

PHILOSOPHY OR THEORY? RETHINKING THE ANALYTIC-CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

Richard L.W. Clarke

The academic discipline called 'philosophy' encompasses not only different answers to philosophical questions but total disagreement on what questions are philosophical. (Richard Rorty "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres")

Whenever a view is held to be absolute anathema by one's contemporaries, that is the time to look at it seriously. (Colin McGinn)

Perhaps the most important commentator on metaphilosophical issues in recent years has been the controversial Richard Rorty. Rorty is, for reasons that I hope to make clear, less controversial among his fellow Pragmatists and Continentalists than among Analysts for whom his pronouncements are often akin to the proverbial red rag to a bull. Rorty has offered many trenchant critiques of the dominance of what he calls the "scientific" (1988, 9) paradigm in philosophy and has offered a vision of an alternative future for the field, one construed along more literary and socio-historically oriented lines that I find not only appealing but refreshingly honest. I am particularly intrigued by his claim that philosophy is "best seen as a kind of writing" (1978-1979, 92) which is accordingly "delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition" (92). In this paper, arguing that it may be time to recognise the inadequacy of conventional demarcations such as 'Analytic' and 'Continental,' I outline the four main areas in which a divergence of views separates literary- and politically-oriented philosophers from the scientifically-minded.

Many would acknowledge that philosophy (what Rorty, *pace* Wilfrid Sellars, often defines broadly as the attempt to 'see how things hang together') has had an uneasy, if not downright hostile, relationship with literature since at least Plato's attempt to expel poetry from his ideal state. This distrust of the poetic has been one of Plato's most precious legacies to philosophy. Plato, you might recall was distrustful not only of literature's moral impact but also of its epistemological insufficiency, its failure ultimately to reflect those Ideal Forms which he thought material objects reflected in turn. It is perhaps the latter inadequacy, its neglect of *the* truth, which has more than any other demarcated the 'messiness' of literature from the purity of that quest for absolute truth with which philosophy has more often than not concerned itself.

Since 1900 or thereabouts, Rorty argues, the hostility between philosophy and literature has developed into a full-blown "split" (1989, 3) that cuts across conventional and unhelpful demarcations of the discipline into Analytic, Continental, and the like. On one side are grouped Analytic philosophers like Russell or Carnap, Continentalists like Husserl and the Structuralists, and other positivists fiercely committed to a scientific and apolitical conception of the discipline. For many thinkers on this side of the divide, physics has served as the most important paradigm of the discipline. On the other,

however, assorted Continentalists and Pragmatists advocate a “poetic” (1988, 9) and / or a political model of the field, Heidegger and Derrida being obvious examples of the former, Gramsci of the latter. The fundamental difference between the two camps revolves less around differences in methodology (I am thinking here of the self-serving and somewhat inane Analytic mantra [à la the famous ‘four legs good, two legs bad’] that Continentalists are fuzzy thinkers who merely need a good dose of logic to come to their senses) or cultural origin (it ought to be obvious that Continentalists are not limited to the Francophone or Germanophone world just as Analysts are not restricted to the Anglophone). Rorty rightly argues, rather, that the difference centres on the question “of whether philosophy has a prelinguistic subject-matter, and thus . . . whether there is an ahistorical reality to which a given philosophical vocabulary may or may not be adequate” (1988; 23). The important question which arises in this context is this: can one ever simply step outside the linguistic and other trappings which seem to be an indelible feature of human consciousness and apprehend the Real, the things-in-themselves, from which vantage-point it is possible to adjudicate between competing truth-claims?

Distinguishing between **Philosophy** and **philosophy**, Rorty sides with the latter, urging the development of a “post-Philosophical culture” (1982, xl) in which **philosophy**, precisely because it cannot adjudicate the “relation of the thought of our time . . . to something which is not just some alternative vocabulary” (xl), comes more to resemble a kind of “culture criticism” (1982, xl). From this perspective, **philosophy** would specialise in “seeing similarities and differences . . . between attempts to see how things hang together” (1982, xl) and would strive to “compare and contrast cultural traditions” (1982, xxxvii), their conceptual frameworks / vocabularies. Rorty proposes that the more appropriate name for members of the second group may be “theorists” (1989, 96) or “ironists” (1989, 73) precisely because these “do not think that there is something called ‘wisdom’ in any sense of the term which Plato would have recognised” (1989, 96). ‘Theoria,’ Rorty suggests, with its connotations of standing back and appraising things from a distance, may be a much more suitable epithet for the pursuit of those, like Rorty, who doubt that they have some privileged access to the absolute truth, some meta-perspective on perspective.

