

## Richard Rorty (1931– )

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Richard Rorty has taught at Wellesley, Princeton, and the University of Virginia. Since retiring from Virginia, he has been a member of the Department of Comparative Literature at Stanford.

Early in his career, Rorty wrote extensively on topics in the philosophy of mind, emerging as an influential defender of eliminative materialism. But he was also concerned with metaphilosophical questions. His introduction to his anthology, *The Linguistic Turn*, surveys the history of the analytic movement with the aim of casting doubt on the view that, by centering philosophy on questions of language and meaning, analytic philosophy provides philosophers with new and more “scientific” methods for solving traditional philosophical problems. This argument foreshadows the radical turn taken by his mature work.

The main themes of this work emerge in a series of essays published in the 1970s and collected in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982). However, it was his book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), that made him the object of intense and often outraged critical scrutiny. In this book, he argues that philosophy, as practiced in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy departments, has exhausted its theoretical resources and outlived whatever usefulness it may once have had. It therefore deserves to come to an end.

Like other “therapeutic” philosophers, Rorty holds that our canonical “problems of philosophy” are to be avoided rather than solved. However, this is not because he sees them as pseudo-problems, rooted in misunderstandings or misuses of language. Rorty’s approach is historicist. He denies that philosophy deals with perennial problems, intelligible to any reflective person because part of the human condition. Our canonical problems, then, are genuine enough, but only in the context of a historically contingent, hence potentially optional, configuration of ideas. Although they may once have promised great things, these ideas can now responsibly be dropped.

In Rorty’s narrative, modern philosophy takes the form of epistemology or the theory of knowledge. Philosophy of this kind originates in the seventeenth century and achieves its definitive form in the writings of Kant. Descartes inaugurates modern philosophy’s epistemological turn by making two moves: introducing methodological skepticism as the principal tool for investigating the foundations of knowledge, and redefining “mind” as that to which each of us has privileged access. Given this

conception of mind, skepticism itself acquires a new and more radical form. For the ancients, skepticism raised the question of whether we can attain certainty about the “real nature” of things. After Descartes, it raises the question of to what extent, if any, our “ideas” are accurate representations of “external” reality. The very existence of the external world is subject to doubt.

Descartes’s philosophical project is foundational in two senses. It aims at identifying both epistemological foundations (certainties that resist skeptical challenge) and metaphysical foundations (the most basic explanatory commitments of the New Science). As Kant saw, the metaphysical aspirations of Descartes and his rationalist successors are problematic. Metaphysicians want to determine a priori, on the basis of our ideas alone, fundamental facts about the world. This cannot be done: Descartes’s skeptical problem thwarts his metaphysical ambitions. Rationalist metaphysics is thus mere dogmatism.

Locke takes an important step towards a more purely epistemological conception of the philosopher’s task by suggesting that, by investigating the powers of the Cartesian mind, we can determine the scope and limits of human knowledge. Locke, however, is insensitive to the powerful and general skeptical problem formulated by Descartes. Locke claims to investigate the limits of human knowledge. But, as Kant charges, in adopting a “historical” – i.e. empirical-psychological – approach to the origins of our beliefs, Locke fails to address the *epistemological* question of our *right* to hold them. Moreover, where the metaphysicians at least attempt to justify the basic presuppositions of modern science, Locke simply takes for granted the corpuscular-mechanical picture of the world.

Kant presents his transcendental idealism as the way beyond rationalist dogmatism and empiricist naturalism. His thought is that, since all empirically knowable objects, “outer” as well as “inner,” are subject to conditions inherent in our cognitive constitution, we can have a priori knowledge of features necessarily characteristic of the world as we are able to know it. However, not all matters of human concern answer to these conditions of objective knowability. Those that do not remain matters of judgment or faith. Kant thus presents us with the idea of epistemology as a non-empirical discipline that determines the cognitive status of all other subjects according to how far they are controlled by reason and evidence, hence whether they aim at objective truth. Thus in modern philosophy, “refuting the skeptic,” now conceived as establishing our right to claim knowledge of an objective, causally ordered world, ceases to be “the languid academic exercise of composing a reply to Sextus Empiricus” (Rorty 1979: 223), becoming instead the key to distinguishing between forms of discourse that are “rational,” “scientific,” or “cognitively significant” and those that are “emotive” or “merely expressive.” Philosophy-as-epistemology becomes central to culture.

