

*RICHARD RORTY: CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS OF LEADING
PHILOSOPHERS*

ARE CAUSAL PRESSURES PART OF THE WAY THE WORLD IS?

Rorty is forever being described as controversial, but I confidently predict that the word ‘controversial’ will drop out of discussions of his work as the twenty-first century progresses. This is not to suggest that his ideas are destined to become orthodox, which is something Rorty would presumably not want anyway¹, and neither is it to suggest that Rorty’s work is not controversial, for it most certainly is; in some quarters it is positively disrespectful. It is simply to suggest that controversy is a short-lived affair in the world of ideas, something which arises whenever something new and surprising is written, and that since Rorty’s ideas seem destined to last, we may expect that future discussions will focus on their viability and power, or lack thereof, while the stir which announced their arrival fades from memory. This present collection is evidence that Rorty’s ideas are indeed destined to last: I have filled four substantial volumes with the best writing on Rorty, but could have filled sixteen with good or at least interesting material, and perhaps thirty-two by scraping the barrel a little. Rorty’s ideas, or in many cases, the ideas he adopted and made his own, are already all over the intellectual landscape just two years after his death, especially in philosophy, but also throughout the humanities and social sciences, and increasingly in non-academic intellectual culture. These ideas are usually being attacked, as they are in the vast majority of the pieces I have selected, and may ultimately prove

¹ Rorty’s aim was to disrupt convention and orthodoxy, although if he were to succeed in overthrowing the conventional belief that there is an objective truth about the world, the new convention would presumably be that there is not one.

untenable, as philosophical ideas usually do, but they have probably now resonated with our times well enough to take their place in the philosophical canon.

I shall not begin with an overview of Rorty's life and career, because this is provided by the pieces in the first section of this volume. Neither will I use this introduction primarily to provide a general overview of Rorty's ideas, because most of the papers in this collection begin with excellent expositions, and a few of them are primarily expository. Neither will I try to explain Rorty's influence on contemporary philosophical thought, because volumes 3 and 4 will provide a better feel for this than any brief schematic comments I might make here. Rather, I shall do something which I hope will be more interesting, namely examine some of the larger, recurring criticisms that have been made of Rorty, with reference to the papers in this collection that make the criticisms.

The central theme these criticisms revolve around, it seems to me, is the apparent conflict between Rorty's critique of philosophy and his own theoretical commitments. Rorty once said, 'I have spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for'², and this metaphilosophical agenda pervades his writings. The conclusions he came to about what philosophy might be 'good for' were largely, and perhaps wholly, negative. When writing about particular areas of philosophy which might be thought to have practical application to the wider world, for instance, his message was always negative; he thought that philosophical theory would not help doctors with bioethical dilemmas (Arras, volume 4), that it would not aid in the political struggles of

feminists (Lovibond, volume 4), and more generally, that political (Johnson, Geras, volume 4) and moral philosophy (Schneewind, volume 4) were not useful tools for resolving political and moral problems. This negativity was based upon historical and theoretical considerations concerning the origins and nature of philosophy, as set out in his main work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature is a critique of representationalism, conjoined to the metaphilosophical claim that philosophy *is* representationalism. According to Rorty's historical reconstruction, the academic discipline today known as 'philosophy', originated in the seventeenth century as a project to provide foundations for knowledge; before that there was no notion of philosophy as a distinct discipline from other branches of learning such as science. The project was motivated by the Enlightenment struggle between the newly emerging mathematical sciences, and the traditional teachings of the Church, with philosophy invented in support of the sciences, with the aim of showing that knowledge is founded upon human reason and experience, rather than divine authority. This project was made possible by the invention of the mind by Descartes, who took the pre-existing metaphor of the mind as a mirror of nature, and literalised it by conceiving the mind as a thing that represents the world. Kant then went on to codify the project of philosophy as an *a priori* study of how our minds represent the world by making two technical distinctions that facilitated future work, namely the analytic / synthetic and intuition / concepts distinctions, and by tying these distinctions in with continuities in intellectual history that enabled later historians to construct a history of philosophy

² Rorty, Richard (1999) 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', in his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin, p. 11.

leading back to ancient Greece. Twentieth century analytic philosophy was simply an attempt to update this project by substituting language for the mind.