Rorty’s views have, of course, been controversial. Some concur with his diagnosis of the state of contemporary philosophy. For example, alluding to C. P. Snow’s famous notion of the ‘two cultures,’ artistic versus scientific, at loggerheads in modern academia, Simon Critchley describes the gulf between these two camps as the “expression of a deep cultural divide between differing and opposed habits of thought” (48): “Benthamite and Coleridgean, or empirical-scientific and hermeneutic-romantic” (48), respectively. Others have vigorously condemned the object of Rorty’s sympathies. It was, for example, J-G. Merquior who first coined the disparaging term ‘litero-philosophy’ to denote “Gallic philosophy” (12), distinguishing what he sees as the philosophical “rigour” (12) of Anglo-American Analytic philosophy from the philosophical “glamour” (12) of thinkers like Bergson, Sartre, Derrida, and Foucault. In a similar vein, though certainly not hostile to Continental philosophers like Derrida, Christopher Norris has attacked the cultural relativism of so-called ‘Postmodernism’ in general and Rorty in particular who has become his particular *bête noire*. (The validity of Norris’ attempt to turn Derrida into a

creature of Enlightenment positivism, to a critique of which the latter devoted so much of his career, is another matter, however.) It is not insignificant, in this regard, that Norris' career has taken precisely the inverse direction to Rorty's. The former has moved away from literary theory and criticism towards an ever increasing engagement with some of the central voices and issues of Analytic philosophy (he is now Distinguished Research Professor in the department of philosophy at Cardiff). The latter has largely abandoned the Analytic philosophy which dominated his early career at Princeton in favour of a mixture of Pragmatist- and Continental-inflected 'culture criticism' with which he first experimented at Virginia and, later, developed in the department of Comparative Literature at Stanford.

It seems to me that it is possible to identify at least four main areas where the gulf separating the scientific and poetic / political paradigms are particularly acute. In what follows, I will attempt to offer an at best cursory and simplified overview of the main bones of contention. Given their centrality to the philosophical endeavour as a whole, it is perhaps perfectly understandable that epistemological, linguistic and logical matters are located at the very heart of the conflict between Philosophers and theorists, respectively. In his classic *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty offers an overview of the history of modern philosophy that traces how a preoccupation with epistemological matters, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gave way in the late nineteenth century to an over-riding concern with the fundamental role played by language in the acquisition of knowledge, the so-called 'Linguistic turn.' This was as true of philosophy on the Continent (manifested in the work initially of thinkers like Nietzsche and, later, Heidegger) as it was of developments in the UK and, later, the USA (the linguistic philosophies of the Analytic school being the obvious examples). There are a number of basic assumptions undergirding the work of the scientific camp that need to be unpacked. It assumes that the truth, though not necessarily straightforward, can be known, that scientific objectivity is possible, that language is an adequate vehicle for representing the world as it really is, and that logic is the key vehicle for ensuring the correspondence of consciousness to the external world. In this tradition, a referential model of language has tended to predominate: the view, simplistically put, that words mean by virtue of reflecting or mirroring things.

This is how Rorty puts it. Devoted to comprehending the nature, origin and limits of human knowledge, philosophy views itself as a "*foundational* discipline" (1979, 132) with respect to the natural sciences especially, a "tribunal of pure reason" (1979, 139) responsible for adjudicating the "objectivity of the knowledge-claims made in the various empirical disciplines" (1979, 135). Committed to what Rorty (*pace* Sellars and Quine) calls the 'Empiricist myth of the given,' it revolves around an ideal of "knowledge as the assemblage of accurate representations" (1979, 163) that refer to the existence of an unchanging reality impervious to human desire, a "permanent neutral framework whose 'structure' philosophy can display" (1979, 315). Correspondence to this reality serves as the ineluctable foundation for all truth-claims: in this schema, the "object which the proposition is about *imposes* the proposition's truth" (1979, 157). Scientific objectivity is achieved by "sorting out the 'given' from the 'subjective additions' made by the mind" (1979, 133-134), that is, by eliminating those 'idols of the mind,' political and otherwise,

which threaten to interpose themselves between subject and object. The most important of these neo-Kantian ‘filters’ in recent times has been language which, once purged of rhetorical superfluity and predicated on syntactical and logical precision, can function as an adequate neutral vehicle for mirroring the world as it really is and, thus, attaining scientific objectivity. Conceiving of their task as one closely allied to that of the scientist, philosophers emphasise the need to pay scrupulous attention to questions of method in the production of knowledge above all.

