

Self, Mind and the Recovery of Metaphysics

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Abstract

Our purpose is to suggest that it is not inevitable that philosophy (and philosophers) are blinded by the spirit of their age, so that they are unable to question prevalent beliefs. To this end, we evaluate a number of Rorty's key ideas, specifically those which are integral to his narrative redescribing the mind-body problematic, and its corollaries as regards traditional and non-traditional views about access to Truth. By examining Rorty's historicism, the difficulties which Cartesian dualism has put historicists and non-historicists in alike, and perhaps most poignantly, the narrative of pre- and post-Cartesian (as well as fictitiously Cartesian) epistemology, we are lead to wonder about both the restrictions of vocabulary in navigating us through these strictures, as well as the pragmatic effectiveness that metaphysics may afford us.

Keywords: Metaphysics, Redescription, Mind, Rorty, Dualism, historicism, Berlin, liberalism

Introduction

Richard Rorty saw the course of philosophy in the twentieth century as one in which tried to depart from two major philosophical trends, only to inevitably return to these very same original tendencies. These two tendencies were historicism and naturalism. The first, historicist trend is guided by the assumption that everything depends on context and that there are no perennial or eternal problems.¹ One finds “nominalism” as a corollary because there is no vantage point from which to speak about the nature of things; all talk about “essence” is meaningless.² Historicism and nominalism are now so deeply entrenched that, as a starting point, we default towards historicism. Secondly, we also strongly default towards materialistic naturalism,³ for unless we find comfort in religious belief or metaphysical chimeras, we find it hard to believe that there is anything in man more than (or other than) matter, and that values may be “non-natural” entities.

This diagnostic is legitimately applied to the preponderance of twentieth-century philosophy. But the reception of such a message is a different matter. That such a diagnostic should be applied to Anglo-Saxon, “analytic” philosophy in addition to the “continentals” is very controversial. A “betrayal,” or the loss of faith in idealism and subjectivism, is surely at the root of the controversy;⁴ for logical positivism, the philosophy of language, etc., had been a reaction against the idealism and subjectivism that raged on the continent through a solid and healthy behaviorist positivism. For this reason perhaps, despite the multitude of themes and problems addressed by Rorty in his most famous speculative book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*⁵, analytic philosophy very notably receives exactly that role in the above narrative.⁶

Given the correctness of the diagnostic, the return at the end of a tortuous path to see that these very same tendencies, historicism and naturalism, may as well have been an inevitable wave from the future. But why does Rorty infer that his task as a philosopher is to navigate this future and to tread these historicist and nominalist tendencies – as opposed to counteract them, or question them? Why does he strive so hard to kill “truth,” to eliminate consciousness, and replace to philosophy with uplifting literature (or “edifying” philosophy whose boundaries with literature are blurred)?

It is important to realize Rorty’s motivation. Rorty is first and foremost a pragmatist. We may say that his major books, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*⁷ (1989) comprehend his most complete statement about the relation of philosophy to political life—while *Achieving our Country*⁸(1998) is just the program for a cultural re-education of the American left (though for some a

¹ See PMN, 3

² See PSH, 47-71.

³ On Rorty’s naturalism see Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xiv-xv.

⁴ See Richard Bernstein, *The new Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1991), 251.

⁵ Henceforth PMN.

⁶ See CP, “Introduction,” xviii.

⁷ Henceforth CIS.

⁸ Henceforth AOC.

prophetic book). As a pragmatist, the force that drives him depends on a judgment that is perhaps this: democracy is more important than philosophy.⁹ “Truth”, conscience, and philosophy itself (insofar as it tries more than a conversation) are useless and their validity has expired. But Truth, Conscience, and Philosophy,¹⁰ when they are written down with capital letters, are even *dangerous* for democracy.

The intellectual’s task is not to provide a social theory based on *arguments*, but by the use of “narratives,” sensitize us to the suffering of others and help us to identify with others, to think of others as equals—to prevent or help to prevent cruelty through a kind of “sentimental education.”¹¹ Such avoidance of cruelty is intentionally *not* related to thick notions of personal flourishing or “morality.” The avoidance of cruelty and the matter of morality are two entirely different and even conflicting realms. Their *vocabularies* are different and incommensurable. We must take human solidarity and personal flourishing as both important, but also as belonging to distinctive “languages”.¹² In other words, vocabularies for deliberation on public and social goods and political arrangements, on the one hand, and the vocabularies of personal fulfillment, self-creation, and self-actualization, on the other, are separate and distinct pragmatic programs.

