Introduction: Rorty as a Critical Philosopher

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Among influential philosophers there are those who publish little and those who publish a lot. If Ludwig Wittgenstein and Edmund Gettier belong to the first group, the second includes, for instance, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, and the provocative and prolific gadfly of American philosophy, Richard Rorty. In his lifetime, Rorty published hundreds of articles and more than a dozen books – so much that it is hard to imagine that he might have had the time to pen anything of philosophical value of which we are unaware. Yet, stacked in the Richard Rorty Papers archive at the University of California, Irvine, are dozens of boxes of such material. Some of these boxes contain lecture notes or early sketches of ideas, but others enclose fully developed philosophical papers that with only minor edits are publication worthy. This volume presents the material in the latter category.

The unpublished papers collected here span four decades of Rorty's philosophy. In the eighteen essays that follow, the reader will encounter instances of Rorty's initial forays of the early 1960s into metaphilosophy and the sweeping sort of *Geistesgeschichte* he admired in Hegel and Whitehead; crisply argued technical tracts characteristic of his first dip into analytic philosophy of language and of mind in the mid-1960s[1]; recognizable anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian critiques of traditional metaphysics and epistemology; reflections on the state of philosophy at particular historical moments; and, of course, spirited engagements with philosophical friends and foes over the years. Rorty was profoundly at home in the essay form, and it shows. The sparkling prose, with its sharp sarcasm, lively wit, fresh turns of phrase, and against-the-grain interpretations that rankled, informed, and entertained generations of readers are on

[1] For Rorty's less familiar early published work, see his *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy: Early Philosophical Papers*, ed. Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

full display here. Even when writing on topics or thinkers not encountered in his published oeuvre, the signature style of the revered and reviled authorial voice that made Rorty one of the most-read and written-about philosophers of his generation graces these pages.

These papers also are noteworthy for new and often more acute angles on philosophical issues that are treated less extensively, or merely touched on, in his published output. Among the essays included here are inquiries into philosophical topics such as existentialism, the incommunicability of felt qualities, the objectivity of values, and naturalized epistemology. They also feature what are, to our best knowledge, the only papers Rorty devoted entirely to certain philosophical figures such as Plato, Kant, Sartre, Kripke, and Ricoeur. A 1999 paper offers what may be Rorty's most in-depth engagement with non-Western philosophers: Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji of the Kyoto School. The opening essay, "Philosophy as Ethics," offers an overarching frame which establishes the continuity of concerns that seem to emerge only later in his published writings. Virtually all chapters provide important insights into Rorty's philosophy; many provide important insights of general philosophical interest, and some offer both at the same time.

Chief among the papers that both illuminate Rorty's own thinking and feature bona fide philosophical contributions is "Kant as a Critical Philosopher" (Chapter 3). This essay presents an original notion of critical philosophy that enables Rorty to shed new light on Kant, as well as on the wider history of Western philosophy. He achieves this by depicting interesting analogies among Kant, Aristotle, and Wittgenstein, all of whom he considers critical philosophers. Briefly put, a critical philosopher aims to present a vocabulary that will invalidate both skeptical attempts at undermining a given datum and foundationalist attempts at grounding it, where this datum can be anything from "the common moral consciousness" to "the science and the mathematics" of one's day. The central aim of Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein was precisely to develop a vocabulary of this kind – a vocabulary targeting two kinds of opponents, foundationalists and skeptics – and it is for this reason their philosophies provoke similar reactions. It is "much easier to know what they were against than to know what they were for; further," Rorty continues, "it is very hard to formulate even their criticisms of either one of their respective opponents. Whenever one tries, one finds oneself saying things that cannot be reconciled with their criticisms of the other of their respective opponents."

Anyone familiar with the reception of Rorty's work will recognize in those kinds of reactions the retorts his own philosophy provoked over the

decades. Here the category of critical philosopher allows us to better understand Rorty's philosophy itself. For one thing, it elucidates the positive remarks on Aristotle and Kant scattered throughout Rorty's later oeuvre, which might otherwise seem puzzling given his familiar negative attitudes toward those thinkers. More importantly, it brings into sharper relief both the common core of Rorty's work across his career and an important shift that begins in the late 1960s and culminates in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, dividing his work into two recognizably different phases.

There was a time when secondary literature on Rorty portrayed this shift in terms of an orthodox analytic philosopher losing the faith and suddenly turning pragmatist. That narrative was later shown to be inaccurate. Rorty, in fact, was interested and versed in pragmatism even before becoming an analytic philosopher. Even during the period when his analytic essays began to garner recognition, present in his work already were pragmatist premises that became his trademark only later.[2] Since then, specialists have been debating the exact nature of the shift.[3] The category of critical philosophy can usefully contribute to these debates. That is, one can explain the nature of Rorty's shift by saying that while both in his early and later periods Rorty was primarily a critical philosopher, in the former period he pursued a local version of critical philosophy while in the latter a global one.

