

RORTY'S FOUNDATIONALISM

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In *Consequences of Pragmatism* Richard Rorty distinguishes between Philosophy and philosophy.¹ The former is a systematic enterprise which seeks transcultural and extrahistorical foundations for knowledge, morals, etc., i.e., systematic philosophy as criticized in Rorty's earlier *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.² It

sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion.... Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge...³

Systematic philosophy's (i.e., Philosophy's) representatives include Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Kant, the early Wittgenstein, and logical positivists, among others.

The latter enterprise (philosophy, lower-case *p*) works under the assumption that efforts to find the True, the Real, the Rational, and the Good, have all failed and that these should be abandoned in favor of edifying discourse, the aim of which is "to help (its) readers, or society as a whole, break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes, rather

than to provide 'grounding' for the intuitions and customs of the present."⁴ Edifying philosophers—Rorty's 'neopragmatists' or 'hermeneuticists'—“think it will not help to say something true to think about Truth, nor will it help to act well to think about Goodness, nor will it help to be rational to think about Rationality.”⁵ The main champions of edifying discourse have been Rorty's three favorite twentieth century philosophers: Dewey, Heidegger, and the later Wittgenstein; also James, Nietzsche and Gadamer; and possibly by implication a lineage reaching back through Montaigne to the ancient Sophists against whom Plato and Aristotle reacted.

In this note I intend to raise and discuss in some detail a fundamental objection to Rorty's argument that systematic philosophy (Philosophy) ought to be abandoned wholesale in favor of edifying discourse. The objection I have in mind was raised in passing in a recent article by Richard Dien Winfield, and implies that any effort such as Rorty's to “deconstruct” the epistemological tradition and pave the way for edifying discourse invariably must commit the very mistake it attributes to others and thus fall prey to the very trap it seeks to avoid. In Winfield's words, Rorty must assume that “his pragmatic description of discourse accurately mirrors the reality of conversation,” and that therefore his position inevitably “reinstates the dilemma of foundational arguments it wishes to overcome.”⁶ I wish now to develop this line of criticism in detail. If sound, it shows that Rorty's position can be more accurately characterized not as edifying discourse but as a form of foundationalism, and that it cannot avoid being so if its arguments are to have the force that Rorty wants them to have. Rorty, I hope to show, has his own version of the “myth of the given”⁷; Rorty's “given” is discourse itself and the social practices it embodies. As such, he writes under the assumption that discourse is transparent to the “eye” of the “deconstructionist” and the descriptions thus obtained are consequently *true* descriptions. Yet his position, if true, undermines its own ability to account for this transparency.

Any meaningful discourse, philosophical or otherwise, has a subject matter or some intended scope of reference (however we flesh these notions out). *PMN* and *CP* take as their subject matter or scope of reference the totality of philosophical discourse, whether systematic or edifying. They argue that in whatever form it takes, the view of knowledge as an assemblage of privileged representations was the product of accidental twists and turns of intellectual history, beginning with Descartes's “invention of the mind” and quest for indubitability, proceeding through Kant's “deduction” of a transcendental matrix of categories, down to modern analytic philosophy's quests for commensuration, for a privileged vocabulary and a standpoint “outside of history and culture.” Since our present-day preoccupations with epistemology, formal seman-

tics, philosophy of mind, and so on, are outgrowths of these quests, if the former are accidental and optional, then so are the latter: "The moral to be drawn is that if this way of thinking of knowledge is optional, then so is epistemology, and so is philosophy as it has understood itself since the middle of the last century."⁸ The foundationalist's quest for a privileged set of mental representations yielding privileged access to "the world" thus collapses, leaving the historical fact of conversation.

Rorty therefore prescribes that in this light, the whole cluster of epistemology-centered preoccupations simply be dropped. Philosophers, argues Rorty, should give up trying to identify "marks of the mental," stop trying to produce better "theories of reference," resist the temptation to eternalize historically particular language games, and cease the quest for eternal canons of rationality for the legitimization of all knowledge claims whatsoever. In other words, the philosopher should give up Philosophy and instead become a hermeneuticist, an "informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses..."⁹

This position, I will argue, gets into trouble by virtue of its own internal dialectic. Let us reconstruct this dialectic by stating Rorty's main claim as precisely as we can and seeing what happens when we develop its logical consequences. Rorty's main claim, on which the rest of his position depends, can be most concisely stated as follows:

- (1) No discourse occupies a privileged, foundational status, has privileged access to the world," or special means of "representing" it.