Rorty thinks this representationalist project was doomed from the outset by a confusion between causation and justification, for although experience is part of the causal explanation of human knowledge, it does not follow that knowledge claims are justified by experience: any attempt to trace the justification for our beliefs to the raw impact of the environment upon our minds falls foul of what Sellars called the 'Myth of the Given'. Rorty also agrees with Quine that we cannot distinguish synthetic claims justified by experience, from analytic claims that are true or false in virtue of what they mean, since experience does not bear on our claims individually, but rather as a collective whole: there is no way to isolate the bearing of the world on our individual claims to see if that bearing is appropriate to what we are claiming. Rorty concludes that justification is not a mechanical transaction between mind and world, which might be systematically studied by philosophers, but is rather a much messier social transaction between people engaged in open-ended conversation; what counts as justified is what people say counts as justified, and since what people say may change in ways that cannot be predicted in advance, the representationalist project of determining the universal conditions of justification is an impossible one. Rorty adds a Nietzschean spin to this conclusion by celebrating the demise of representationalism, on the grounds that it was motivated by the desire to reassure ourselves in our beliefs through the approval of the world, rather as we previously reassured ourselves through the approval of God. Overcoming this insecurity is to be welcomed as a significant milestone in human progress, then, and once we realise that

we ‘cannot step outside our skins’³ to compare what we say about the world to the ‘way the world is’ (in Nelson Goodman’s phrase), then we should also realise that we have no justification for believing that there actually is any ‘way the world is’.

There is a straightforward ‘end of philosophy’ logic to this narrative: we are told about the motivations for philosophy and the methodology upon which it was based, and then we are told that the motivations were undesirable and the methodology irreparably flawed. Rorty threw dust into the eyes of commentators, however, by drawing back from an anti-philosophical stance at the very end of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, even if, as was claimed in an early review, he had no right to do so (Skinner, volume 2). What Rorty says is that the philosophical profession will continue because specialists in reading the canonical texts of Western philosophy will continue to be required, and these specialists may prove to be useful intermediaries between disciplines. Given the story Rorty has just been telling, however, the fact that people will continue to read these texts seems regrettable, if inevitable, and it is hard to see why experts on these texts should be particularly suited to fostering cross-disciplinary discussion. Another distraction from Rorty’s ‘end of philosophy’ logic is provided by his celebration of ‘edifying philosophy’, but again this cannot be interpreted as a positive suggestion for the future of philosophy, since edifying philosophy is characterised as a reaction against systematic philosophy, and Rorty’s stated aim is to help society outgrow its need for systematic philosophy; he is committed to the value of edification, which is the creation of, and hermeneutic engagement with, unfamiliar forms of discourse, but he provides no reasons for thinking that edification should have anything to do with philosophy.

³ Rorty, Richard (1982) ‘Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy’, in his *Consequences of*

Rorty threw yet more dust into the eyes of commentators in a slightly later treatment, by making a one-off, but much cited, distinction between ‘Philosophy’ and ‘philosophy’: the former is the academic discipline Rorty tried to deconstruct in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and the latter is not a discipline at all, but rather Rorty’s name for the sort of ‘culture-criticism’ that might be undertaken by an ‘all-purpose intellectual’.⁴ When Rorty subsequently extols the virtues of a ‘post-Philosophical culture’, then, it seems as if he is only calling for the end of one type of philosophy, ‘Philosophy’, but that he has a positive suggestion for what might replace it. However, the suggestion that philosophers become all-purpose intellectuals who try to form a panoramic view of culture by acting as non-specialist intermediaries between the discourses of different disciplines, bears only one tenuous link to philosophy as we know it, namely that the philosophers of the traditional canon were often, but by no means always (Rorty says that Frege was less ‘philosophical’ than Henry Adams⁵) trying to form a panoramic view of the world. However, the systematic way in which constructive metaphysicians and logical positivists, for instance, were trying to form such a view has little or nothing to do with Rorty’s notion of culture-criticism.

Another way to look at it is this: what makes someone count as a philosopher, as Rorty said on a number of occasions, is simply the books they read. And yet there is no reason to think that the books academic philosophers specialise in would prepare them in any way for the kind of role Rorty has in mind. Quite the contrary, since on

Pragmatism, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. xix.

