

TECHNOLOGY AND RORTY'S CULTURAL POLITICS

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Abstract

In section 1, I point out the tension in Rorty's commitment to both pragmatism and materialism. In section 2, I explain how Rorty sought to justify this combination, and argue that his account is not only implausible, but incomplete. In section 3, I explain what I think is the underlying reason for Rorty's commitment to materialism, namely to promote the social utility of technology for eliminating extreme poverty. After showing how this stance fits into a standard discourse of scientific rationalism, to which a strong opposing case can be made, I conclude, in section 4, that Rorty's notion of philosophy as cultural politics could be a very useful approach to new technological developments, capable of revitalizing philosophy's public voice; but only if detached from Rorty's anti-philosophical agenda.

Keywords

Richard Rorty; Pragmatism; Materialism; Technology; Scientism; Cultural Politics

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1. Pragmatism and Materialism

Rorty's pragmatism is very easy to understand. It is a suggestion about what we ought to do. We ought to stop talking about truth, knowledge and representation in absolutist terms, because this stifles social progress. It allows people with religious convictions to maintain that they have 'the truth' on their side, which causes conflict with those who believe in a different 'truth' and closes down the options for dialogue. It allows scientific rationalists to claim that they know the ultimate nature of reality, on the grounds that scientific methods allow us to represent that reality accurately; once more, belief in a privileged description of reality, the one that reveals 'the truth', blocks the path to creative description and dialogue. So we should forget about these notions, for which traditional philosophy is largely to blame, and focus on what really matters: social usefulness. We have a great plurality of discourses for describing the world, and nothing limits our ability to create new ones except our imaginations and social consciences. Without the pernicious notion of '*the accurate description of reality*', we would be better equipped to create imaginative new descriptions of reality designed to alleviate the terrible suffering and injustice we find within it. Driven by a social conscience rooted in empathy for the feelings of others, we would sift through our descriptions, experimenting with the potentially useful ones and discarding the ones which have proved more trouble than they are worth - and we would be guided by usefulness alone, with never a thought wasted on 'the truth'.

Understand this suggestion, and the fact that it is, and could only be, a suggestion, and you basically understand Rorty's philosophy. It lies behind everything he wrote – when it is not right on the surface, which it usually is. However, although the suggestion itself – forget about truth and representation to build a brighter world – pervades Rorty's work, its status as a suggestion for a social experiment only became apparent in his later writings, after Rorty

had been forced to make this clear in response to critics accusing him of self-refutation. For it could not be a claim to truth: a claim that it is true that there is no truth, and hence that we are free to describe the world however best suits us. Rorty knew about Protagoras and the history of relativism. He knew that any attempt to make that kind of claim would be self-refuting. So when pressed with charges of self-refutation, as most notably occurred in an exchange with Hilary Putnam (Rorty 1998 [1993]), he revealed what he was really up to.

It is arguably the case that *every claim Rorty ever made* must be construed as a suggestion to the effect that: ‘*if we describe things in this way, then it might be socially useful – and so I suggest that we experiment with this description*’. This is not necessarily to say that Rorty was incapable of making truth-claims, but rather that in the final analysis, this all a truth-claim could ever amount to for him.¹ It very rarely seems like this is what is going on when you read Rorty, however, namely that he is not being guided by the merits or demerits of the position he is discussing, but only by whether describing it positively or negatively would be more socially useful; the cynical might wonder how often this thought actually crossed his mind, when he was hard at work and nobody was accusing him of self-refutation. So, for example, one reason he gave for thinking that ‘developing a pragmatist culture would be an experiment worth trying’, was that ‘consequences of the sort that enemies of the Enlightenment feared would be produced by giving up on God’ were consequences which never actually transpired (Rorty 2010 [2006-7], p. 105). But why should we describe the world that way, as many contemporary religious fundamentalists would not? One reason, presumably, would be that this description of how the Enlightenment turned out might be useful for getting us to believe that a pragmatist culture might be worth experimenting with. Not exactly self-refuting, you might think, but if not then dangerously close.

¹ Thanks to Bjørn Ramberg for persuading me to tone down my point here.

Many have not taken kindly to Rorty's central pragmatist suggestion. In a recent interview, Daniel Dennett says that,

Sometimes, views can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true. I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You'd have people going around saying: "Well, you're part of that crowd who still believe in facts."

