

of them has much in the way of arguments.

Q. What do you make of Donald Davidson and the contemporary philosophy of action, which has been taken very seriously on the continent?

A. I never found it very interesting. It seems to me to be a hang over from the problem of free will. I'm afraid that after reading Hume on the compatibility of free will and determinism I never looked back. Unlike some German writers, I don't see it as having much to do with moral philosophy.

Q. And the work of the Oxford philosopher Michael Dummett? Are you worried by the problem of intuitionism? Some philosophers might say that, as a matter of fact, the giving of grounds often comes to an end with an appeal to intuitions, such as when we say 'I see that' or 'It's not clear'.

A. I don't see a problem. Either one refers to what we all intuit or to what we all normally do. It doesn't make much difference.

Q. Are you worried by the charge that there is a contradiction between the idealism of your metaphysical views and the materialism of your psychological views?

A. Idealism as a metaphysical view is pointless: the old idealist attempt to find some phenomena which the materialist cannot explain fails. But I think, as Sellars shows, that you can have all the advantages of both materialism and idealism if you just make a few distinctions. So be a materialist if you want to, but realise that being a materialist is simply putting a bet on what the vocabulary of the predictive disciplines will turn out to be.

Q. So the doctrine which creates the impression of tough-mindedness doesn't have much tough content. Would you take the same approach to scientism? Do you think that the only reliable, valid knowledge we have is scientific knowledge?

A. That way of putting it presupposes that knowledge is a natural kind. I think it's better to say that there are lots of different justifiable assertions, including not only scientific assertions but aesthetic and social judgements. One end of the spectrum has

an elaborate machinery for establishing the norms behind it, just as there are experts at one end of the spectrum, the other not. But the two kinds of enterprise are one. So there is really no need to worry where knowledge stops because the distinction between where you go to explain something and where not is not a distinction between knowledge and opinion. It's a sociological distinction.

Q. Nonetheless, you do cling to a form of scientism?

A. I think of myself as stealing the point from Sellars that one's categories in metaphysics should be the categories of the sciences of one's day. But that's simply to say what a boring subject metaphysics is.

Q. Can we end on the problem of your approach to history. You began as a McKeonite comparativist taking the larger historical view, and have now returned to it. Yet your philosophical training does not really help you all that much with the problem of how to influence future historical developments. It does train you in the art of destruction and you could be seen as attempting to destroy philosophy as the theory of knowledge just as Adorno attempted to destroy social philosophy. But such destructions often have unintended effects. How can you envisage them, let alone take responsibility for them? In sum, you don't have a theory of history?

A. No, I don't. I'm not a historicist in Popper's sense.

Q. But you are perhaps an historicist in the sense of one who holds that history is all-important and that it is usually helpful to take careful account of changing historical circumstances and exact processes of historical genesis. Could you perhaps say something about your relationship to the British philosopher of history, R.G. Collingwood?

A. I read Collingwood a long time ago in my twenties and forgot most of it. I now realise that I may have recently taken up things which I originally read in Collingwood. We have to take history seriously. I see post-philosophy continuing the conversation of mankind in that context.

II: Edifying Discourses

Joe McCarney

Rorty's book* has already been the centre of a good deal of attention. It has been widely regarded by students and teachers of academic philosophy as saying important things about the past, present and future of their subject, and the paperback comes decked with tributes from notables, pointing to the same conclusion. Its significance is further acknowledged by

* Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Basil Blackwell, 1980, £4.95 pb.

the publication of an interview with the author in this issue of *Radical Philosophy*. This review will try to provide a backdrop to the interview and to the debate by setting out and assessing the themes of the book.

They seem easy enough to state. The book is, above all else, an attack on the tradition which sees philosophy as, essentially, epistemology. Its central concern on that view is the adjudication of claims to knowledge, and since culture is the assemblage of

such claims, philosophy is foundational in respect to the rest of culture. Epistemology, since its invention in the seventeenth century, has been pursued as a general theory of representations, images in that great mirror of nature which is the human mind. The roots of this way of thinking go back, however, to the foundations of Western thought, to the Greek insistence that man's essence is 'to know', and that knowledge is to be conceived of by analogy with perception and explicated through the use of ocular metaphors. As against all this, Rorty's main philosophical thesis is that knowledge is a matter not of a certain relation between subject and reality but, of social justification, of what is endorsed by one's community or of what one can get away with in conversation with one's peers. This in turn yields a conception of philosophy in which epistemology is succeeded by hermeneutics and knowledge by edification. It is no longer to be seen as foundational, as concerned to establish a permanent, neutral matrix for all inquiry, but rather as itself a particular cultural genre, a 'voice in the conversation of mankind'.

