Two Perspectives on Richard Rorty

I: From Philosophy to Post-philosophy

An Interview with Richard Rorty

conducted by Wayne Hudson and Wim van Reijen

Q. Professor Rorty, you have recently written a book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, which has aroused comment throughout the English speaking world. In it you argue that the analytical movement in philosophy has run its course and that a more hermeneutical kind of philosophy is now required. Could you perhaps say something about your way into philosophy, the main stages in your development, and the tendencies in your own thinking which you have had to struggle against most?*

A. As an undergraduate I went to the University of Chicago, to a university with a curriculum devised by a philosopher where you were given the impression that anyone worth anything would study philosophy. I stayed on for graduate work at Chicago. My teachers there were Rudolf Carnap the logical positivist, Charles Hartshorne a disciple of Whitehead and Richard McKeon an historian of philosophy. I worked with Hartshorne on speculative metaphysics and wrote a lot about Whitehead. After getting my Master's degree I went to Yale, where there were the same alternatives: Carl Hempel in place of Carnap, Paul Weiss in place of Hartshorne, and Robert Brumbaugh in place of McKeon. There I wrote a thesis comparing Aristotle on *dunamis* with the seventeenth century rationalists on the notion of possibility. It was a very McKeonite, comparative, piece. My interests until 1960 were historical and metaphysical. Then I got a job at Wellesley, a small college near New York. My colleagues there explained to me that I was behind the times and ought to find out what was going on in the world of philosophy. So I read the then fashionable Oxford philosophers (Austin, Ryle, Strawson). Earlier I had read the logical positivists but not liked them much. I also read Wittgenstein's *Investigations* for the first time and that made a great difference. So I changed from being an old-fashioned philosopher to being an up-to-date analytical philosopher partly as a result of pressure from my peers. When I got a job at Princeton after having been at Wellesley for three years, even more pressure was applied. There were certain things one had to know. I then spent about ten years trying to do things with Sellars and Wittgenstein within the framework of contemporary analytical philosophy. In the early seventies I got sick of that and tried to do something larger in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which was very much the old McKeonite trick of taking the larger historical view. The tendencies which I have had to struggle against most have been, on the one hand, the temptation to avoid contact with contemporary discussion and just be historical, and, on the other, the temptation to become so immersed in contemporary discussion that I just write journal articles.

Q. Have your views changed since you wrote *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature?*

A. The main change I'm aware of is getting considerably more respect for the late Heidegger. I used to think of Heidegger as having a brilliant grasp of the historical tendencies which led to what he thought of as the late Nietzsche, and what I think of as pragmatism. But I thought that his view of the Greeks was merely nostalgic. I now think I was wrong and that the late Heidegger had a much subtler view. I am now trying to write a book called *Heidegger Against the Pragmatists* to give an account of how Heidegger managed to see Nietzsche's quasi-pragmatism as dialectically correct (in the sense that if you were in the Western tradition Nietzsche was where you were going to end up) but nonetheless as a *reductio ad absurdam* of that tradition.

Q. What faults do you now detect in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature?*

A. I think that what may be wrong with the book is that I take the positivistic therapeutic enterprise of clearing away pseudo-problems terribly seriously. Sometimes I think I've overdone it. The book has been read by non-philosophers as blowing the whistle on analytic philosophy and all it stands for, whereas it seems to me to be an attempt to carry out the positivists' original programme.

Q. Are you worried that the effect of your book may be different from that which you intended?

A. Yes I am. The book should not be read as an attack on analytical philosophy. What I was trying to say was that there is a dialectical strand within analytical philosophy which fulfils itself in the American philosophers Quine and Sellars in a way which leads back to Dewey and the American Pragmatists. Of course, Quine and Sellars don't like what I make of

their work. They don't want to see analytical philosophy as veering back to Dewey.

Q. Many people will want to ask you why Dewey? What can we still learn from him?

A. I think Dewey and James are the best guides to understanding the modern world that we've got, and that it's a question of putting pragmatism into better shape after thirty years of super-professionalism.

Q. But such a reformulated pragmatism might differ considerably from your own views. What, for example, do you make of Dewey's theory of experience?

A. I regard that as the worst part of Dewey. I'd be glad if he had never written *Experience and Nature*.

Q. But if, as you suggest, philosophers give up the idea of truth as accurate representation, then might not a theory of experience be important for philosophy which had abandoned both the attempt to find foundations and the search for a theory of knowledge?