He goes on to say of the view that there are various competing 'narratives' with which the world can be described, that, 'One of those narratives is the truth and the others aren't; it's as simple as that' (Dennett 2017). It is interesting that Dennett should take such a hostile stance to the quintessentially Rortyan position, because Dennett and Rorty were close allies, as is clear from all their exchanges.² Dennett does not mention Rorty in the interview, and no doubt would seek to distance him from the irresponsible postmodernists he was criticising. But this would be disingenuous, because unlike others who held the view Dennett describes as 'evil', Rorty made his stance perfectly clear, sometimes in popular articles designed for the general public. Rorty was actively looking for consequences – he was a key spokesman for the kind of social changes which Dennett observed taking place in certain quarters, and despised.

So how, you might wonder, was an alliance between Rorty and Dennett even possible? The answer is to be found in their shared materialism. Rorty pioneered eliminativist materialism

² See, for example, Rorty's glowing review of Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (Rorty 1991) – Dennett's main work, in which Rorty's ideas make a significant entrance at the end (Dennett 1991: 461); or see Dennett's appraisal of the importance Rorty had for young materialists like himself in the 1960s (Dennett 2014: vii).

and this had a great influence on Dennett, who is its main advocate today. That is already enough to indicate why they might have been prepared to be maximally tolerant of each other when it came to other matters. But it raises another, considerably more puzzling question; one which fans of Rorty, who tend to be attracted to his anti-authoritarianism, pluralism and social conscience, routinely skirt around. The question is: why *would* Rorty advocate materialism? Rorty stood, above all else, for denying that any kind of description has a privileged attachment to reality. But materialism privileges our physical description of the world. Not only that, but it was the dominant description-privileging metaphysical position throughout Rorty's career – in the early 1960s, he would have seen it first acquiring the dominance that it retains to this day. So you would expect it to have been his main target. Instead, he was allied to the materialist establishment, albeit as a maverick and distrusted figure. It is an establishment he helped to build. On the face of it, this is very odd indeed.

I think the answer is to be found in Rorty's attitudes to technology, and this is what I shall now go on to explain.

2. The Handmaiden of Technology

The privilege Rorty gave to physical science's description of the world by endorsing materialism (aka physicalism) was not a metaphysical one. If it had been, his position would have been grossly incoherent. Still, any notion of a non-metaphysical materialism is liable to seem strange within our current philosophical climate, where materialism is the dominant metaphysical 'ism'; the only one with 'contemporary clout', as Putnam once put it (Putnam

1983, p. 208).³ It would not have seemed strange to Rorty, however, since he grew up in a Marxist household. Marxists have meant many things by ‘materialism’, with politics, rather than metaphysics, almost always being their focus. They see in it a politically-charged, revolutionary vision, which wrests control from the priesthood by asserting our oneness with an all-encompassing material reality, and which focuses our attention on the need to arrange the material conditions of our existence to the benefit of all (Eagleton 2016). This is somewhat closer to what Rorty had in mind than the metaphysical view that only the language of physical science describes ultimate reality. Nevertheless, Rorty’s materialism does indeed privilege this language, as any materialism must. It claims that ‘every event can be described in micro-structural terms, a description that mentions only elementary particles, and can be explained by reference to other events so described’ (Rorty 1991 [1987], p. 114). *Every* event can be described in this language; no other language has the privilege of absolute universality.

Rorty justifies his allegiance to materialism historically. He sees his preferred version as completing an important job which metaphysical idealism first began in the Enlightenment, namely that of relegating physical science to the status of simply one description among others, so that the scientism of thinking that physical descriptions trump the rest could not take hold. Idealism ‘succumbed’ to ‘anti-scientism’, however, by portraying physical science as a description of ‘the merely phenomenal’ and handing the task of providing the ultimate description of reality to philosophy (Rorty 1991 [1987], p. 113). Rorty’s materialism does not

³ For Rorty’s original advocacy of a non-metaphysical materialism, see Rorty 1979, pp. 114-125; for discussion, see Tartaglia 2007, pp. 94-7. As I pointed out in the latter, he officially abandoned eliminative materialism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. But he only rejected it construed as a metaphysical claim – his non-metaphysical materialism remained as eliminative as ever, as can be seen by his later endorsements of Dennett and of the whole Rylean tradition which taught us, as Rorty saw it, *not* to take consciousness seriously. See Tartaglia 2017 and 2019, which have references to all of Rorty’s key writings on these issues.

do this – it credits natural science where credit is due, while eschewing any notion of an ultimate description – and thereby accomplishes the task of keeping physical descriptions in their place in an updated and more effective manner.