By contrast, less enamoured of empiricism and arguably more oriented towards rationalism (though not in the facile sense of an adulation of reason), theorists most often seem to assume that truth is a much more tricky affair: truth-claims are relative to both the tropes we apply (which are consequently more than ‘merely wit to advantage dressed’) and / or the asymmetry of the socio-historical context in which they are elaborated. In this schema, scientific objectivity is most often a charade and language an instrument that continually threatens to undermine its user’s intentions by virtue of the very nature of signification. Two paradigms of language have tended to predominate in this tradition: the expressivist, the view that meaning, not unlike one’s breath, emanates from within, emerged as the dominant mode of thinking about language and, by extension, culture, in Germany in the nineteenth century, replacing at least for a while the centuries-old assumption that words function mimetically. (Hence, M. H. Abrams’ celebrated account of the epistemic shift from ‘mirror’ to ‘lamp’ which occurred in intellectual history around this time.) In so-called ‘Continental’ philosophy (as well as Fregean linguistics, I’m told), the expressivist model has undergirded, explicitly or implicitly, the work of several of the most important schools: Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology (under which rubric I group Transcendental phenomenology à la Husserl, Heideggerian Existentialism, and Gadamerian Hermeneutics). In more recent times, however, inspired by Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), a radically different and profoundly influential model of signification has emerged which argues that meaning is produced systemically, rather than referentially or expressively. From this point of view, meaning has less to do with the object a sign purports to imitate or with expressing the innermost thoughts and feelings of the individual: it is primarily a function, rather, of the relationship that exists between signs. Structuralism has given rise, in turn, to so-called Post-Structuralism in which, though the basic systemic assumptions articulated by Saussure are retained, the precise quasi-scientific mechanism by which meaning is thought to be produced has been rigorously critiqued. Derrida’s main goal in this regard has been to show that there is an unsettling, rhetorical dimension to language that undermines and disseminates intention. Derrida’s contention has disturbed the complacency of contemporary philosophers and it is not for nothing that Derrida, at the time of the odious Cambridge affair, observed that the Sophists still haunt our philosophical conversations.

Rorty contends that theorists, viewing their discipline as necessarily imbricated in, rather than “underlying” (1979, 132), a wide variety of disciplines, not least the arts, are doubtful that reason can ever function in some pure and impartial way to distinguish the true from the untrue. Suspicious of the existence of “ahistorical formal ‘structures’” (1988, 21) merely waiting to be discovered, theorists reject the “ideal of objective

cognition” (1979, 13), arguing that knowledge is not derived from but imposed on an inherently malleable ‘Real’ capable of bearing as many interpretations as human ingenuity allows. In this schema, ‘truths’ are “made rather than found” (1989, 3), a function less of the “object known” (1979, 159) than the “arguments given for them” (1979, 157), knowledge on any issue amounting to little more than the “current consensus on that topic” (1985, 66). Scientific objectivity is rarely, if ever, possible because knowledge is a function not only of the social and political context in which it is elaborated, but also of the tropes we apply: where philosophy regards “metaphor as a distraction from . . . reality” (23), theory regards metaphor “as the way of escaping from the illusion that there is such a reality” (23) waiting simply to be known. From this perspective, one’s “choice of vocabulary matters at least as much as one’s answers to the questions posed within a given vocabulary” (1985, 60). Doubtful as a result that philosophy can find “natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions” (1982, xxxvii), theorists view their role as akin to that of the cultural critic and historian as a result of which “historico-metaphilosophical reflections on their own activity” (1988, 21) are deemed far more important than methodological scrutiny.