Rorty’s Mirror of Philosophy

The matter of the relation of theory and practice—specifically of what Rorty thinks is the task of public intellectuals—had surfaced as early as 1979. He laments that philosophy as such has become prey to the Platonic-Kantian approach, even if Platonic-Kantian approach has been in the past a humanizing quest for the eternal order or a pure source of human inspiration and aspiration. Its questions are the “wrong” kind of questions.

Let us say that we concede without major objections (although perhaps with many objections of detail) to Rorty’s diagnosis of the two main tendencies in contemporary continental and analytical philosophy noted at the outset. Historicism and naturalism reveal perhaps the exhaustion of modern philosophy as defined by its emphasis on epistemology, but they are nonetheless very different reactions to such tiredness. We must thus examine carefully the main question that this diagnosis leaves open: how does Rorty reconcile the idealist subjectivism underlying historicism, with the materialistic behaviorism underlying naturalism?

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that it is not inevitable that philosophy (and philosophers) blinded by *Geist*, by their *milieu*, by being *thinkers of their era*, are unable to question the prevalent beliefs of that age. Perhaps surrender to an otherwise likely future is not the only possibility.

Rorty reached the conclusion that *Geist* does blind because he believes that the notion of an ideal vocabulary, or of a natural language, or even of a vocabulary that is able to convey permanent ideas or

⁹ See Rorty, “The priority of democracy to philosophy” in *ORT*, 175-196.

¹⁰ See *CP* xiv.

¹¹ See *EHO* Part III, Part III of the *CIS*.

¹² *CIS*, xv.

problems throughout the ages, to have been radically discredited. His introduction to *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* begins with a narrative of the successive waves of ideas in the contemporary era: The French revolution has shown that, if not society itself, the vocabulary of social relations has been “turned inside out like a glove.”¹³ After the French revolution, intellectuals defend utopian politics, and the Will of God and the nature of man were put aside in the name of science. This turned out to be short-lived; for just after, the Romantics claimed for art the role (formerly) occupied by science as a guide to action.

Rorty in this book and his most recent books clarifies that he is not trying to offer *arguments* against the vocabulary he wants to replace, but rather to propose an attractive *alternative vocabulary*.¹⁴ He summons Davidson’s treatment of “truth ties,”¹⁵ but—against Davidson’s own convictions—his purpose is to inveigh against any attempt to replace language by “mind” or “consciousness” as an intermediary medium between the “self” and the “world.”¹⁶

In his previous major book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), written about ten years before *Contingency*, he famously resorted science fiction to present how it would be possible (in a distant future, in another planet) to think without recourse to the idea of mind, as the “Antipodeans” before their first contact with us.¹⁷ But who are these Antipodeans?

Rorty imagines a planet where its inhabitants are like us—featherless bipeds who build, invent, and create many of the kinds of things we do.¹⁸ But they do not know that they have ‘minds,’ and therefore do not speak of ‘mental states’ nor explain the differences between ‘persons,’ and ‘non-persons’ through notions such as ‘mind,’ ‘awareness,’ ‘spirit,’ etc. Even those who believe in their immortality—or that of animals and robots—speak only of the resurrection of the body, because they never feel the need of any other notion to explain themselves.

Their knowledge of physiology is imagined such that each well-formed sentence in the language which anybody bothered to form could easily be correlated with a readily identifiable neural state. This state occurred whenever someone uttered, or was tempted to utter, or heard, any sentence. This state also sometimes occurred in solitude. Since in this distant planet, neurology and biochemistry are well ahead of the same sciences on Earth, and conversation among concerned their neural states. For example, when children were on course towards danger, mothers or fathers would warn of the stimulation of what we call ‘C-fibers.’¹⁹

¹³ See CIS, 3.

¹⁴ CIS, 9.

¹⁵ CIS 10, chap. 1. See also Donald Davidson, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. But Davidson does not want to help him to kill truth, see Brandon, *Rorty and his Critics*, 65-80 and Davidson “The Structure and Content of Truth.” *Journal of Philosophy*, 87, June 1990.

¹⁶ CIS 10

¹⁷ See Tartaglia, *Op. cit.*, chap 4, 71-79.

¹⁸ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979) 70.