So materialism is socially useful for the same reason that idealism once was, namely that it prevents scientism. Materialism *prevents* scientism personally, that strikes me as a maximally implausible thesis. So implausible, in fact, that it tempts me to look to Rorty's personal circumstances for an alternative explanation (materialism was all the rage and 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em'). But let us hear a little more of what he has to say.

There was a time, at the end of the 18th century, when idealism seemed to offer a viable defence against the threat of the scientific description of reality displacing all others – a defence against 'scientism', as we would now say. The problem was that of 'how to fit art, religion, and morality into the Galilean world-picture', and Kant tried to solve it by conceiving philosophy as a 'super-science'. Since 'reason had been discovered by philosophy to be wider than science', idealism was able to go beyond the Galilean world-picture, which was only applicable to a second-rate phenomenal reality, so as to defend the legitimacy of alternative descriptions (Rorty 1982 [1981], p. 146). Keeping all our descriptions on a par, so that one supposedly 'true' description cannot be allowed to dominate, is a vital social function, according to Rorty's pragmatist convictions – so idealism was a good thing. But unfortunately, this task was achieved by installing a new ultimate description to usurp the scientific one, and by entrusting that description to philosophy. This was a bad thing, because it reinforced the idea that some descriptions represent reality better than others and set up philosophy as a cultural overseer charged with determining representational accuracy. So

philosophy became an obstacle to pluralism and pragmatism – which largely explains Rorty’s virulent anti-philosophy.

Fortunately, idealism’s influence rapidly faded. Idealism was a ‘specifically philosophical form of romanticism’, and when it did fade, all that was left was romanticism pure and simple: a new emphasis on individual expression and creativity, combined with hostility to conformity. Idealism was *philosophical* romanticism, because it tried to establish the legitimacy of a plurality of different vocabularies through *reason*, whereas post-philosophical romantics simply focused on creating inspiring new descriptions; they did not care about ‘which propositions are true but rather what vocabulary we should use.’ With Hegel, we were provided with a much better ‘sense of liberation from science’, as he showed ‘the relativity of significance to choice of vocabulary, the bewildering variety of vocabularies from which we can choose, and the intrinsic instability of each’. This was a better way of reminding us that, ‘the scientists’ claim to discover the way things really are’ is ‘a pretension which needs to be curbed’ and that the scientist ‘merely goes through mechanical procedures, checking off the truth-value of propositions – behaving like a glorified stock-room clerk inventorying the universe in accord with a predetermined scheme’. In fact, the ‘sense that science is banalistic, except perhaps in those rare creative moments when a Galileo or a Darwin suddenly imposes a new scheme, is the essence of romanticism’ (Rorty 1982 [1981], pp. 143, 148, 142). This does not sound like a materialist talking to me; but again, let Rorty continue with his story.

The war against scientism did not stop there, however, for there was a ‘third step in the process of establishing the autonomy and supremacy of the literary culture’: romanticism was replaced by pragmatism. Thanks to Nietzsche and William James, the emphasis was no

longer on creating new vocabularies to ‘bring hidden secrets to light’, but rather to ‘help us get what we want’. They abandoned truth in favour of usefulness; different vocabularies were no longer thought to illuminate reality in different ways, but rather to serve different purposes. Scientism was no longer a threat, because science could hardly tell us the truth if there is none. And the pragmatists did not say this on the basis of any truth they had discovered either – they were ‘the first generation not to believe they had the truth’ (Rorty 1982 [1981], p. 150). They just said things, in the hope they would be useful.

Materialism is supposed to fit into this picture as a useful adjunct to pragmatism. For in the form of non-reductive materialism, it is ‘no more of an ally of science than any other area of culture’, while having the benefit of providing ‘all the respect for science we need, combined with more respect for poetry than the Western philosophical tradition has usually allowed itself’ (Rorty 1991 [1987], pp. 113, 125).