Another important disagreement, one derived from the first adumbrated above, concerns the nature of identity. There are a number of intersecting concepts which I am grouping under this general rubric: human nature, subjectivity, the self, the personality, consciousness, the mind, cultural identity, and so on. Which term one emphasises depends on your philosophical orientation, I would think. In the scientific camp, the view is widely shared that knowledge is made possible by the existence of a physiological basis for a common core of rationality in human beings. To put this another way, the view has come to be widespread that in order to understand the nature (and limits) of knowledge and the role played therein by language, an understanding of the physiological basis and the resulting mechanisms of consciousness is indispensable. This is why, in recent times, philosophy of mind (and related areas such as cognitive science and psychology) has emerged as the single most important branch of philosophy in terms of both the sheer volume of research and teaching emphases. (Any programme today that does not share such emphases seems a little dated, somehow.) Due to the efforts of Rawls and company, social and political philosophy has made something of a comeback in such circles in recent times but still remains, I would suggest, on the periphery of serious philosophical discussion. I get the impression that a(n unspoken) feeling is prevalent that once the scientific comprehension of the structures of consciousness is completed, the philosophical equivalent, I suppose, of the human genome project, there will be little need to engage in social and political discussion, at least not of the sort which currently obtains, because questions as to how we ought to live with each other will be resolved by a more complete, scientific understanding of human nature.

This is why Rorty argues that, from this perspective, the role of the Philosopher is that of “cultural overseer who knows everyone’s common ground” (1979, 317): to be precise, that “common rationality” (1979, 318) which is the foundation of all scientific inquiry. An epistemologically-centered Philosophy, Rorty argues, is predicated on the view not only that there are “two ontological realms – the mental and the physical” (1979, 125) but that “knowledge of general truths is made possible by some special, metaphysically

distinctive ingredient in human beings” (1979; 125). This special factor, whether denoting something transcendental or physiological in nature, has more often than not been connoted by a particular metaphor: that of the “Glassy Essence” (126) of consciousness in which the things of this world find themselves mirrored. The image which has held “traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods” (1979, 12). This model of the mind is the inevitable corollary of a certain paradigm of knowledge: “[w]ithout the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would never have suggested itself” (1979, 12). Mind and world exist, consequently, in a symbiotic relationship: the former (or at least our understanding of it) has historically grown to the extent that ever more deeply concealed truths of the latter have been gradually revealed to the mind intent upon discovery.

If Philosophers have accordingly tended to emphasise the fixity and universality of certain structures of consciousness, theorists have tended to be suspicious of such claims, in some cases viewing them as yet another example of the ‘truth-effects’ that the link between discourse and power permits. While not denying the importance of physiology in the constitution of our identity, theorists do not believe that it can be reduced in some crude way to genetic and related determinants. They argue that the other camp ignores the equal importance of socio-historical factors in the shaping of our identity, for which reason there is no question of a timeless or universal human nature of the sort envisaged in the Enlightenment. Precisely because our natures cannot be predicted in some deterministic way, precisely because of cultural specificity, social and political philosophy remains one of the most important branches, perhaps *the* central area of research, for theorists. The differences between Philosophers and theorists on this score are perhaps best underlined in a celebrated exchange between Foucault and Chomsky on Dutch TV. For Foucault, there is no fixed human nature which scientific investigation of the mind and language merely *reveals*: our definitions of our identity, he argued in a myriad places, are the malleable product of various discourses about the self, including most recently the philosophy of mind and language, through which have come to view ourselves in certain ways and to act accordingly. Given such metaphysical antifoundationalism and epistemological relativism, this is why some such as Rorty are critical of the “vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism” (1989; 44) and argue that what “culture needs” (52) is an “improved self-description rather than a set of foundations” (52), better ways of thinking about our selves rather than a fruitless quest for elusive and essentialist foundations.

Philosophers and theorists are also separated by very different perspectives on the history of philosophy. According to Rorty, philosophy thinks of itself as developing in ways analogous to the “history-of-science-as-the-story-of-progress” (1985, 58), that is, in the direction of an ever greater rapprochement with the Real. This is why, as with the natural sciences, the study of contemporary solutions to certain recurrent problems is privileged over what, from the vantage-point of the present, must appear to be merely a prior history of muddled anticipations, half-truths, and downright errors. Philosophy possesses what Rorty characterises as a “cream-skimming picture” (1985, 66) of its own past, that is, as

