RORTY AND THE MIRROR OF NATURE

Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

By JAMES TARTAGLIA

CHAPTER 1:

RORTY

> It is a miserable story: man seeks a principle through which he can despise men - he invents a world so as to be able to slander and bespatter this world: in reality, he reaches every time for nothingness and construes nothingness as 'God,' as 'truth,' and in any case as judge and condemner of *this* state of being.
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> Friedrich Nietzsche, 1888
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> (Nietzsche 1967: 253)

Overview: Philosophy and Truth

It is sometimes said as a criticism of someone's views that they 'cannot see the wood for the trees', meaning that they have focused so narrowly on a particular issue that they have failed to see the significance of that issue within a wider context. This is certainly not a criticism ever likely to be levelled at Richard Rorty, philosophy's self-professed specialist in 'great big pictures' (Rorty 1982: xl), whose frame of reference is more likely to be the entire history of western thought than the latest hot topic of debate within the professional journals. That is not to say that Rorty does not go in amongst the trees to debate the fine detail of particular philosophical positions. On the contrary, that he has done so consistently throughout his career is what provides his work with its content and power.

Nevertheless, whenever Rorty takes sides in philosophical debates, he is sure to have one eye securely fixed on a grand narrative that contextualizes the debate for him, and which provides the motivation for his continual efforts at 'breaking the crust of convention' (379), at shaking up received views in the hope of instigating new and more fruitful lines of inquiry. The two received views he has done the most to challenge are, characteristically enough, amongst the biggest themes available to a philosopher: philosophy itself and truth. These themes are deeply connected within Rorty's thought, and by beginning with an overview of what he has to say about them, we can approach *Philosophy and Mirror of Nature* (henceforth PMN) as Rorty approaches philosophy: with an eye to the big picture.

Rorty wants to undermine the confidence philosophers have in their subject as an autonomous discipline with its own subject-matter and its own methodology for dealing with that subject matter. Unlike history, geology, biology, and a whole host of other standard academic subjects, Rorty thinks that philosophy is deeply suspect. On a fairly neutral conception of the subject, philosophy studies our most basic and general ways of understanding the world by attempting to overcome perennial problems that can arise whenever those ways of understanding are reflected upon. The philosopher investigates the nature of mind, knowledge, and time, to take some prime examples, but does so in full generality, as opposed to investigating minds of particular people, instances of knowledge, or historical eras. Since philosophy is a problem-based subject, the way into these investigations is to address problems for understanding the world in such terms, problems like finding a place for minds alongside physical objects, or securing human claims to knowledge from sceptical challenges, or explaining the elusiveness of the temporal present. Throughout the long history of the subject, philosophers have developed methods for solving these problems, or at least in the hope of making progress towards solutions. One of the most complex and thorough methods ever developed was that of Immanuel Kant, a method which Kant hoped would place philosophy on the ‘secure path of a science’ (Kant 1933: Bxiv). This is a phrase Rorty loves to quote, for it encapsulates everything he does not want for philosophy. Rorty’s aim, in stark contrast to Kant’s, is to keep philosophy well away from the ‘secure path of a science’.

Kant’s ambition for philosophy to become a scientific enterprise has resurfaced in all the main philosophical movements since his time, and it manifests itself as strongly as ever in the highly specialised work which predominates in philosophy today, at least in the English speaking world. Rorty is against this sort of technical, professionalized philosophy not because he thinks there are better ways of making progress on the central problems of philosophy. Rather, he is against it because he thinks progress in philosophy is impossible, and that a scientific approach obscures this. For Rorty, the ‘perennial problems’ I mentioned above are little more than historical aberrations, outdated ways of thinking which it is a mistake to perpetuate. Philosophical problems are to be ignored. They are to be put aside and forgotten rather than solved, just as problems which interested mediaeval scholars, such as how best to understand the nature of angels, were never solved, only forgotten. While philosophy remains on the ‘secure path of a science’, however, Rorty thinks it will be able to continually renew itself. The old problems will be forever recycled in new formulations, which will in turn spin off technical side-issues that only specialists can debate. As the technicality increases, encouraged by the dream of piecemeal scientific progress, philosophical research becomes increasingly detached from the intuitive problems that first attracted its practitioners, and increasingly irrelevant to the rest of culture. And the more philosophers are required to specialise to understand the latest research, the less likely they are to have the synoptic and historical vision required to question their own research programmes and recognise old debates resurfacing in contemporary jargon. In short, once on the ‘secure path of a science’, Rorty thinks that the degeneration of philosophy is self-perpetuating. And that is why he wants to break ‘the crust of convention’, to disrupt ‘normal’ philosophical activity.

These are views *on* philosophy rather than *in* philosophy, and hence Rorty’s work is distinctive in being primarily metaphilosophical rather than philosophical, where a metaphilosophical position is a position on the nature of philosophy, rather than on the nature of mind or knowledge or some other topic in philosophy. Rorty does have views *in* philosophy too - as already mentioned, he goes in amongst the trees as well as surveying the woods - but his philosophical views are generally adopted for metaphilosophical purposes, namely to make traditional lines of philosophical inquiry appear uninteresting, and thereby to persuade conventional philosophers to try something new. Rorty is not proposing a view of the nature of philosophy in any conventional sense, however, since he denies that philosophy has any autonomous subject-matter, and hence that it has any specific nature. This is what led him to say that ‘“the nature and function of philosophy" is a pseudo-topic' (Rorty 1998: 317), on the face of it, a rather surprising denouncement of metaphilosophy from the man widely regarded as its premier exponent. But consider the parallel case of eliminative materialism, the view that minds do not exist. If we insisted on a narrow conception of 'philosophy of mind', we might deny that this is a view in the philosophy of mind. But it would be misleading to do so. Likewise, it would be misleading to deny that Rorty holds views on the nature of philosophy. He has a metaphilosophy, just a negative one.