Now it must immediately be noted that Rorty’s conception of non-reductive materialism is not the mainstream one; not now, not ever. That is a version of metaphysical materialism: the view that only microphysical particles and forces ultimately exist, combined with the conciliatory amendment that this does not necessarily mean other things, such as people, cars, forests, etc., do not exist at all; nor that they only could exist if reducible to combinations of microphysical particles. Instead, the mainstream non-reductive materialist respects these other things by saying that they supervene upon, are grounded upon, or are realised by, the particles; they are ontologically dependent upon them, but in such a messy, complex manner as to make reduction impossible in principle. That is not what Rorty means. He simply means that all events have a physical description; they may have many others, but they must all be

describable in microphysical terms. In his view, reduction can only be a linguistic relation, not an ontological one – so any claim to the effect that a tree is nothing over and above the particles is ruled out of court. To exist is to figure in a language game, and since the language games we play with ‘trees’ and ‘particles’ are very different, linguistic reduction can be achieved ‘very rarely’. It would require a language game to become dispensable, such that the entities it commits us to are no longer needed. And the way this almost always happens is not through analysis, but because the language game ‘fades away’ of its own accord (Rorty 1991 [1987], p. 115).

So non-reductive materialism fits the pragmatist campaign against scientism, by claiming that although all events are physical, their physical descriptions can never usurp all other descriptions. But since it is still materialism, it has the distinct advantage, which has attracted people to it since ancient times, of ruling out other candidates for an ultimate description: those offered by religion and metaphysics.

I see two major flaws to this story, one philosophical, and the other a matter of common sense. The first is that Rorty never tells us *why* we should believe that all events can be described in microphysical terms. This is hardly a reflection of fact, namely that, as it happens, we are able to describe all events this way. There is precious little we can describe this way except for microphysical things; perhaps some types of chemical reaction, but certainly nothing as big and particular as a tree or football match. For this kind of claim to make any sense, a reason is needed. The ontological materialist has a good one: we must be able to describe everything physically, in principle, because everything is physical. But what could Rorty say? Presumably he was not suggesting a transcendental condition on the

physical form of understanding. Perhaps he would say that the language game physicists play requires them to describe all events in microphysical terms. But quite apart from the fact that this would sabotage his commitment to the contingency of language, it would be patently false – physicists look to describe events relevant to their theories. Moreover, even if it were true, it would be no reason to think they were guaranteed to succeed, even in principle. Saying that all events have a physical description seems much more like a *philosophical* language game; one played by materialists, and which makes no sense unless reality is ultimately physical. For if it was *contingent* that all the events our haphazard history has led us to talk about have microphysical descriptions, how could anyone know?

If pressed, Rorty would no doubt say it was just a useful claim to make – which brings us to the common-sense objection. For if, like Rorty, social consequences are your be-all-and-end-all, and you are looking to have the social effect of quashing scientism and affirming the potential legitimacy of each and every band within our rainbow of descriptions, then materialism is obviously the last thing you want to advocate, given the world we live in – a world where the most aggressive advocates of scientism, if they have philosophical awareness, use ‘materialism’ as their rallying call, and where those without such awareness simply disparage philosophy (like Rorty) – while presupposing materialism nonetheless. And if subduing science with laid-back pluralism is your agenda, then you would surely not want to devise a theory, eliminative materialism, which has provided a very useful tactic for dealing with the awkward fact that human beings are conscious among those who treat ‘scientism’ as a badge of honour; people such as Alex Rosenthal, who think only fermions and bosons exist, and that history is bunk (Rosenthal 2011).

Imagine a small band of royalists wanting to turn the tide in a culture of overwhelming republicanism. One of them becomes an influential advocate of ‘republicanism’, but is always careful to explain, to anyone who will listen, his subtle reasons for thinking that his own particular brand of republicanism is not like the rest – since it actually favours royalism. Not helpful. If this man thought he could tame republicanism in this manner, he was crashingly naïve. No doubt Rorty thought he was being pragmatic by subversively proposing an ironic materialism that would steer the mainstream away from essentialism, ahistoricism, metaphysics and scientism. But siding with a movement that despises everything you stand for is never worth it, even if you do succeed in taming it a little; and as far as I can see, Rorty steered the mainstream of materialism not one iota. Rorty was an ironic liberal as well as an ironic materialist – but his *instincts* were liberal.⁴

So let us take stock. We know Rorty did not believe in metaphysical materialism. We know he was concerned about scientism; he thought the task of stemming its flow was of the utmost historical significance. We know that there is no way, consistent with Rorty’s anti-metaphysical and anti-epistemological principles, that he could possibly justify the claim that all events have microphysical descriptions, except by saying that it is a socially useful thing to claim. What we do not yet know is why he thought materialism was so useful. And for Rorty, that must be the crux of the matter.

