

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

**Richard Rorty: Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature:
Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition**

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2009, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links Class Use and other Permissions. For more information, send email to: permissions@press.princeton.edu

*Introduction to the
Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition*

MICHAEL WILLIAMS

In memory of Richard Rorty, teacher and friend.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature sent shock waves through the ranks of professional philosophers. Thirty years on, it remains a book that anyone interested in philosophy ought to read—or re-read, for Rorty’s arguments are as vital today as when they first appeared. Rorty’s book is a visionary work that challenges us to rethink our understanding of the philosophical enterprise. It is the single greatest influence on the revival of American Pragmatism, one of the most exciting developments in philosophy today. Its influence has been felt far beyond the confines of academic philosophy.

Mirror is a work of enormous scope and ambition, ranging over epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and much else besides. However, Rorty’s intent is less to defend positions within these areas of philosophy than to call into question the very idea of philosophy as a professionalized discipline with a distinctive subject matter.

Rorty sees philosophy, as it came to be understood in the last century, as an attempt to work through the consequences of a conception of knowledge as *accurate representation*, a conception rooted in the metaphor of mind as the mirror of nature. From its seventeenth-century origins, principally in the writings of Descartes, this metaphor leads to the emergence of what Rorty calls “philosophy-as-epistemology,” with its canonical list of textbook problems: the mind-body problem, skepticism, the nature of truth, and the rest. According to Rorty, we should not keep trying to solve such problems, which have evolved into forms designed to resist solution. Better to put them behind us.

It is all very well to suggest that certain problems *should* be

set aside. But *can* they be? To break their intellectual hold on us, we need arguments to convince us that they are dispensable. Further, these arguments must not themselves imply epistemological or metaphysical commitments of the sort that we are trying to escape. This is a tall order. Consider the Logical Positivists, who were as hostile as anyone to traditional philosophical theorizing: because their rejection of metaphysics rests on a paradigm instance of philosophy-as-epistemology—the verifiability theory of meaning—they perpetuate the genre. Appreciating this danger, we might be tempted to seek an exit from philosophy-as-epistemology through the more purely therapeutic strategies that we find in Austin or Wittgenstein. However, his admiration for Austin and Wittgenstein notwithstanding, Rorty is suspicious of the idea that philosophical problems are “nonsensical” or result from abuses (or misunderstandings) of ordinary language. Anything has a sense if you give it one; and who knows where ordinary ways of talking end and philosophical theory takes over?

Rorty takes a different approach. His way out of philosophy-as-epistemology turns on a broadly pragmatic outlook that he calls “epistemological behaviorism.” Epistemological behaviorism is not a commitment to reduce mental activity to overt behavior but a methodological stance. As an epistemological behaviorist, he examines human thought and knowledge from a public, third-person standpoint, treating language as communicative and knowledge as the result of argument and discussion. Differences lacking practical import have no theoretical significance either.

Although Rorty eschews the pragmatist label, finding the term “a bit overladen” (p. 176), his epistemological-behaviorist stance is a paradigm of pragmatism, as recently characterized by David Macarthur and Huw Price.¹ According to

¹ David Macarthur and Huw Price, “Pragmatism and Quasi-Realism,” in *New Pragmatists*, ed. Cheryl Misak, 95–97 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Rorty identifies himself as a pragmatist in the introduction to his first collection of essays, entitled (appropriately enough) *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

Macarthur and Price, who acknowledge Rorty's influence, contemporary pragmatism combines two commitments. The first is to linguistic priority: don't start by asking about the nature of mind, knowledge, etc.; start by asking what we are doing in deploying mentalistic or epistemological vocabulary. This is very much how Rorty proceeds. The second is to antirepresentationalism, which counsels us to avoid approaching our various vocabularies in ways that make *theoretical use* of representationalist notions such as truth (as correspondence to fact) or reference (e.g., as some naturalistically explicable word-world relation). Antirepresentationalism—the rejection of the idea of mind (or language) as the mirror of nature—is the leitmotif of Rorty's book.