Michael Dummett argues that Frege, the founder of analytic philosophy, is as much a revolutionary as Descartes (see DUMMETT). In Dummett’s view, Frege’s revolution replaces epistemology, as the foundation of philosophy, with philosophy of language or “the theory of meaning,” with the result that analytic philosophy is sharply discontinuous with philosophy-as-epistemology. Rorty sees no such discontinuity. Frege is a (notably original) member of the “back to Kant” movement. His turn to logic and language is an attempt to eliminate the Kantian tradition’s last vestiges of psychologism, thereby rescuing philosophy from the scientific naturalism that was threatening to

overwhelm it. Analytic philosophy thus continues to pursue, in the idiom of “language,” the epistemological questions that Kant and his predecessors pursued in the idiom of “ideas”: segregating the cognitively significant from the merely expressive, drawing lines between the a priori and the empirical, showing where we should and should not be “realists” about truth, and so on.

A distinction that is absolutely essential to this Kantian style of philosophizing is that between scheme and content. Accepting this distinction, we will see empirical knowledge as involving two clearly distinguishable components, concepts and intuitions, or as resulting from the cooperation of two faculties, understanding and sensibility. On this model, “mind” or “language” orders or interprets the factual elements “given” to consciousness. Taken together, Rorty argues, Sellars’s attack on “the myth of the given,” Quine’s skepticism about the analytic/synthetic distinction, Wittgenstein’s critique of ostensive definition and “private language,” and Austin’s sarcasm about “the ontology of the sensible manifold” leave this fundamental commitment no longer credible (see AUSTIN, QUINE, SELLARS, and WITTGENSTEIN).

Rorty sees these critics of the Kantian tradition as united by a kind of methodological behaviorism. In their different ways, they invite us, first, to look at how we actually use words, revise beliefs, evaluate theories, or conduct inquiries and, second, to ask whether there is any payoff, theoretical or practical, in partitioning our beliefs or statements into “true-by-virtue-of meaning-alone versus true-by-virtue-of-fact” or “purely observational versus theory-laden.” The answer is “No.” The advantage of taking the linguistic turn, then, is not that it offers new ways of solving old problems but that it makes this methodological orientation plausible, thereby allowing us to set the old problems aside. In this way, analytic philosophy transcends and cancels itself.

The picture of inquiry and justification that results from abandoning the dualism of scheme and content is holistic, coherentist, and pragmatic. Inquiry is a process of constantly reweaving our web of belief under the impact of observation and in the light of multiple interests and criteria, theoretical and practical. Rorty thinks that this holistic picture blurs all the methodological distinctions – between the a priori and the a posteriori, the necessary and the contingent, fact and value, the sciences and the humanities, and so on – that philosophers bent on projects of epistemological or metaphysical demarcation want to keep alive.

Present in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, but much more strongly emphasized in subsequent writings, is the claim that the most fundamental error of our philosophical tradition is the notion that truth is correspondence with reality or accuracy of representation. The quest for truth-as-correspondence reflects an urge to be guided by something greater than ourselves: the World, the True, or the Good. (Rorty thinks of today’s hard-headed scientific realism as evincing an essentially *religious* attitude.) This quest (which is as old as philosophy itself, philosophy-as-epistemology being simply its modern incarnation) is always associated with demarcational projects dividing matters of human concern into an upper and lower division: knowledge versus opinion, nature versus convention, philosophy versus poetry. However, in addition to undermining methodological grounds for such demarcations, the holistic, broadly coherentist and pragmatic conception of inquiry common to Quine, Sellars, and Wittgenstein makes it difficult to see individual sentences or beliefs as “corresponding” to anything. Whether

we look at inquiry from the standpoint of method or that of truth, we find no room for philosophy.