His historical story does not tell us. It tells us that there is now a version of materialism which is *compatible* with pragmatism. But he is not content to simply say, as would be far more characteristic, that: ‘even if it *were* true that all events can be described microphysically (who

⁴ Thanks to Martin Müller for the comparison to Rorty’s liberalism.

knows? who cares?), that would not mean that all other descriptions were answerable to the physical ones.’ No, he actively promoted materialism. Of course, he thinks materialism is a useful defence against other, non-scientistic claims to possession of the ultimate description; although that is only plausible if it is conflated with the metaphysical kind, since an idealist (for example) could easily concede that all events can be described physically, while adding that those descriptions are not ultimate. Rorty also wanted to break down barriers to communication between anti-scientistic continental European philosophy and materialist American philosophy; but only for the purposes of uniting them in pragmatism. So why not just promote pragmatism and forget about materialism? Rorty’s materialism provides ‘all the respect for science we need’, he says. But why go out of your way to show respect to something so ‘banausic’, when you are worried about the West’s ‘temptations to scientism which its own scientific and technological success has engendered’ (Rorty 1991 [1987], p. 125). What social payoff did Rorty have in mind?

The answer emerges after the heyday of Rorty’s materialism in the ‘70s and ‘80s, when his work became more explicitly political in the ‘90s. Now he can be found saying that, ‘physics is the handmaiden of technology and of the poetic imagination,’ and that ‘descriptions of objects in terms of elementary particles are useful in many different ways – as many ways as particle physics can contribute to either technological advances or imaginative, astrophysical, redescriptions of the universe as a whole. But that sort of utility is their *only* value’ (Rorty 1999 [1994], p. 59). Leave aside the reference to inspiring astrophysics, which I suspect was an afterthought, and this makes the situation much clearer. He advocated materialism because he wanted to promote the technological advances made possible by scientific descriptions. He thought technology was socially useful, as it most obviously is – useful for almost everything

we do, whether good or bad – and not wanting the pragmatist anti-scientism agenda to get mixed up with an anti-technological one, he thought it best to give materialism his blessing.

3. Technology is our only hope

In his 1992 essay, 'Love and Money', Rorty begins by quoting novelist E.M. Forster saying, in 'a voice that mingles pity with self-disgust', that, 'We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet.' The idea this inspires in Rorty is that the very poor become 'unconversable' because they cannot afford to expend energy on anything except struggling to get by; they 'cannot afford any disinterested actions' and the 'light shed by novels does not reach them' (Rorty 1999 [1992], pp. 223-4). I do not know about any of that, but the light shed by music reaches most people, rich or poor, and when Rorty sums up his point by saying, 'No money, no chance for love', he unintentionally echoes the title of Mighty Sparrow's classic calypso, 'No Money, No Love' – 'we can't make love on empty belly', sang Sparrow. I find that song a refreshing contrast to Rorty's cloying condescension (irony does not help) and baseless generalisations, for genuine as his concern for global poverty no doubt was, he writes as if describing another species. In any case, he goes on to say that 'all us liberal gentlefolk' hope that we will eventually 'produce so much money that, when shared out as it should be, there will be nobody left who is very poor' (Rorty 1999 [1992], pp. 224). And for that, as he ultimately concludes, technology is our only hope.

Rorty's essay was inspired by his first trip to India, where the contrast between 'the beggars in the hot streets' and his 'pleasantly air-conditioned hotel' clearly weighed heavily on his

mind; as is typical when people encounter that kind of poverty. He reflects that ‘there is, or soon will be’ enough money ‘sloshing around the northern hemisphere’ to eliminate poverty in this part of the world through a programme of redistribution (Rorty 1999 [1992], pp. 225-6).⁵ What worries Rorty, however, is the thought that ‘there will never be enough money in the world to redeem the South’. Disturbed by predictions of massive population growth, he sees the only possibility for redemption in breakthroughs from science and technology; for example, ‘a breakthrough in plasma physics which makes fusion energy, and thus (for example) desalination and irrigation on a gigantic scale, possible and cheap’. In this light, he pours scorn on scepticism about technological progress, the need for ‘new values’ and ‘non-Western ways of thinking’, and ‘all the talk about cuddling up to the natural environment’. He thinks scepticism about technology, which turns from ‘planning to dreaming, and from science to philosophy’ is ultimately a ‘self-deceptive reaction to the realization that technology may not work’. But it is our only hope, and to turn our backs on it is to callously treat the very poor as ‘unthinkable’ (Rorty 1999 [1992], pp. 226-8).