Rorty's pragmatism incorporates a kind of naturalism. This claim may strike those who know something of Rorty's work as implausible. Naturalism is often associated with physicalism, just the sort of metaphysical doctrine that Rorty deprecates. But here we can invoke Price's useful distinction between *object naturalism* and *subject naturalism*. An object naturalist starts with a view about what sorts of things fundamentally exist, giving himself the task of accommodating things that do not seem to fit easily into his ontological scheme. For example, a physicalistic naturalist will wonder how (or whether) meanings or values find a place in a world of elementary particles. By contrast, a subject naturalist simply takes up an empirical attitude toward human practices.² Subject naturalism is thus more methodological than metaphysical. A subject naturalist may well turn a critical eye on object naturalism, asking how we have to be conceiving physical or psychological vocabulary to get into metaphysical difficulties in the first place. Rorty is just this kind of subject naturalist. As Price has remarked, Rorty is not just a kind of naturalist *within* philosophy; he is a naturalist in his examination *of* philosophy.³

² Huw Price, "Naturalism without Representationalism," in *Naturalism in Question*, ed. David Macarthur and Mario de Caro (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³ Personal communication.

Now naturalists, subject naturalists included, typically hold that there is no clear line between philosophy and the natural sciences, or even that philosophy is just science at its most abstract and general. Rorty avoids this kind of scientism. Though respectful of the natural sciences, he does not suppose that scientific knowledge exhausts empirical knowledge. Nor does he suppose that the natural sciences—even psychology—are especially relevant to his philosophical concerns. Rather, he turns for illumination to the history of ideas. As Robert Brandom notes, Rorty’s philosophy is a synthesis of naturalism and *historicism*.⁴

Rorty’s historicism is rational rather than sociological. Rorty practices what is sometimes called “internal” history. Philosophy-as-epistemology follows a rationally intelligible career. It begins with new ideas that respond to reasonable motives. It develops through responding to problems generated by those ideas. Finally, it subjects its founding ideas to devastating criticism, transcending and canceling itself.

Historicism blends readily with antirepresentationalism. On Rorty’s antirepresentationalist view, language is better understood as a set of tools rather than as the mirror of nature. Like new tools, new ways of talking do not simply enable us to cope better with *existing* projects and problems: they give us new things to do. In the light of new problems and projects, old ways of talking may come to seem more trouble than they are worth, in which case problems couched in their terms may reasonably be dropped.⁵

This is an unsettling suggestion. Philosophical problems are often thought to be perennial: available to anyone who reflects deeply on the human condition. To be sure, solutions to philosophical problems may be highly theoretical; but the problems themselves are “intuitive,” independent of tendentious theoretical ideas. Rorty’s historicism makes him

⁴ Robert Brandom, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism,” in *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). This volume is essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in Rorty.

⁵ *Ibid.*

suspicious of intuition. An air of intuitiveness may indicate nothing more than familiarity with certain ways of talking. History can make the familiar strange again, revealing the contingency of supposedly ineluctable starting points for philosophical reflection.

Rorty blends linguistic priority, antirepresentationalism, and historical explanation in a way that analytic philosophers were unused to. Granted, Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* proceeds along similar lines. But Dewey wasn't (and isn't) much read in analytic circles; and in any case, Rorty's diagnostic narrative is far superior in depth and detail.

Rorty's reconstruction of the rise and fall of philosophy-as-epistemology embodies a conception of epistemology that connects it with *demarcation projects*. Paradigm demarcational questions are "Which forms of discourse express genuine knowledge and which are merely expressive?" or "What belongs to reason and what to faith?" Since the poles of such antitheses are never accorded equal value, demarcational projects assign forms of discourse to upper and lower divisions, with profound consequences for our sense of what is important in our culture. Because of these consequences, philosophy itself comes to seem supremely important. Rorty's demanding conception of epistemology explains why philosophy *matters*. If we subtract its larger ambitions, as many philosophers today are inclined to do, epistemology degenerates into a scholastic enterprise. (Remember the Gettier problem.)

Demarcational ambitions emerge very early in our Western intellectual tradition and from the beginning turn on problematic contrasts: *physis* (nature) versus *nomos* (convention), philosophy versus poetry, logic versus rhetoric. However, the principal object of Rorty's attention is *modern* philosophy. Rorty first investigates modern philosophy's heroic age, from Descartes to Kant, when the problems that continue to shape philosophical thinking first acquire recognizable shape. Two problems in particular we owe to Descartes: the skeptical problem concerning our knowledge of the external world, and the mind-body problem. Rorty stresses the

novelty of Descartes's problems, which he traces to Descartes's original conception of the mind.⁶ Provocatively, Rorty speaks of Descartes's *invention* of the mind (Chapter 1).