What is meant by "local" here is that in his early period Rorty pursued critical philosophy *within* the bounds of philosophy as it had been traditionally practiced in the West. He was arguing for vocabularies that allowed for the dissolution of certain attempts to undermine or ground given data, and saw this is as a contribution to philosophical progress. This is the Rorty who wrote like a professional philosopher and thought that

[2] See, for example, Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). For a fuller account of Rorty's philosophical development than we can provide here, see *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[3] The difficulty with pinpointing this shift more precisely is that it is not a sharp break but a development that unfolds over time. Already in his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*, Rorty highlighted key "difficulties" inherent in the turn to linguistic methods in analytic philosophy, difficulties that were both metaphilosophical – outlined already in his essays of the early 1960s – and epistemological, stemming from the critique of the spectatorial account of knowledge common to "Dewey, Hampshire, Sartre, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein." See *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 39n75, and *passim*. As he developed a full account of this epistemological critique and its implications, eventually published as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Rorty continued to publish in an analytic style roughly until the mid-1970s.

philosophy, as practiced in his day, was important. What then happened was that Rorty came to believe that undermining and grounding were all that traditional Western philosophy consisted in, and that these goals are not worth pursuing at all. He thought that they were most likely unrealizable, given that no philosopher had hitherto succeeded at grounding or undermining anything, and that even if they were realizable, they could not help solve important social and political problems.

Rorty's critical philosophy then went global. Instead of offering vocabularies that aimed at dissolving particular instances of foundationalism and skepticism, he started offering vocabularies aimed at dissolving foundationalism and skepticism in general, that is, *globally*, and therefore at dissolving what he perceived to be traditional philosophy as such. This is the Rorty who stopped arguing like a professional philosopher and who thought that philosophy, as traditionally practiced in the West, had outlived its usefulness. This is the Rorty who advocated for a new philosophy with a different goal and method. The goal was to assist with existing projects of strengthening democratic attachments and to offer new visions of what such communal projects might look like. The method would be that of cultural criticism, an amalgam of cultural anthropology, literary criticism, and history. This pattern of switching from one mode of critical philosophy to the other is visible throughout Rorty's published work, as well as in the papers collected in this volume.

I Early Papers

The volume's first two essays, in particular, evidence the nature of Rorty's philosophical interests prior to his concerted effort to get himself up to speed on the analytic debates in which his new Princeton colleagues were so deeply engaged.[4] Already we see the influence of pragmatism on his thinking. Also unmistakable is his preoccupation with the ineluctability of choice amid pluralistic alternative viewpoints. In "Philosophy as Ethics," perhaps the most accessible piece in the volume, Rorty traces the historical origins of philosophy and the initial spur to philosophizing to the desire to justify values. In a Jamesian spirit, he underscores the futility of the two-

[4] Rorty himself described this effort of professional self-education, following his arrival at Princeton in 1961, as "striving to make myself over into some sort of analytic philosopher." "If I was going to win my colleagues' respect," he explained, "I had to speak to some of the issues with which they were concerned and to write in somewhat the same vein as they did." See Richard Rorty, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty: Library of Living Philosophers*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), 13;11.

thousand-year-long "pathetic history" of failed attempts to justify ethical imperatives. Still, Rorty finds a positive lesson here, arguing that "a bad reason may be a good story." He uses James's theory of truth to show that there is a pragmatic way to argue an "ought" to an "is" that avoids problems associated with positivism and foundationalism.

"Philosophy as Spectatorship and Participation" (Chapter 2), Rorty's only extensive engagement with existentialism, reveals the influence the movement had on his thought, which hitherto only could be conjectured from the existentialist themes and references scattered throughout his other writings.[5] Its account of philosophy's conflicted ideals of detachment and engagement is both of general metaphilosophical value and particularly timely now, when philosophy is chided, on the one hand, for failing to contribute sufficiently to struggles for social justice and, on the other, for daring to contribute to them in the first place. Rorty argues that "the tension between being relevant and being rational, between immediacy and mediation, between participation and spectatorship is . . . *the* philosophical problem," and highlights existentialism's "refusal to seek for security through the quest for objectivity" as a unique break in the history of philosophy.

"Kant as Critical Philosopher" (Chapter 3) constitutes Rorty's only paper devoted exclusively to Kant and his most probing, sympathetic, and original account of the thinker. As discussed above, Rorty's novel take on Kant is based on a distinctive understanding of critical philosophy, which allows Rorty to do three things: first, to provide an explanation for the diversity of interpretations of Kant's oeuvre; second, to show striking analogies between Kant and other figures in the history of philosophy whom Rorty also classifies as critical philosophers, such as Aristotle and Wittgenstein; and, third, to highlight the lasting value of Kant's thought, which for Rorty is to "make it impossible" to think that "the task of philosophy is to provide constitutive principles which will back up regulative principles."

