacing charm, a quick and biting wit, a dizzying capacity for broad analogies, and a way

of dividing through diverse thinkers in a single sentence that in less skilled hands would be mere pastiche. Let one brief sample, picked almost at random, serve: “When we consider examples of alternative language games – the vocabulary of ancient Athenian politics versus Jefferson’s, the moral vocabulary of Saint Paul versus Freud’s, the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle, the idiom of Blake versus that of Dryden – it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these better than another, of the world as deciding between them” (CIS 5). Rorty seems to read everything. He moves easily from Wittgenstein to Heidegger or from Dewey to Derrida, but he is as apt to draw from a Philip Larkin poem, from Proust, or from a Nabokov novel as from Kant or Nietzsche.

Rorty seems to have always been a voracious reader. In a rare autobiographical essay he describes his childhood as bookish and solitary. He grew up in a household steeped in leftist politics. “When I was 12, the most salient books on my parents’ shelves were two red-bound volumes, *The Case of Leon Trotsky* and *Not Guilty*. These made up the report of the Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. I never read them with the wide-eyed fascination I brought to books like Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, but I thought of them in the way which other children thought of their family’s Bible: they were books that radiated redemptive truth and moral splendour” (PSH 5). He also read Marx, *Marius the Epicurean*, Proust, Eliot, Plato, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and so forth. And he devoured books about wild orchids. His was an unusual childhood and family.

Rorty was born in 1931, the only child of James and Winifred Raushenbush Rorty.¹ James and Winifred Rorty were prominent in leftist and literary circles in New York. James was sympathetic to the Communist Party, though he never became a member. During the 1920s, he served as editor of *The New Masses*, a Communist journal that published the likes of John Dos Passos, Ezra Pound, Upton Sinclair, and other then-controversial writers. Winifred Rorty was also a writer – a specialist on race relations – and like James she was a Communist and active on behalf of leftist social causes. Daughter of the well-known theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, the founder of the Social Gospel Movement, she was steeped in progressive values and the connections of a socially active and politically conscious family. She had been a graduate student of Robert Parker at the University of Chicago during the heyday of the Chicago School of social theorists.

When Richard was barely a year old, James and Winifred made a highly contentious break with the Communist Party. Along with a few others, they were convinced that Stalin had betrayed communism, and they were concerned by the extent to which the Communist Party in America was

controlled from Moscow. In the overheated politics of the day, such a break produced enemies of former colleagues, along with their disillusionment about communism. The Rortys left New York for the remote rural community of Flatbrookville in the Delaware Water Gap area of New Jersey. Richard grew up in Flatbrookville, dividing his attention between his books, his fascination with wild orchids, and the stream of guests of his parents that included John Dewey, Carlo Tresca (the Italian anarchist), John Frank (Trotsky's secretary, who lived with the Rortys under an assumed name), Sidney Hook, Whittaker Chambers, and Lionel Trilling. Rorty says of this period:

I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not 'Trotskyites' at least socialists. I also knew that Stalin had ordered not only Trotsky's assassination but also Kirov's, Ehrlich's, Alter's and Carlo Tresca's . . . I knew that poor people would always be oppressed until capitalism was overcome . . . [I knew] a lot about what factory owners did to union organizers, plantation owners to sharecroppers, and the white locomotive engineers' union to the coloured firemen (whose jobs white men wanted, now that the diesel engines were replacing coal-fired steam engines). So, at 12, I knew that the point of being human was to spend one's life fighting social injustice. (PSH 6)

Though raised in the causes of social justice, Rorty records that he also had an abstract, absolutist, and aesthetic bent. While in Flatbrookville, he went through a religious period and also developed his lifelong Wordsworthian love of nature, especially wildflowers and birds.

At fifteen his parents enrolled him in a new college for precocious teenagers at the University of Chicago. As Rorty recounts it: "At fifteen I escaped from the bullies who regularly beat me up on the playground of my high school . . . by going off to the so-called Hutchins College of the University of Chicago. (This was the institution immortalized by A. J. Liebling as 'the biggest collection of juvenile neurotics since the Children's Crusade'.)" Rorty reports – in an especially telling observation – that insofar as he had any project in mind at the university, it was "to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me – in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats – 'hold reality and justice in a single vision'" (PSH 7).