The major difficulty with the book arises in regard to its positive aspect, its alternative vision of philosophy. The difficulty is not, as Rorty seems to suggest in the interview, that the vision is incompletely spelled out: it is that what is said about it is not coherent. This shows itself in a straightforward way in the language of the presentation. Hermeneutics, we are told, is 'what we get when we are no longer epistemological' (p.325). But the chapters which expand this idea do so in incompatible ways. In Chapter 7 it is consistently maintained that the epistemology-hermeneutics contrast is one between 'discourse about normal and about abnormal discourse' (p.346), so that hermeneutics is 'the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse' (p.320). The doctrine of Chapter 8 is that hermeneutics is *itself* abnormal discourse. Moreover, 'to insist on being hermeneutic where epistemology would do' is to make ourselves able to view normal discourse 'only from within our own abnormal discourse' (p.366). Hermeneutics is, it now appears, abnormal discourse about normal discourse, the mirror image, as it were, of the previous conception. Perhaps Rorty simply changed his mind between chapters, and it may be that the incongruity can, in any case, be resolved at some deeper level. But the puzzle should not be left to the reader to sort out.

There are other puzzles in this area. Hermeneutics is linked in Chapter 8 to the project of 'edification', that is, of 'finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking' (p.360). Edifying philosophy, we are told, is 'supposed to be abnormal' (p.360), is 'peripheral' as opposed to 'mainstream' (p.367), is 'essentially reactive' (p.366) and 'can be *only* reactive' (p.378). This line of thought is intelligible enough as it stands. But Rorty also wishes to take seriously the suggestion that epistemology-centred philosophy is merely 'an episode in the history of European culture', to be comprehensively superseded by edification: 'Perhaps philosophy will become purely edifying ...' (p.394). It is at best not obvious how all philosophy could conceivably be 'abnormal', 'peripheral' and 'reactive'. Once again the reader seems entitled to more guidance than the text provides.

The charge of incoherence can draw support from elsewhere. It arises also in connection with the idea of conversation. Edifying philosophy aims at 'continuing a conversation', and philosophy in general is best appreciated as a voice in the conversation of mankind. There are various grounds for misgiving here. For one thing, it is far from clear what taking part in a conversation involves. On the negative side, Rorty insists that it is not merely an 'exchange of views' and positively, that it is

'saying something' (pp.371-72). These are enigmatic clues, but they are all we get. Obviously there is an element of paradox in the fact that philosophy's credentials in the conversation of mankind rest on the superseded tradition of Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Husserl. Moreover, the invocation of Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein as the pillars of the edifying alternative seems adventitious and unconvincing. At any rate, all awareness of contemporary reports of what it was actually like to encounter the last two of these figures socially must be repressed, if one is not to find something risible in the idea of them as heroes of the cause of conversation. The real problem, however, lies elsewhere.

It lies in the fact that the image of the conversation of mankind is a deeply discordant element in the scheme of the book. The phrase itself and the inspiration behind it are, as Rorty acknowledges, derived from Michael Oakeshott. The implication is clear in Oakeshott, and is any case hard to avoid, that the conversation of mankind is a blending of past and present, a communion of the living and the dead to which all the 'voices' contribute in their own distinctive, unitary 'modes'. This is a wholly ahistorical conception, a paradigm of the 'attempt to escape from history' of which Rorty accuses traditional philosophy. As such, it is the characteristic product of the declining days of a school, English Idealism, which he explicitly recognises as being, even in its best days, resolutely non-historicist (p.165). How can it be reconciled with his own much-canvassed historicism, his feeling for the discontinuity and diversity of ages and cultures and his sense of the significance of abnormalities in discourse, of 'incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary'?