In "The Paradox of Definitism" and "Reductionism," Rorty begins to apply his early metaphilosophical insights to then-prominent topics in linguistic philosophy.[6] "The Paradox of Definitism" (Chapter 4) critiques modern philosophy's pervasive privileging, in metaphysics and epistemology, of sharp-edged definiteness over fuzzy indefiniteness, where the latter

[5] See, for example, the discussion of Sartre and "the 'existentialist' view of objectivity" in part three of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[6] These views are developed further in his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*, by which time he already perceives the limitations of the linguistic project.

is deemed a function of human "ignorance and confusion," rather than, with Aristotle, seen as something existing in nature. Dubbing this bias "definitism," he characterizes it as "the view that there is nothing which can reasonably be called a statement which is neither true nor false." "The resurrection of pragmatism," he argues, with its contextualism, "has been causing trouble for definitists." But he also invites definitists into the pragmatist camp to avoid the paradox they face by recognizing Dewey's insight that "every transaction will involve both fuzzy and non-fuzzy elements" and Peirce's view of logic "as a normative rather than a descriptive discipline."

"Reductionism" (Chapter 5) takes up the question, "Can we abandon reductive analysis as a method of philosophical discovery and still keep the intellectual gains which have accrued from its employment as a method of deciding what questions to discuss?" After presenting the twentieth-century program of reductive linguistic analysis as a mature form of the seventeenth century's "reductionist conception" of the goal of inquiry, he examines J. O. Urmson's arguments, ultimately concluding that he "fails to take account" of "the cases in which reductive analysis is applied to the technical vocabularies of philosophers." Even though he agrees with Urmson that most reductive analyses, judged by their own standards, are unsuccessful, Rorty nevertheless thinks a basis for distinguishing useful from useless analyses is possible. We also see here Rorty's early interest in eliminability, which shortly thereafter becomes the basis for a distinctive contribution.[7]

In "Phenomenology, Linguistic Analysis, and Cartesianism," Rorty explains why he remained uninterested in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics. This piece converges nicely with the Kant essay in presenting the "contest between phenomenology and linguistic analysis as a competition between two groups of opponents of a single enemy" – Cartesianism. Rorty judges the linguistic analysts to be the better candidate of the two to lead "the anti-Cartesian revolution," and distills their position to three central metaphilosophical claims: the Pragmatist thesis; the Naturalistic thesis; and the Conventionalist thesis. He uses this platform to critique Ricoeur's phenomenological approach to problems in the philosophy of language.

"The Incommunicability of 'Felt Qualities'" (Chapter 7) focuses on the claim that has been at the center of many debates generated by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: that "we cannot communicate certain qualities" – for example, the special felt qualities of toothache – to

[7] See his "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism," *Review of Metaphysics* 24, no. 1 (1970): 112–121.

others. Rorty suggests that philosophers have been making too much of that claim. Instead, he argues that it is true only in a "philosophically innocuous" sense – we can never be sure whether we mean or know the same thing in describing "X" – and false when it becomes philosophically interesting, since using the noun *toothache* correctly in relevant circumstances denotes knowledge of the term, even if the felt qualities of a toothache were never experienced. By focusing on language use, Rorty alleviates the philosophical controversy and the threat of epistemological skepticism, concluding that we need deny "neither the existence of a perfectly good sense of 'know' in which there can be prelinguistic or nonlinguistic knowledge (or 'awareness' or 'consciousness'), nor the existence of unshareable mental particulars to which we have privileged access."

Rorty offers his most extensive and systematic treatment of Saul Kripke's work in "Kripke on Mind-Body Identity" (Chapter 8). He puts Kripke's arguments back into an often overlooked historical and philosophical context that sheds new light on their viability and overall significance. Anyone interested in mind-brain identity theory, in particular, who think it was shown to be untenable by Kripke's criticisms and remain puzzled by it still being alive and well will profit from Rorty's explanations why those criticisms, in fact, must "leave the issue about mind-body identity where it stood." Rorty predicts that in the wake of Kripke's criticisms, "the old issues will go over into the new vocabulary – with less talk about meaning and more about reference, but without dialectical loss to either side."