A. I'd prefer 'discourse' to 'experience'.

Q. How far are you worried by the charge that at the end of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature you fail to provide an adequate account of the form which future philosophy should take?

A. The sense that people have at the end of the book that I should have answered the question 'What should philosophy do *now*?' is probably my fault. The way I hoped they would react was to say that maybe the notion of philosophy as a discipline or a distinct sector of culture had run its course. Philosophy as we understand it was something invented by the German Idealists between about 1780 and 1830 as a candidate for the leadership of culture. After that, no one believed in it anymore. Since then it's just become another academic discipline, but with pretentions. I agree with the late Heidegger that the science/poetry/philosophy distinctions we have lived with are outmoded, and, in particular, the notion of philosophers as the people who can provide the rest of culture with a framework. It seems to me that the demand that there be something for philosophy to be is unfounded. It assumes that there is some normal, necessary, human activity called philosophy.

Q. Nonetheless, isn't the sense of intellectual parsimony which pervades the book to some extent a legacy from ideas which imply that there is something for philosophy to be?

A. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* I was perhaps in transit. I now think that what I should have tried to do at the end of the book was to make a transition from philosophy as a discipline to a larger and looser activity.

Q. One could question whether that would have been enough if, as you suggest, philosophy is now coming to an end and we are entering a period of post-philosophy. You say in one of your articles that pragmatism is the philosophical equivalent of literary modernism. Isn't modernism a rather old trick to bring out at this stage?

A. Not in philosophy, which in this respect has lagged behind. I agree that in the culture as a whole it looks a little stale.

Q. You are conspicuous among contemporary analytical philosophers in your positive reassertion of the post-philosophical significance of creative imagination. To what extent do you think that we need a greater awareness in philosophy of the effectivity of stories?

A. Surely what the French philosophers and the Yale literary critics are doing is helping us to see how we live in story after story after story. Perhaps the Yale literary critic Harold Bloom does it best. He's currently writing a huge book on Freud which just might provide us with a way of reading Freud as a figure in the Romantic tradition. People like Derrida and De Man [another Yale literary critic], on the other hand, still seem to me to have too much respect for philosophy.

Q. Have you particular criticisms of contemporary French philosophy?

A. What I find disturbing about the fashionable French is that they aren't utopian. They hold out no hope. I think that their position is an over-reaction. I have written a comparison between Dewey and Foucault in which I argue that Foucault's stuff on truth as only being available as a product of power is simply saying what Dewey said: that discourse and truth are made possible by community life. Of course, calling it power sounds more pejorative. But Dewey was a utopian thinker who tried to create a culture in which setting up heroes was a natural form of cultural advance. Whereas Foucault doesn't want any heroes. Almost as though philosophers have no right to have heroes.

Q. Did Heidegger have any heroes?

A. Hölderlin. The poets of the past.

Q. If you recognise the need for a degree of utopianism in philosophy, shouldn't you make more methodological provision for it? Isn't there a contradiction in your work between the tough-minded eliminative side, which is largely continuous with the old analytical philosophy, and the more tender-minded side where you want philosophy to do things for which you don't provide adequate methods?

A. I don't see that.

Q. Perhaps it's another way of asking you if your position is not really too conservative? If you are really not still too close to old style analytical philosophy? Take the philosophy of psychology. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature you attack the Cartesian understanding of human beings which implies that we have minds as well as bodies. You speak instead of persons without minds. That's in the old negative tendency of analytical philosophy. But couldn't you approach it differently. Couldn't you ask how far persons can change what they can become by ascribing to themselves counter-factual properties?

A. But the human ability to change character by redescribing oneself is not an attempt to discover the nature of the mind. It's an attempt to create something for human beings to be that they have never been before.

Q. But then isn't the distinction which you draw in your work between empirical description and moral deliberation too dualistic? Doesn't it perhaps reflect the influence of the Geisteswissenschaften tradition which you yourself criticise Charles Taylor for advocating?

A. I agree that you could read some passages in my writings without ever realising that most moral

deliberation does take the form of finding new forms of self-description. So I guess that I made too much of that dichotomy.

Q. One of the most interesting things in your work may be that you suggest that analytical philosophy is watered down Kantianism which should now abandon its transcendental project or the attempt to construct a single neutral matrix in terms of which all questions can be judged. Could you expand on this?