The conception is problematic in other ways. It is presented by Oakeshott in an idiom that straddles the language of aesthetics and that of etiquette. This aspect is whole-heartedly taken up by Rorty. Philosophical judgement becomes for him a species of connoisseurship, with terms such as 'tact' and 'civility' the key instruments. Thus, we are told: 'To think of Wittgenstein and Heidegger has having views about how things are is not to be wrong about how things are exactly; it is just poor taste' (p.372). This is surely an admission of intellectual collapse. In the quasi-aesthetic mode, one might suggest that here American philosophy has achieved decadence at one bound. The question that arises is how it was possible for a tough-minded historicist to fall for a concept as precious and vapid as 'the conversation of mankind'. Why should a sophisticated, contemporary Mid-Westerner assume the persona of a fake eighteenth-century English gentleman? The answer must lie in something deeply congenial in the Oakeshottian vision. It may be poor taste to say so, but its appeal seems to be fundamentally ideological.

What is appealing is Oakeshott's conservatism. In this context the image of the conversation of mankind is wholly appropriate in so far as it sponsors a contemplative acceptance of the perennial riches of the human condition. Rorty's conservatism, however, is overlain with radical rhetoric. He likes to tease, but always with the final assurance that this philosophy too leaves everything as it is. The urge to have your cake and eat it finds expression in ways that are sometimes mundane, even slightly comic. Thus, it might be supposed that the thesis of the book has depressing implications for the practice of philosophy as a sociological reality. After all, it tells us that the analytic movement 'now has little more to do' (p.173), and, more generally, that the professional philosopher's self-image collapses with the loss of the mirror of nature idea (p.392). Perhaps, to put it crudely, we should start worrying about our jobs? It is hard not to feel that the

frisson the book has induced in the profession has something to do with such suspicions. Rorty is sensitive to this aspect of the situation and at the end of the book takes steps to render it harmless. He notes that the rejection of the old professional self-image might seem to 'entail the claim that there can or should be no such profession'. But 'this does not follow', more especially because 'the need for teachers who have read the great dead philosophers is quite enough to insure that there will be philosophy departments as long as there are universities' (p. 393). The terms of this reassurance are precisely weighted. The residual need is for people to teach the writings of the mighty dead. This should indeed serve to secure philosophy a legitimate place in the academy, with the status of, say, classical philology. That is to say, it suffices to guarantee a philosophy department in Princeton, though not in Peoria. The expansion of the profession in recent years in the United States and Britain has been lubricated by the sense, obscurely felt and yet influential inside and outside the academy, that the philosophers were on to something important or, at any rate, prestigious. This generous view can scarcely be accommodated to the claim that their role is to be expositors of a handful of classic texts. Institutional arrangements can, of course, survive the loss of their legitimating ideas. Nevertheless, this loss must always be a serious matter, and Rorty's fellow professionals do well to regard him as a dangerous person, for all his innocent airs.

His conservative instincts work against the grain of his thesis in more important ways. The tension shows itself in the way the argument loses its grip whenever reassurance is being dispensed. Thus, for instance, we are told that 'the view that there is no permanent neutral matrix within which the dramas of inquiry and history are enacted has as a corollary that criticism of one's culture can only be piecemeal and partial - never "by reference to eternal standards"' (p.179). There is a false opposition here, and without it the claim that criticism must be piecemeal is merely gratuitous. If one has 'eternal standards' to refer to, criticism can be as piecemeal as one likes. The standards license it to home in on objects of any level of generality in the human world. The point is surely that in the light of such standards the distinction between what is and what is not piecemeal and partial, so significant for Rorty's 'holism', is of no theoretical interest. If, however, one takes him literally it becomes quite hard to see how piecemeal criticism is even possible, or, at any rate, how it can ever be justified. For, on his account, justification at this level must presumably be in terms of those culturally accepted practices which the criticism is calling into question. On the other hand, his historicism makes it easy enough to see how criticism can be directed to the whole. For it can appeal to the conception of a systematically different way of doing things. After all, the questioning of the philosophical tradition in the name of an edifying alternative shows what is possible. Moreover, Rorty's thinking in this area draws, as he explains, on the Kuhnian distinction between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' science. He should therefore have no difficulty in acknowledging the link between criticism and the kind of paradigm switch that Kuhn describes. He should be prepared, if ideology did not get in the way, to present himself as a prophet of revolutions in the realm of concepts.