Prior to Descartes, philosophers and theologians toy with various ideas concerning the special nature of the mind (or soul): capacity for survival *post mortem*; or its capacity for *rational* knowledge, as evidenced by our ability to grasp necessary (timeless) truths and not just react to the here and now. Descartes is not insensitive to such considerations. Nevertheless, his criterion of mentality is quite different. For Descartes, the hallmark of the mental is presence to consciousness, which he identifies with *incorrigible knowability*.

Descartes invents the mind in the course of an attempt to replace the intellectual environment of Scholastic Aristotelianism with one more hospitable to the new mathematical physics.⁷ For Descartes, Aristotelianism is common sense—what we might call folk epistemology and folk physics—worked up into a philosophical system. Unfortunately, mathematical physics is wildly at variance with our common-sense conception of the world. As naively experienced, the world is replete with colors, sounds, smells, and so on. But physics teaches that, in its true nature, the world is just swarms of colorless, odorless particles, swirling about in the infinite space whose silence appalled Pascal.

The apparent conflict between common sense and physics presents three problems for Descartes:

1. Common sense is too much under the spell of perceptual experience. In particular, its folk epistemology em-

⁶ Although now more widely recognized than it was—thanks in part to renewed interest in ancient skepticism—the novelty of Descartes's problem remains underappreciated. For the difference between ancient and modern skepticism, see Myles Burnyeat's groundbreaking paper "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed," *Philosophical Review* 91, no. 1 (January 1982): 3–40.

⁷ Though Rorty does not make the point, Descartes sees this task as vitally important because, like Bacon, he holds that mechanical science promises to make us the "lords and masters of nature."

bodies a naive empiricism, according to which our concepts of things—hence our understanding of their true natures—are derived by abstraction from the deliverances of the senses. However, though mathematically intelligible, physical reality is literally unimaginable. Descartes thus associates the conflicting world-pictures with an epistemological division between “Reason” (operating with innate ideas and offering conceptual understanding) and the imagination (working with materials provided by the senses and encouraging us to equate intelligibility with picturability). He wants to convince us that the former is the ultimate source of genuine knowledge: knowledge that is both “clear” (i.e., certain) and “distinct” (i.e., so conceptually precise that we don’t make false inferences). To enforce this invidious distinction, he develops a form of skepticism that (he claims) bears unequally on Reason and the senses as potential sources of certainty and understanding.

2. Since colors and other “secondary” qualities seem to find no place in a corpuscular-mechanical world, Descartes needs somewhere to put them. Following Galileo, he partially relocates them to the mind. Physically speaking, colors are powers possessed by external objects, in virtue of their microstructural properties, to induce characteristic visual experiences in appropriately constituted observers. Greenness, as we experience it, is no more to be found in the objects that induce sensations of green than a tickle is to be found in a feather applied to our skin.
3. Rational thinking is equally recalcitrant to being understood in mechanical terms. Ideas are intrinsically “intentional” or representational. By their very nature, they are about or “of” something: a unicorn, Paris, or the square root of three. Since an intentional object (what an idea is an idea “of”) need not be a material object—indeed need not exist at all—intentionality cannot consist in any kind of causal-mechanical relation. Furthermore, rational inference is guided by our capac-

ity to grasp logical connections. It cannot be reduced to mere association between ideas, resulting from mechanical processes in the brain.

Descartes thinks that his new conception of the mind will solve the problem of the place of secondary qualities and thoughts in a mechanical universe, while underwriting the selective skepticism that his demarcational ambitions require.

In thus reconceiving the mind, Descartes puts the rational grasping of necessary truths in a box with mere sensations. But what do sensations and thoughts have in common? We have already seen the answer: “presence to consciousness.” While intrinsically representational, ideas must themselves (on pain of infinite regress) be known “immediately,” that is, without representation. Not being known by representation, they cannot be *mis*represented: immediate awareness is therefore necessarily incorrigible. Thoughts and sensations are unmissable: you can’t have them without knowing that you do; and you can’t be wrong about what thought or sensation you are having.

