

## 12

# Richard Rorty

KAI NIELSEN

Richard Rorty is a controversial figure in contemporary philosophy. The very mention of his name in a respectful tone gets some philosophers hot under the collar and from others a prompt dismissal. Others, including some very important others, take him very seriously indeed. Among them, some think his views are largely on the mark and importantly creative and innovative (such as Donald Davidson, Michael Williams, and this author) while others take him equally seriously but think his views are deeply and importantly flawed (such as Bernard Williams and Charles Taylor).

Richard Rorty was born on October 4, 1931 in New York City. He was a professor of philosophy at Princeton University from 1961 to 1982, a professor of the humanities at the University of Virginia from 1982 to 1998, and since 1998 has been professor of comparative literature at Stanford University.

Rorty is one of the most important philosophical figures of our time. While I have criticized and recorded my reservations about his work, he has clearly articulated some very important things in the way they should be articulated. Indeed, I would conjecture (always a chancy matter concerning such things) that, like Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas (see HABERMAS), W. V. Quine (see QUINE), and Davidson, Rorty will be studied in the next century and will not, like many others of current fame, disappear from view.

This chapter gives an account of Rorty's version of pragmatism after the so-called linguistic turn, his attack on epistemology and metaphysics, and his metaphilosophy. I shall weave into my account what I take to be some of the most important criticisms that have been made of Rorty and consider some of the ways he has responded or could have responded. Rorty would scoff at being called a systematic philosopher but, as with Quine and Davidson, if one reads him attentively and carefully, then the various parts of his account fall into a coherent and interrelated whole yielding an understanding and a vision of what philosophy has been, is now and could, with luck, become.

Rorty, in a manner very unlike Wittgenstein's, is lavish with his "isms." He typically characterizes the stance he takes in terms of some "ism" or other (though typically a negative one): anti-representationalism, anti-epistemology, anti-essentialism, anti-metaethics, anti-ethical theory, anti-authoritarianism, anti-grand social theory, anti-metaphysics, anti-Philosophy, and the like. This could be summed up in what I think

is a pervasive attitude, indeed a deeply held conviction, of Rorty's, namely his *anti-theoreticism: his deep distrust of theory*. This runs through all the topics he discusses, from metaphilosophy to epistemology and metaphysics, to ethics and politics. The pervasiveness and the rationale for this shall be a *leitmotif* of this chapter.

One thing should be immediately recognized as problematic: the very idea of anti-Philosophy. That proves, some of his critics will say, that Rorty wants to see the *end of philosophy* and indeed that he is being frivolous about and dismissive of philosophy. Rorty rejects that characterization and one can see why from a characterization he makes in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982, pp. xiv–xvii). Rorty remarks that “‘philosophy’ can mean simply what Wilfrid Sellars called ‘an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term’.” Rorty goes on to say (1) that “no one would be dubious about philosophy taken in this sense” and (2) that this activity covers many people, including many intellectuals, who would not normally be thought to be philosophers and *may* exclude some professional people, able in their own way, who are traditionally classified as philosophers, such as Alonzo Church or Richmond H. Thomason. (Leo Tolstoy or George Eliot, however, on the above characterization, are philosophers and, as Rorty says, “Henry Adams is more of a philosopher than Frege.”)

Rorty goes on to say: “No one would be dubious about philosophy taken in this sense.” But many would be dubious, and with good reason, about *Philosophy*, which is something more specialized, where “*Philosophy*” is taken to mean “following Plato and Kant’s lead in asking questions about the nature of certain normative notions (e.g., ‘truth’, ‘rationality’, ‘goodness’) in the hope of better obeying such norms.” Where I italicize and capitalize *Philosophy* I am speaking of the metaphysical-epistemological position of the Tradition which Rorty repudiates and claims should be set aside. When I use *philosophy* with a little “p” and italicized, I am speaking of the Sellarian thing that Rorty thinks is both unproblematic and a valuable thing to do. Where the “p” in neither *philosophy* nor *Philosophy* is italicized, I am being neutral concerning which (if either) is to be claimed. In spite of the harshness of his dismissal of *Philosophy*, Rorty is not saying that the great dead philosophers, who were usually both (I add) *Philosophers* and *philosophers*, should not be read and studied. Of course they should. Rorty, like any sensible and reflective person, regards them as an indispensable and precious part of our cultural heritage.

