

RORTY AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION: COMMENT ON PROFESSOR SZUBKA

- Brian Leiter -

I am grateful to Professor Szubka for the stimulus of his paper¹ and the opportunity it presents to think about the relationship between Richard Rorty's later "pragmatic" philosophy and the so-called "analytic" tradition he came to repudiate. I am in agreement with Professor Szubka's central thesis, namely, that there is a "partial" continuity between the Rorty of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and his later writing, and the Rorty of the 1960s: Rorty was not the diehard "analytic" philosopher who then, suddenly and inexplicably, gave up on the whole business. His metaphilosophical work in that decade, especially as exemplified in *The Linguistic Turn*, signaled quite clearly his misgivings about the philosophical project typically associated with the analytic tradition (which at that time, at least, was not yet moribund). I will offer some additional support for Professor Szubka's thesis drawn from Neil Gross's recent biography of Rorty, which illuminates both Rorty's education at Chicago and Yale in the 1940s and 1950s and the context in which he became a kind of "analytic" philosopher at Princeton in the 1960s². I shall then suggest that the more striking question about Rorty is not why he gave up on "analytic" philosophy, but why he gave up on *philosophy*, that is, on a two-thousand year tradition stretching back to antiquity, one which nothing in his pre-Princeton education and experience would have led us to expect. Rorty's "radical break" was not with 'analytic' philosophy – a point often obscured in popular presentations of his work – but with *philosophy* itself. And it is that that demands some explanation.

As Neil Gross demonstrates, the two formative influences in Rorty's philosophical education were the *historical* orientation of the University of Chicago (especially under the tutelage of Richard McKeon), where he was an undergraduate, and the "metaphysical" and even "theological" orientation of the Yale University department, where he was a graduate student. Indeed, speculative metaphys-

¹ Szubka [2010].

² Gross [2008].

ics — of the kind associated with Alfred North Whitehead at Harvard earlier in the 20th century, Charles Hartshorne at Chicago, and Brand Blandshard and Paul Weiss at Yale — was central to Yale’s conception of its mission in the 1950s. In opposition to ordinary language philosophy and logical positivism, the leaders of the Yale Department wanted it to “stand for speculative philosophy and the sacred” (Gross [2008] p. 130 [quoting Kuklick]). When Rorty applied to Yale, he described his interests thus:

I should like to acquire a better grasp of the alternatives on the nature and content of logic, and, most of all, to learn as much as I can about the specific differences and similarities between the methods and results of the predecessors and exponents of existentialism and those of the type of philosophy which, I think, reaches its culmination in Whitehead and his successors... Eventually... I should like to study in Europe and gain a more thorough and immediate acquaintance with recent European developments in philosophy (*ibidem*, p. 137).

This was plainly not a ‘statement of interests’ by a young logical positivist. Indeed, the young man who wrote a 600-page doctoral dissertation on the concept of “potentiality” in Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, concluding the thesis with a critique of ‘logical empiricism’ (*ibidem*, p. 142-143), did not seem a likely recruit to the ‘analytic’ revolution sweeping American philosophy. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Neil Gross documents, Rorty was very much concerned with the pragmatism of Pierce, as well as the critiques of philosophy in Wittgenstein and Sellars (*ibidem*, p. 157 ff.) — even admitting, correctly, that most of what he published “was parasitic on [the] ideas” of Sellars (quoted in *ibidem*, p. 160). Yet, as Gross notes, “it would have been eminently clear to Rorty that in order to be tenurable [at Princeton in the 1960s], he would have to make a significant contribution to analytic thought” (*ibidem*, p. 177). One line of research was metaphilosophical, reflected in *The Linguistic Turn*, on which Professor Szubka focuses. The other line of research, on which Professor Szubka does not comment, was a series of papers in philosophy of mind, defending, among other doctrines, eliminative materialism! It is harder to square this work with Rorty’s later views, though perhaps this was pure professionalism on his part: after about 1970, he never really returned to these issues.

As Professor Szubka observes, the later Rorty abandons the idea that philosophy should “find[...] solutions to a certain set of problems and seek[...] consensus” in favor of the idea of philosophy as “continuing iconoclastic conversation and proposing wide-ranging narratives having transformative effects on their readers” (Szubka [2010], p. 155). This idea of “philosophy” would have been as

shocking to W.V.O. Quine and David K. Lewis as to Brand Blanshard and Alfred North Whitehead. As Jaegwon Kim correctly pointed out in an illuminating 1980 essay,³ the argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is directed against three very general doctrines, none of which are peculiar to (or even distinctive of) English-speaking philosophy in the 20th century. Kim identified them as:

- (1) The Platonic doctrine concerning truth and knowledge, according to which truth is correspondence with nature, and knowledge is a matter of possessing accurate representations.
- (2) The Cartesian doctrine of the mind as the private inner stage, "the Inner Mirror," in which cognitive action takes place. The Platonic doctrine of knowledge as representation was transformed into the idea of knowledge as inner representation of outer reality. The Cartesian contribution was to mentalize the Platonic doctrine.
- (3) The conception of Philosophy according to which it is the business of philosophy to investigate the "foundations" of the sciences, the arts, culture and morality, and adjudicate the cognitive claims of these areas. Philosophy, as epistemology, must set universal standards of rationality and objectivity for all actual and possible claims of knowledge.