¹⁹ PMN, 70-71.

Until the arrival of a planetary expedition from Earth, the Antipodeans had never been aware of the lack of concept of mind. The Terrestrial beings did not, however, demur from their prejudices and instead insisted on asking themselves: “Do they really have minds?”—in a way as the Spanish conquerors wondered whether the newfound American Indians had original sin, or even a rational soul.

At first glance, the behaviorism that Rorty describes among the Antipodeans is merely the fulfillment of Gilbert Ryle’s promise to wash away impurities of our vocabulary of the “concept of mind.” Indeed, it is difficult not to recognize some truth in the description with which Gilbert Ryle introduces his book on the subject.²⁰ According to the author of *The Concept of Mind*, most philosophers, psychologists and believers, although admitting difficulties and reservations as to details (which they assume may eventually be resolved²¹), adhere today to a creed or doctrine which springs mainly from Descartes and approximates something like, ‘barring serious malady, every human has an operating mind (and a body)’. But there is a difference between mind and body. Since bodies are physical things, they are the kinds of things we can observe with scientific instruments, such as to calculate our height, or our weight or the microscopic cells that our bodies are made of; whereas the mind is somehow ‘non-physical’ or ‘less physical than the body’ so that it is not be observed by scientific instruments, or directly measured, or observed from the exterior like a body. Thus, the body is public or external while the mind is private or internal.²²

Consequently, we tend to think as if there was a “ghost” inside La Mettrie’s famous “machine man”—something of a materialist heir to Descartes’ substance dualism.²³ Although today most philosophers, or at least those who are non-believers in some kind of religion, tend to think that the mind does not exist and does not function after death, even the ‘physicalists’ narrate two parallel histories: that of the body and that of the mind. They seek through ‘consciousness,’ self-awareness, and introspection the source of answers about their inner self. To think otherwise would be more than problematic; it would be almost unthinkable.

Ryle’s efforts to describe man through his behavior, without reference to the intentions, thoughts, and sensations that precede, accompany, and succeed man’s actions, were only relatively successful. His materialistic ‘monism’ has not been able to eliminate the dualism of ‘common sense,’ which is investigated by psychologists, and others of like kind. But the trend of contemporary philosophy of mind seemed to be heading in the right direction,²⁴ and some of the ill-solved problems in Ryle’s proposal were in the process of being effectively eliminated.²⁵ Whatever we think about these ill-solved problems, it seems certain that Ryle correctly identifies his “culprit”, the author of the “official doctrine”: Descartes.

²⁰ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson’s University Library, London, 2009) 1.

²¹ G. Ryle, *op. cit.*, 1.

²² G. Ryle, *op. cit.*, 1-2. By shortening the text, we also removed some paragraphs.

²³ La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), 35.

²⁴ At least up to a certain dualistic reversal by Thomas Nagel. See CIS 21, note 12.

²⁵ See Rorty, “Contemporary Philosophy of Mind”, *Synthese* 53, November 1982.

Imprisoned by Cartesian dualism?

Descartes' intention was to mathematically prove the "spirituality" of the mind. He began by replacing the scholastic hylomorphic soul with a bodiless mind. The mathematical Cartesianism requires the fission of reality into substances as different as the ideas that we have about them, in such a way that when the *philosopher is busy with metaphysical notions he should not know that he has a body*, and when the *scientist is busy with physics it is best that he forgets that he has a mind*. The Cartesian mind is a substance with sole, essential operation of thought. It is a thinking thing (*res cogitans*),²⁶ and consequently not something that feeds or moves; for such notions refer to the body, which is an altogether distinctly and clearly different idea.

Of course, as Étienne Gilson reports in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*,²⁷ when Voltaire crossed the English Channel in 1728, he met the flourishing of the moderate empiricism of Locke, instead of the logical Cartesian "dreamers," who were emmeshed in the problem of trying to solve how these substances, defined by incommensurate terms (i.e. essentially bodiless mind, and essentially mindless body) could stand in relation to the other.²⁸ Locke's empiricism was moderate because he did not ignore facts nor did he derive a law from a single fact. It should be noted that while Locke denies innate ideas in the first chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,²⁹ he does assert that we come across things through sensations (external or bodily) and reflection (about the inner workings of the mind). We are thus facing still two sources of knowledge and two realities. Of course, the mind travels in the same carriage that moves the body, and Locke does not rule out the existence of a "thinking matter" as the essence of the mind, a solution that obviates the problem of the communication between two completely different "natures" of kinds of things.³⁰ Voltaire was drawn to Locke's hypothetical materialism,³¹ but Locke's idea revealed that fissure between internal and external *fora* that was to last.³² Locke's notion of "idea" does not solve, indeed aggravates the fissure.³³ Not even Kant, awake from his dogmatic slumber, could free himself of the notion of the mind as a Regulatory Idea, even as he was unable to demonstrate its existence (since thoughts and feelings have a kind of self-evident or apodictic character).³⁴