*Philosophy* is an affair of the *Philosophic Tradition*, while *philosophy* is something quite common and pervasive among reflective people and has nothing necessarily to do with any professional discipline or activity. “Pragmatists,” Rorty adds, “are saying that the best hope for *philosophy* is not to practice *Philosophy*. They 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” (1982, p. xv).

Some might think that this is not only to be anti-theoretical but that it is to be crudely Luddite. But we must remember that when Rorty is talking about Truth, Goodness, and Rationality, he is taking them to be proper names of objects – goals or standards – objects of ultimate concern. He takes them to be interlocked Platonic notions. He has a long and careful elucidation of such notions and particularly of the whole Cartesian and Kantian traditions whose usefulness, and even their very

intelligibility, he puts in question. James Conant, in an insightful discussion, raises questions as to whether it is uselessness or unintelligibility that is centrally at issue. It looks like it can't be both, for to discover that something is useless would seem at least to presuppose that it is intelligible. In his earlier writings Rorty stressed unintelligibility; in his later writings he stresses lack of usefulness. Conant makes it evident that there is something to be sorted out here (see Conant 1994, pp. xxvii–xxxiii).

The claim that there is nothing dubious or problematical about *philosophy* in contrast to *Philosophy*, however, can be challenged by noting that philosophers like Wittgenstein would find both *philosophy* and *Philosophy* problematic. Seeing how things hang together, especially in the broadest possible sense of the term, is no easy or unproblematic feat. It is not altogether clear what it would be like to do this or what our criteria for success here would be. To weave and unweave the web of our beliefs until we gain an understanding of the “scheme of things entire” may be such an utterly hapless task – as hapless as *Philosophy* – that it is better not to try to engage in it. Indeed we may only have an inchoate sense of what we are after.

However, on the contrary, *philosophy* is not as problematic as *Philosophy*. We have some sense of what it would be like to forge a belief pattern that would cohere and not just be a mere jumble. Full and complete coherence is another thing. We have no idea what that is. But we have an idea how to get our affairs in order and we have some idea how people in Europe or North America should live. Not a precise idea, of course, but some, albeit contestable, idea that could be developed and articulated with persuasiveness and care. And when I said that philosophers like Quine, Davidson, and Rorty have accounts of *philosophy* that hang together, you understood something of what to expect in reading their accounts to either confirm or disconfirm what I said. We have, in fine, some coherent sense of how to do *philosophy*, but no coherent sense of how either intelligibly or usefully to do *Philosophy*. The pragmatist realizes that she can best do *philosophy* by being anti-*Philosophical*. She wants to bring an end to *Philosophy* but not to *philosophy*. By doing *philosophy*, she can perhaps gain something of a sense of things, make some sense of our world, some sense of the problems of human beings and how not to distract ourselves with the pseudo-problems of *Philosophy*: asking and giving fallibilistically, fully aware of our finitude, and without the “ambition of transcendence,” something of what a just society or even a world would be, and something of how a life could be fulfilling. In seeking these things, pragmatists do not expect a perfect fit, but they are not satisfied with just a jumble of beliefs either. They seek to give some coherence to their beliefs and some sense of what is important and what is not.

Pragmatists, classical and neo, care about these things and believe that Platonic-like reflections on Reason, the Truth, and Justice will do nothing to yield enlightenment. Indeed, these Platonic undertakings will just serve to impede our understanding of what Rorty's anti-theoreticism comes to.