⁴ Rorty, Richard (1982) ‘Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy’, in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. xv.

any natural reading, which is the sort Rorty employs when criticising traditional philosophy, these books are antithetical to the pluralist culture Rorty wants to usher in. Rorty wants new ways of reading these books to be developed, and ends *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* wondering what roles Plato, Kant, Descartes, et al. ‘will play in our descendents’ conversation’.⁶ In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty goes on to celebrate one such new way of reading these books, namely Derrida’s innovation of converting philosophers into characters in a private fantasy, and then making dirty jokes about them.⁷ But why would such a dramatic (risible, in my view) approach be required? Because these books are naturally read as promoting the very views which Rorty opposes.

My interim conclusion is that Rorty is thoroughly committed to an ‘end of philosophy’ thesis. He holds back from expressing it, because he realises that the Western philosophical canon and the profession that talks about it is here to stay, and so rather than pointlessly calling for an end to something he knows will not end, the pragmatist in him finds it preferable to look around for something harmless and perhaps useful for philosophy to do. The use he finds for the profession, however, is one for which a knowledge of philosophy books would be very little help, and Rorty’s call for philosophy books to be interpreted in radically new ways, makes considerably less sense than if he were to call for them not to be read at all, given that in his view, the best way to solve a problem is to forget about it: surely having books about philosophical problems hanging around would just be an unwelcome reminder. Once the dust has cleared, then, it is easy to see that Rorty’s ‘40 years’ quest to find out

⁶ Rorty, Richard (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 394.

⁷ Rorty, Richard (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 6.

‘what, if anything, philosophy is good for’, ended with him concluding that philosophy is good for nothing: in the public domain, he said, novelists like Orwell are more useful than moral or political philosophers, and in the private domain, novelists like Proust are more useful than philosophers like Nietzsche or Heidegger.⁸

Suppose the conclusion above is correct: Rorty’s position is that philosophy should come to an end, and his awkward attempts to smooth over that conclusion are best put to one side. If we accept this, then the real problem begins, for it seems clear, on the face of it at least, that the way Rorty has reached his position is on the basis of philosophical arguments. He accepts Sellars’ and Quine’s arguments against representationalist conceptions of truth, justification, and knowledge, and replaces them with holistic, social, and causal alternatives. Moreover, he has a host of other philosophical commitments that he defended rigorously throughout his career; on most of the central topics in contemporary philosophy of mind and language, those familiar with his work will know what side of the debate Rorty would be on. So on the face of it, then, it makes no sense: how can you oppose philosophy on the basis of philosophical commitments?

One way to make sense of it is to put Rorty’s ‘end of philosophy’ commitment to one side, and interpret him as just another philosopher. Robert Brandom (volume 1) takes this line in a way that is charitable to Rorty, interpreting him as a constructive philosopher of language, and indeed, metaphysician, whose work follows through on the consequences of Quine’s rejection of the analytic / synthetic distinction, with his ‘end of philosophy’ theme to be dismissed as a ‘peripheral frill’. Others take the

⁸ Rorty, Richard (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

similar but less charitable line that Rorty is part of a Quinean movement in philosophy that rejected logical empiricism on holistic grounds, with Rorty simply overdramatising his opposition to earlier analytic philosophy as if it were an opposition to philosophy *simpliciter* (MacIntyre, volume 2; Peters, volume 3). The most common and least charitable line, however, is that Rorty is up to his neck in philosophical commitments, and rather implausible ones at that, contrary to his own intentions.

One such charge sometimes levelled at Rorty is that he is a ‘linguistic idealist’ (Farrell, volume 3), since by holding that words can only be compared to more words, and never to the ‘way the world is’, the world becomes a mere ‘projection’ or ‘shadow’ of language. Attributing this position to Rorty is tempting when he is insisting on the ‘ubiquity of language’⁹, especially given that the holism he advocates comes straight from the idealist tradition, and his critical target is almost always metaphysical realism. However, this position is subject to a straightforward objection (Geras, volume 4), which is that the world itself must be differentiated and structured in order to account for the possibility of public language: differentiated and structured sentences must themselves be something in the world, since unlike the ‘ideas’ of the idealists, they are not even candidates for independent existence. But Rorty was never a linguistic idealist, not even inadvertently, and he wrote an essay explaining why, in which he calls the position ‘textualism’, and argues that it rests on the false inference from “‘We can’t think without concepts or talk without words” to “We can’t think or talk except about what has been created by our thought or talk””.¹⁰ Rorty’s pragmatist,

⁹ Rorty, Richard (1982) ‘Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy’, in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. xx.