It is, in fact, multiply negative. As Donald Davidson has succinctly put it, 'Rorty sees the history of Western philosophy as a confused and victorless battle between unintelligible scepticism and lame attempts to answer it.' (Davidson 1990: 137). It is this view of the history of the subject which lies behind Rorty's scepticism about normal philosophical research: he thinks philosophy was designed for dubious purposes, and that it has had no success in fulfilling those purposes anyway, despite trying for a very long time. History provides Rorty with a tool for dismantling philosophy and a motivation for wanting to do so. By showing the questionable origins of issues and ideas now taken for granted, he hopes to undermine the confidence of philosophers inclined to think of their work as akin to science, and hence as largely ahistorical. But Rorty has at times gone much further than just trying to inject some historical circumspection into philosophy to keep it off the 'secure path of a science': he has suggested that even philosophers of his own disruptive ilk should aim to work themselves out of a job (Rorty 1991b: 86), and has expressed the hope that his brand of 'antiphilosophy' might lead to a 'post-Philosophical culture' (Rorty 1982: xl). This sounds like a call to bring philosophy to an end once and for all. That, however, is not necessarily the idea. What he certainly wants to end is philosophy-as-we-know-it, or as he used to say, Philosophy (with a capital ‘P’). Rorty fully expects future generations to read the classic works of philosophy such as Descartes’ *Meditations* and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. He also expects the people who specialise in reading these texts to call themselves ‘philosophers’. Nevertheless, he hopes that in the future, these texts will no longer be read in the same spirit, will no longer be taken literally. Instead, philosophy will be thought of as a vaguely demarcated genre of literature, and nobody will think of this genre as dealing with real and important problems, much less as contributing to an ongoing quest to unravel the fundamental enigmas of human existence. He wants the great texts of philosophy to be thought of as just great texts.

Now if it were not for the connection between philosophy and truth, the other major theme in Rorty’s work, then this negative metaphilosophy might easily be dismissed. After all, if the problem is that philosophy cannot make any progress, then it is not obvious why turning it into a form of literary study which does not even aim at making progress should have any great significance. Nor is it obvious that this transformation would make philosophy more interesting, as Rorty thinks, rather than simply more accessible. But the connection Rorty makes between philosophy and truth provides his attacks on philosophy with greater urgency than if he were simply calling out for members of his profession to stop deluding themselves. The connection is that Rorty sees philosophy as the last respectable bastion of a certain conception of truth, one which he thinks is holding back progress in intellectual life. He thinks that the abandonment of this conception of truth is required for the complete secularisation of human thought, and that a transformation in philosophy might, in the long run, have a positive role to play in this much wider transformation.

The conception of truth in question here is that of objective truth, in the literal sense of a truth that that comes from objects, by contrast with the subjective truth which sentences such as ‘I like liquorice’ express: this may be true when I say it, but false when you do, indicating that its truth depends as much on the subject (me or you) as the object (liquorice).[1] Now one traditional way of understanding objective truth is in terms of a relation of correspondence holding between our language and the world. So for instance, a sentence like ‘some roses are red’ can be used to say something objectively true, according to this view, because it is able to relate in the right sort of way - able to correspond - to certain real objects, i.e. real red roses. Of course, objective truths do not always relate so neatly to physical objects - consider the sentence ‘house price inflation is getting out of control’ - but even a sentence of this sort can be thought of as corresponding to some rather messier portion of reality, the ‘object’ of the sentence in an extended sense of ‘object’, which in this example might incorporate banks, houses, and people in some complex way. This idea of objective truth, then, may be summed up as the idea that whether or not the things we say, think or write are true, depends on whether or not they correspond to how the world really is.

This idea of objective truth may sound like an innocuous piece of common sense, as many philosophers and the vast majority of non-philosophers still think that it is, but Rorty thinks it is anything but innocuous. On his view, it is a residue of religious thought hidden deep down within our ordinary ways of thinking, a residue which philosophy has unwittingly helped to perpetuate.

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[1] This is the sense in which I shall use ‘objective truth’ throughout this book. Rorty sometimes confuses matters by talking as if he has no problem with objective truth, but in such cases he means truth against a backdrop of contingent consensus or linguistic ‘programming’ (see Chapters 9 and 10 below).

The explanation of how this situation came about, according to Rorty, is to be found in the Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth century.

Kant proposed as a motto for this movement: ‘Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding!’ (Kant 1996: 17), since the guiding idea was to cast off the authority of the church, the crown, and ancient texts, and to instead rely upon human reason for understanding the world. Rather than believing God had already revealed the truth through certain institutions, people should instead try to work the truth out for themselves by means of science and philosophy. These ideas made an unprecedented contribution to the secularisation of culture, but did not go far enough according to Rorty, for an element of religious thought remained that has prevented the secularisation process from reaching completion. This is because the notion of objective truth was left untouched. Belief in divine guidance was thereby simply displaced rather than discarded, for truth continued to be thought of as something forced upon us by a non-human agency. Faith in God was gradually transformed into faith in science, because with the religious conception of truth intact, the most we could do was progress from believing that the truth is dictated by God, to believing that the truth is dictated by an independent, objective world, i.e. by the ‘way the world is’ (Goodman 1972).

