BOOK REVIEWS

PHILOSOPHY AND THE MIRROR OF NATURE, Richard Rorty; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 401 pages, $20.

Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* brings to light the deep sense of crisis within the profession of academic philosophy which is similar to the paralyzing pluralism in contemporary theology and the inveterate indeterminacy of literary criticism. Richard Rorty's provocative and profound meditations impel philosophers to examine the problematic status of their discipline—only to discover that modern European philosophy has come to an end.

Rorty strikes a deathblow to modern European philosophy by telling a story about the emergence, development and decline of its primary props: the correspondence theory of truth, the notion of privileged representations and the idea of a self-reflective transcendental subject. Rorty's fascinating tale—his-story—is regulated by three fundamental shifts which he delineates in detail and promotes in principle: the move toward anti-realism or conventionalism in ontology, the move toward the demythologizing of the Myth of the Given or anti-foundationalism in epistemology, and the move toward detranscendentalizing the subject or dismissing the mind as a sphere of inquiry.

The chief importance of Rorty's book is that it brings together in an original and intelligible narrative the major insights of the patriarchs of postmodern American philosophy—W. V. Quine, Wilfred Sellars, and Nelson Goodman—and persuasively presents the radical consequences of their views for contemporary philosophy. Rorty credits Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey for having "brought us into a period of 'revolutionary' philosophy" by undermining the prevailing Cartesian and Kantian paradigms and advancing new conceptions of philosophy. And these monumental figures surely inspire Rorty. Yet, Rorty's philosophical debts—the actual sources of his particular anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian arguments—are Quine's holism, Sellars' anti-foundationalism, and Goodman's pluralism. In short, despite his adamant attack on analytical philosophy—the last stage of modern European philosophy—Rorty feels most comfortable with the analytical form of philosophical argumentation (shunned by Wittgenstein and Heidegger).

From the disparate figures of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, Rorty gets a historicist directive: to eschew the quest for certainty and the search for foundations.

> These writers have kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we

> may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day. They have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's "superstition" was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described. (p. 367)

For Rorty, the Western philosophical tradition can be overcome principally by holding at arm's length the ahistorical philosophical notions of necessity, universality, rationality, objectivity and transcendentality. Instead, we should speak historically about transient practices, contingent descriptions and revisable theories.

The basic lesson Rorty learns from Quine, Sellars, and Goodman is an anti-reductionist one: to refuse to privilege one language, language-game, morality, or society over another solely by appealing to philosophical criteria. For the results will more than likely be apologetics, "attempts to eternalize a certain contemporary language-game, social practice, or self-image" (p. 10). In cases of conflict and disagreement, we should either support our prevailing practices, reform them or put forward realizable alternatives to them—without appealing to ahistorical philosophical criteria or standards. In short, Rorty rejects philosophical discourse as the privileged mode of resolving intellectual disagreements.

Rorty's historicist, anti-reductionist viewpoint rests upon the three fundamental shifts in postmodern American philosophy toward anti-realism in ontology, anti-foundationalism in epistemology and detranscendentalism in philosophy of mind. The first move can be traced directly to Quine's and Goodman's convincing criticisms of Rudolph Carnap's grand reductionist project in *Logical Construction of the World* (1928) and of A. J. Ayer's more simplistic yet equally influential verificationist program in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). Quine's holism in his famous essay "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" and Goodman's critical pluralism in his succinct masterpiece "The Way the World Is"—both deeply anti-realist in spirit—contain two major insights: the conventional character of constructing logical systems of the world and the theory-laden character of observations. These insights have been recently popularized by Thomas Kuhn's historicist and anti-reductionist philosophy of science.

The move toward anti-realism and conventionalism in ontology leaves no room for a correspondence theory of truth (of any importance) in that it undermines the very distinctions upon which such a theory rests: the distinctions between ideas and objects, words and things, language and the world, propositions and states of affairs, theories and facts. The result is not a form of idealism because the claim is not that ideas create objects, words create things, language creates the world and so forth. Nor is the result a form of Kantianism because the claim is not that ideas constitute objects, words constitute things, language constitutes the world and so on. Rather the result is a form of pragmatism because the claim is that evolving descriptions and ever-changing versions of objects, things and the world issue forth from various communities as responses to certain problematics, as attempts to overcome specific situations and as means to satisfy par-

ticular needs and interests. To put it crudely, ideas, words and language are not mirrors which copy the world but rather tools with which we cope with the world.