Rorty characterizes pragmatism as anti-representationalism (1990; 1996, pp. 635–7). This is a view which meshes nicely with *philosophy* and is a major tool in the setting aside of *Philosophy*, particularly in its Cartesian and Kantian forms. It is also a major tool in his attack on foundationalism, the conception of mind as a mirror of nature (a key notion in representational theories of knowledge), his rejection of correspondence theories of truth, his setting aside of epistemology, and his rejection of the

conception of knowledge as accurate representation depending on an a priori knowledge of mind as something inner that each of us has a direct and privileged access to and which affords Philosophy with a foundational knowledge of “ultimate reality,” a grasp of “the unconditional” and criteria of “unconditional validity.”

As Rorty puts it in the very first page of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

Philosophy as a discipline . . . sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and of mind. 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. (1979, p. 3)

Philosophers can come to know something, this traditional claim of Philosophy contends, that no one else can know so well. Philosophy, as Kant contended, is “a tribunal of pure reason, upholding or denying the claims of the rest of culture” (ibid., p. 4). It can do this in studying persons as knowers of the activity of representation. This will enable us to see how knowledge is possible, how a knowledge is possible which consists in accurate representation of what is outside of the mind. To “understand the possibility and the nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations” (ibid., p. 3).

On this traditional conception of Philosophy, its core concern is to yield a general representation of reality. It will be a theory which will divide up culture into areas that “represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all” (despite their pretense of doing so) (ibid., p. 3). Perhaps physics, sociology, and theology would count as examples of each. The expectation that this traditional foundationalist conception of Philosophy gave expression to was that it was here where Philosophy enabled us to “touch bottom”: where one found “the convictions which permitted one to explain and justify one’s activity as an intellectual and thus to discover the significance of one’s life” (ibid., p. 4).

The long and complicated narrative – though a narrative packed with arguments – that is *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* documents such a conception of Philosophy. It does so first, for Descartes’ conception of mind, pointing out how this came to seem compelling, shows why after all it wasn’t, shows how foundational epistemology grew out of it in Locke’s account which in turn led to Kant’s synthesis responding to difficulties in Locke, how Philosophy came in the early twentieth century then to be transformed into foundational analytic philosophy and in turn how this was finally rather decisively undermined by the logical behaviorism of Sellars and Quine, with Sellars displaying of the myth of the given and with Quine’s attack on the claim to have a priori knowledge and to be able to demarcate the analytic and the empirical. This, together with the work of the latter Wittgenstein, undermined foundationalism and the claim to a distinctive role for Philosophy rooted in epistemology or conceptual analysis.

Rorty then goes on to consider the attempt to articulate a “naturalistic epistemology” and then to articulate, criticize, and set aside the attempt to articulate a philosophy of language with a theory of reference like that of Saul Kripke, David Lewis, or Hartry Field, which, resisting the holism of Quine and Davidson, would (if successful) yield a metaphysical realism or a “scientific realism” that appeals fundamentally to

physics and takes physics at face value. Physics, as David Lewis claims, “professes to discover the elite properties” where “elite” means the ones whose “boundaries are established by objective sameness and difference in nature” (1984, p. 226, as quoted in Rorty 1991, p. 7). These “elite properties” show how nature is carved at the joints yielding the one true objective description of the world. It yields (*pace* Putnam – see PUTNAM) an account of reference which is not ‘made true’ by our referential *intentions* (Lewis 1983, pp. 227–8; italics mine). We have here the return of metaphysics in the form of a robust realism attuned, so it is claimed, to a scientific mindset.

I doubt very much if *physics* professes to discover such elite properties. Rather, it is some Philosophers such as David Lewis who make such claims and that it is not a doctrine of physics that physicists have a set of concepts that enable us to “carve nature at the joints.” This is a metaphysical metaphor that some metaphysically inclined philosophers with the ambition of transcendence wish to attribute to physics. But it is hardly a part of physics itself. But be that as it may, Rorty responds to Lewis’s scientific realism in the following way. He remarks that anti-representationalists “see no sense in which physics is more independent of our human peculiarities” than morality, social anthropology, literary criticism, or a host of other practices – various areas of culture answering to different human needs and interests – viewing things from often different perspectives and with various interests in mind. We have, Rorty goes on to claim, no coherent conception of a language-independent determinate reality, no conception of how words relate to non-words such that the words picture them, no conception of how sentences correspond to facts (sentence shaped bits of the world) such that these true sentences picture them or, our intentions aside, no sense of how we can get an accurate representation of how things are in the world independent of a particular language or scheme of representation or a set of optional practices. We have no understanding of what it would mean to stand outside any language and just compare our language with the world to see how it maps it or mirrors it.