Rorty took this idea from Nietzsche, but he has long since made it his own. To see the force of it, consider how naturally acceptance of a ‘way the world is’ leads into the supposition that there must be a single form of description that can capture all of reality, i.e. a maximally correct description of ‘the way the world is’. In the present age, science is the obvious place to look for such a description, and scientifically minded people do indeed often assume that the progress of science is bringing us ever closer to the final truth about the universe, to what some physicists call ‘a theory of everything’. Thinking this way only requires extending the common-sense view of progress in science as consisting in the production of ever more accurate descriptions of reality. The only further assumption needed is that this process has an end point. Now according to Rorty, the fact that we are so inclined to think this way is the ‘legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own’ (Rorty 1989: 5). This is Rorty’s explanation of why we so readily suppose that there must be one privileged description of the world. And Rorty is surely right to suppose that *some* explanation is needed of why it is so natural for us to think this way, given that human beings have developed many different ways of describing the world, and that there is no barrier to our developing many more. Of course, some ways of describing the world are much more useful than others, and scientific descriptions have proved extremely useful in the development of new technologies. But the question remains of why we should seek to explain differences in usefulness with the notion of objective truth. Rorty thinks there is no good reason, only an historical explanation.

A striking consequence of this view is that to be ‘consistent’ atheists (Rorty 1998: 62), people need to give up on realism, that is, on the belief that reality has its own intrinsic nature independently of how we describe or experience it, and about which there is an objective truth to discover. With this in mind, Rorty has put a new spin on the old atheist jibe that religious belief stems from a longing for permanent parental guidance: ‘A lot of people now find belief in God immature, and eventually a lot of people may find realism immature’ (Fosl 1999: 40). A culture that matures to the point of finally giving up on realism would, he thinks, realise that ‘what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right' (Rorty 1982: 166). In such a culture, the authority of non-human objectivity would be replaced by human solidarity, and forms of description would not be ranked according to their supposed ability to correspond to the true nature of reality, only according to their usefulness, something which varies from context to context. This could have far-reaching consequences. For example, it would remove any reason for thinking that 'quarks and human rights differ in "ontological status"' (Rorty 1998: 8), that the former are more real than the latter. Thus liberated, people would realise that there may be as much or more reason to believe in human rights than fundamental physical particles, since neither sort of belief is forced upon us.

Rorty's Career

These themes of philosophy and objective truth run throughout and motivate Rorty's many and diverse writings. They are intimately connected, for Rorty sees philosophy as the guardian of objective truth: the academic subject which sets out to determine what objective truth is, and under which circumstances we can have access to it. Without objective truth and the cluster of ideas which revolve around it, Rorty does not think that philosophy as traditionally conceived makes any sense. So his views on truth clearly provide a motivation for his metaphilosophical agenda. Nevertheless, for the purposes of assessing Rorty's thought, it is his metaphilosophy that must take priority, since his views on truth derive from his reading of the history of philosophy, and from certain arguments within that history. As Rorty himself has often insisted, his case for breaking with the philosophical tradition stands on its own merits, regardless of the wider cultural benefits he hopes for from the abandonment of objective truth (Rorty 1991b: 6). And that is why PMN occupies such a crucial position within Rorty's work, for it is in this book that Rorty presents his case against traditional philosophy, a case which has not substantially moved on since then, though Rorty himself has. If that case is flawed, then philosophers may safely carry on with business as usual, ignoring Rorty's subsequent attempts to get to grips with life after objective truth. On the other hand, if that case can be sustained, then carrying on with business as usual might be a waste of time, or worse still, an actual hindrance to wider intellectual progress.

On its publication in 1979, PMN had an impact that was immediate and dramatic, and it is still at the vanguard of debate today, though the full extent of its influence is disguised by the perfectly understandable tendency - given the way Rorty writes - for philosophers to discuss the figures he discusses in the way he discusses them, rather than to discuss Rorty himself. PMN is a large-scale, uncompromising, occasionally venomous, and extremely ambitious book, with a long and detailed plot that works its way inexorably towards conclusions of the most substantial kind. It is the hub of Rorty's most influential ideas, and contrary to a popular misconception which Rorty has encouraged, his position has hardly changed at all since he wrote it. He did go on to widen his interests, discuss new figures, and talk more about politics, but aside from the politics, there is very little in his subsequent work which was not prefigured in PMN. Moreover, there are a number of surprising and highly original positions buried deep within PMN which have hardly seen the light of day, probably because Parts One and Two can be extremely hard going in places, unlike the far more accessible and better known Part Three.

What makes PMN unique is that it was not intended as a constructive contribution to philosophy at all, but rather as an attack on it. If it were not for PMN, Rorty might just be thought of as continuing in a tradition of radical philosophers who reject objective truth, one which goes back to Protagoras, who claimed that ‘man is the measure of all things’. But by turning philosophy against itself, by employing analytic methods to undermine analytic philosophy, and by using the history of philosophy as an argument for the discontinuation of that history, Rorty challenged objective truth in a far more fundamental way: by challenging the wisdom of continuing to debate topics like truth.