As Kim notes, there are many philosophers who would be identified as "analytic" who reject all of these views. Perhaps more importantly, there are plenty of philosophers whom no one would think "analytic" who embrace one or more of these doctrines. Kant, Hegel, and Husserl, for example, are obviously more invested in the conception of philosophy as *foundational* to the rest of culture than, say, W.V.O. Quine or Jerry Fodor. Rorty's attack on the three doctrines identified by Kim, then, was not an attack on the now defunct "analytic" philosophy of the mid-20th century; it was an attack on the central concerns of philosophy going back to antiquity.

To my mind, the most puzzling fact about Rorty's later work is that he repudiated *the whole of philosophy*, not just a particular movement in Anglophone philosophy of the post-War era. Many philosophers took seriously the two argumentative linchpins of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* — Quine's critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction and Sellars's critique of the "Myth of the Given" — but none of those so influenced — I am thinking, *inter alia*, of Jerry Fodor, Gilbert Harman, Stephen Stich, Hilary Kornblith, Alvin Goldman, Paul Churchland, Robert Cummins, among many others--thought that the right response was to

³ Kim [1980].

scrap the traditional philosophical ambition of figuring out what was true and knowable, in favor of some ill-defined rhetorical excitation and uplift. Instead, *most* philosophers thought the upshot of the destruction of “analytic” philosophy by Quine and Sellars was that philosophical questions had to be suitably *naturalized*, that philosophy’s only function was to offer some abstract reflection upon and clarification of the discoveries of the sciences. If Harvard had taken Quine seriously, they would have closed the Department of Philosophy, and sent its remaining ‘useful’ members to help their muddle-headed colleagues in the natural and social sciences think more clearly about what they were doing. If Princeton had taken Rorty seriously, they would have simply turned philosophy and its history over to the experts in narratives and rhetoric in literature departments.

Rorty, in one of his last articles, agreed with me that one could divide much of the current Anglophone philosophical scene into “naturalists” and “quietists,” Rorty’s own sympathies lying, of course, with those who thought we should remain “quiet” about traditional philosophical problems rather than naturalize them⁴. We should do so, said Rorty, because such questions have no relevance to what he called “cultural politics”⁵. One might think of this as an elite bourgeois academic’s version of Marx’s 2nd Thesis on Feuerbach: “the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.” Marx, of course, wanted to repudiate the metaphysics and epistemology of German Idealism, since such inquiries were irrelevant to revolutionary practice. Rorty, by contrast, wants to make philosophy the handmaiden to “cultural politics,” which, on the evidence of his own rather vapid liberal political writings, is unlikely to make the capitalist class tremble.

Nietzsche famously remarked that all great philosophies are a kind of “involuntary and unconscious memoir” (*Beyond Good and Evil*). So what “memoir” has Richard Rorty given us in the form of his philosophical corpus, which goes from a dissertation on the concept of potentiality to a complete repudiation of the entire philosophical tradition? We can only speculate, but I will conclude with two suggestive anecdotes.

Rorty’s first wife, the philosopher Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, described the young Richard Rorty as “dedicated to the greater glory of God through philosophy” (Gross [2008] p. 198) and suggested to his biographer, Neil Gross, that the psychoanalysis he underwent during much of the 1960s and into the early 1970s

⁴ Rorty [2007]. He here responds to my “Introduction” to *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. B. Leiter (Clarendon Press, Oxford 2004).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

(*ibidem*, p. 216 n. 98) contributed significantly to the work that became *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

The second anecdote comes from my own experience. I was fortunate as a university student to have Rorty as a teacher, in a course covering Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and William James! The theme of the course was clear in retrospect: reactions to Kant either went the bad metaphysical route (Fichte and Hegel) or the good pragmatist route (Marx, Nietzsche, and James). In retrospect, the narrative was implausible, but there is no doubt that Rorty was a gifted lecturer and I remain grateful for the experience. But what is relevant here is a comment Rorty made one day during a discussion section: “it’s too bad,” he said, “that there turned out to be no absolute to correspond to,” which was followed by one of his trademark shrugs.

There is no God and there is no ‘absolute’ – Quine and Nietzsche, among many others, would have agreed with those claims. Why did Rorty respond to those realizations his way, rather than Quine’s or Nietzsche’s? The real answer may, alas, rest with his psychoanalyst.

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