Rorty's focus on truth reflects an increasing self-identification with pragmatism. Having adopted a broadly coherentist picture of justification and inquiry, Rorty flirted briefly with the Peircean suggestion that truth is ideal justification. However, his settled outlook – which he identifies with the pragmatism of James and Dewey – is a radical anti-essentialism with respect to the traditional objects of philosophical concern. Rorty's Pragmatist does not replace a correspondence theory of truth with an epistemic account but rather holds that truth (or rationality or goodness) is not the sort of thing that we can usefully theorize about.

Rorty thinks that, among contemporary philosophers, Donald Davidson has done most to advance the pragmatist cause. According to Rorty, Davidson's work not only reinforces Sellars's rejection of "given" facts and Quine's repudiation of the analytic/synthetic distinction, it traces the connections between belief, truth, and meaning in a way that deprives these notions of all demarcational significance. For all their criticisms of traditional epistemology, Sellars and Quine are prone to backsliding because they remain committed to the view that the natural sciences, especially physics, get at "hard facts" or "the ultimate nature of reality" in a way that the softer disciplines do not. Davidson is able to go beyond Sellars and Quine because he is wholly free of this lingering scientism.

Perhaps because neither approach to truth makes our understanding of truth the key to traditional epistemological or metaphysical problems, Rorty pays scant attention to the distinction between Davidson's view that the concept of truth, while of considerable explanatory significance in the theory of meaning, must be taken as primitive, and the "deflationary" view that truth-talk is only an expressive convenience. Indeed, he often treats Davidson's view as a form of deflationism, a suggestion that Davidson emphatically (though perhaps not entirely convincingly) repudiates.

Another notable influence on Rorty's version of pragmatism is Thomas Kuhn. Rorty thinks that Kuhn's distinction between "normal" and "revolutionary" science invites wide application. In all areas of discourse, there are times when inquiry proceeds more or less normally, solving in agreed-upon ways commonly recognized problems, formulated in a familiar vocabulary. But sometimes we can make progress only by dropping old questions in favor of new ones, or by changing the basic vocabulary in terms of which our problems and projects are described. Rorty thinks that his own pragmatist attack on traditional philosophy is an instance of just such an attempt at revolutionary change.

Rorty's rejection of the correspondence or "realist" conception of truth is often thought to amount to an extreme form of linguistic idealism. If our beliefs do not answer to the world, truth is something we make up: the idea of objective truth goes by the board. Rorty thinks that the idea of "answering to the world" confuses causation with justification. Because we are trained in observation-reporting practices involving the causal triggering of reporting dispositions by external circumstances, the world plays a causal role in regulating our beliefs. But it does not play a justifying role. The situations that provoke such reports do not demand to be described in any particular vocabulary and do not determine the inferential or theoretical significance of the reports they provoke.

Critics sometimes charge that giving up on a substantive notion of truth, whether realist or Peircean, prevents Rorty from seeing inquiry as progressing. Rorty meets this charge by saying that improvements are measured retrospectively and comparatively – by reference to problems solved, improvements made, or alternatives foregone – rather than by their shortening the distance between ourselves and the End of Inquiry. We have no conception of what it would be for inquiry to have an end, no idea of “the Truth” as the Ideal Theory of Everything or the way that Nature itself would like to be described.