This is what Rorty seems to be after with his denial that there is an ontologically special entity, the "mind," which represents or "mirrors" nature (cast in linguistic terms, of course). It should be clear, though, that this claim—and the arguments used to present and defend it, are part of the totality of philosophical discourse—whether systematic or edifying. Thus Rorty's position cannot avoid the property of being reflexive or self-referential. Indeed, any piece of philosophical writing which takes the *totality* of philosophy for its subject matter will be self-referential.¹⁰ So if Rorty is to present and defend (1) above, he must also be willing to agree to (2):

- (2) *PMN* and *CP* do not occupy a privileged, foundational status, have special access to "the world," or special means of "representing" it.

So far, there is no reason to think Rorty would object. However, he follows Quine and countless others in holding that discourse is a natural phenomenon no different in kind from any other natural phenomenon;

just as with "mind," there is nothing ontologically special about discourse, no "language-fact distinction." Therefore, discourse is part of the world and not something standing separate from it, "over" or "above" it, as it were. This, though, permits us to recast (1) above as (3):

(3) No discourse occupies a privileged, foundational status with respect to the rest of discourse, has special access to it, or means of "representing" it.

And from (3), we can infer (4):

(4) *PMN* and *CP* can occupy no privileged status with respect to the rest of discourse, have privileged access to it, or special means of "representing" it.

(4), I submit, is where serious difficulties intrude; (4) has direct and paradoxical implications for the status of Rorty's own position and the force of its arguments. Furthermore, Rorty is aware of the paradox. As Charles B. Guignon recently reported:

Asked about the status of his own philosophy, Rorty replied that it is an interesting move in the latest language games, but that 100 years from now it may come to be seen as having no point whatsoever...Rorty's own writings seem to be pushed into an impossibly awkward position. In order to work out a conception of conversation with no referent, he has to describe a saying which is not saying anything *about* anything. But this means that he has to use language to convey information about the impossibility of using language to convey information about anything.¹¹

Rorty himself has been surprisingly untroubled by this. I shall now argue that he *should* be troubled, because the internal dialectic of his position has led to a result the very intelligibility of which is suspect. We seem entitled to ask, By what means does Rorty have access to the rest of discourse in such a way that he can make assertions about it and argue in their defense? By allowing the inference to (4) Rorty has undermined a crucial necessary condition for his talking about discourse or indeed about anything else; as Steven J. Bartlett recently put it,

If we assume we want to talk about a collection of objects of various sorts, we are compelled to allow some means for this thinking of talking about them to proceed—we must be permitted somehow to refer to what we want to think or talk about. This is trivially true, and therefore I take it as basic.¹²

Rorty must therefore avoid the consequence described by Guignon if his thesis about the hopelessness of foundationalism is to be more than an exercise in futility. Let us consider briefly some of the strategies he might take.

One obvious strategy he might take is to maintain that works such as *PMN* and *CP* are of a higher *type* than the works of Descartes and Locke down through contemporary analytic philosophy of mind and representation (though, of course, Rorty would not put the matter this way). Yet there are reasons why this kind of move will not work. Had it been successful, the Theory of Types (where all such strategies originate) would have prevented any sentence, theory, or discourse from referring in some way to itself, or including itself in the domain to which it applies. But as both Frederic B. Fitch and Paul Weiss were able to show, the Theory of Types and all strategies based on it quickly get entangled in the very difficulties which they were designed to avoid.¹³ These would have precluded reference to the *totality* of discourse by banning from philosophy all propositions of unrestricted scope. Weiss had no difficulty in showing, however, that the Theory of Types must be formulated in propositions of unrestricted scope. Thus it fails; and all derivative strategies for avoiding the self-reference of a philosophical discourse about philosophy fail.

A more promising move Rorty might make is to offer a better interpretation of the claim that his work has no privileged status, where by "privileged" is meant ahistorical. This would involve his maintaining (as indeed he does, following the later Wittgenstein) that the meaningfulness of a contribution to the philosophical conversation as regards its having a subject matter, etc., is dependent on its place in the conversation. Therefore what is meaningful and appropriate at one time might come to lack all meaning and appropriateness later, perhaps due to changes in the rules of the language games during the intervening period. Even if we make this move, though, it does not solve the basic problem implicit in (4) above; it does not show how, in Bartlett's sense, we are permitted to refer to philosophical discourse at all if Rorty's theses are right. It does not answer the question of how his descriptions of discourse *at present* acquire their validation and provide the basis for a way of philosophizing that has advantages over foundationalist competitors. I submit that Rorty's position is trapped by its internal dialectic, no matter what move he makes. By granting (4) he effectively removes his means of referring to his subject matter and thus undermines the force of his entire position. Of course, this result is unacceptable. As stated above, Rorty intends to refer us to philosophical writings, and we are expected to be persuaded of the *soundness* of his arguments. He must therefore reject (4) and

implicitly (and, on his own terms, illicitly) adopt an assumption of a precondition for reference (5):

(5) *PMN* and *CP* have at least some privileged, foundational status, special access to the rest of discourse, and means of “representing” it.