There is, no doubt, with many Philosophers and theologians, an “ambition of transcendence,” but, *pace* Thomas Nagel or Stanley Cavell, we only have with such talk a blur of words and inchoate feelings without the slightest idea what it would be for us to achieve or in any way even to gesture at transcendence or in any way (*pace* Habermas and Apel) to gain some “universal validity” floating free of the contingencies of time and place and the imprint of what just happens to be our acculturation.

We understand how one cobbling together of beliefs may be more coherent than another. But this inescapably is just from where we stand, given our own take on things. But we have no idea what it would be like to gain a context-free coherence which just yields a cluster of beliefs or considered convictions that are justified *period*. Justification is always with reference to a given audience, with given interests at a particular time and place. Truth is usually time-independent, but justification never is. We can sensibly aim at getting what for a time and place is the best justified cluster of coherently hanging together beliefs that careful inquiry can then attain, that at the time are best *taken* to be true, but they always might at some later time be reasonably taken to be false. We cannot simply by fiat rule this out. If we say we want beliefs or convictions that are not only the ones that at a given time are the most reasonable and reasonably taken to be true, but as well *just are true full stop*, then we are asking, not for a ton of bricks, but for the tone of bricks. If our aim is to obtain beliefs which just

are true and known timelessly to be true, we have just another incoherent ambition of transcendence. There is no way to escape our finitude. No representationalist account, or for that matter anti-representationalist account, is going to give us such a skyhook for all times and climes – show us how our propositions (or sentences if you will) correspond to the way the world is. The ambition of transcendence is something we should resolutely set aside.

Anti-representationalism, to summarize, is an account “which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality” (1991, p. 1). Anti-representationalists reject the very idea that beliefs can represent reality; they are neither realists nor anti-realists. Truth, they claim, is not an *explanatory* property. The correct but platitudinous “‘P’ is true if and only if P” does not claim that P corresponds to or represents anything. Anti-representationalists reject the whole realist/anti-realist problematic, denying that the very “notion of ‘representation’ or that of ‘fact of the matter’ has any useful role in *philosophy*” (1991, p. 2).

Rorty is not denying that there are links between our language and the rest of the world, but these links are *causal* not *epistemological*. We cannot avoid being in touch with the world. We have no idea of what it would be not to be in touch with it. As one macro-object, we are constantly impinged on by other macro-objects, both animate and non-animate. We causally speaking bang around like billiard balls colliding with each other.

Our languages, as much as our bodies, are shaped by our environment. Our languages could no more be “out of touch” with our environment (grandiosely the world) than our bodies could. But we speak here of causal contact and not of representation. The fitting is a coping with our environment not a fitting by accurate representation. Rorty is thoroughly Darwinian. That is, like all the other pragmatists, Rorty takes Darwin seriously and tailors his account to fit and build on Darwin.

However, as Rorty asserts again and again in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, causation is one thing and justification is another. Like Davidson, he thinks that only a belief can justify another belief. Justification comes through gaining a coherent pattern of beliefs. We, in weaving and unweaving our web of beliefs, justify them; and in doing this we justify one belief in terms of others. We seek, for a time, and for certain purposes, to get the most coherent pattern of beliefs we can forge. But all this justification is time and place and interest dependent. We never escape fallibilism and historicism. In pushing justification as far as it can go, we seek, for a time, the widest and most coherent cluster of beliefs we can muster, but each time for a particular purpose. We do not understand (perhaps *pace* Sellars) what it would be like to get the most coherent set of beliefs *period*.