II Later Papers

In the essays that comprise the second part of the volume, there appear similar figures, conceptions, and arguments, but the tone is remarkably different, reflecting Rorty's switch from a local to a global version of critical philosophy. Virtually all of these essays provide critiques of certain projects within the philosophy of Rorty's time, but do so mainly to show that philosophy, as then practiced, needs to be abandoned. The projects are both skeptical and foundational, and include the attempts at renewing epistemology by Hacking and Kim and by Goldman and Fodor (Chapters 9 and 10), J. L. Mackie's moral skepticism (Chapter 11), Crispin Wright's and Bernard Williams's brand of realism (Chapter 14), the bald naturalism of John McDowell (Chapter 15), the reductionist semantics of "David Lewis, Saul Kripke, David Kaplan, and John Perry" (Chapter 16), and

Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji's brands of absolute idealism (Chapter 17).

Rorty aims to show that all these projects, however clever and intricate, amount to wasting intellectual energy on something of no real practical value. This is because, Rorty reiterates, the problems that these projects tackle are, most likely, insoluble, and even if they could be solved, the solutions would have no bearing on social life. Consider questions such as whether the world can "exert rational control on the mind" or whether "moral values are 'out there' or are just 'in us'" (Chapters 11 and 14). These problems will only be important to those who believe in outdated doctrines such as Aristotelian hylomorphism or the "seventeenth-century notion that what science does not know about is not real," and so will their solutions. In this sense, these and other problems of mainstream philosophy are like the problems of alchemy or scholastic philosophy; they should simply be left behind. In "Naturalized Epistemology and Norms," for instance, Rorty admits that Goldman succeeds in demonstrating "the relevance of psychology to epistemology," but he sees this as something akin to having successfully demonstrated "the relevance of particle physics to alchemy." Similarly, in "The Current State of Philosophy in the United States" (Chapter 13), Rorty admits that many analytic philosophers are "skilled, hard-working, enthusiastic, professionals" but stresses that this in itself does not mean that the problems they tackle are important. After all, there were many such people among seventeenth-century physicists discussing "how to use terms like 'natural motion,' 'violent motion,' 'quantity of motion,'" and "'inertia'"; or among theologians discussing "how many sacraments Christ instituted." Yet the problems they focused on seem merely quaint today.

Instead of tackling such problems, Rorty would want contemporary philosophers to contribute to the "furtherance" of "the projects of social cooperation (building an egalitarian, classless, casteless, society, for example)" by pursuing cultural criticism. He tries to set an example by engaging in cultural criticism himself, in the form of "explaining to people why philosophy will not do some of the things sometimes expected of it." The explanations Rorty offers in the second part of the volume take the form of sweeping narratives on the history of philosophy in general and the history of analytic philosophy in particular. By Rorty's account, the reason why analytic philosophy is socially useless is not only that it is preoccupied with a set of hopeless problems it inherited from the philosophical tradition (see "What Is Dead in Plato"), but also because it was invented as a way to put philosophy on "the secure path of a science" ("The Current State of

Philosophy in the United States") and thereby to separate it from history, literature, and politics.

It needs to be stressed here, however, that the picture of analytic philosophy painted by Rorty is not entirely grim, as he thinks there are analytic philosophers who escape the aforementioned dynamic. Rorty focuses in particular on Donald Davidson and Robert Brandom, situating them within the tradition of philosophical pragmatism and reconstructing its history (see Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17). He sees its origin in the classical pragmatists' project of combining Hegel and Darwin in order to develop a "thoroughly secularized philosophy" that would "contribute to efforts to make this world better, rather than deferring human hope to another world" ("Remarks on Nishida and Nishitani"). And he sees its contemporary manifestations in Davidson's and Brandom's attempts at naturalizing the philosophy of mind and philosophy of language (Chapters 14, 15, 16). In "Brandom's Conversationalism" (Chapter 14), he argues that these attempts allow us to eschew "the Platonic/Aristotelian account of human beings as distinguished from the brutes by their ability to penetrate through appearance to reality," along with a whole gamut of pointless debates this account generated, such as those between realists and anti-realists or empiricists and rationalists. It is to the full sweep of the pragmatic tradition, then, that Rorty looks for the seeds of philosophy's much needed change.

Now, one might argue that this picture has in many ways become obsolete. These days, after all, there are quite a few analytic philosophers directly concerned with urgent social problems. But one might still say that the picture retains its accuracy in the sense of warning us against the uncritical belief that philosophers can significantly contribute to solving today's social problems by working on the philosophical problems of yesteryear, the problems bequeathed to us precisely by the philosophical tradition Rorty is after. In addressing X or Y social problem, it is always tempting for a philosopher to start out by addressing the epistemology or ontology of X or Y, and to then circle around a set of old ontological and epistemological conundrums. One lesson which flows from Rorty's papers is that philosophers should cease taking for granted that their inquiries into the ontology or epistemology of a social issue will yield concrete results in a timely fashion and that such results, if obtained, might have any bearing on how that issue can be solved in practice. They should be more cautious than that. This is, as we hope to have shown, but one of the many important lessons offered by the essays collected in this volume.