Rorty’s ideas fit neatly into a certain discourse of scientific rationalism, usually heavily mixed with scientism, antipathy to religion and, if it is thought worth mentioning, philosophy. Thus, under the banner of ‘Ferraris for All’, concerns about the environment are dismissed as ‘sustainababble’ and it is bravely proposed that we concrete-over the rainforests to make room for all those Ferraris – because nothing matters apart from people, and everyone deserves the best, it being callous to think otherwise (Ben-Ami 2010). This ties in nicely with Rorty’s view of nature as ‘the vast silent waste through which the stars blindly run’ – as the ‘antithesis of Spirit’, and a ‘wasteland’ which ‘occasionally gets lit up and transformed by

⁵ Interestingly, Rorty excludes China from ‘the North’, thereby showing a surprising lack of foresight for the man who predicted the rise of Donald Trump (Rorty 1999 [1998], pp. 89-90).

language' (Rorty 2009 [2006-7], pp. 295-6). Nature is not 'lit up' by the brute fact of animal consciousness, for Rorty – consciousness is a pernicious philosophical illusion, and saying that 'the more attractive sorts of [non-human] animals' feel even *pain* is simply a 'courtesy' we extend them because their faces are human enough for us to imagine them talking (Rorty 1979, pp. 189-190). It is language that matters to Rorty: the light of the novel, which has not reached the 'unconversable' at the bottom of the heap. The natural environment which remains untouched by humans is just a resource to be used in bringing the poor up-to-speed with literary culture; without that, or some other human use, it is literally nothing.

Scientific rationalists tend to be much more optimistic than Rorty; he simply thinks we must maintain faith in technological progress to avoid being callous. But authors like Stephen Pinker (2018; *Enlightenment Now*), Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler (2014; *Abundance: The Future is Better than you Think*), and Matt Ridley (2010; *The Rational Optimist*) are confident that our rapidly developing technological capabilities will soon solve all our problems. Ridley, for instance, thinks of technological development as an unstoppable force for good, with things only being held up when the human narratives Rorty championed – our 'obsession with human intentionality, design and planning' – get in the way (Ridley 2015, p. 4). And internet pioneer Kevin Kelly (2016; *The Inevitable*), simply takes technological determinism for granted, and tries to predict the ways in which our world will soon be transformed beyond recognition, so that his readers can profit from these changes.

There are pessimists too, however, such as John Gray, who on this issue, seems considerably more Rortyan than the actual Rorty ever was.⁶ In Gray's view, the scientific rationalist's 'faith in progress' is 'the Christian idea of history as a universal narrative of salvation dressed up in secular clothes'. Technology will not solve our problems because 'humans are highly inventive animals, who use their growing knowledge in the service of their most urgent needs – however conflicting, or ultimately self-destructive, these may prove to be'. Technological development is not driven by the kind of grand philanthropic project which techno-optimists have in mind, but by 'the interplay of all-too-human forces and motives – war, profit and the vanity of leaders' (Gray 2004 [2002], p. 31). Gray's hypothesis about how we will get the population under control is that there will soon be wars, unlike any we have seen before, which will radically reduce the human population, and thereby give the rest of the environment a chance to recover from a 'ferociously destructive creature' whose 'capacity for self-destruction is even greater' (Gray 2004, p. 79).

Given the steady operation of Moore's law, which means computer processing power doubles every couple of years, and the fact that enormous amounts of money are being poured into using that power to create intelligences greater than our own, nobody can really know what will happen. At the moment, whether you are optimistic or pessimistic may turn on how much faith you have in the intentions of Silicone Valley's technologists. We do know some things, however. We know that technological development is not under the control of a worldwide, philanthropic government. We know that we live in a world of competing powers and that there are various historically-entrenched flashpoints in the world. We know that these competing powers will always seek the military edge to protect their people and extend their interests, and that technology provides this; artificial intelligence has yet to produce the

⁶ Like Rorty, Gray has demonstrated impressive prophetic powers (see Gray 2004 [2003]).

mass unemployment many predict, but it is already at the centre of a new arms race between the USA and China. And we know that things can go wrong on a grand-scale, because they almost did in 1962, when disaster was averted by the most fragile contingencies imaginable (for just one example, see Tegmark 2017, p. 112).