This is to suggest that the logic of his theory makes him a kind of Young Hegelian. The idea is not as fanciful as it may appear. From one point of view the interest of the book lies in the way it displays the whole analytical movement struggling to catch up with Hegel, who figures as a discreet, yet powerful, presence throughout. He stands, as Rorty recognizes,

at variance with the Kantian-epistemological tradition that is the chief target, and, perhaps for that reason, the references to him are by no means unsympathetic. Thus, there is something highly agreeable, at least to the present reviewer, in the explanation of why Hegelianism failed to appeal to the professors: it 'made philosophy too popular, too interesting, too important, to be properly professional' (p.135). That history is currently permitting a second shot at the ivory tower is strongly suggested by Jay Rosenberg's conclusion, quoted by Rorty: 'we must come to see the physical universe as an integrated physical system which necessarily "grows knowers" and which thereby comes to mirror itself within itself' (p.297). Moreover, Rorty keeps a careful eye on the links between Hegel and the heroes of analytical philosophy. Thus, he refers to the 'Hegelian implications' of Quine's 'behaviorism and holism' (p.195) and to Sellars's self-description of 'Empiricism and the philosophy of Mind' as 'incipient *Méditations Hégéliennes* (p.192). One can hardly help feeling that if only the closet Hegelians in the analytical movement would come out, the whole business might yet limp on to Feuerbach. All sorts of possibilities must surely then open up.

The opposition to historicism and conservatism is but one instance of a tendency to face different ways at once. Some others may be briefly noted.

(1) Rorty seems uncertain where he stands as regards the fact-value distinction. Thus, Sellars is commended for keeping it (p.180, n.13) and Gadamer for giving it up (p.364). Moreover, their treatment of it is in each case taken to be central to their achievement.

(2) It is not clear how the various accounts of 'truth' fit together. It is referred to indifferently as 'what it is better for us to believe' (p.10) and as 'what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying' (p.176). These formulas, standing respectively, one might suppose, for Rorty's pragmatism and his epistemological behaviourism, do not obviously amount to the same thing. Neither can safely be identified with a third, 'the homely use of "true" to mean roughly "what you can defend against all comers"' (p.308). This use has nothing 'homely' about it, as anyone who tries it out on their nearest and dearest will surely discover. It is a philosopher's construct designed to flatter the professional debater who alone will find it plausible to think, as Rorty puts it elsewhere, of 'rational certainty' as 'a matter of victory in argument' (p.156). It is not easy to see how one can simultaneously be pragmatist, behaviourist and sophist in this area.

(3) Structural uncertainties are reflected in the curiously short-winded character of the discussion at key points. For one who values continuing the conversation above all else, it is remarkable how often Rorty confesses to being able to see how something or other should be 'debated' or 'argued' (e.g. pp.28, 97, 178, 364; cf. interview on the impossibility of arguing with Kripke). Perhaps the most important example of this enervation is the handling of Kuhn's suggestion that 'there is a serious and unresolved problem about why the scientific enterprise has been doing so nicely lately', in the sense of 'repeatedly producing powerful new techniques for prediction and control'. This is, of course, the central problem to which scientific realism addresses itself, and through which it has made its fortunes in recent years. Rorty's response is to recommend that we should not feel it acutely and should not regret our inability to resolve it: here as elsewhere, the rule is that there is nothing to be done but describe 'what counts as justification within the various disciplinary matrices constituting the culture of the day' (p.340). This laid back attitude will seem unimpressive if one allows that philosophy may, and should, be responsive to

cultural concerns outside the academy. In our day nuclear issues are among the most pressing of these, and they provide also a spectacular illustration of the link between theoretical advance and technology. Rorty might have been expected to deal more responsibly with the intellectual challenge of understanding science as the voice in the conversation of mankind that makes it possible to put a stop to the conversation. But even if the whole enterprise, or at least the European role in it, now seems set to end with a bang, it is still a pity that analytical philosophy should go before with such a tiny whimper, however elegantly emitted.

The elegance, at any rate, is not in doubt. The literary merits of Rorty's book are substantial and do much to account for its impact. Its style is vigorous, supple, self-assured, with many incidental felicities of expression. More narrowly intellectual merits are evident chiefly in the treatment of the history of ideas. This displays mastery of the material, a fresh eye for its connections and disconnections and the ability to fix the results in striking generalisations. Admittedly, it is all done in terms of the achievements of Great Men, Descartes' 'invention of the mind' and so on, and this individualised historiography sits somewhat oddly with the socialized epistemology, the sense of the community as the source of epistemic authority. But within its familiar limits, it is a valuable and stimulating discussion. It is perhaps ironic that Rorty should be best at the broad historical sweep and fairly unimpressive, as this review has tended to show, as regards the feature for which, in the interview, he particularly commends the analytical movement, the 'insistence on detail and mechanics'. But, of course, it is a commonplace enough sort of pathos to find individuals and movements priding themselves most on qualities they do not in fact possess.