Cartesian representationalism marks a decisive break with Aristotelian hylomorphism. On a hylomorphic view, we know an object through sharing its form, in the way that someone’s retinal image shares a shape with the object he is looking at. The crucial feature of this view is that knowing does not involve being *aware* of a form that might or might not be shared with an object, but consists *simply* in the sharing. By contrast, Cartesian ideas are objects of immediate awareness. They need not share forms with the objects they represent and can therefore correspond more or less accurately to them.

Descartes’s representationalism is well adapted to his demarcational ambitions, especially when combined with another key move. To reinforce the plausibility of putting sensations in a box with rational thought, Descartes treats sensations as representations. The “of” in “idea (= concept) of a triangle” is the same as that in “idea (= sensation) of red.”⁸ However, although

⁸ Sellars thinks that the conflation of genuine intentionality of thought with the “quasi-intentionality” of sensation is one of the gravest errors that

sensation is a form of “thinking,” it is an epistemically second-rate form because it is inevitably *confused*. The mathematical concept of a triangle, clearly and distinctly grasped, yields certain knowledge of a true and immutable essence: with such knowledge, we cannot make bad inferences. By contrast, a sensation of red—no matter how phenomenologically vivid—is never more than a potentially misleading representation of a bodily state (or its external cause): misleading because it is apt to lead us to false conclusions. This holds even for sensory imaginings—pictures in the mind’s eye—of geometrical objects. We can *understand* the difference between a thousand- and a thousand-and-one-sided figure, but we cannot *picture* it. At best, we can picture two figures, each with lots of sides.

So far, we have been concerned with our knowledge of the natures of things. But if we are immediately aware only of our own representations, it is problematic how the senses alone can even assure us of the external world’s *existence*. A philosopher steeped in Aristotelian hylomorphism would have difficulty even understanding this problem, as many of Descartes’s contemporaries initially did. Descartes’s new conception of the mind utterly transforms the skeptical problematic, from that of responding to Pyrrhonian reservations about the possibility of attaining certainty about the real natures of things (given seemingly intractable differences of opinion in theoretical matters) to that of connecting subject and object—that is, that of reassuring ourselves that our ideas correspond to anything whatsoever and, if so, to what extent. This problem has nothing to do with controversy and everything to do with the nature of the mind. It becomes hard to see how we can know even things that no one regards as controversial.⁹

Descartes bequeathed to twentieth empiricism. See Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, with a Study Guide by Robert Brandom and Introduction by Richard Rorty (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Brandom’s study guide has its origins in a set of notes on the later sections of Sellars’s essay that Rorty developed for students in the late 1960s.

⁹ For further development of this theme, see my “Descartes’s Transformation of the Skeptical Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Skepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Descartes's conception of the mind aligns two dualisms: one epistemological (what is immediately known versus what is knowable only by inference) and the other metaphysical (between the mental/inner/nonspatial and the material/external/extended). But although the reductive programs (idealism, physicalism, etc.) prompted by these dualisms continue to command our attention, they are no more compelling than the dualisms they are meant to overcome. Rorty argues that they are not compelling at all. There is nothing ineluctable about the Cartesian conception of mind. We are not forced to put sensory "raw feels," or *qualia*, in a box with conceptual awareness. Indeed, we are not forced to recognize *qualia at all*. *Qualia* intuitions—currently thought of as the locus of the "hard" mind-body problem—are the *product* of Cartesian ways of talking, not an incontestable justification for them (see Chapter 2). We are not compelled to see intentional description as *clashing* with mechanical description, as opposed to *complementing* it. The threat of external world skepticism is not built into the human condition.