With his illicit but nevertheless necessary presupposition of (5), Rorty reinstates foundationalism in the very sense Winfield mentions, and which he himself criticizes. For (5) is clearly a foundationalist's thesis; it offers Rorty the equivalent of a transcendental standpoint from which he can survey the whole of discourse and declare that it does or does not have certain properties—and declare that we *should* cease philosophizing as we have been and begin philosophizing in a new way (that is, give up Philosophy and simply do philosophy).

To summarize, Rorty's position fails in that in the act of attempting to persuade us of the hopelessness of foundationalism it cannot avoid reinstating foundationalism. Rorty sought to “deconstruct” our contemporary preoccupations with theories of knowledge, rationality, mind, and reference, only to end up with the equivalent of a transcendental philosophy by misadventure. As such, his own position is subject to whatever criticisms can be validly made against transcendental philosophy generally, the prototype of which is Hegel's critique of Kant. According to Hegel, Kant's transcendental turn faced the problem of being unable to account for its own standpoint: if every act of cognition presupposes the categories, then how, by what means, do the categories themselves become transparent to cognition?¹⁴ Following this prototype we can conclude that Rorty's arguments fail the same way, by assuming the transparency of discourse from a standpoint “outside” of it combined with an inability to account for that standpoint.

There remain, of course, many legitimate questions about the possibility of systematic philosophy, beginning with the question of whether systematic philosophy can be done in the absence of “foundations.” There is also the question of the role of edifying discourse in conveying philosophical insights. But these topics must wait for another occasion.¹⁵

1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp.xiv-xvii. Hereafter *CP*.

2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979; hereafter *PMN*.

3. *PMN*, p.3.

4. *Ibid.*, p.12.

5. *CP*, p.xv.

6. Richard Dien Winfield, "The Route of Foundation-Free Systematic Philosophy," *The Philosophical Forum* 15 (1984): 330.

7. As Richard Bernstein also suggested—cf. his "Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind," *Review of Metaphysics* 23 (1980): 772.

8. *PMN*, p.136.

9. *Ibid.*, p.317.

10. For the best discussion of this point see Frederic B. Fitch, "Self-Reference in Philosophy," *Mind* 55 (1946): 64-73. A slightly different version of the same article appears in the authors text *Symbolic Logic: An Introduction* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1952), pp.217-25.

11. Charles B. Guignon, "On Saving Heidegger from Rorty," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (1986): 410.

12. Steven J. Bartlett, "The Idea of a Metalogic of Reference," *Methodology and Science* 9 (1976): 89.

13. Fitch, "Self-Reference in Philosophy"; Paul Weiss, "The Theory of Types," *Mind* 37 (1928): 338-48.

14. In Hegel's *Logic* we find the following:

Kant undertook to examine how far the forms of thought were capable of leading to the knowledge of truth. In particular he demanded a criticism of the faculty of cognition as preliminary to its exercise. That is a fair demand, if it means that even the forms of thought must be made an object of investigation. Unfortunately there soon creeps in the misconception of *already knowing before you know*—the error of refusing to enter the water until you have learnt to swim. True, indeed, the forms of thought should be subjected to a scrutiny before they are used: yet what is this scrutiny but *ipse facto* a cognition?

G.W.F. Hegel, *Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p.66.

15. Richard Dien Winfield and William Maker are currently at work on at least the first of these; cf. Winfield, "The Route to Foundation-Free Systematic Philosophy." See also his "Conceiving Reality Without Foundations: Hegel's Neglected Strategy for *Realphilosophie*," *The Owl of Minerva* 8 (1984): 183-98; "Dialectical Logic and the Conception of Truth," *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 18 (1987): 133-48, and other recent articles; cf. also William Maker, "Reason and the Problem of Modernity," *The Philosophical Forum* 18 (1987): 275-303. An earlier and rather different version of the present paper was read under the title "Three Inconsistencies in Rorty's Antifoundationalism" to a Special Session of the Society for Systematic Philosophy, 83rd Annual Convention of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division Meeting, December 28, 1986. I am very grateful to Professor Winfield for offering detailed criticisms of earlier versions of this paper, for helping to arrange the above session, and for encouragement; this paper has also benefited from a number of discussions with Professor Maker.