The conclusions of PMN placed Rorty on a trajectory away from the philosophy departments and towards his current life as a professor of comparative literature. The fact that he was prepared to make such a move generates interest in his biography: what sort of philosopher ends up turning against philosophy? Well, one uncharitable answer that you often hear is: a philosopher who failed to make any progress on philosophical problems, and so set out to show that no-one else could either. This line came out recently in response to a review Rorty wrote of a book on the history of analytic philosophy (Rorty 2005). Its author, Scott Soames, concluded by celebrating the fact that philosophy ‘has become a highly organised discipline, done by specialists primarily for other specialists’, or as he might as well have said, that philosophy is now on the ‘secure path of a science’. No prizes, then, for guessing the pitch of Rorty’s review. In response, Soames dismissed Rorty’s ‘weary scepticism’ as ‘not so much the result of Olympian detachment as the disappointment of a true believer’(Soames 2005)[2], echoing Richard Bernstein’s original charge that,

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[2] Soames said this in response to a very high-handed review, in which Rorty is apparently amused that anyone would consider vagueness an important topic of debate, neglecting the fact that he himself once did; see his discussion of Peirce on vagueness in ‘Pragmatism, Categories, and Language’ (Rorty 1961a).

> There seems to be something almost oedipal - a form of patricide - in Rorty's obsessive attacks on the father figures of philosophy and metaphysics. It is the discourse of a one time 'true believer' who has lost his faith.
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> (Bernstein 1991: 251)

A more enlightening version of this charge, however, came from Jürgen Habermas:

> [Rorty's] program for a philosophy that is to do away with all philosophy seems to spring more from the melancholy of a disappointed metaphysician ... than from the self-criticism of an enlightened analytic philosopher.
>
> (Habermas 2000: 32)

This is more enlightening because if Rorty ever was a 'true believer', it seems to have been long before he joined the analytic establishment.

Richard McKay Rorty was born in New York City on October 4th, 1931, an only child born into a highly intellectual and politically active environment. His parents were well-known left-wing writers, advocates of Trotsky's socialism and vocal opponents of Stalin, who both wrote books and articles on social reform, and whose house was a melting pot of left-wing ideas, visited by a constant stream of unionists and organisers, philosophers and poets. The philosophical hero of the house was John Dewey, with whom the family had loose connections. Dewey was one of the founders of Pragmatism, American's only home-grown philosophy, and was also a socially committed public intellectual, who Rorty remembers as 'the dominant intellectual figure in

America in my youth ... often called the philosopher of democracy, of the New Deal, of the American democratic intellectuals' (Borradori 1994: 105). This combination meshed perfectly with his parents' deep patriotism and political ethos. And the esteem in which Dewey was held clearly had a big influence on the young Rorty, since Dewey is to this day his main inspiration: he describes himself as a follower of Dewey (Rorty 1991a: 211), many of his central ideas are lifted directly from Dewey, and his career progression from academic philosophy into the public sphere has followed closely in Dewey's footsteps. Even 'breaking the crust of convention', Rorty's ever-present motivation, is a quote from Dewey.[3]

At the age of fifteen, Rorty was taken out of school and enrolled at a college for precocious youngsters at the University of Chicago - Dewey's old university - thereby finding himself a very young undergraduate in one of the most important philosophy departments of the time, the one where Rudolph Carnap was busy making logical positivism the mainstream philosophical approach in America. As Rorty was later to see it, logical positivists like Carnap who had fled Nazi Germany 'simply took over American philosophy departments' (Borradori 1994: 109), replacing what they regarded as the naïve, imprecise, and provincial tradition of American Pragmatism with a scientific approach to philosophical problems. This way of putting it, which is far from isolated within his writings, makes it hard to avoid the suspicion of a nationalistic motivation for Rorty's metaphilosophical agenda, but is nevertheless probably best regarded as a superimposition from his later political views. In any case, Rorty also says that he went along with the prevailing disdain felt for Pragmatists like Dewey as a form of ‘adolescent revolt’ (Rorty 1999: 9), and threw himself into traditional metaphysics: this, if anything, was his period as a ‘true believer’.

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[3] Despite being his favourite Dewey quote, Rorty never provides the reference. The passage I think he has in mind is when Dewey wrote, 'The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. The process is art' (Dewey 1954: 183). But that is art, not philosophy. Another reference I found was to breaking 'the crust of the cake of custom' (Dewey 1922: 170), but again Dewey was not talking about philosophy. However, back in 1967 (Rorty 1967a: 36) Rorty did refer to Friedrich Waismann saying that 'What is characteristic of philosophy is the

The philosopher who dominated Chicago at the time was not Carnap, but Richard McKeon, a somewhat unique figure for the distinctively metaphilosophical and historical approach he took to the subject, seeking to provide taxonomies of the different ways of thinking that motivate philosophical views, rather than confronting those views directly (see McKeon 1990). This presence must have exerted its influence, but Rorty soon honed in on the most historically minded of all philosophers, Hegel; when he stayed on at Chicago for an MA, he wrote his thesis on the Hegelian philosopher A.N. Whitehead, supervised by an ex-student of Whitehead’s, Charles Hartshorne. It was Whitehead who said that ‘The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato’ (Whitehead 1978: 39; Rorty 1999: xviii), a metaphilosophical position entirely in keeping with Rorty’s own, though Whitehead’s main concern, like Hartshorne’s, was metaphysics of the most uncompromising variety. In the Preface to PMN, Rorty says of Carnap, McKeon and Hartshorne, three philosophers who could hardly have been much more different, that he ‘treated them all as saying the same thing: that a “philosophical problem” was a product of the unconscious adoption of assumptions ... which were to be questioned before the problem itself was taken seriously’ (xiii). That he was able to hear them all this way suggests a distinctively Rortian approach to philosophy right from the start.