¹⁰ Rorty, Richard (1982) ‘Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism’, in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 155.

by contrast, rejects any attempt to accord one vocabulary a privileged status, be that the vocabulary of atoms, of ideas, or of vocabularies themselves, and thus sees ‘no interesting difference between tables and texts’.¹¹ Rorty is not making the bizarre ontological claim that there are only vocabularies, then, but is rather saying that since we can only understand the world in terms of some vocabulary or another, and hence cannot compare our vocabularies to the world in abstraction from our vocabularies, we should reject the idea of a privileged vocabulary which does maximal justice to the ‘way the world is’ as an illusion.

Rorty is not rejecting the world in favour of language, then, but rather rejecting the idea of a privileged or best way of describing the world. This is clear from the fact that in rejecting the representationalist model of how our words relate to the world, he does not thereby deny that our words relate to the world at all, but rather insists that this relation is strictly causal. According to Rorty’s causal view of the relation between language and the world, the world can ‘cause us to hold beliefs’ and can ‘decide the competition between alternative sentences’, but only ‘once we have programmed ourselves with a language’.¹² Once a vocabulary is in place, then, the world causes us to believe some things and not others: there is no need to say that some of our beliefs represent the world better than others. This offers a simple response to the objection (Blackburn, volume 1) that even if there is no uniquely privileged way to map a landscape, there are still better and worse maps, that is, ones which represent the landscape better than others; Rorty can instead say that once a vocabulary is in place, some maps will cause us to respond more effectively to the causal pressures exerted by the landscape.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 153.

This creates another problem for Rorty's position, however, and one that is much more serious than accusations of idealism. The problem is how to square Rorty's insistence that causal pressures 'will be described in different ways at different times and for different purposes, but they are pressures none the less', with his denial that there is a 'way the world is'.¹³ For what else could a causal pressure that exists however we describe it, and indeed, whether or not anybody exists to describe it, possibly be if not a constituent of a mind and language-independent world? Moreover, if Rorty is committed to the existence of such a world, but also denies that we can ever assess the adequacy of our vocabularies for describing it, then it might seem that he is committed to Kant's unknowable world of 'things-in-themselves' (Hall, volume 2, Geras volume 4). And to make matters worse, 'causal pressures' are not Rorty's only language-independent commitment, because he also says that pain is 'nonlinguistic'.¹⁴ It seems that language is perhaps rather less ubiquitous than it at first seemed.

Now Rorty certainly does not want to be committed to Kant's things-in-themselves; he thinks it is one of the most preposterous philosophical positions ever proposed.¹⁵ And on reflection, this commitment cannot be ascribed to him, because to hold that causal pressures and pains are things-in-themselves would be to hold that they have a nature that is unknowable to us, whereas Rorty's view is that it only makes sense to

¹² Rorty, Richard (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 5-6.

¹³ Rorty, Richard (1999) 'Truth without Correspondence to Reality', in his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin, p. 33.

¹⁴ Rorty, Richard (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 88-94; in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty argued that language-users attribute pain to non-language-users on the basis of emotion, which suggests this later commitment to pain as non-linguistic may not be quite what it seems.

talk about the nature of things within some vocabulary or another. Rorty is opposed to the very idea of intrinsicity, of ascribing a nature to something in abstraction from its relations to other things, as can be seen from his career-long opposition to the invocation of intrinsic properties ('qualia') in the philosophy of mind, and also in his extended conception of existentialism: Rorty goes beyond the traditional existentialist claim that human beings are distinctive in not having an essence, by claiming that nothing at all has an essence.¹⁶ So Rorty is not treating causal pressures and pains as unknowable things-in-themselves, but is rather saying that they can be known in any number of different ways, by means of any number of different vocabularies, but that none of these vocabularies has any special attachment to their essential nature, since they have no such nature.