A. The fundamental mistake of transcendental philosophy, it seems to me, is to take one form of discourse and to say that it has been so successful that there must be something in it through which we can discover the secret of rationality. I think that analytical philosophy is a recent variation on this transcendental theme, which, in so far as it is a Kantian transcendental enterprise, has the faults of all such enterprises.

Q. But you don't see this as going to the methods used by analytical philosophy?

A. No. I think that analytical philosophy can keep its highly professional methods, the insistence on detail and mechanics, and just drop its transcendental project. I'm not out to criticise analytical philosophy as a style. It's a good style. I think the years of super-professionalism were beneficial.

Q. Aren't there passages in your work which suggest that you yearn for another style? That philosophy should acquire a new vocabulary?

A. In philosophy as therapy, as in psychoanalysis, no special vocabulary is useful. Philosophy as a free-floating criticism of culture does not require a special vocabulary. It's continuous with the kind of writing you get throughout the academy. If you think of Skinner and Dunn in England, Foucault in France and Clifford Geertz and Lionel Trilling in the United States, they are or were really in the same business. Although some of them are philosophers and some of them are not.

Q. If you think that philosophy should be social and cultural criticism because the more ambitious tasks which it has set itself simply cannot be performed, would you want to argue this, not simply in terms of the competence of philosophy as a discipline, but in terms of a doctrine of the radical finitude of man? Are you, after all, influenced by Kant?

A. Certainly by Heidegger's book on Kant. The late Heidegger finds words to express this finitude. I think it's a question of conserving the realisation of it, rather than of attempting to turn it into another theory.

Q. As a pragmatist you tend to evaluate doctrines in terms of their historical success. Doesn't that make it difficult for you to maintain a rationally justifiable critical approach to the way things turn out? To the path which historical tendencies take?

A. I agree that there is something conservative about pragmatism. Nonetheless, it seems to me that devotion to concrete historical contents is something one loses at one's peril. One then falls into utopianism in the bad sense when people begin to kill each other for abstract principles.

Q. But you don't have a stronger notion of utility than simply historical tendency, how things worked out?

A. No, I don't. I think it's a trap to be avoided. It leads to setting up entities above history.

Q. But does that leave you with an adequate position in moral philosophy? How, for example, can one know who acts well or badly?

A. As Kantian individual selves we could not do it. As members of a community we do it all the time. Those who act badly are those who behave contrary to the project which makes us the community we are.

Q. If, however, you take the pragmatist approach here, in what terms would you develop a moral criticism of current social rules?

A. The only way we can criticise current social rules is by reference to utopian notions which proceed by taking elements in the tradition and showing how unfulfilled they are.

Q. Would you think that the only way one could criticise a Nazi guard in a concentration camp was by reference to utopian notions?

A. By reference to what to him would seem utopian notions. Given his education, it would be a question of saying that there is a picture of Europe very different from yours in which all this wasn't necessary. Moral criticism is too easy here. It's as easy to say that someone is doing wrong as it is to kill him. What is difficult is to say why we aren't doing it too.

Q. You once edited a very influential anthology called The Linguistic Turn. Do you now think that in some areas the turn to language in analytical philosophy made the real philosophical issues more difficult to see? For example, in the philosophy of psychology?

A. I see what you mean in the case of Gilbert Ryle or Norman Malcolm. But do you think it affects a philosopher like Daniel Dennett? At the moment I'm trying to persuade the people in Heidelberg that in the philosophy of psychology Dennett is all anyone needs.

Q. Despite your enthusiasm for pragmatism, your own approach to psychological questions is neo-behaviourist rather than pragmatist. What do you make of the psychological doctrines of William James?

A. I confess that I never finished his book on psychology. I think that in his philosophical books he was defending his father's religious views against nineteenth century positivism.

Q. There is a lot of interest currently among philosophers in the essentialist logical doctrines of Saul Kripke, who is also at Princeton. What is your attitude to Kripke?

A. I find him arguable with. He seems to me to be saying: take all the intuitions you can think of which are anti-pragmatic and I'll give you a philosophy of language which matches those intuitions. But how one could argue whether one *wanted* these concepts I can't imagine. I have the same reaction to Thomas Nagel, who was at Princeton until recently. Nagel has a deep sense of the problems of philosophical realism as being the problems to work on, and his work is getting more and more interesting - especially towards the end of his new book, *Mortal Questions*, where he emphasises that the traditional philosophical problems are not just historical, but still relevant. He and Kripke fit together beautifully. But I don't think either

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 metaphilosophical 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 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

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