Was Rorty able to throw a bridge over the English Channel³⁵ and close the gap between continental and analytical trends in philosophy of mind? An approximation of positions or convergence of trends, as

²⁶ R. Descartes, *Meditations*, collected in R. M. Eaton, *op. cit.*, 100.

²⁷ E. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1937) 164.

²⁸ Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, 2 vols. (Hachette, Paris, 1917) vol. II, 1 and 5.

²⁹ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols. (Ed. J. A. St. John, London, 1877) vol. 1, 129.

³⁰ See J- Locke, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 339-411.

³¹ See E. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1937) 172.

³² A fissure larger than the fissure of the two brain halves of the mental experiences of analytic philosophy of mind. See our paper "Identity."

³³ See Tartaglia, *Op.cit.*, on "Locke's mistake", 100-106.

³⁴ E. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004) see preface.

³⁵ CQ xxi-xxii.

diagnosed, is not necessarily an interception of these tendency lines, which may not be compatible (a doubt that a nominalist cannot help raising since if all ideas are but *flatus vocis*, but even a realist may think these ideas are not on the same plane).

For Rorty, however, the problem of our inner (or mental) and outer (or corporeal) intuitions is only a problem of vocabulary, which is born with modern philosophy. For even if we dropped all our notions of mental states associated with the body, and even our notions of those mental states which do not give us a clear association with the body, it would still remain *intelligible* to us that there could hypothetically be a distinction between what is mental and what is bodily.³⁶ We simply need a new vocabulary.

The first part of Rorty's *Mirror* discusses the current situation of epistemological dualists and points to the paradoxes which implicates them by examining, with good insight, the problem of our prevailing intuition of the chasm between these 'two worlds.' The liberation of Cartesian dualism to which Rorty leads us, however, depends on the acceptance of philosophical *arguments* against a rooted intuition. The burden of the proof, he says, falls on the dualists, who must explain how two things can be of irreducible ontological kinds.³⁷ Nonetheless, a survey of our concepts and language games shows Rorty that we do not really know what 'divine,' 'infinity,' 'immateriality,' 'temporal but non-spatiality,' 'intentionality,' 'universality' may be and therefore (*ergo*) we should discard them as misleading. Let us say, to synthesize, that the question 'what is the mind?' was reduced or led to a question of vocabulary in order to prevent us from keep stumbling in that ontological dichotomy. Rorty states near the end of his survey That our tendency to take seriously the intuitions of the chasm between the two worlds is merely a matter of playing favorites with a specific language game.³⁸

Given that his writings are supposedly a defense of pragmatism which raises suspicions about all kinds of theories, Rorty's texts are curiously well argued by successive, critical examination of questions concerning the immateriality of intentionality,³⁹ and of mental states or properties,⁴⁰ or of giving privilege to what we might call 'first-person phenomena'.⁴¹ He deals at length with theoretical questions such as "How can we convince ourselves that the intentional must be immaterial?"⁴²; "Why should the mental be thought of as immaterial?"⁴³; "Why should the epistemic privilege we all have of being incorrigible about how things seem to us reflect a distinction between two realms of being?"⁴⁴ Owing to the strength of dualistic (delusional, not merely 'apparent') intuitions of us modern men, we may be led to think that only what Ryle

³⁶ CIS 17.

³⁷ CIS, 19.

³⁸ CIS 22.

³⁹ CIS, 27.

⁴⁰ CIS, 28.

⁴¹ CIS 29.

⁴² CIS, 27.

⁴³ CIS, 28.

⁴⁴ CIS 29.

called its “metaphysical status” has changed: after Rorty there is no longer an ontological gap because we are materialistic and behavioristic.