But does this make any sense? If nothing has a nature except as it relates to a vocabulary (and presumably a vocabulary only has a nature as it relates to a causal pressure), then what is being related? Relational existence requires something to be related. With a vocabulary in place, words are causally related to ordinary objects, but if neither the words nor the objects have a nature which predates the vocabulary and can persist through its replacement, then the relation could only be some kind of self-creating spontaneity which brings words and objects into existence. Rorty did actually once hint that 'panrelationism' was the position he had in mind¹⁷, but it requires strange and deep metaphysical commitments; Sartre's existentialist view that human being is a 'nothingness' which gains a transitory nature by relating to the world was

¹⁵ Rorty, Richard (1999) 'A World without Substances or Essences', in his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin, p. 49.

¹⁶ Rorty, Richard (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 361-2.

¹⁷ Rorty, Richard (1999) 'Ethics without Principles', in his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin, p. 70.

never particularly perspicuous, but if the world becomes a nothingness as well, the result is downright mysterious. And in any case, if this is what Rorty has in mind, why does he insist that causal pressures exist however we describe them? Surely if the causal pressures have no nature of their own, then their nature as causal pressures must depend on their relation to a vocabulary. What Rorty says sounds more like the metaphysical realist view that causal pressures do have their own independent nature, moderated perhaps by a little epistemological scepticism to the effect that we could never know we have described their nature entirely accurately, although we can at least know that they are ‘causal pressures’.

If it now seems that we are taking Rorty down roads he would not want to travel, we must ask how else we are to make sense of his position? Perhaps the best option is to return to his metaphilosophy. Central to Rorty’s metaphilosophy is his distinction between the ‘philosophical’ and ‘ordinary’ (or as he sometimes put it, ‘vegetarian’ (Dennett volume 3)) senses of words, with the former understood as Platonic fabrications designed to escape from ‘the context within which discourse is conducted’¹⁸, such that truth in the philosophical sense is something unattainable in principle, something not only inexpressible in the vocabulary of current science, but inexpressible in the vocabulary of the science of our most advanced descendants. Rorty’s metaphilosophical proposal is that we abandon philosophical senses and make do with only ordinary senses. Viewed in this light, then, we can interpret him as saying that ordinary, vocabulary-bound talk about causal pressures and pains is unproblematic, but that we must not fall into the philosophical trap of talking about causal pressures, or anything else, independently of some vocabulary or another.

Specifically, we must resist any need we might feel to invoke the notion of representation to explain why current vocabularies allow us to cope with our environment more effectively than past ones did (c.f. Blackburn, Vaden House, volume 1; Skinner, Bernstein, volume 2; Salem-Wiseman, volume 3). On this interpretation, then, Rorty is not saying anything about the essence or lack-thereof of a vocabulary-independent world, but is rather suggesting that we stop talking about a vocabulary-independent world.

The problem with this response, however, is that Rorty's headline position that there is no 'way the world is' is clearly intended in the philosophical sense. In the ordinary sense, there obviously is a way the world is: my mouse currently being placed to the right of my computer is part of the way the world is. Moreover, in the ordinary sense, there is nothing wrong with talking about representation: some maps represent landscapes better than others, and the sentence 'my mouse is placed to the right of my computer' more accurately represents the world than a sentence saying it is on the left. When Rorty objects to representationalism, he is not objecting to these 'vegetarian' ways of talking, but is rather objecting to the philosophical idea that vocabularies as a whole bear a representational relationship to the world, such that some vocabularies (e.g. that of mediaeval science) represent the 'way the world is' better than others (e.g. that of contemporary science). When he says that language bears a strictly causal relation to the world, then, he must also be talking in the philosophical sense, since this is meant to present an alternative to representationalism. Moreover, Rorty says that causal pressures exist whatever vocabulary is employed to talk about them, which clearly takes us outside of the ordinary-sense discourse of our

¹⁸ Rorty, Richard (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

own vocabulary: he cannot simply be saying that causal pressures are ordinarily spoken of as if they were vocabulary-independent, for instance.