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piercing of that dead crust of tradition and convention, the breaking of those fetters which bind us to inherited

Rorty went to Yale for his Ph.D., where he continued to work on Whitehead. After his doctorate, there followed two years in the army (not through choice), and then three years at Wellersley College, before Rorty moved to Princeton University in 1961, where he was to stay for over twenty years. Any perception of Rorty as a regular analytic philosopher during this first period of his career, however, one who was later to 'lose his faith' or become 'disappointed', would require the support of some very selective quotation from what he was actually writing. The first sentence of his first published paper is:

> Pragmatism is getting respectable again.
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> (Rorty 1961a: 197)

Wishful thinking at the time, perhaps, but Rorty was eventually do more than anyone to raise the profile of pragmatism. The paper goes on to align pragmatism with the therapeutic approach to philosophy of Wittengenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, just as he later did in PMN. His second paper, a review article called 'Recent Metaphilosophy', finds Rorty struggling to systematise metaphilosophical approaches, again showing quite clearly where his interests already lay.

Rorty first made his name with a 1965 paper called 'Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories', in which he argued that it was a consequence of physicalism (a.k.a. materialism[4]) -

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preconceptions, so as to attain a new and broader way of looking at things' (Waismann 1956: 483).

[4] Some philosophers makes a distinction between 'materialism' and 'physicalism', but Rorty does not. I prefer 'physicalism' (nobody believes that only matter exists anymore), and hence will use that term except when referring

the view that everything which exists is physical - that mental sensations such as pains do not in fact exist. The term 'Eliminative Materialism' was coined to describe Rorty's position (Cornman 1968), but to the extent that this represented a regular contribution to analytic philosophy of mind, it was the contribution of easily its most controversial position. Constructive philosophers do still debate the pros and cons of various versions of eliminativism, but for Rorty, this seems rather to have been a stage on the way to the wholesale elimination of traditional philosophical problems undertaken in PMN, a useful tactic to be later applied across the board.

Rorty's work took on its more familiar shape in the seventies, in a series of classic papers eventually collected together as *Consequences of Pragmatism*. The collection begins in 1972 with 'The World Well Lost', which presents a complex argument, generated in typical Rortian style by weaving together various ideas from Quine, Sellars, and in particular Davidson, and which has 'Dewey's "naturalised" version of Hegelian historicism' emerging victorious at the other end. The hub of the paper is that given Davidson's argument for the impossibility of comparing radically different ways of conceptualising the world, an argument we shall examine in Chapter 8, there can be no prospect of assessing the accuracy of our own way of conceptualising the world by seeing how it measures up to 'the world itself'. This realist notion of the world is an 'obsession rather than an intuition', and hence is the 'world well lost' of the title. By this point in Rorty's career, his metaphilosophical preoccupations may not have changed very much, but he now had a plan: to deconstruct analytic philosophy with its own arguments.

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to 'eliminative materialism' (nobody ever says 'eliminative physicalism'), or archaic positions, or when commenting on quotations about 'materialism'.

As Dewey and continental philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida increasingly came to the forefront of his work, Rorty felt himself becoming estranged from the analytic establishment. This rift became public in 1979, when Rorty was the President of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association at a time when the organisation was in a state of crisis. The crisis had built up because various types of non-analytic philosophers - pragmatists, idealists, continental philosophers, etc. - felt their careers had been sidelined by the dominance of analytic philosophy, thus depriving them of research funding and keeping them out of top jobs and journals. Organising themselves as the 'Pluralists', they flooded the APA elections, and voted in their own candidates to top positions, despite none of these candidates having been nominated by the official committee. The 'Analysts' looked to Rorty to overthrow the result, on the grounds that many of the votes had been illegally cast. Rorty refused.

1979 was also the year that PMN was published. Apart from its impact in philosophy, it became hugely influential in the humanities generally. This seems to have been a genuine surprise to Rorty, since the book was aimed squarely at professional philosophers. Nevertheless, its conclusions were plain enough for all to see, and appeared to legitimise new directions being taken in critical theory and literary, sociological and cultural studies, directions already taken by continental thinkers like Derrida and Foucault. By breaking down the hegemony of knowledge which natural science and philosophy had enjoyed over social science and literature, and by seeking to undermine any notion of a universal, atemporal truth, Rorty's book seemed to provide a theoretical sanction for the exploration of traditionally philosophical themes such as freedom, truth and power within the context of literature, contemporary culture, history and economics. Thus Rorty came to be seen as the principal English-speaking representative of postmodernism.

In 1982, Rorty moved to the University of Virginia to become a professor of humanities. His interests broadened accordingly, and he began making forays into the public arena with his political, ethical and cultural views. His brand of ‘Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism’ (Rorty 1991a: 197-202), which defended the ‘bourgeois’ liberal institution of a rights-based culture, whilst denying it any ahistorical legitimacy, led to him being denounced in the press as politically naïve, dangerous, or both. These ideas culminated in Rorty’s second major work, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in which he moves effortlessly between his old themes of philosophy and truth, and his new political and cultural ideas, to take in reflections on the novels of George Orwell, Derridean deconstruction, and much else besides. Since then, his career has been split between continued engagements with analytic philosophers, continental philosophers, and theorists of all descriptions, and life as a public intellectual, the world famous ‘Man who Killed Truth’, as he was dubbed in the title of a television documentary.[5] The year 1998 provides a revealing snapshot of this career, for he both moved to his current post in the Department of Comparative Literature at Stanford University, and published two very different books: *Achieving Our Country*, a defence of patriotism, and *Truth and Progress*, a volume of essays engaging recent work by analytic philosophers such as Crispin Wright, John McDowell, and John Searle.