In a more philosophical vein—and as more pointedly argued in Rorty's celebrated essay "The World Well Lost"—the theory-laden character of observations relativizes talk about the world such that realist appeals to "the world" as a final court of appeal to determine what is true can only be viciously circular. We cannot isolate "the world" from theories of the world, then compare these theories of the world with a theory-free world. We cannot compare theories with anything that is not a product of another theory. So any talk about "the world" is relative to the theories available.

The second move, toward demythologizing the Myth of the Given or antifoundationalism in epistemology, can be traced to Sellars' persuasive effort in his renowned essay "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" to call into question the given element in experience—the self-authenticating, intrinsically credible, theory-neutral, noninferential element—which provides the foundations for other knowledge-claims and serves as the terminating point for chains of epistemic justifications in traditional theories of knowledge. This move takes the form of an attack on pre-linguistic awareness and various notions of intuition. This antifoundationalist viewpoint precludes the notion of privileged representations because it views knowledge as a relation to propositions rather than as privileged relations to the objects certain propositions are about.

> If we think in the first way, we will see no need to end the potentially infinite regress of propositions-brought-forward-in-defense-of-other-propositions. . . . If we think of knowledge in the second way, we will want to get behind reason to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would be not just silly but impossible, for anyone gripped by the object in the required way will be *unable* to doubt or to see an alternative. To reach that point is to reach the foundations of knowledge. (p. 159)

For Rorty, the search for such foundations expresses a need to be gripped, grasped and compelled. This holds for Plato's Eye of the Soul perceiving the World of Being, Descartes' Eye of the Mind turned inward grasping clear and distinct mental representations or Locke's Eye of the Mind turned outward seeing "singular presentations to sense" as bases for our knowledge. All such models view ahistorical, terminal confrontation—rather than historical, fluid conversation—as the determinant of human belief. In short, the Myth of the Given—the philosophical privileging of representations—principally rests upon epistemological attempts to escape from history and put a closure upon human practices. Therefore Rorty concludes,

> When Sellars's and Quine's doctrines are purified, they appear as complementary expressions of a single claim: that no "account of the nature of knowlege" can rely on a theory of representations which stand in privileged relations to reality. The work of these two

> philosophers enables us. . . to make clear why an "account of the nature of knowledge" can be, at most, a description of human behavior. (p. 182)

The third move, toward detranscendentalizing the subject or dismissing the mind as a sphere of inquiry, can be traced to Gilbert Ryle's logical behaviorism in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) and Quine's radical behaviorism in *Word and Object* (1960). Rorty's own epistemological behaviorism links Ryle's attack on the Cartesian disembodied ego and Quine's assault on the Kantian transcendental subject (and Husserlian nonempirical ego) to subversive strategies against epistemology per se.

> A holistic approach to knowledge is not a matter of anti-foundationalist polemic, but a distrust of the whole epistemological enterprise. A behavioristic approach to episodes of "direct awareness" is not a matter of antimentalistic polemic, but a distrust of the Platonic quest for that special sort of certainty associated with visual perception. The image of the Mirror of Nature. . . suggests, and is suggested by, the image of philosophy as such a quest. (p. 181)

Two crucial consequences flow from Rorty's historicist, anti-reductionist project. First, the distinction between the "soft" human sciences and the "hard" natural sciences collapses. The basic difference between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften* is neither the self-defining character of the former nor the context-free facts of the latter. Rather the difference is between the relative stability of normal vocabularies in the natural sciences and the relative instability of normal vocabularies in the human sciences. And the irreducibility of one vocabulary to another does not imply an ontological distinction—only a functional difference.

> As Kuhn says in connection with a smaller, though obviously related issue, we cannot differentiate scientific communities by "subject matter," but rather by "examining patterns of education and communication." (p. 331)

This rudimentary demythologizing of the natural sciences is of immense importance for literary critics, artists, and theologians who have been in retreat and on the defensive since the Enlightenment. And the sparks generated by such a novel viewpoint in our technocentric culture are only beginning to fly.