It seems, then, that the need to abandon philosophical senses is something Rorty preaches but does not practice, and this might be considered a general failing of his, as for instance when he urges liberal ironists not to redescribe others in such a way as to exclude and humiliate them, but then redescribes his opponents as ‘metaphysicians’ in order to do precisely this (Young, volume 4). The problem is not simply that Rorty is urging us to stop engaging in talk about a vocabulary-independent world, whilst he himself continues to talk this way. Such a situation might be unavoidable, as for instance mentioning the supernatural would be practically unavoidable if you wanted to urge people to stop talking about the supernatural. Rather, the problem is that Rorty wants to deny that there is any vocabulary-independent world, and this is a fully blown philosophical claim even by his own criterion of ‘philosophical’: it steps outside of our ordinary talk about what we take to be a vocabulary-independent world. Now someone who wanted to persuade us to stop talking about the supernatural might also deny that the supernatural exists, of course, since the non-existence of something is an excellent reason to stop talking about it, but no parallel problem would arise here, since this denial would not itself be a supernatural claim. But Rorty’s denial that there is a ‘way the world is’ is itself a philosophical claim, despite the fact that the claim is supposed to persuade us of the futility of making philosophical claims. So Rorty has a problem; it seems that he simply cannot leave ordinary language alone, despite his repeated recommendations that others do so (Phillips, volume 2). And perhaps this is because he himself is obsessed with the very epistemological tradition

he wants us to forget about (Losonsky, Devitt, volume 1; Bernstein, MacIntyre, Dworkin, volume 2; Peters, volume 3).

The best objection to Rorty along these lines was originally developed by Hilary Putnam (volume 3), but presented in its most compelling form by Ronald Dworkin (volume 2; see also Kirk, volume 2). The objection is that Rorty adopts an impossible stance: if, as he advises, we restrict ourselves to ordinary senses and do not try to step outside of our own vocabulary, then that vocabulary will assure us that there is indeed a way the world is, namely the world described by common sense and science. But this then precludes Rorty from telling us, from a philosophical viewpoint, that there is no 'way the world is'. In short, Rorty cannot both reject the philosophical stance and speak from it.

Now Rorty did respond to this objection explicitly, albeit more perfunctorily than might have been hoped, by saying that, 'my strategy for escaping the self-referential difficulties into which "the Relativist" [as Putnam labels Rorty] keeps getting himself is to move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics, from claims to knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try'.¹⁹ The suggestion, then, is that Rorty is not speaking as a philosopher when he denies that there is a 'way the world is', but rather as a social reformer who thinks that society would be better off if we all believed that there is no 'way the world is'. The problem with this response, however, is that it seems to remove all the argumentative weight from Rorty's position; his rejection of the 'way the world is' can no longer be based on his holism, nominalism, and verificationism, for these are

all philosophical positions. All it can consistently be based on is the anticipated social benefits of everyone coming to believe that there is no ‘way the world is’. But Rorty offers no empirical evidence for believing that there would be any such benefits, and so since he cannot fall back on philosophical argumentation, it seems that adopting the stance of the social reformer leaves him with nothing more than an unargued hunch.

But maybe this is too quick: even if Rorty does distance himself from the philosophical tradition to maintain consistency, he still has a historical story to back up his position. According to this story, philosophy originated in the attempt to use representationalism to provide foundations for scientific knowledge, but the attempt faltered upon insoluble problems, it proved to be redundant in any case, since science established its current place in culture without help from philosophy, and it was eventually undermined by the holism of Sellars and Quine. Now if we take Rorty’s ‘social standpoint’ response seriously, in order to avoid Putnam and Dworkin’s complaint, then we could interpret Rorty’s position as not an endorsement of the philosophy of language of Quine and Sellars, but rather as the suggestion that Quine and Sellars would be a good place to leave philosophy at rest, on the grounds that since their holism undermined the last constructive programme in philosophy, and such programmes have had a conspicuous lack of success in achieving what is now an obsolete goal, there is no good reason to restart philosophy with a new constructive programme. This may seem far-fetched as an interpretation of Rorty, since he argued for philosophical positions influenced by Quine and Sellars throughout his career, but there are occasions when he seems to suggest that this is exactly what he had in mind.