One speaks today of brain (formerly Locke’s “thinking matter”), because the mind is or a re-description of the brain inside the body. Rorty however claims to have dissolved the problem by way of nominalism: if (in addition to his previous argument against the ‘neo-dualists’) we do not give distinct ontological statuses to mind and body like Descartes did, then there is no ontological problem to solve either; it is just a matter of the dualist language game, with the burden of proof being upon *them* to demonstrate cogency, as we meanwhile work towards better vocabulary.⁴⁵

Our first question was asked and answered: if and how does Rorty reconcile (and to what extent) idealistic subjectivism with materialistic behaviorism? Not at all. Neither conciliation, nor approximation is attempted: It is actually a landslide victory of materialistic naturalism. Matter is all there is out there and immateriality a delusion due to hypostatizing of mental states into substances. Subjectivists or idealists would hardly be convinced.

Doing away with the Concern about Truth

In the present and on this planet, unlike among the Antipodeans, the question of the non-corporeality of the “mind” is still (but only temporarily) an issue that we cannot avoid entirely because we are bound not only by the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, but by a deeper magic we need to reject entirely, namely ‘ocular epistemology’ as defined by the Plato-Kant standard.

According to Rorty, the metaphysics that starts with the self and representation must both be discarded. Even philosophy of language has not been consistent in the rejection of the ‘myth of the given.’ In a collection of texts from the late 1960’s this was already evident. It is that, even in terms of Gustave Bergman’s “linguistic turn,”⁴⁶ analytical metaphysics has not yet abandoned some very objectionable traits: the search for a neutral or impartial point of view; the idea of an ideal or precise language instead of the current language (now all languages are contingent, *ergo...*); the idea of discovery rather than the pragmatic idea of a proposal. In short, the ideas of *representation* and *self as a “glassy medium,”* that is the *focal point of representations* is at the root of all dualistic evil. And it was necessary to cut the Gordian knot that binds the philosophers by doing away with both the ideas of ‘self’ and of ‘truth.’

That the question thus arises to us seems all the more paradoxical as the “self” was invented by modern thinkers to be the sure and undeniable fulcrum upon which a new and rigorous post-scholastic philosophy could be based. The disputes between philosophers would cease, for the result of ideas as clear and

⁴⁵ CIS 32

⁴⁶ CP, xxi.

distinct as mathematical universals would erase our disagreements or establish agreements through logical proof.

It is true that the great variety of experiences and categories of thought (or vocabularies) paved the way for Montaigne's brand of skepticism, of which René Descartes and Edmund Husserl tried to escape. They also raised doubts, but doubting was a professional task, not a moral attitude. In modern history, many thinkers considered the contradiction between philosophical positions so deep that only a radical doubt allowed to clean the slate and begin to build on solid foundations rather than on sand. Beginning with a universal doubt, it would, on the contrary, be a cornucopia from which flows not only the mind and its ideas (among which we would find God), but also the whole world, ???.

Their failure seems to disappoint us. We simply have to abandon philosophy altogether and replace it with poems, novels and films. In conclusion, we must assume failure, or rather the futility of effort, and define as the main task of philosophy the dissolution of philosophical problems. Philosophical problems, in fact, are not permanent, but always changing.

To support such dissolution of philosophy, Rorty proceeds to a fine analysis of the Thomist and (possibly Aristotelian) arguments about the capacity of something to exist separately from the body. They inferred, using hylomorphism as the underlying psychology, the non-material operation of intelligence in which the subject does not become a focal point of representations, but becomes identical with the thing known.⁴⁷ This argument differs from the various contemporary Cartesian and neo-dualist arguments, such as Nagel. But for this we must realize, Rorty notes, how radically different these theories of knowledge are. Both depend on imagery from the world—phantasms for Aristotle, and representations for Descartes. For Aristotle, intellect (*nous*) becomes through some sort of reconstruction of the phantasmata exactly what is “out there,” whereas for Descartes, the representations of the things “out there” are looked at from some interior vision, and then attempts to verify that what is seen inside is really what is there on the outside.⁴⁸

The questions that these philosophers raise are therefore not even the same: The Cartesian model so natural to us makes the Aristotelian model seem obsolete, so that when it is compared with the ancient Greek Pyrrhonian skepticism, we may wonder why Aristotle (or Plato) never seemed to take it as a serious, philosophical puzzle.⁴⁹

But how can Rorty know enough to unironically answer, alongside Wallace Matson, “Why Is not the Mind-Body Problem Ancient?” so he can say that, unlike the Antipodeans, “[t]he Greeks did not lack a concept of mind, even of a mind separable from the body”? Or again, that “from Homer to Aristotle, the line between mind and body, when drawn at all, was drawn so as to put the processes of sense perception on the

⁴⁷ CIS 44.