The next step in the development of philosophy-as-epistemology is taken by Locke.¹⁰ In his empirical-introspective investigation of the powers of human understanding, Locke takes for granted a generally Cartesian conception of mind, though he repudiates Descartes's innatism and providentialism. As a result, Locke creates suspicion about the idea of establishing substantive truths by a priori reflection alone. Instead, Locke ties investigation of the mind's capacities to the humbler project of determining the scope and limits of human knowledge: humbler because answers to ultimate metaphysical questions and detailed knowledge of the corpuscular-mechanical natures of things may be beyond our powers. But although more pessimistic than Descartes about the likely

¹⁰ Though Rorty does not stress the point, it is worth noting that Locke's motives are much less scientific-metaphysical and much more political-theological than those of Descartes. The aim of Locke's demarcational project is to contrast knowledge and faith, in the interests of curbing "enthusiasm" (i.e., fanaticism) and promoting toleration in matters where certainty is unattainable.

progress of mechanical science, Locke does not face up to the deep skeptical potential of his Cartesian starting point, a problem which in any case he lacks the resources to address.

As Kant sees, the skeptical questions that epistemology has to answer concern the justification of our ways of thinking (*quid juris*), not their origin (*quid facti*). Furthermore, these questions are *so* general that they *must* be dealt with a priori. Locke's approach to epistemology, which conflates causation with justification, is a question-begging empirical investigation of our right to claim empirical knowledge. Locke does not have a secure enough basis—or even the right kind of basis—for his demarcational project.

Locke's epistemology is transitional, retaining vestiges of the older tendency to give primacy to knowledge *of* an object. In a breakthrough move, Kant insists that knowing—even in perceptual experience—is knowing *that*. Thinking is a matter of making judgments, which alone can be true or false, justified or unjustified. Unfortunately, Kant's insight leads him to replace Locke's naive causal account of knowledge with a mysterious quasicausal account, transcendental idealism, according to which the mind “constitutes” the objects of experience by “synthesizing” sensory intuitions according to concepts—that is, classifying them according to rules.

Some concepts—such as the concept of red—are empirical and may be acquired through experience-based teaching. But all judgment necessarily involves the *pure* concepts of the understanding: a grasp of these concepts *consists* of an ability to make judgments of the various possible logical forms (assertoric, conditional, etc.). The upshot is that we can know a priori that any world we can know about must take a certain form—objects in space and time, standing in stable causal relations—for these formal features of the world are just the logical forms of judgment in their empirically applicable (“schematized”) guise. Philosophy (as metaphysics) is thus saved, though at a price. We can only know substantive a priori truths about the world as we can *experience* it—that is, know it through judgments synthesizing intuitions according

to conceptual rules. Other matters (practical, religious, aesthetic) involve their own kinds of rationality but are not matters of *knowledge*.

For Kant, some judgments are made true by conceptual considerations alone. “Gold is a metal” is one such, since the rule for applying the concept “gold” includes the stipulation that anything golden is also to be classified as metallic. By contrast, the judgment that gold is plentiful in South Africa must be verified experientially, by way of sensible intuition. Kant thus puts in place two vital distinctions: that between analytic judgments, true by virtue of meaning alone, and synthetic judgments, hostage to empirical evidence; and that between the sensory Given and its conceptual interpretation. Philosophy-as-epistemology now emerges in full flower. Philosophers can start sorting out the a priori and a posteriori elements in knowledge. They can distinguish what is presented to sense (or “observation”) from what is added by conceptual interpretation (or “theory”). They can determine which forms of discourse are genuinely cognitive and which merely expressive or practical. They have the theoretical tools for examining human knowledge *as such*.

Rorty argues that, by the end of the nineteenth century, philosophy as “what Kant had shown us how to do” was in danger of being squeezed out by the twin pressures of the natural sciences (including physiological psychology) and the historicizing legacy of Hegel. Like Husserlian phenomenology, analytic philosophy begins as a reaction against these tendencies. It is an attempt to reclaim philosophy’s place as the discipline that answers, with respect to fundamental forms of thought, the question *quid juris?* and not merely *quid facti?* At least through its first five or six decades, then, analytic philosophy remains fundamentally neo-Kantian, though modern mathematical logic leads to the replacement of “mind” with “language” as the vehicle of representation.

In the pivotal Chapter 4, “Privileged Representations,” Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism comes to the fore. Taking this stance, we find no practically significant difference between judgments that supposedly hold in virtue of “mean-

ing alone” and those that are just too obvious to be worth discussing. This insight is the great contribution of Quine. If Quine is right, there are no analytic truths. This means that philosophers can no longer cite their concern with “purely conceptual” matters in defense of their discipline’s claim to be a priori.