We also need for justification to obtain to have an intersubjective consensus concerning this. It is these two things – having something that is intersubjective and having a consensus – which will give us the only viable conception of objectivity that we can have. Anything more is just *objectification* which gives us the usual Platonistic illusion. We have a fallibilistic, coherentist method of justifying beliefs replacing epistemology; we have as well a coherentist model of justification replacing a deductivist one. Anti-representationalism, at least Rorty-style, is holistic, logically behaviorist, perspectival, anti-essentialist (nominalist), historicist, and fallibilist.

Critics have repeatedly attacked, with varying degrees of subtlety, this view as relativistic and/or irrationalist (for example, Putnam 1990, pp. 18–24; Kolakowski 1996, pp. 52–7, 67–76; Bloom 1987), decreasing in subtlety as we go from the first to the third. Rorty has repeatedly brushed these criticisms aside (see 1991, pp. 21–34, 203–10; 1998, pp. 43–62).

A relativistic view is, as Rorty characterizes it, “the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic is as good as every other” (1982, p. 166). And an irrationalist is someone who says you can say anything or hold anything on any topic or issue you like whether you have any reasons for it or not if you feel like saying it or holding it. You should live by your gut feelings whatever they are no matter whether you have reasons for them or not. Rorty says that these are both absurd views that practically no one holds. Certainly, as we already have seen, he does not hold them. Rorty seeks to justify beliefs by getting them into coherent patterns and he attends to reasons for beliefs and against them and plainly regards these things as reasonable things to do. He does not think, however, that one can attain an ahistorical Archimedean point, that one can free oneself completely from one’s acculturation and that one can escape ethnocentrism. His ethnocentrism is not the anthropologist’s, who instead says that we must think that what our culture thinks is so or right is correct and that the beliefs of other cultures, where they differ from ours, must be wrong. Rorty rather uses “ethnocentrism” to connote an inescapable condition of “human finitude” and as loyalty to a liberal tolerant sociopolitical culture that prides itself as being open to other cultures and other points of view where these cultures are themselves tolerant (1991, p. 15). Ethnocentrism in Rorty’s sense is an unblinking acceptance of our finitude as inescapable, and a recognition that we cannot stand utterly free from our culture and our place in history. But loyalty to such a liberal culture, as everyone knows, is not something that is universal. There are, of course, people, including intellectuals, as Rorty stresses elsewhere, who are not liberals. Nietzsche and Loyola, for example, and he could have added, to get a little more contemporary, Karl Schmidt (1991, pp. 179–84). We can call them mad if we will, but that is just to hit them over the head with a conception of “rational” from liberal culture – a conception which they do not share. Nor is it to refute them with arguments or to show our views to be in any way superior. Rorty takes this impasse or deadlock to be inescapable. Where our reflective equilibria are challenged, and for the fallibilist the most cherished practices in accordance with which she lives are challenged, there is, Rorty claims, nothing more non-circular that can be said. To try to push such questions so far is itself the irrational attempt by Platonic types – irrational because unintelligible – to seek to ground our practices, not just on other practices, but on something external to *all* other practices. Unless we believe that our belief-systems are like axiomatic systems (something they are not), there are no first principles that we *must* just start with and not question.

When many philosophers claim that Rorty is a relativist or irrationalist, they are really accusing him of historicism and a practice-oriented philosophy. To that charge he willingly pleads guilty. But his stance is not relativism or irrationalism, but a claim that there is no absolute or ahistorical conception of justification that yields unconditionality. But this is not at all to claim that anything goes or that any belief is as good as any other. It is just to reject Absolutism and Platonism and it is anything but evident that Rorty is mistaken here.

Charges that Rorty is caught in self-referential paradoxes or performative self-contradictions come into sight. He responds, like Wittgenstein, that he has no Philosophical views to set against representationalism, foundationalism, theories of truth, metaphysics, Platonic conceptions of the Good, and the like. He is not claiming to have gotten things right. He is not a systematic philosopher with Philosophical views on things, but, like Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and John Dewey, an edifying philosopher whose aim is to edify, that is to help his “readers, or society as a whole, break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes, rather than to provide ‘grounding’ for the institutions and customs of the present” (1979, pp. 366–7).