To hold reality and justice in a single vision: how better to express the fundamental goal of the philosophical tradition initiated by Plato? "I read through Plato during my fifteenth summer, and convinced myself that Socrates was right – virtue *was* knowledge. That claim was music to my ears, for I had doubts about my own moral character and a suspicion that

my only gifts were intellectual ones" (PSH 9). He did his best at Chicago to be a Platonist but, as he puts it, "it didn't pan out." He worried about the tension in Plato's thought between constructing arguments for one's position that will convince all comers and achieving the incommunicable certainty of the Good that lies beyond dialectic and argument. He worried about the problem of giving noncircular arguments for one's first principles and the inability to achieve a neutral standpoint from which to adjudicate alternative first principles. He came to worry about the worth of philosophical talent itself, since it seemed to come to nothing more than "a matter of proliferating as many distinctions as were needed to wriggle out of a dialectical corner. . . . I became less and less certain that developing this skill was going to make me either wise or virtuous. . . . Since that initial disillusion (which climaxed about the time I left Chicago to get a Ph.D. in philosophy at Yale), I have spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for" (PSH 10–11).

Though he may have harbored doubts about the possibility of holding reality and justice in a single vision, and though he may have worried about what philosophy was good for, the early years of his academic career – first at Wellesley College and then at Princeton – seem firmly grounded in the philosophical mainstream. Since World War II, the philosophical mainstream in the United States was defined by logical positivism and its aftermath. Rudolf Carnap, Carl Hempel, and other prominent philosophers fleeing the rise of Nazism came to occupy important positions in America, bringing with them the methods of logical analysis of language that served to render traditional metaphysical questions nonsensical. They brought an ambitious view of the unity of science through the reduction of all scientific inquiry to physics and a view of philosophy as providing the foundations of science. The ascent of positivism in American philosophy departments served to marginalize indigenous philosophers such as James, Dewey, and Lovejoy. It also provided the logical apparatus to dismiss the metaphysical and humanistic interests of contemporary German and French philosophers. For at least a generation of analytically trained American philosophers, Heidegger was known only through a paragraph from "What Is Metaphysics?" that Carnap cited to demonstrate the power of the logical analysis of language to ferret out metaphysical nonsense. The methods of logical analysis of language and the alliance of philosophy and science relegated the history of philosophy to antiquarian interest. Philosophy had to do with the problems of meaning, truth, and knowledge, to which it brought its special methods of analysis.

If one knew Rorty only through the handful of papers he published early in his career, he would appear to be a reasonably skilled and well-trained analytic philosopher. He published papers in the mid-1960s and early 1970s on the mind–body identity theory, arguing against the incorrigibility of mental representations and favoring what he termed “eliminative materialism.” He edited a collection of essays under the title *The Linguistic Turn*, which brought together a range of philosophers writing on the topics of language, meaning, and truth – then central to analytic philosophy. He wrote on Wittgenstein and Strawson. He seemed to be staking out a career as another talented philosopher applying the methods of analytic philosophy to the perennial problems of the nature of mind, language, and reality.

In retrospect, of course, we can see that something else was going on. Perhaps a better indication of what he was thinking could be found not in the papers he was then known for but in the books he was reading and reviewing throughout the 1960s – John Blewett’s *John Dewey: His Thought and Influence*; Raymond Aron’s *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*; Edward Moore’s *American Pragmatism: Peirce, James, and Dewey*; Paul Goodman’s *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals*; Edward Madden’s *Chauvancy Wright and the Foundations of Pragmatism*; H. D. Lewis’s *Clarity Is Not Enough: Essays in Criticism of Linguistic Philosophy*. In retrospect, we can take seriously Rorty’s introduction to *The Linguistic Turn* – as Jürgen Habermas has recently done² – in which he raises doubts about the future of analytic philosophy, writing about it in the past tense, and in which he announces his anti-Platonic sympathies with Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. In retrospect, we can see that Rorty’s eliminative materialism, then deemed to be merely one among various alternative positions available in the debate over mind–body identity, was actually an attempt to undermine the entire modern (Cartesian) philosophical tradition that organized the world in terms of mind and matter.