one differentiated by the specificity of both its subject-matter (the “quest for knowledge about permanent and enduring topics” [1985, 66]) and its practitioners (“people who specialised in that sort of thing” [1985, 66]) from the wider “history of ‘thought’ or culture” (1985, 56) in which the mere opinions of non-philosophers such as historians and *littérateurs* occupy centre stage. Canon-formation is accordingly not a mystery to philosophers: only the select few who have functioned as signposts (albeit, in most cases, flawed ones) on the path towards *the* Truth deserve to be studied. Philosophical historiography accordingly tends to take two main forms in this tradition. What Rorty calls “doxography” (1985, 61), convinced that Philosophy has “in all ages and places . . . managed to dig down to the same, deep, fundamental questions” (1985, 63), is devoted to merely “ticking off what various figures traditionally called ‘philosophers’ has to say about problems traditionally called ‘philosophical’” (1985, 62). This is the corollary of “rational reconstruction” (1985, 49) in which “we anachronistically impose . . . our problems and vocabulary on the dead to make them conversational partners” (1985, 49) in the “hope of getting them to admit that we have gotten those ideas clearer, or in the hope of getting them clearer still in the course of the conversation” (1985, 52). The ultimate goal of both “such enterprises in commensuration” (1985, 53) is to “assure ourselves that there has been rational progress” (1985, 51) and that, by avoiding past errors, we are drawing ever nearer to the final solution of urgent universal problems.

By contrast, theory views its history as analogous to that of the arts: “nonteleological” (1989, 16) in nature, it takes the form of “successive metaphors” (1989, 20) or vocabularies all at best asymptotic with respect to the Real. Because no vocabulary can be privileged on the grounds of correspondence, theorists emphasise that a historical consciousness which seeks to “‘place’ each vocabulary in a series of vocabularies” (1985, 61) in order to “trace changes” (1985, 61) is indispensable. Theorists view cultural or intellectual history as the inescapable “ground out of which histories of philosophy grow” (1985, 70), stressing the historical and cultural specificity of all philosophising, the contingent rather than necessary nature of the solutions proposed, and the blurred boundary between philosophy and other forms of intellectual activity. Canon-formation in this schema is a much more arbitrary and ephemeral affair as a result of which theorists focus their attention on the processes by which particular vocabularies and their proponents attain hegemonic status, albeit only temporarily. Two historiographical genres tend, therefore, to predominate in this tradition: “contextualist historical reconstruction” (1985, 63) which, by “bracketing one’s own better knowledge” (1985, 50) in order to describe thinkers from the past “in . . . their own terms” (1985, 50), reminds us of the historical and cultural specificity of all problems deemed ‘philosophical’; and “*geistesgeschichte*” (1985, 56) which, working “at the level of problematics rather than of solutions to problems” (1985, 57), constructs narratives designed to show “how we have come to ask the questions which we now think inescapable and profound” (1985, 61).

The fourth main area of disagreement concerns the nature of the philosophical enterprise itself. Rorty is of the view that philosophers tend to focus on the analysis of “ahistorical formal ‘structures’” (1988,1) by attempting to solve eternally recurrent problems that transcend the particularities of time and place. Because Philosophers believe that they perform a task akin to that of the scientist, they entertain few doubts about the scientific

nature of the enterprise in which they are engaged, and thus see little need to engage in metaphilosophical reflection, apart from a scrupulous attention to questions of method. By contrast, theorists doubt that philosophy can find “natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions” (1982, xxxvii) as a result of which philosophy can never be anything more than our “own time apprehended in thoughts” (Hegel qtd. in Rorty 1982, xl). (Rorty argues that “our time” [1982, xl] really means “our view of previous times,’ so that, in Hegelian fashion, each age of the world recapitulates all the earlier ones” [1982, xl].) Conceiving philosophy as little more than a Bloomian “family romance” (1978-1979, 96) and their role as similar to that of a literary critic or literary historian, theorists engage in the dialectical “reinterpretation of our predecessors’ reinterpretation of their predecessors’ reinterpretation” (1978-1979, 92), that is, in the “inconclusive comparison and contrast of vocabularies (with everybody trying to *aufheben* everybody else’s way of putting everything)” (1982, xli). The gap between the two parties, Rorty writes,

coincides pretty closely with the division between philosophers who are not interested in historico-metaphilosophical reflections on their own activity and philosophers who are.... This difference in interests parallels a difference in reading habits, a difference in philosophical canons. If the preeminent figures in one canon include Berkeley, Hume, Mill, and Frege, one will probably be not much interested in metaphilosophy. If they include Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, one probably will – . . . in the form of an historical narrative which places the works of the philosophers within the historical development of the culture. (21)

I find intriguing Rorty’s suggestion that hermeneutics be viewed less as a “successor subject” (1979, 315) to a defunct epistemology and philosophy of language than as something of a “Socratic intermediary” (316) weaving its way between a web of competing truth-claims and seeing the “relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers” (318).

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