Second, the conception of philosophy is no longer that of a tribunal of pure reason which defends or debunks claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. Rather the voice of the philosopher is but one voice—that of the informed dilettante or polypragmatic, Socratic thinker—among others in a grand Conversation. Rorty's deconstruction of philosophy as a subject, a *Fach*, a field of professional inquiry results in equalizing (or de-privileging) the voice of the philosopher in this grand Conversation.

> In this conception, "philosophy" is not a name for a discipline which confronts permanent issues, and unfortunately keeps misstating

> them, or attacking them with clumsy dialectical instruments. Rather, it is a cultural genre, a "voice in the conversation of mankind" (to use Michael Oakeshott's phrase), which centers on one topic rather than another at some given time not by dialectical necessity but as a result of various things happening elsewhere in the conversation (the New Science, the French Revolution, the modern novel) or of individual men of genius who think of something new (Hegel, Marx, Frege, Freud, Wittgenstein, Heidegger), or perhaps of the resultant of several such forces. (p. 264)

Rorty's historicist, anti-reductionist perspective amounts to a self-styled neo-pragmatism. His plausible yet objectionable uses of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey and his creative misreadings of Quine, Sellars, and Goodman yield the most adversarial position in American academic philosophy since the fervent anti-professionalism of William James. Rorty's anti-epistemological radicalism and belletristic anti-academicism are welcome in a discipline deeply entrenched in a debased insularity and debilitating isolation. Yet, ironically, Rorty's project, though pregnant with rich possibilities, remains polemical and hence barren. It refuses to give birth to the offspring it conceives. Rorty leads philosophy to the complex world of politics and culture, but does not permit it to get its hands dirty.

Rorty's seductive interpretation of the Western philosophical tradition in general and the Anglo-American analytical tradition in particular is itself symptomatic of the ahistorical character of Anglo-American philosophy. Rorty's historicist sense remains too broad, too thin—devoid of the realities of power; his neo-pragmatism is too vague, too nonchalant—and unmindful of the decline of liberalism. For example, Rorty's Wittgenstein had nothing to say about the later Wittgenstein's bleak views on the decay of Western civilization (recently published under the title *Culture and Value*); his Heidegger is silent about the early Heidegger's anti-democratic panacea for Europe; and his Dewey lacks the activist Dewey's sense of the need for a new vision of society and culture. Rorty's deconstruction of philosophy seems to retreat into the philosophical arena as soon as pertinent socio-historical issues—such as the relation of objectivity-claims to oppressive actions or transcendental discourse to ideological hegemony—are raised.

Rorty's narrative leaves unexplored many socio-historical questions of utmost importance. In fact, his historicist sense seems to overlook them. For instance, is there a link between the emerging anti-realism and conventionalism in ontology and the crisis of intellectual authority within our learned professional academies and educational institutions? Is there a relation between the anti-foundationalism in epistemology and the crisis of legitimacy among those subjected to our intellectual authority? Does the detranscendentalizing of the subject express the deep sense of impotence in postmodern capitalist societies, the sense of reaching a dead-end with no foreseeable way out or no discernible liberating projects in the near future—hence the proliferation of prevailing apocalyptic forecasts, narcissistic living and self-indulgent, ironic forms of thinking? If science is, as Rorty notes, a "value-laden enterprise," is there an ideological character intrinsic to the very methods of the natural sciences owing to an agreed-upon conception of and disposition toward nature which may promote the domination not

only of our environment but also those subsumed under the rubric "nature" such as women, non-Europeans and even "earthy" workers?

The central concern underlying these rhetorical yet crucial questions is that it is impossible to historicize philosophy without partly politicizing (in contrast to vulgarly ideologizing) it. Surely, the relation of philosophy to history and politics is complex. Yet embarking on a historicist project which deconstructs philosophy entails dragging in the complexities of politics and culture. To tell a tale about the historical character of philosophy while eschewing the political content, role and function of philosophy in various historical periods is to promote an ahistorical approach in the name of history. To deconstruct the privileged notions of objectivity, universality and transcendentality without acknowledging and accenting the oppressive deeds done under the aegis of these notions is to write a thin (i.e., intellectual and homogeneous) history; that is, a history which fervently attacks epistemological privilege but remains relatively silent about political, economic, racial and sexual privilege. Such a history even raises the sinister possibility that the anti-epistemological radicalism of neo-pragmatism—much like the anti-metaphysical radicalism of poststructuralism—may be an emerging form of ideological hegemony in late capitalist societies which endorses the existing order while undergirding sophisticated anti-epistemological and anti-metaphysical tastes of postmodern avant-gardists.