For mainstream (that is, analytic) philosophers in the 1960s, however, Rorty was a mainstream philosopher. That perception changed in December 1972, however, when he delivered a paper at the annual meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association (APA) titled “The World Well Lost.” Rorty, of course, had been trying out the ideas in this paper prior to the APA presentation and its subsequent publication in the *Journal of Philosophy*. But to most who heard and read this paper, it was a turning point. Marshaling the views of W. V. O. Quine, Wilfred Sellars, and Donald Davidson, Rorty sought to *trivialize* then-current debates over correspondence and coherence theories of truth and scientific

realism in order to undermine the very notion of a world independent of thought. Even more disconcerting, he had good things to say about Dewey. The paper ended with the claim that “if we can come to see both the coherence and correspondence theories [of truth] as non-competing trivialities, then we may finally move beyond realism and idealism and to the point at which, in Wittgenstein’s words, we are capable of stopping doing philosophy when we want to” (CP 17).

Throughout the 1970s, Rorty published papers that blended the ideas of Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein in a crusade against any concept of philosophy that gives legitimacy to mainstream philosophical debates about truth, knowledge, and realism. Worse, he took Derrida seriously, taught Michel Foucault’s works in his classes, and paid attention to what was happening in English departments where new approaches to literary theory were emerging. He was also traveling the lecture circuit, trying out chapters of what would become *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature is in some sense a “god that failed” book for Rorty. In it he aimed to show why reality and justice could not be held in a single vision, and why the view of philosophy that runs from Plato and Kant through contemporary analytic philosophy does not come to very much. It is one thing, however, to place this book in Rorty’s intellectual development and the philosophical context in which it was written. It is another thing to get clear about what his position is and the basis for it.

2. THE PRAGMATIST CRITIQUE OF EPISTEMOLOGY-CENTERED PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature challenged a conception of philosophy that was almost universally accepted among mainstream Anglo-American philosophers in the 1970s. This conception of philosophy, inherited from Descartes and given its clearest formulation by Kant, holds that before philosophers begin to speculate about what is and what ought to be, they should first get clear about what they can know and what they can’t know. For this standard conception of philosophy, theory of knowledge is “first philosophy,” and all other areas of philosophy should accede to its judgments about the limits of knowledge. At the heart of traditional epistemology is “representationalism,” the view that we are, at the most basic level, minds containing beliefs of various sorts, and that our first task is to make sure our beliefs accurately represent reality as it is in itself. The project of determining which representations are accurate and which are not is seen as having broad implications for culture as a whole. Philosophy aims to be

“a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretence of doing so)” (PMN 3). It is because of its claim to be the final court of appeals for any knowledge claims whatsoever that philosophy can see itself as foundational in respect to the rest of culture.

Epistemology-centered philosophy assumes that our primary goal as philosophers is to find a set of representations that are known in such a way as to be beyond the pale of doubt. Once such privileged representations are identified, they can serve as the basis for the foundationalist project of justifying beliefs that make a claim to being knowledge. The representations that have been taken to be inherently and automatically accurate have been of two sorts. First, there are beliefs based solely on the meanings of the terms they contain, *analytic* sentences such as “A doe is a female deer.” Second, there are beliefs that immediately register the deliverances of sensory experience, beliefs such as “Red here now” or “Ouch! Pain!” The ideal of foundationalism is to ground our entire system of beliefs on the basis of such bedrock representations.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature is especially good at spelling out some of the core assumptions about foundationalism and representationalism widely accepted by the philosophical mainstream. The dominant outlook in Anglo-American philosophy assumes that the world consists of natural kinds of items and that our task is to achieve a correct mapping of these types – a grasp of how the world is “carved up at its joints.” This approach assumes a sharp distinction between the world of facts, on the one hand, and our minds and their representations, on the other. And it assumes that since natural science alone is properly equipped to know reality as it is in itself – since it alone succeeds in identifying facts – it is the only form of inquiry that achieves true knowledge. All other purported forms of knowledge (moral reflection, literary criticism, the *Geisteswissenschaften*) can only hope to approximate the ideal of knowledge achieved by natural science.

Rorty thinks this entire conception of our epistemic situation is shot through with conceptual logjams and insoluble puzzles. The prime offender in this circle of problems is the uncritical assumption that representationalism gives us the right picture of our basic predicament. To circumvent these puzzles, Rorty suggests that we need to replace “the notion of knowledge as the assemblage of representations” with “a pragmatist conception of knowledge” (PMN 11) that focuses on what humans *do* in coping with the world rather than on what they *find* through theorizing.