If I seem to be steering heavily towards pessimism here, it is only to make Gray's more limited point that there is no guarantee that technology will lead us to paradise. There is no meaning of life that we are collectively acting out, so things could go wrong. Given that advanced technology allows them to go wrong on a grand scale, then, and that such scenarios are easy to imagine (an elderly president concerned more about saving face than the prospect of cutting his life short by a decade or so, for instance), we should be cautious – as opposed to our current non-strategy of a worldwide race to the latest technological innovation, vaguely motivated by the need to get beggars off the streets of Calcutta. There are beggars on the streets of the rich little English town I live in. Such people are not unthinkable; politicians think about them and decide their plight is not a vote-winner. If technology makes us vastly richer, this will not necessarily change (if it means having only one Ferrari rather than two), but if things goes badly awry, then either we all die, or those at the bottom will suffer most. Even Dennett, the philosopher-scientist of Silicon Valley, thinks technology may lead us *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*, as he puts it in the title of a recent book (Dennett 2017); such a return would not help the beggars. But perhaps it is simply inevitable that technology ultimately leads to the destruction of the species wielding it (Shklovski and Sagan 1966). Or maybe we can avoid that fate by using technology to 'morally enhance' ourselves (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Either would put an end to Rorty's historical conversation.

I am not suggesting that Rorty was a typical techno-optimist; he was very concerned about economic justice and the need for redistribution, which are notions the techno-optimists of ‘abundance’ typically scorn. But he did have enough hope invested in technological progress to feel that it justified his materialism on pragmatic grounds, and to make him disparage any hint of scepticism about the *desirability*, as opposed to practical application, of technological advance. There is, however, a better approach to technology available than that of leaving it to its own devices, whether in hope or resignation. This is to open a public discussion about it: to take it out of the hands of scientism-devotees, and politicians who have already decided that since science and technology is good for economic growth, there is no general issue to discuss, only specific issues thrown up in the course of unrestricted technological development that need to be dealt with through legislation. If philosophers become a lot more vocal about the specifically *philosophical* issues raised by technological development, philosophy really might start being more socially useful – just as Rorty wanted.

4. Philosophy and Cultural Politics

Rorty wanted to reconceptualise philosophy as something more useful to contemporary life. He wanted to replace the traditional conception of philosophy as a discipline concerned with a related set of ahistorical problems for the human intellect, with a new conception of it as ‘Cultural Politics’. Much of his opus is dominated by his negative agenda of discrediting the traditional conception; but none of that was any use to philosophers who want to affect our conversation about technology. It simply undermines the voice of philosophers, such as Rorty himself, by reinforcing the dominant anti-philosophical voice in our world, that of scientism. The only useful contribution Rorty might have made to this debate with his talk of there being no objective truth, would have been by pointing out the consequence that technological

development is not an inevitable path to redemption, but rather a conversation that needs to be steered. But he did not say that, because he pledged himself to an ungrateful materialist establishment; primarily out of guilt, but partially for expediency, would be my hypothesis.

Nevertheless, Rorty's positive agenda of philosophy as cultural politics could be just what we need. His paradigm is that of arguing about linguistic practice. Such arguments are commonplace; for example, that it would be better if people stopped classifying each other in racist terms, or stopped defining 'marriage' in exclusively heterosexual terms. Rorty focuses on whole discourses, however. A good example of this is whether it would be better if we all stopped talking about God. Now the obvious objection to conceiving such debates in terms of linguistic practice is that this neglects ontology: the question of whether God actually exists. If God exists, then presumably we should talk about him. But Rorty does not believe in ontology; and here we see the connection with his crusade against traditional philosophy. As he sees it, once we are persuaded that such concerns are confused, and hence that there is no answer to whether God really exists or not, the only question that remains is whether it is useful to talk about God. Thus philosophy as cultural politics is supposed to be a natural replacement for traditional philosophy; it rights the wrongs of its predecessor, so to speak.