⁴⁸ CIS 44-45.

⁴⁹ CIS 45.

body side”?⁵⁰ Rorty’s nominalism somehow does not prevent him from understanding the problems even those that are almost impossible to “translate,” as in the absence of the Greek equivalent notion to “sensory,” which simply belongs to another language game entirely. He does concede that there was, in Descartes, a certain novelty about that place where representations appear and at which we gaze interiorly. But his suggestion is simply that it never was taken seriously long enough to become problematic. Only when the historical circumstances of the 17th-century occurred did it occur to Descartes to address the matter as a problem, and to address it as he did.

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Of course, the interior representations had to be checked against reality—and natural science did wonderfully with this. So, to sum up: in the modern age, “science, rather than living, became philosophy’s subject, and epistemology its center.” But why is not the solution a return to Aristotle, as MacIntyre, another contemporary historicist, narrates it to be?

How strong is Rorty’s case in favor of nominalism and historicism against Plato-Kant white witchcraft? It seems strong so far as modern philosophy and epistemology are related, but only to (explain).⁵² And small surprise. After all, before him also both Dewey and James versions of anti-Platonism were considered insufficiently rigorous (by analytical) *or* insufficiently radical (by continentals). (why?) Rorty too may be both insufficiently radical and insufficiently rigorous.⁵³

Bearing this in mind, we might say that Rorty threw away the ladder or the scaffolding, and so now he is prevented from answering the very questions he raised before about what is “out there.” How does he know that there is no mind and the sole task of his arguments is to dispense with the concept of the mind? Or how does he know that mind is the subject of his, and Aristotle’s, and Kant’s, and Ryle’s conversations? Is not this a case of a man who knows too much?

Metaphysical vocabulary

For the difficulty is: how does Rorty even know that Greeks, and Descartes, and “Antipodeans,” along with their and modern earthly explorers (in a sense including himself) speak of the same stuff (they do not), trying to solve the same (ahistorical and therefore nonexistent) problem of the mind? According to him, there are no permanent problems. Soul, mind, body, matter are mere *flatus vocis* and only understandable within a tradition or within the spirit of the age.

⁵⁰ CIS 46

⁵¹ (CIS)

⁵² Rorty should not wish to know any answers anyway, since these questions / answers outlived their usefulness (see CP xiv)

⁵³ See CP, xvii.

Consistent historicists, as their Straussians foes⁵⁴ noted Are very precise in the historical evaluation of previous thinkers, traditions, systems, and so forth. Indeed, “They forbid themselves to speak of a system of philosophy if the author of a philosophic doctrine did not consider his doctrine a ‘system.’” Neither do they “speak of Plato’s ‘metaphysics’ or of Socrates as the founder of ‘ethics,’” or even of “the Greek ‘theory of the State,’ or of Greek ‘religion,’ or of the ‘religion’ of the Bible or of the ‘philosophy of history’ of the Bible. And this is because “terms such as these do not occur in the vocabulary of the books or men in question.” According to them, “Plato never spoke of ‘metaphysics,’ Socrates apparently never spoke of ‘ethics,’ the Greek language has no words which could be translated by ‘State’ or ‘religion,’ nor are there words in biblical Hebrew which could be translated by ‘religion’ or ‘philosophy’ or ‘history’.”⁵⁵ These are different vocabularies.

We can declare the effort of tackling the question of the mind useless, but if we want as Rorty, to argue or just re-describe this Plato-Kant standard that crosses the ages, do we not need such meta-vocabulary that allows this almost impossible translation? Obviously, this is as far as we go without overcoming the examination of language. But going beyond language is what metaphysics, perhaps in a futile effort, seeks.

A sentimental education may protect us against utopian illusions, and with a true political philosophy which reminds us of the limits set for all human hopes and desires, as Pascal avers. But the vocabulary that Pascal used was a vocabulary completely different from Rorty’s. The construction of scholastic arguments turned out not to be so different from the way arguments appear in PMN. Do we need a meta-vocabulary to understand all these arguments? We can certainly limit ourselves to translating arguments into narratives. For example, instead of arguing about the usefulness of philosophy, we could build a narrative of how the policy of religious toleration inaugurated by reasonable statesmen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would not have been accepted if political philosophers had not enlightened public opinion and persuaded people that it was not a religious or moral duty to rebel against heretical governments.