Rorty gives the name “epistemological behaviorism” to the pragmatist conception of knowledge he works out in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. His alternative approach is called “behaviorism” (or “psychological nominalism”) because it rejects the idea that experiences play a crucial role in making sense of our claims to knowledge and proposes instead that we see knowledge as based on social practices. Epistemological behaviorism is claimed to be the common denominator in the three philosophers Rorty takes as role models for his critique of traditional philosophy – Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger. But the key arguments he uses to support this view are taken from Quine and Sellars.

From Quine, Rorty takes the critique of the analytic–synthetic distinction, the distinction between sentences that are true solely by virtue of the meanings of the words they contain and others that are known through experience.³ The upshot of this argument is that any statement can be revised when it is found to be inconsistent with a large enough batch of our beliefs. Although we are inclined to suppose that such sentences as “A doe is a female deer” are analytic – that is, true by virtue of the concepts they contain – Quine’s argument suggests that the apparent infallibility of such sentences results more from their central position in our web of beliefs than from anything having to do with the meanings of concepts. Given sufficient pressure from other areas of our web of beliefs, we would be willing to abandon any belief.

What this shows is that no beliefs have the status of being privileged representations solely because they are analytic or conceptually true. Instead, our beliefs form a holistic web in which the truth of any particular belief is established on the basis of its coherence with the whole set of beliefs. From this critique of the idea that some sentences are true solely by virtue of the meanings of their terms, Quine calls into question the usefulness of the very idea of meanings – understood as mental items – in determining reference or the correctness of belief. Quine’s rejection of “the idea idea” – the idea that ideas mediate between us and things – is one key building block in Rorty’s attempt to show that the mental has no crucial role to play in making sense of our capacities as knowers.

The second building block of Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism is Wilfrid Sellars’s attack on “the Myth of the Given” in his essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.”⁴ In this essay, Sellars calls into question the traditional empiricist assumption that our ability to use language and our knowledge of the world must be grounded in immediate sensory experiences, in raw feels and preconceptual sensations that are just “given” in the course of our transactions with objects.

In opposition to this assumption, Sellars claims that “all awareness is a linguistic affair.” To back up this claim, he draws a distinction between (1) awareness as discriminative behavior (the raw ability of sentient creatures to register inputs from the environment, a capacity common to humans and amoebas) and (2) awareness that involves the ability to notice what *sort* of thing something is (the ability of sapient beings to perceive something *as* such and such). The first type of awareness is a matter of causal interaction with the world – being affected by pain, for example, or responding differentially to stimuli in one’s environment. Sellars does not deny that such episodes and states occur, but he holds that they can have no role to play in grounding knowledge. This is so because knowledge, that is, justified true belief, always has a propositional structure – it is belief *that* such and such is the case. Moreover, the only way a proposition can be justified is by means of inferences from other propositions – in Rorty’s words, “there is no such thing as justification which is not a relation between propositions” (PMN 183). It follows, then, that only the second type of awareness can be used to justify knowledge claims. It is not the raw stimulus in the perceptual field that is relevant to knowledge, but the awareness *that* “this is red,” which contributes to the formation of justified true belief.

Where empiricism tried to show how all concepts arise from particular instances of sensory experience, Sellars, like Wittgenstein before him, argues that one must already possess a fairly wide range of concepts before one can have sensory experience in the epistemically relevant sense. To be aware of something in a way that can serve as a basis for knowledge, we must know what *sort* of thing it is, and that means being able to experience the thing under a description – to see that it is *F* but not-*G*, not-*H*, and so on. We “have the ability to notice a sort of thing” only if we already “have the concept of that sort of thing.”⁵ Since, on Sellars’s view, having a concept is being able to use a word, it follows that having a concept involves being a participant in a linguistic community in which justifying claims is carried out. Awareness in the relevant sense always presupposes the ability to abide by the norms that govern the shared space of reasons of a linguistic community. Justification is therefore always “a matter of social practice” (PMN 186). Sellars sums this up by saying, “The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or state [of observing] as that of knowing . . . , we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.”⁶

Rorty interprets Sellars as having shown that justifying knowledge claims “is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice” (PMN 170). Forming beliefs,