Rorty has also been widely criticized for preaching irrationalism and relativism. He rejects both charges. He agrees that his relaxed version of coherentism entails that justification is less algorithmic than many epistemologists have wanted it to be but denies that this is equivalent to the claim that anyone can (rationally) think whatever he likes or that any system of beliefs is as good as any other. Our settled beliefs, involuntary observations, and theoretical and practical interests provide all the constraint we need (and can possibly have). His position, he concedes, is “ethnocentric” in the following sense: at any stage of inquiry, we can only work with whatever beliefs and theories and criteria we have on hand. That is, we have to accept the irreducible contingency of our investigative and argumentative resources. Given this contingency, there are likely to be issues with respect to which, at any given time, not all people can find common ground. But this does not mean that some (or any) disputes reflect commitments that are in principle “incommensurable.” We cannot predict the future of inquiry and never know how the dialectical situation will evolve. Rorty thinks that only disappointed foundationalists will equate his thoroughgoing fallibilism with skepticism, relativism, or irrationalism.

In recent years, Rorty’s writings have taken a political turn. He defends a position he sometimes calls “postmodern, bourgeois liberalism”: “bourgeois liberalism” because it fully endorses the rights and freedoms typically guaranteed by the rich, industrial democracies; and “postmodern” because it eschews the need for providing those rights and freedoms with a philosophical justification. Rorty recognizes that many philosophers think that, if we give up on such Enlightenment conceptions as universal reason and the Rights of Man – the kinds of thing philosophy is invoked to underwrite – we leave ourselves with no way of showing what is wrong with oppressive, discriminatory, or tribalist forms of political life. Indeed, he thinks that concerns about relativism and irrationalism grow out of just this fear. In reply, he advocates facing up to the “priority of democracy to philosophy.” Democratic constitutions and the rule of law are appealing to people with our history and cultural background, but often to other people too, if they get the chance to enjoy them. Those who want philosophical foundations for liberal-democratic institutions should recall that such institutions did not appear overnight. Extending political rights and legal protections to all citizens, without regard to religion, race, or gender took time; and, in Rorty’s view, this increasing inclusiveness owes more to an enlargement of sympathies than discoveries to the effect that rationality or moral considerability is more widespread than used to be thought. Imaginative literature and investigative journalism have done more for the oppressed and excluded than inquiries into the “foundations” of morals and politics.

Unusually for an American philosopher, Rorty has written extensively about such “continental” figures as Husserl, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. He sees continen-

tal and analytic philosophy as having followed parallel courses. Like Frege, Husserl wanted philosophy to be rigorous and scientific, yet deeper than and prior to the special sciences. Also like Frege, he sought this depth and priority in a general account of representation. Unlike Frege, who turned to logic and language, Husserl looked for a theory of the invariant structures of consciousness. But he too provoked a pragmatist reaction. Roughly speaking, Heidegger (especially the Heidegger of *Being and Time*) stands to Husserl as the later Wittgenstein stands to Frege and Russell. The consequences of this reaction are further worked out in Derrida's deconstructive readings of seminal philosophical texts and Foucault's historicist reconstructions of vanished conceptions of scientific knowledge.

While he is generally regarded as arguing for the death of philosophy, this is a description Rorty repudiates. Following Sellars, he suggests that "philosophy" can be understood two ways. On the one hand, there is philosophy (little p): the attempt "to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term." This Hegelian project of grasping one's time in thought could only come to an end if inquiry itself (in a broad sense that encompasses science, the humanities, literature, politics, and the arts) ground to a halt. On the other hand, there is Philosophy (big p): the Platonic–Kantian project of determining how to seek truth (or conduct oneself rationally to do more good) through discovering the nature of truth (or rationality or goodness). Where philosophy seeks reflective self-understanding, and perhaps self-transformation, but always at a particular stage of inquiry, Philosophy tries to discern the permanent framework within which all inquiry proceeds. In trying to kill off Philosophy, Rorty looks forward to a "post-Philosophical culture," in which such a quest will look as quaint as medieval theological disputes look to secular intellectuals today. Learning to do without Philosophy, as most intellectuals have learned to do without religion, means coming finally to take full responsibility for our opinions and values. Rorty's philosophy is thus a version of "humanism," in Sartre's sense.

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