Looking over his career, then, it is hard to see PMN as a product of dissatisfaction or disillusionment. Metaphilosophy, rather than problem-solving, was always Rorty’s game, and this peculiarly singular vision seems to have guided him from the outset. Following that vision consistently, from criticising traditional philosophy to pioneering new approaches, has inevitably left Rorty with an ambiguous reputation amongst analytic philosophers. On the one hand, Rorty's association with postmodernism - though he has now disowned that label (Rorty 1999: 262-277) - and his efforts at breaking down the distinction between philosophy and literature, have understandably fuelled suspicions. On the other hand, philosophers doing serious work on mind and language cannot fail to notice that Rorty's views are very similar to those of his more conventional contemporaries, particularly Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett and Hilary Putnam: if Rorty is to be believed, the only really substantial difference consists in their failure to follow through to his conclusions. Moreover, PMN's challenge has already inspired two of the most interesting constructive efforts of recent philosophy, namely John McDowell's *Mind and World* and Robert Brandom's *Making it Explicit*. So there is circumstantial evidence on both sides. The only way for philosophers to be sure what to make of Rorty, however, is to assess the argument of PMN. If nothing else, he has at least provided an excellent opportunity for metaphilosophical reflection.

The Introduction to PMN

At the beginning of the introduction, Rorty says that philosophy takes itself to deal with 'perennial, eternal problems' (3), problems that characterise the human condition, and which consequently might occur to any person in any era, so long as they were to reflect in the right sort of way. That problems concerning mind and knowledge, which Rorty immediately singles out as the central philosophical problematics, do indeed strike us as perennial and eternal, is a

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[5] 'Richard Rorty: The Man Who Killed Truth', directed by Carole Lochhead, BBC4 (UK television), Tuesday 4

consequence of the root problem with traditional philosophy: that it is ‘an attempt to escape from history’ (9), an attempt to substitute the particularity and happenstance of our lives for a universal and fail-safe understanding of what is going on based on an ahistorical objective truth. This aim conflicts with Rorty’s commitment to historicism, the view that all human activities, including the ways we think, must be understood in terms of the particular historical epoch we find ourselves born into. On Rorty’s view, there is nothing perennial or eternal about the central philosophical problems of mind and knowledge. They are rather a product of a certain period of history, in which a certain conception of mind seemed to provide the best available model for a foundationalist conception of knowledge.

To determine the foundations of knowledge is to determine exactly what it is that allows us to know. So, for instance, what allows me to know that there is a bottle on the table is that I can see it - my vision provides the foundation for that particular item of knowledge. The sense in which philosophy is a foundational discipline, however, is much wider than this, for it is concerned with the general foundations of knowledge, those most basic conditions which underwrite any case of human knowledge. If we could determine these conditions, then we could determine which sort of inquiries generate genuine knowledge, and which do not. Thus philosophy, in Rorty’s view, seeks to play the role of a ‘cultural overseer’ (317), ranking different forms of activity according to their ability to make contact with the objective truth. So, for example, if we take experience as the foundation of knowledge, then we may rank science at the top of the cultural pecking order, astrology at the bottom, and Freudian psychoanalysis somewhere in between. If on the other hand

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we think that reason is more fundamental, as many traditional metaphysicians have, then we may place philosophy above science.

Philosophy sets itself up as foundational, according to Rorty, by seeking to adjudicate claims to knowledge on the basis of a special understanding of the foundations of knowledge, rather as a judge adjudicates claims to innocence on the basis of a special understanding of the law. By determining these conditions, philosophy attempts to ‘eternalize’ our best current understanding of the world, to ‘ground’ it in something that can never be overturned in the future, namely the objective truth. Now in order to adjudicate claims to knowledge, philosophy needed a special expertise, and according to Rorty, found it in the seventeenth century idea of the mind as a repository of representations. Knowledge came to be seen as accurate representation of the world, that is, as the correspondence of a mental representation of the world to the objective truth about the world. Providing a ‘general theory of representation’ became the ‘central concern’ (3) of philosophy, because with such a theory it would be possible to determine exactly when our minds are accurately representing the world, and when they are not. So, for instance, philosophers could determine that science uses the right methods for generating accurate representations of ‘the way the world is’, but that astrology does not.

The mind was able to play the foundational role philosophers required of it, because it was conceived of as something that could be studied nonempirically, that is, by reflection and analysis rather than through experience. This immunised philosophical theories from history, since such theories were not based on observations of the world, which are always changing, but on reasoning about the ways in which we observe the world and come to know things. Rorty thinks that the idea of nonempirical reflection on the way in which we represent the world has dominated philosophy since the seventeenth century, simply changing format from the analysis of mind, to the analysis of language in the twentieth century, with all other issues in metaphysics and epistemology being in some sense spin-offs from this representation-based foundationalist agenda, an agenda which is itself simply a manifestation of the general urge to escape from history.