Indeed, the relativist, even nihilist, outlook of neo-pragmatism upsets mainstream realists and old-style humanists. So the battle within the Academy between the professional avant-gardists and professional establishmentarians will continue to be intense. Yet after the philosophical smoke clears, the crucial task is to pursue thick (i.e., social and heterogeneous) historical accounts for the emergence, development, sustenance and decline of particular vocabularies in the natural and human sciences against the backdrop of dynamic changes in specific (and often coexisting) modes of production, political conflicts, cultural configurations and personal turmoil.

Surprisingly, Rorty is highly suspicious of thick historical accounts. For example, when a provisional explanation—even a speculative one—seems appropriate for the centrality of ocular metaphors in Western thought, he asserts that

> there was, we moderns may say with the ingratitude of hindsight, no particular reason why this ocular metaphor seized the imagination of the founders of Western thought. (p. 38)

And when he contemplates questions about the acceptance and performance of modern science and moral consciousness in the West, he concludes that "in no case does anyone know what might count as a good answer" (p. 341).

In light of such pessimism regarding historical accounts, one wonders whether Rorty takes his own pragmatic viewpoint seriously. Is a "good answer" something more than a particular insightful interpretation based on an emerging, prevailing or declining social consensus put to a specific purpose? Is not Rorty's narrative itself a "good answer" to Cartesians, Kantians and analytic philosophers? In short, Rorty's neo-pragmatism has no place for ahistorical philosophical

justifications—yet his thin historicism rests content with intellectual historical narratives and distrusts social historical narratives. Furthermore, Rorty's refusal to take seriously politics and culture is clearly illustrated in his frequent use of a homogeneous conception of society.

> Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call "epistemological behaviorism." (p. 174)

It should be clear that Rorty's thin historicism needs Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel; that is, his narrative needs a more subtle historical and sociological perspective.

Like his maternal grandfather Walter Rauschenbusch, the great social gospel advocate, Richard Rorty has secured an undeniable place in American letters. Both defied the systematic aims of their disciplines and directed their energies to the impure realities of history. Both confronted a rigid, lethargic Academy and changed a host of would-be academicians into critical actors. But Rorty has gone further. He has written with more profundity, argued with more brilliance and sketched his perspective on a larger canvas, namely, Western culture itself. Yet, in the end, Rauschenbusch and Rorty shed light upon varying aspects of the same, though evolving, historical problematic: the crisis of American capitalist civilization. And, despite their blindnesses, we are better equipped to overcome this crisis because of Rauschenbusch and Rorty—because of the engaged patriarch of theological liberalism and his insouciant progeny of post-philosophical liberalism.

NOTE: It should be noted that Rorty learned anti-reductionist lessons from his early teachers at the University of Chicago, Richard McKeon and Robert Brumbaugh, and his thesis adviser at Yale, Paul Weiss. His first two major essays, published in 1961, bear witness to such lessons: "The Limits of Reductionism" in *Experience, Existence and The Good: Essays in Honor of Paul Weiss* (Carbondale, 1961), ed. Irwin C. Lied, pp. 100-116, and "Pragmatism, Categories, and Language" in *Philosophical Review* 70 (1961), 197-223.

For Rorty's more detailed and technical attacks on the various forms of intuition, see his important essay, "Intuition" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, pp. 204-12; "Wittgenstein, Privileged Access, and Incommunicability," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1970), 192-205; and "Criteria and Necessity," *Nous* 7 (1973), 313-29.

Rorty's most explicit treatment of the professional character of contemporary American philosophy can be found in his brilliant essay, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," *The Georgia Review* 30 (1976), 757-69.

Rorty's critical advice to Michel Foucault applies equally to himself when he writes, "His obviously sincere attempt to make philosophical thinking be of some use, do some good, help people, is not going to get anywhere until he condescends to do a bit of dreaming about the future, rather than stopping dead after genealogising the present." "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," *London Review of Books*, 19 February-4 March, 1981, p. 6. Richard Bernstein makes this charge more pointedly in his fine review of Rorty's book in *The Review of Metaphysics* 33 (1980), 745-75, especially 767-75.

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