

IN MY OPINION, THAT'S YOUR OPINION: IS RORTY A FOUNDATIONALIST?

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Richard Rorty is well known for his sophisticated presentation of the idea that systematic philosophy has failed and should be abandoned. For our purposes here I will call Rorty's position skepticism, though he prefers the term pragmatism. Steven Yates argues that just as the systematic philosopher attempted to step back from human subjectivity and determine the real truth about real reality, so Rorty is attempting to step back and give us objective truth about the history of philosophy, which after all is an aspect of reality too. Rorty's attempt to tell us something objectively true about the history of philosophy is supposed to put him in the same boat with the other philosophers whose efforts to determine some important truths he is criticizing. Yates says that Rorty is attempting to give us an objective truth in the very saying that the attempt to achieve objective truth has failed.

It is an old objection to skepticism, going all the way back to Plato, that it is self-referentially incoherent. The objection is that

if a skeptic so much as speaks, he implicitly betrays his position. In speaking he is presumably enunciating something he believes to be true and he is making an implicit and sometimes explicit argument for the thing he is saying. On this view, however little we may be said to know, it is incoherent to say we know nothing. This is the essence of Yates' and Winfield's and Guignon's objection to Rorty.¹

But it is unlikely that skepticism is so easily refuted. In the first place, note that skepticism has no burden of proof. The skeptic, if he chooses, need only sit in Buddha-like calm, observing the "strife of systems", waiting for the philosophers to satisfy their own collective minds, waiting for them to quit their mutual refutations of each other. The skeptic need not refute the dogmatists so long as they are refuting each other. In the meantime he merely observes that nothing of philosophical interest has achieved even the appearance of satisfactory resolution. One might note that this observation is itself a knowledge claim of some philosophical interest, rendering the observer a minimal dogmatist himself, with implied standards of knowledge, etc. But this is not necessarily so as we shall see shortly, and even if it were, it is really to no great purpose to admit we can know nothing except that we can know nothing.

It is as if a man were lost at sea, who knows he is lost, who is told, the knowledge that you are lost shows an implicit recognition of the lack of certain landmarks or other reference points. Since you see that no reference points are present, you also see that they are absent. In that respect then, you are not essentially lost; you know you are away from all your reference points and it is thus self-referentially incoherent to say "I am lost". This speech is of course small comfort to the man and does not address his central plight. Similarly, Yates and many others admit that knowledge is not *yet* satisfactorily grounded, but wish at the same time to deny that we are essentially lost. We are not *essentially* lost, they think, because we can *recognize* that we are lost. This line of reasoning may be true as a technicality, but it evades the skeptic's real contention and man's essential plight.²

For now we note only that the skeptic has no burden of proof and Rorty does not trouble himself with elaborate efforts to *prove* the skeptical conclusion (such an attempted proof would be doing systematic philosophy all over again). In effect he merely invites us to survey the history of philosophy and open our eyes to the evident chaos. The conclusion that the enterprise has failed should be manifest. Rorty explicitly deplores positive efforts either to underwrite or to *debunk* claims to knowledge. So he is not in the uncom-

fortable position of refuting knowledge claims with positive arguments. He merely observes the devastation all about.

Now it is true that when a man speaks, even to affirm the skeptical position, he does necessarily presupposes some considerable mass of shared meanings and standards with his audience. But this necessity hardly prevents the expression of the skeptical position. The skeptic implicitly prefaces all his remarks with a statement something like this: "Assuming for purposes of this conversation a great mass of shared meanings and standards, and standing thus on a provisional platform presumably largely shared by you, my hearers, I would say..." The skeptic therefore must speak *as if* reason enjoys some competence, *as if* we had some standard for distinguishing the meaningful from the meaningless, the probable from the improbable, the true from the false. He believes that *ultimately* all is at sea, but this does not prevent him from performing the experiment of thinking. In fact, everyone performs in this position since reason, whether inductive, deductive, or abductive, has not been grounded in a way that meets even its own demands (and if it were it would then only circularly justify itself or claim a minimal self-consistency), so everyone who reasons necessarily does so in the *mere* faith that reason will be vindicated by and by. If the word faith alarms, we may put it another way. In conversing and arguing we *act as if* we had foundations upon which we stand together, we *suppose* various things for purposes of discussion, etc. In talking and thinking we hope for insights and even perhaps convincing conceptions to appear, notwithstanding that much is being presupposed in the conversation. Nothing hinders these modest hopes, since skepticism merely doubts that anything can be established objectively. But since something is always being presupposed in any argument, any conclusion is always provisional, even skepticism itself if it endeavors to base itself on arguments.

It certainly appears that we can only talk about anything by presupposing numerous other things. We can only critique some subject matter by standing on the ground of other things not at present under scrutiny. The examined subject matter, having been scrutinized and perhaps improved (by standards held in the background), can then become part of the presupposed background as some other subject is examined. We are obliged to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps. Though we have no objective referent for the word "lift", our interpretation of things may grow in apparent breadth and coherence. But so far as we can now see, interpretations can never be grounded outside themselves, and they are prone

to "revolutions" in which they collapse and are replaced by wholly other interpretations. Our reason for rejecting one interpretation in favor of another is that it fails to satisfy in some particular, as often as not a non-rational particular. In the contemplation of scientific, religious, and especially metaphysical theories, we necessarily presuppose a background of meanings and standards of a very primitive nature, so primitive that they are themselves difficult to isolate or critique. And if they are doubted in a living way the result is what we are liable to call, alternatively, madness, or a "crack in the cosmic egg" (Joseph Chilton Pearce), or, in other cases, prophetic revelation and revolution.