Now currently envisaged developments in technology, such as biotechnology and artificial intelligence, raise massive philosophical issues, whether you conceive philosophy in the traditional fashion (questions about how we ought to live, how we conceive ourselves (personal identity and the self), how we should conceive artificial intelligences (consciousness, freedom) etc.) *or* whether you conceive it as cultural politics (whether we should pursue or discontinue scientific discourses concerning genetics, artificial intelligence,

dark matter, etc.). Rorty notes that, ‘people who regret that physicists ever investigated radioactivity, or speculated about the possibility of splitting the atom, are accused of confusing science with politics’ (Rorty 2007 [2002], p. 4). But he does not agree, on the grounds that if we try to strictly separate scientific questions about the nature of physical reality – knowledge of which allows us to technologically manipulate that reality – from political questions about whether to pursue certain technologies, then we will fall into the trap of taking ontology seriously. Better to simply discuss whether learning the scientific language would be useful. So it would seem that philosophy, as cultural politics, has a great task ahead of it at present: determining which scientific discourses we ought to pursue.

Rorty did not contribute to this agenda, but the idea is still a good one, in essence at least. Take Rorty’s example of a ‘revolution in plasma physics’. The prospect of this allowing us to feed the world, which is why Rorty mentioned it, would be a major factor in favour of judging the discourse useful. On the other hand, it might lead to the development of weapons that could destabilise the current political situation, as well as leading to social problems in a century or so, when the technology becomes available to anyone who wants it. You would have to look into questions about how reasonable it would be to expect the technology to be used for alleviating poverty, and how likely it was to affect the military balance of power, before coming to an informed opinion about whether the discourse was worth continuing. It might be something of a guess, in the end. But that would be better than lunging for any revolution in physics you can get without public discussion. It would be more democratic and rational. We might have guessed that biological weapons would not be a good idea.

In the case of this particular example, truth and ontology are beside the point. If the scientists can make the revolution happen, it makes no difference to our social concerns whether this is because of the intrinsic structure of reality or not. However, there is no reason to restrict Rorty's good idea that philosophy should engage in cultural politics, with his spurious anti-philosophical agenda. For when we consider producing artificial intelligences, or biologically altering ourselves, then questions about what we really are – things that can be replicated in a laboratory, or something else – are entirely relevant. People who hope to live forever by uploading the contents of their minds onto a machine will fail to do so if we are not computer programmes; so the money put into that task is wasted, and we owe no moral duty to the outcomes. And proper, traditional philosophy is also of the highest relevance to the determinism which leads people to assume that technological development is an inevitable backdrop to our lives, rather than something that we, as free agents, can steer. Bring these specifically philosophical considerations to bear on the issues about technology which really concern people – and quite rightly so – and there will be a reason to listen to philosophers. Something like Rorty's notion of philosophy as cultural politics, but embedded within real philosophy, could be very socially useful.

Annotated bibliography

Rorty, Richard. 1982 / 1981. Nineteenth-century idealism and twentieth-century textualism. In *Consequences of pragmatism*, 139-159. Brighton, UK: Harvester Press.

[This is the main source for Rorty's historical story about the progression from idealism to pragmatism, as he saw it. It is also an attempt by Rorty to distance his own views from idealism. It is one of Rorty's classic papers, I think.]

Rorty, Richard. 1999 / 1992. Love and money. In *Philosophy and social hope*, 223-228. London: Penguin.

[This short piece is the key to understanding the connection in Rorty's mind between metaphysical materialism and technological progress, in my view.]

Rorty, Richard. 2007 / 2004. Cultural politics and the question of the existence of God. In *Philosophy as cultural politics: philosophical papers, volume 4*, 3-26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[This article, written towards the end of Rorty's career, is the clearest statement and defence of his notion of 'philosophy as cultural politics'. It contains interesting reflections on both religion and recent debates in the philosophy of consciousness.]

Gray, John. 2004. *Heresies: against progress and other illusions*. London: Granta Books.

[Gray is always outspoken and fascinating to read. His main stance is that the idea of progress is an illusion inherited from religious belief; I find this collection of papers a marked improvement on his better-known *Straw Dogs*.]

Scharff, Robert C. and Dusek, Val (Eds.). 2003. *Philosophy of technology: the technological condition, an anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

[An excellent introduction to the philosophy of technology, containing both historical and contemporary readings.]

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