The particular representationalist direction which philosophy took in the seventeenth century was the result of latching onto and transforming something much older, namely ‘Greek ocular metaphors’, and it is with this historical contingency that Rorty explains the title of his book:

> The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations - some accurate, some not - and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. (12)

The ‘Mirror of Nature’ is the mind, and whether or not reflections in the mirror (i.e. representations in the mind) count as knowledge depends on whether they accurately reflect nature (i.e. correspond to the objective truth about the ‘way the world is’). Philosophy is the nonempirical study of the ‘mirror’, which uses reason to determine the conditions in which the mirror is able to properly reflect nature. In this way, philosophy seeks to be foundational, to determine the conditions which any sort of inquiry would have to meet in order to generate knowledge, the ultimate aim being to put us in touch with the ahistorical objective truth so that we can ‘escape from history’.

One major target of PMN, then, is the foundationalist project of trying to provide a theory of knowledge based on the notion of representation. Rorty's approach will be to reveal the dubious historical motivations which led to the entrenchment of this idea, and to show that recent arguments in analytic philosophy make any such project untenable. In this way, PMN aims to undermine all philosophical work which owes a debt to foundationalism and representationalism, broadly construed. He goes much further than this, however, because he also thinks that very idea of a separate and systematic subject called 'philosophy' is inextricably linked to its original foundationalist motivations. Consequently, he will also aim to discourage attempts to re-start philosophy on a non-foundationalist, non-representationalist basis.

Apart from running through the plot, the other important thing Rorty does in the introduction is introduce his three heroes: Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey. This must have seemed a very provocative list of 'the most important philosophers of our century' (5) in 1979, but thanks to efforts made by Rorty and others at breaking down the divide between analytic philosophers like Wittgenstein and continental philosophers like Heidegger - in Rorty's case by treating them fairly indiscriminately, as he tends to treat all figures from all traditions and eras - Wittgenstein and Heidegger are these days fairly uncontroversial candidates, though the choice of Dewey still looks idiosyncratic. The clearest thing these three philosophers have in common, and hence the clearest reason for Rorty's selection of them - apart from their being, as he once said, 'the most romantic ... the farthest-out, the most prophetic' figures he could find (Nizick & Sanders 1996: 113-4) - is that they are all opposed to representational conceptions of mind and knowledge, that is, to the 'Mirror of Nature' idea. There are many other thematic points of contact, however, especially in the case of Dewey where there is near thematic convergence, but fortunately the argument of PMN can be followed without even a basic understanding of these three major thinkers, only an understanding of certain self-contained arguments within analytic philosophy which can be explained as we go along. Nevertheless, it is good to at least be aware of the basic methodological influence which these philosophers had on the text of PMN.

The influence of Wittgenstein is to be found in Rorty's therapeutic conception of philosophy. In the later phase of Wittgenstein's career, which produced the *Philosophical Investigations*, one of his main methods was to show that 'philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*' (Wittgenstein 1953: §38). The idea was that these problems are generated, and begin to puzzle us, when we isolate ways of talking from the ordinary situations which provide their *raison d'être*. Wittgenstein portrays the philosopher as someone who has entered into an abnormal linguistic practise and is behaving accordingly. So, for instance, he gives the example of a man thinking about the mind-body problem, clutching at his forehead and staring into empty space (ibid.: §412). The confusion he feels is not an appropriate response to a deep problem, according to Wittgenstein, but rather part and parcel of a generally strange way of acting, as the man struggles to devise a way of talking which no real-life situation would ever require of him. The cure, or therapy, is to be reminded of the normal ways of using language which philosophy has deviated from, in order to lead the philosopher away from the linguistic traps laid by the tradition. The *Philosophical Investigations* is full of original analogies, disanalogies, and examples, to draw attention to the strangeness of philosophical language, and thus to persuade philosophers to put it aside. Rorty has his own examples in this vein (esp. 'The Antipodeans'), but on the whole his brand of therapy is 'parasitic': it is based on the arguments of constructive philosophers, which he uses to demonstrate the futility and undesirability of further constructive effort.

The influence of Heidegger is to be found in Rorty's method of historical deconstruction, or as Heidegger put it, 'destruction'. In his most influential work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger warned against an acceptance of philosophical tradition that 'takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence' (Heidegger 1962: 43). This historicist advice is particularly important to Heidegger, since he thinks that the philosophical tradition has covered over and obscured 'the meaning of Being', leading human beings to fundamentally misinterpret their own existence. By 'destroying' the history of philosophy at the key stages which led to this misinterpretation, Heidegger tries to 'appropriate' that history - to give it some contemporary relevance rather than allowing it to become a source of dogma - and to thereby recover 'our first ways of determining the nature of Being' (ibid.: 44), an original understanding of reality which current ideas derive from but distort. There is, then, a negative and a positive aspect to Heidegger's historical agenda: uncovering past errors and recovering what has been lost. As far as the negative agenda goes, Heidegger, like Rorty, targets representationalist conceptions of mind and knowledge, which he thinks result from overemphasising a certain specialised and detached attitude to the world, and thereby overlooking the wider context in which such attitudes arise - a critique which resembles Wittgenstein's to the extent that the activity of philosophising is itself liable to induce this detached attitude. Heidegger, however, also has a positive agenda: to overcome today's technological and manipulative understanding of reality by recovering the ancient Greek ideas from which it derives. Now in many ways, PMN is a very Heideggarian book, since Rorty traces philosophical ideas right back to the ancient Greeks, and his main method is historical deconstruction. A crucial difference, however, is that Rorty is not trying to recover anything from the tradition (see Rorty 1991b: 27-49).