The narratives are powerful, but it may not be possible to avoid a non-dogmatic, if pragmatic, metaphysics: a vocabulary of vocabulary that allows us to speak of the problems of justice in Plato and Rawls, of the soul in Aristotle and Descartes, of the dystopias in Moro and Orwell. How may eventually Rorty talk about the stimulation of the C-Fibers in the mind of the Greeks and the pain in the soul of the Antipodeans? Which meta-vocabulary would make it possible?

Conclusion: a modest recovery of a vocabulary of vocabularies?

⁵⁴ See PSH, 14-15.

⁵⁵ Strauss, “Historicism” (1941) in Colen and Minkov, *Toward natural Right and History* (Chicago: Chicago University press, 2018).

We do not want Rorty to be as a “conversation stopper” as religion is. And as a historicist he cannot fail to know that his theory would be washed away with the change of the world, since like all others it is dependent on *Geist*. A non-dogmatic metaphysics does not have to pretend to be suitable for all kinds of uses of the vocabulary, nor to say what can be said under penalty of being silent. It may be rather an effort of “non-fiction literature” that codes for contingent vocabulary,⁵⁶ but does not necessarily cut off the most important access to the reality of things that are first to us (and not at all).

Can we fight against what Berlin calls “incurable deep metaphysical needs”? One fundamental political concept, the concept of nature, is of philosophic origin. Metaphysics seems, in effect, an enterprise subject to serious objections. The phrase coined by Aristotle’s editors to assign a set of books that address questions beyond physics may ultimately have no other subject than to clarify the terms and concepts that science used as language, or at the least according to some illustrious representatives of analytic philosophy. Nothing exists beyond languages, or vocabularies, including science. So, after all, maybe we should just settle for it and give up a useless effort to seek substantive answers. Three centuries confirm the total loss of common-sense prestige in favor of a rigorous science. Socrates could find nothing by asking around his commonsensical interlocutors “what is F,” and this because opinion is no longer (and has never really been) the point of access to the principles of things, or an inspiration about how to live, but at its best only a semi-coherent set of practical aphorisms that allows us to guide our daily lives and, at worst, petrified prejudices. At least, that is one way of taking the situation.

But “nature” was not just a theoretical notion. *Nature* is the standard by which Plato-Kantian philosophers judged all actual political orders and is their guide for reform and improvements. By contrast to nature, all real orders are imperfect. Rorty asserts that we must assume failure, or rather the futility of the effort. The history of its (failed) attempts is what we call philosophy.⁵⁷ Such a contention looks credible. Metaphysics, in fact, seems to be the failed part of the modern project. The successful part is obviously science. But both belong together, according to Rorty, because they share the illusion of representation. Science’s prestige marches along untouched by Rorty’s consternation and it is from science—its history, the philosophy of that history—that we hope for any answers to current problems and issues. Philosophy on the other hand does not seem to produce cumulative knowledge, but is instead always entangled in the very same issues. If there is a “truth” in matters of metaphysics it seems inevitable to conclude that the history of philosophy is a history of mistakes and failed attempts.

Nonetheless, if the history of philosophy is the narrative of a progressive separation from a radiant but vaporous sun of new and more solid planets, the different scientific fields, fragmented but verifiable empirically, as Isaiah Berlin thinks, we still cannot ignore the fact that certain questions appear irreducibly

⁵⁶ See the “afterword” in Brandom, Robert (ed.), *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytical Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵⁷ See CP, xiv.

philosophical: Why *does* the world have three dimensions?; What *is* time?; What *should* we do?; etc.⁵⁸

Although the problem may remain as a question mark, according to Berlin, this should not prevent ourselves from seeking an answer, since saying that a question has no right answer or we don't know how to look for it is a very different thing altogether from saying that it is *meaningless*. The question, like other similar metaphysical questions, has the embarrassing habit of coming back in through the window when we try to throw it out to the door. Is it not unpragmatic to seek the dismissal of whatever fulfills "the deepest needs of the spirit?"

⁵⁸ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories* (Princeton University Press Princeton, 1999).