¹⁹ Rorty, Richard (1998) ‘Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace’, in his *Truth and Progress*:

One such occasion was when he ceded that John McDowell's position in *Mind and World* provides a way of rehabilitating empiricist philosophy, but objected that enacting such a rehabilitation was unmotivated and would be counterproductive.²⁰ This suggests that he did not think Quine and Sellars were unanswerable, only that they were better left unanswered.

If this is right, then perhaps Susan Haack (volume 2) is also right that the philosophical argumentation Rorty engaged in was, 'a ploy to persuade others less enlightened than himself by playing the game by their rules', and that as such, he was a 'cynic'.²¹ However, if Rorty did defend holism and 'causal pressures', whilst denying that there is a 'way the world is', solely because he thought it was useful to do so, then although his position may be consistent, it is argumentatively light. For almost all philosophers think that philosophy has plenty of goals apart from epistemological ones, and even if we grant that philosophy has not achieved these particular epistemological goals in the past, Rorty cannot, without falling back on philosophical arguments, rule out the possibility that it will do so in the future. Moreover, the claim that these goals are not desirable receives little support from Rorty's historical story; he has philosophical arguments for why these goals are unattainable in principle, but he cannot rely on these from a purely social standpoint.

Philosophical Papers, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 57.

²⁰ Rorty, Richard (1998) 'The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell's Version of Empiricism', in his *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 150. See also Rorty's response to Brandom (Brandom, volume 1): Rorty, Richard (2000) 'Response to Robert Brandom', in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and his Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 183-90 (see esp. p. 185).

²¹ Haack, volume 2; this assessment does not sit easily with the anecdotal evidence about Rorty's attitude to intellectual life from those who knew him personally (see Metcalf, volume 1).

I can sum up the results of the preceding discussion by saying that there are at least two ways to make sense of Rorty's position, namely by reading him as a philosopher or as a metaphilosopher. If we read him as a philosopher, then he is committed to a form of panrelationism, and his metaphilosophy is just a way of dramatising his opposition to pre-Quinean philosophy. If we read him as a metaphilosopher, then he does not hold a philosophical position, but he nevertheless argues, cynically perhaps, for a philosophical position that makes constructive work seem futile, in order to bring about the social benefits of an end to philosophy. Neither of these interpretations are easy to square with everything, or even most, of what Rorty wrote: read as a philosopher, the metaphilosophical themes which predominate in his work are an omnipresent anomaly, but read as a metaphilosopher, the conviction with which he defends philosophical positions seems psychologically implausible. So what is it to be: philosopher or metaphilosopher?

For myself, I have no doubt that Rorty intended to be first and foremost a metaphilosopher, whether or not he always managed to consistently maintain that stance. Does this mean that he was a cynic? He was a self-professed ironist and pragmatist, and as such, he thought that all vocabularies were both thoroughly contingent and justified only on account of their usefulness. Considered in this light, his advocacy of certain philosophical vocabularies can hardly be called cynical, for he was not sneering at his opponents by putting forward positions as true when he did not believe them himself. Granted he did not think Quinean holism was objectively true, but he did not think anything else was either, and he did at least think that Quinean holism had a certain job-specific usefulness, in that it might help bring about an end to philosophy. This justified him in hermeneutically engaging his opponents

on their own terms, even if his ultimate goal was the still greater usefulness of abandoning all philosophical commitment. Given Rorty's pragmatism and irony, then, his position can be rendered consistent on a metaphilosophical interpretation, although once all the philosophical argumentation drops out, you have to ask yourself whether he has any right to make pragmatism and irony the basis of his thinking; perhaps Putnam and Dworkin's problem of stance enters here through the back door. But even if Rorty did inconsistently employ philosophical reasoning to reach his conclusions, his central conclusion, that people would be better off forgetting about the objective truth and concentrating on what it is useful for them to believe, is such a powerful and original suggestion for wide-reaching social reform, that perhaps it is quite capable of standing on its own. If we are leaving argument aside, however, then it seems to me that far from philosophy being the regressive area of culture which upholds the archaic idea of an objective truth, it will instead be the only credible dissenting voice when science comes to announce the objective truth about the world; philosophers like Rorty will provide that voice.