The influence of Dewey is to be found in Rorty's pragmatism. Dewey wanted to enact an 'emancipation' of philosophy from the problematic it had inherited from the tradition, because of doubts about 'the genuineness, under the present conditions of science and social life, of the problems' (Dewey 1917: 5). In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey traced traditional philosophy's lack of practical import, and thus its increasing irrelevance to the wider world, to the Greek idea that 'the office of knowledge is to uncover the antecedently real, rather than, as is the case with our practical judgements, to gain the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise' (Dewey 1930: 20). This separation of knowledge from action, which Dewey explains in terms of the social conditions of ancient times and the influence of religion, led to both the idea of an atemporal, objective truth - an 'antecedently real' - and to a 'spectator theory of knowledge' (ibid.: 26). For Dewey, these ideas had long outlived their social relevance, turning the continued debate of traditional problematics into 'an ingenious dialectic exercised in professorial corners by a few who have retained ancient premises while rejecting their application to the conduct of life' (Dewey 1917: 58). Dewey's pragmatist remedy was to reconnect knowledge and action, so that beliefs would be evaluated by their usefulness within prevailing social circumstances, rather than by objective truth. And this, of course, is Rorty's agenda exactly. Quite apart from inheriting Dewey's overall motivation - as well as his intermediate targets of systematic philosophy, objective truth, and representational accounts of mind and knowledge - the strictly methodological influence of Dewey's pragmatism can be seen from the way in which Rorty evaluates philosophical ideas and distinctions according to their practical import, or lack thereof. Pragmatism can also be seen as a motivating factor for the whole format of PMN, since the use of contemporary analytic arguments was the approach most likely to persuade Rorty's target audience - contemporary analytic philosophers - of his Deweyan agenda.

Obstacles to Understanding *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

There are certain obstacles to a critical reading of PMN: to following the argument, and to doing so without being unduly sceptical or overly sympathetic. It is worth becoming aware of these before we move on.

The first and most obvious obstacle is that PMN makes unusual demands of the reader by drawing together numerous complex positions from throughout the history of philosophy in order to build its argument. Rorty's range of reference is notoriously vast - and daunting - and his presupposition of familiarity with all of these philosophical positions has excluded many interested parties from a first-hand acquaintance with his work: PMN was, after all, aimed at professional philosophers, and few of these can have picked up on every reference which Rorty breezes through. This book should be of help in overcoming the first obstacle.

The second obstacle, which can make readers unduly sceptical about Rorty's history, is the well known fact that his interpretations are very controversial: to get some idea of the extent of this, you need only note that there are scores of articles by Wittgenstein- , Heidegger-, and even Dewey-scholars, all disputing Rorty's interpretations, and that two of the key figures in PMN, W.V.O. Quine and Thomas Kuhn, personally disowned Rorty's use of their work. Now obviously we cannot go into even a representative proportion of these competing interpretations here: we would get bogged down immediately. However, for the purposes of critically engaging with PMN, there is really no need, just so long as Rorty's arguments do not depend on philosopher X or Y putting forward a view, rather than Rorty himself putting forward a view inspired by X or Y. The only time this distinction might be thought to make a difference is when Rorty is engaged in historical deconstruction. However, unlike Heidegger, whose appropriations really do force the words of other philosophers into the mould of Heidegger's own thought, Rorty's interpretations actually tend to be fairly conventional: much as he clearly admires appropriation and 'strong misreading' (Rorty 1982: 151), this is not obviously what he does. What he does do is 'purify' philosophers - leave out the bits he does not like - which can be intensely annoying, but is no great cause for concern. Consequently, there is no need to single Rorty's historical readings out for anything more than standard critical scrutiny, and no warrant for anything more than ordinary, healthy scepticism.

The third obstacle is the combination of Rorty's distinctive writing style and large-scale subject matter, which can come across as exciting and dramatic, making it easy to be uncritically carried along by Rorty's narrative, or else imprecise and evasive, making it just as easy to be uncritically dismissive of what can seem like endless sweeping generalisations. An early review, which took the latter perspective, described PMN as 'long on claims and polemic but short on argument' (Ruja 1981: 300), and it is not difficult to see how you might reach this conclusion, especially given Rorty's own widely reported negative comments about the value of argument (Rorty 1989: 8-9). Such comments, however, should be taken lightly - rather like his negative comments about metaphilosophy - since there is plenty of argument in PMN in the form of plausible considerations, objections, counterproposals, analogies, and all the other argumentative strategies normally employed in philosophy. Things only seem different in PMN because of the scale of the subject matter, which amplifies Rorty's claims and places greater burden on the arguments. Given that any historicist critique of philosophy would face similar difficulties of scale, however, and that the enterprise seems both valuable and legitimate, the critical reader must simply try to compensate accordingly: challenging when substantive alternatives present themselves, and otherwise letting the narrative flow.

The fourth obstacle - by far the biggest one for readers without at least a degree in philosophy - is that PMN is designed to provide relief from philosophical puzzlement, and this can be of little interest to those not puzzled in the first place (c.f. Malachowski 1990: 365-370). To appreciate Rorty's attempt at debunking the traditional philosophical picture, you must first have seen its power, and for this reason, the next chapter will provide a sympathetic overview of it which fills in some of the background that will be required later on. The brush strokes will be vast, of course, but that suits the subject-matter when dealing with Rorty, and in any case, the traditional picture is so compelling that it only requires minimal introduction to grasp how far from obvious Rorty's claims really are. If you already have a solid background in philosophy, and are much more sceptical about Rorty than you are about the traditional problems of mind, knowledge and language, then you may want to skip ahead to Chapter 3 at this point.