My purpose here has been to defend Rorty's right intelligibly to affirm that philosophy has failed, or more specifically that epistemology has failed. But whereas I conclude from this that we have a right to continue our speculations, I am not sure what Rorty would have us do. If he is saying that we may proceed with all aspects of philosophy, but only in the light of the fact that we are not likely ever to *ground* these speculations in objectivity, then I would agree with that. He does wish for the conversation to go on. But if he goes further and says that we should abandon speculative philosophy altogether, then I demur from that, and am left entirely puzzled about what intellectuals should be talking about. In that case I would endorse Guignon's criticism that Rorty's proposed conversation "has no referent". If we are not permitted to speculate about some supposed actual something, say reality, then our talk must be a pure spinning of wheels, a phenomenon hard to imagine were it not almost perfectly exemplified in the writings of the Continental philosophers most admired by Rorty.

In any case I would defend Rorty's right to speculate on the nature of human "conversation", and his right to observe that it has never been grounded. Certainly Rorty would not *argue* that he can demonstrate the truth of his view. He is expressing a viewpoint which seems true to him and he is inviting his readers to agree with him. There is nothing in his denial of philosophical foundations to prevent him from expressing an opinion, an opinion based no doubt upon various considerations and, more ultimately, upon certain broad *assumptions* about standards of meaning and thought which he presumes to share with his readers. If he is wrong in that assumption, well, excuse him. He surely has no illusions about proving his thesis.

One may proceed with argument and conversation in the hope of achieving a perspective on the world which is highly satisfying personally. One may search for interpretations which are intrigu-

ing, mind-expanding, satisfying, edifying, even apparently true, all without pretending that any of them rest upon unshakable or even fully stateable foundations. The satisfaction aimed at can be aesthetic, moral, intellectual, or the best balance of all such factors, "all things considered" in a favorite phrase of James'. A skeptic can have a viewpoint which is highly satisfactory to him personally without pretending to be able to prove it either certainly or probably. Nor, I repeat, is he under any obligation to prove that no viewpoint can be proved. Only if he takes such a burden upon himself does he risk an unpleasant appearance of incoherence or self-contradiction.

I am tempted to say that with effort we could probably find a way of expressing the skeptic's position which evaded the self-referential problem, something like "It seems that men probably know nothing", or "It seems that men have no agreed-upon criteria of truth". But, as a skeptic, I can foresee that one could write a book exploring endless variations and possibilities along these lines, exploring criticisms and counter-criticisms, the Theory of Types, etc., the end result of which would be a morass of complexity and confusion, concerning which there would be little or no agreement among even the wisest readers of the book. And even if there were a clear outcome, the investigation itself would have had to presuppose standards of meaning and reason such that the outcome would be provisional upon those presuppositions.

Finally, I would make this point. The skeptic is not the only one with self-referential problems. The dogmatist has a corresponding problem. If knowledge is supposed to exist, there must be some standard or standards by which candidates for such alleged knowledge are judged. Whatever these standards are supposed to be, they must be measured for their validity. But we should then be in the position of judging the truth of our standards of truth by themselves. This is self-referential in a question begging mode (though not in a self-contradictory mode). According to Brand Blanshard,

It must be admitted that no valid *argument* can be offered for any exclusive criterion of truth. For the supporter of such a criterion is always in a dilemma: if he rests his case upon the use of his own criterion, he begs the question; if he rests it on any other criterion, he is either admitting the validity of that other criterion, and then his own is not the only one, or else offering an argument that he must grant as worthless.³

This is the perennial problem of the criterion. It is exceedingly difficult to imagine how it may be resolved. Certainly no answer to this problem has achieved philosophical consensus. Further, the difficulty appears to be substantive, not merely technical. It complicates wonderfully the predicament we are in: The claim to know and the claim not to know are alike claimed to be self-referentially incoherent. If *both* claims are incoherent, that would seem in a left-handed way to favor the incoherence involved in the skeptic's position more than the incoherence involved in dogmatism. If all sense seems to collapse upon close examination of these issues, do we not need a word to express this appearance?

In summary, (1) skepticism hardly makes an argument, merely noting the appearance of devastation. (2) Skepticism speaks from a platform of mere assumptions presumably shared by hearers. (3) The skeptic is entitled to express opinions, and (4) equally entitled to look for conceptions which are personally satisfying and which are even supposed to be true. (5) The dogmatist faces the problem of the standards used to establish his standards, a self-referential problem of far more moment than that facing the skeptic. I thus conclude: there is no real problem with saying, "In my opinion, everything's a matter of opinion".

1. As noted in Yates' article.
2. This is only a rough analogy. I do not know how much weight it will bear.
3. Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought* (New York: Humanities Press, 1939), Vol. II, p.219.