The distinction between the sensory Given and its conceptual interpretation meets a similar fate. The point of the appeal to the Given is to ensure that thought is constrained by something external to itself. But when it comes to the empirical verification of knowledge claims, we see that evidence involves publicly intelligible observation sentences. Such sentences are consensually admitted because they are *causally* keyed (via training) to environmental circumstances. Nothing of practical significance comes from linking the credibility of an observation sentence with an individual’s confrontation with a private datum. This is the take-home message of Sellars’s attack on “the Myth of the Given.”

If Sellars is right, the observational-theoretical distinction is methodological rather than ontological. There is no permanent observation language, providing the ultimate court of appeal for all knowledge claims. This is because no properties are “intrinsically observational”: observability is a matter of what we can be taught to report on reliably. Observability is therefore something we can change our minds about. People have held that they could spot witches; but they never could, because there aren’t any. What goes for witches goes for *qualia*: that we think that we are “immediately aware” of them does not mean that there *have* to be such things.

In Rorty’s view, however, neither Quine nor Sellars goes all the way. Taking up the epistemological-behaviorist stance lets us see that neither of the Kantian distinctions is tenable. Rorty’s argument is a masterful synthesis of Quine and Sellars, taking the best from each and going beyond both.

While happy to dispense with the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine retains a residual affection for empiricism. This encourages him to look for a “naturalized” successor to

the sensory Given, a successor that he is tempted to find in retinal stimulations. But stimulations are irrelevant to justification: observation sentences are what matter. Quine also inherits empiricism's scientific tendencies. His rejection of a highly theorized notion of meaning makes him suspicious of everyday meaning talk. Unable to shake the idea that only certain ways of talking are truly "factual," Quine does not recognize that, on the holistic and conversational model of justification his own views point to, we should admit that different ways of talking are useful for different purposes.

Sellars presents a mirror image of Quine. He dispenses completely with the sensory Given while retaining an affection for conceptual truth. Thus Sellars continues to think of himself as "giving analyses" of this or that concept, thereby encouraging the idea that philosophy has special methods. Further, Sellars has his own monistic tendencies. According to Sellars, the task of philosophy is to understand how things, in the largest sense of the term, hang together, in the largest sense of the term. But he interprets this task in the light of a supposed clash between the Manifest and Scientific (i.e., physicalist) Images of Man-in-the-World. An epistemological behaviorist should rest content with a relaxed linguistic pluralism. Some ways of talking are useful for the prediction and control of natural processes. Others are useful for deliberation or for thinking of new ways of living. Things can hang together by serving different functions, thus not conflicting.

It remains to think through the implications of dropping the Kantian distinctions. In Chapter 5, Rorty argues that philosophers should not pick fights with cognitive psychologists, provided that psychologists (or, more likely, their philosophical admirers) avoid thinking that psychology can fill the place vacated by epistemology. In Chapter 6, he examines the claim (advanced by Michael Dummett) that philosophy found itself on the right path when, thanks to Frege, philosophy of language replaced epistemology as philosophy's foundational subdiscipline. Here, Rorty makes an important distinction between two forms of philosophy of language, "pure" and "impure." Pure philosophy of language aims at

systematizing our notions of meaning, reference, and necessity, taking advantage of the tools provided by modern logic, but without supposing that this project has much to do with traditional epistemological or metaphysical issues. Impure philosophy of language is explicitly directed toward such issues. Philosophy-as-epistemology is not improved by linguistic fancy dress.