In other ways Rorty is admirably self-aware. Behind the flamboyance, he is intelligently modest in his conception of the book, insisting that it adds

little to the ideas of its heroes, but is concerned rather to present them in a therapeutically effective way (pp.7, 13). As a cultural document which crystallizes certain tendencies of the day, its importance is indeed undeniable. It is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand current stirrings in the academy, and, more especially, the rapprochement now in process between certain elements of the analytical and continental traditions. It does nothing, however, to ease suspicions that this development is being conceived along somewhat opportunist lines and is fuelled on one side by the simple discovery that Heidegger, Gadamer, Foucault and Derrida are eminently assimilatable, and, once one gets over their exotic idiom, represent no threat to anything. There is obviously a negative lesson here, that of showing what radical philosophy in these times is not. But Rorty's pioneering efforts have also something positive to teach. Here one must return to the project of edification to note that he wishes to retain the implication of relevance to guiding moral choices (pp.384, 388). If one combines this point with recalling the distinctive ideological cast of his own practical preferences, the contrast between knowledge philosophy and edification philosophy begins to sound like a variation on one of the oldest of themes, that of lordship and bondage:

The toad beneath the harrow knows
Exactly where each tooth-point goes;
The butterfly upon the road
Preaches contentment to that toad.

In the context of this dialectic Rorty's book appears as an attempt to unite the academy in the West behind the edifying discourses of the butterfly. Any alternative approach must try its stand on the knowledge of the toad, and seek to be the voice of that knowledge. It still has no better starting point than Hegel's treatment of the theme, with its assurance that the future belongs to the toad as the agent of spirit.



m/f

a feminist journal

no 7 July 1982

Family Affairs: Parveen Adams

Political Lesbianism and Feminism –
Space for a Sexual Politics? : Hilary Allen

Women – A Reserve Army of Labour? : Jenny Somerville

Prostitution and Feminism in 19th
Century Britain : Nancy Wood

Reviews & Discussion

£1.80 UK £2.20 Europe £2.50 US

22 Chepstow Crescent, London W11 3EB

FRAMEWORK

WHAT are the "politics of representation"?

HOW are you structured by Hollywood hegemony?

WHO controls the myth-machines of broadcasting?

WHERE are Independent and Third World cinemas driving the wedge?

WE MAY NOT HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS,
BUT AT LEAST WE'RE ASKING THE QUESTIONS

FRAMEWORK,
English and American Studies,
University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ.

CURRENT ISSUE – 19
Dulac: Archaeology of Film Theory/Classic American Cinema: Samuel Fuller
interview, Scheib on SHOCK CORRIDOR/Cinema Action's SO THAT YOU
CAN LIVE dossier/TV: Documentary/Hollywood Corner: REDS/ESCAPE
ROUTE TO MARSEILLES part III/LIFE AND DEATH OF A HOLLYWOOD
EXTRA script/News/Festivals/Books...

FRAMEWORK published 3 times yearly. £1.00.
IN FRAMEWORK 18: Mayakovsky on Cinema and
Theatre (1913-1927); Simpson, 'Fraying' in Defence
of Film Theory; David Will asking 'Questions of
Psychoanalysis, Questions of Heidegger'; Chasen on So
that you can Live; Wyer-the Police on British TV;
interview with Ken Loach; Escape Route to Marseille
part I: debate on film festivals and Latin American
coverage; Willemen, Coed, Ranneau; script of Raynal's
New York Story; Wollen and Sitney on Avant-gardes;
News, Books, Periodicals....

RATES:
SUBSCRIBERS(not institutions): £1.20/£2.50 per issue.
Subscribe to as many issues as you wish (up to a maximum
of 10), or complete your collection with back issues (No. 8
onwards still available).
INSTITUTIONS: SPECIAL BACK RUN COMPLETE SET
INCLUDING OUT OF PRINT ISSUES 1-5 (Only a few
still available) Issues 1-19 for £45/£95. Subscriptions: 3
issues £5.50/£18.00, 6 issues £12.00/£35.00.