Rorty's attack on philosophy-as-epistemology got (and gets) him a bad name in certain philosophical quarters. His work's favorable reception outside departments of philosophy contributes to this by linking him with the excesses of postmodernism. To his critics, Rorty is a skeptic, a relativist, an irrationalist, and a nihilist. He is none of those things. Rorty is not an *epistemological skeptic* but rather a *skeptic about epistemology*. A philosophical skeptic holds, or pretends to hold, that any view is as good as any other. Rorty doesn't think this for a moment. Rorty's view is that skepticism (along with relativism, etc.) is the dark side of epistemology. Epistemology aims at a wholesale justification of our beliefs about the world (with a resultant downgrading of beliefs that resist appropriate grounding). Accordingly, skepticism is where you end up if you think that epistemology ought to work but doesn't. What leads to skepticism is not inadequate epistemology but the very idea that knowledge, justification, and truth are objects of theory. Without this idea, the project of wholesale justification would not seem intelligible. To borrow an example from Jerry Fodor, if we dispense with the Kantian distinctions, explaining how we know anything whatsoever begins to look like explaining everything that happens on a Tuesday: in neither case do we have a domain that even promises theoretical integrity. Here we come back to the original sin of representationalism. Skepticism in its radical, modern form arises out of mirror imagery, which suggests puzzles about the distorting effects of the mirror and thus about Knowledge of Reality. When we drop such imagery, the threat of skepticism recedes. Of course, we can still ask how to find things out about this or that concrete topic. But such questions are not the province of philosophy.

Am I underestimating the extent of Rorty's skepticism? What about his remark, outrageous to sober epistemologists, that being justified is saying whatever your conscience or your society lets you get away with? Answer: it is just a gloss on epistemological behaviorism. The point is not that "justified" (a term of approval) *means* "socially accepted" but that, in practice, the only way of getting anything decided is conversationally: by discussion. What Rorty teaches is not skepticism, or relativism, or irrationalism, but modesty. As he puts it in a late paper, if we could give up our addiction to underwriting current ideas with philosophical gimmicks, "we might become able to dispense with words like 'intrinsic,' 'authentic,' 'unconditional,' 'legitimate,' . . . [and] get along with such banal expressions of praise or blame as 'fits the data,' 'sounds plausible,' 'would do more harm than good,' 'offends our instincts,' 'might be worth a try,' and 'is too ridiculous to take seriously.'"¹¹

Rorty is often accused of "linguistic idealism"—the view that facts are "made" rather than "found." This charge, too, is unfounded. In rejecting the Kantian distinctions, Rorty is not arguing that everything is *nomos* and nothing *physis* but rather questioning the made/found distinction itself. We make up theories and try to live with them. If they work out well, they count as discoveries. Finding is *constrained* making. Rorty does not deny that the world exerts an influence on how we think. But in accordance with his conversational conception of justification, he thinks that the world's influence is causal, not justifying. This is not to say that causation is irrelevant to justification, only that causal influences must be *recognized* before they can be brought into the conversation.

What does all this mean for philosophy's future? In *Mirror*, Rorty suggests that philosophy become hermeneutic and edifying. He generalizes Kuhn's distinction between normal and revolutionary science into one between normal discourse, conducted according to shared standards, and ab-

¹¹ "Grandeur, Profundity and Finitude," in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 87.

normal discourse, in which participants are experimenting with new ways of talking. Hermeneutic philosophers ease the way for what is new by sympathetically charting its relations to the old. Edifying philosophers aid conceptual innovation by resisting attempts on the part of systematic philosophers to harden intuitions by turning current practices into epistemology or metaphysics. As long as there are systematic philosophers, we will have need of edifying critics.

Rorty became dissatisfied with this suggestion. In later writings, he argues that philosophy should concern itself with cultural politics: conversation about what to have conversations about. But even in *Mirror*, this suggestion is just below the surface. Rorty extends, rather than replaces, his conception of philosophy as hermeneutic and edifying.

In his last essays, Rorty complicates his narrative concerning the rise and fall of philosophy, giving more weight to the tradition's moral-philosophical dimension. A longstanding aim of philosophy has been to seek knowledge of how things ultimately are, in order to discover what kind of people we ought to be. Rorty's idea, also implicit in *Mirror*, is to replace the idea of discovering what we essentially are with that of determining what to make of ourselves. Philosophy now appears as a transitional genre, bridging the gap between a religious past, with a place for everything and everything in its place, and a fully secular, "literary" culture, in which we will turn to imaginative literature for ideas about the sort of persons to be or the sort of societies to live in. The human world is ours to remake: we are denizens of what Michael Oakeshott calls a *civitas pelegrina*, a city of resident aliens, united only by the civilities of a conversation to which there can be no end.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, we hear one of American philosophy's most distinctive voices coming fully into its own. This voice was stilled too soon. But if it had never been heard, our philosophical conversation would be poorer by far.