Yet Rorty also refers to himself as an anti-representationalist, an anti-foundationalist, and an anti-essentialist. This seems to put him in a self-referential paradox. However, by using “antis” here he may be indicating he is rejecting views without asserting or assuming alternative views. Yet he also calls himself a pragmatist, a historicist, a nominalist, and a holist. There he seems to be asserting positive views, but then he seems at least to be unsaying what he says when he says he is setting out no philosophical views. But here his distinction between *Philosophy* and *philosophy* frees him from self contradiction and from self-referential paradox. What Rorty is rejecting is *Philosophy* – grand metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical theories – by claiming they are either useless or incoherent. But he is not doing it by making a *Philosophical* claim himself but by making a claim in *philosophy* which is for him the unproblematic humdrum attempt to try to see how things hang together. In attacking these Platonic-Kantian conceptions and replacing them with his own non-*Philosophical* conceptions, he is further showing how our concepts in practice hang together. He is being anti-*Philosophical* in being *philosophical* where *Philosophy* and *philosophy* refer to quite different activities. He would be in self-contradiction if he claimed to be an anti-*Philosophical* *Philosopher*, but not by being an anti-*Philosophical* *philosopher*. Such a philosopher need not be setting one metaphysics against another or one epistemology against another. He just adds additional “antis” to his list and does that from a non-*Philosophical* point of view. He is not caught up in the *Philosophical* tradition anymore than Wittgenstein and Dewey were. Nor need he be authoritarian in espousing anti-authoritarianism. Rorty puts the matter rather differently himself in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979, pp. 370–2), but in a way that is compatible with the more direct and less puzzling way in which I untangled him from a putative referential self-contradiction.

I turn now to a very perceptive criticism of Rorty’s account which I think actually comes to a *friendly amendment* which considerably strengthens Rorty’s own account. It is an account given by Michael Williams, who remarks: “Rorty betrays an attraction to views that are seriously in tension with the pragmatism he officially espouses” (2003, p. 62). Williams explains what is at issue and then proceeds to show why Rorty, in line with his overall views, shouldn’t be attracted to such views.

Rorty, as we have seen, generally takes a fallibilist and historicist stance. Many beliefs vary extensively over time and place; even our firmest considered judgments, as Rawls acknowledges, are at least in principle revisable; there is no ahistorical standard, no universal criteria of validity or soundness of judgment to which we can appeal to assess whole belief-systems or forms of life or of what we take to be our most important and crucial commitments in some *final and unassailable* way. This is fallibilism and



it comes to much the same thing as *mild* skepticism, like Hume's "mitigated skepticism." It is the view, as Williams puts it, "that nothing is absolutely certain, that (given enough stage-setting) anything is revisable; that even the most deeply entrenched views can be revised or abandoned" and goes on to characterize this mild or mitigated skepticism as fallibilism (Williams 2003, p. 76). *Radical* skepticism, he observes, is a much more severe form of skepticism. It holds "not just that nothing is absolutely certain: rather, with respect to a given subject matter, there is not the slightest reason for believing one thing rather than another" (ibid.). But Rorty, Williams acknowledges, sees the absurdity of this *radical* skepticism just as he does of relativism. He takes it as plainly so "that no one finds every view on any topic of importance equally appealing" (ibid.). No one, Rorty realizes, is either a *radical* skeptic or a relativist and there are good Davidsonian reasons (which Rorty accepts) for denying that anyone can be and that not because they take the views of common sense as practically authoritative. Whatever a person's belief about common sense, there are logical reasons for saying it is incoherent to be a *radical* skeptic. Belief must precede doubt and make doubt possible. Fallibilism teaches us that (1) we can doubt anything but not everything at once and (2) that we cannot even doubt unless we already believe some things. Universal Cartesian doubt is impossible, indeed conceptually incoherent. It is not enough to doubt to say "I doubt."

Indeed, Charles Pierce, Wittgenstein, and Davidson are very likely right that massive agreement is a precondition of meaningful disagreement. Williams remarks, correctly, that "the distinction between fallibilism and *radical* skepticism [and relativism] is crucially important for a philosopher like Rorty. This is because, while fallibilism is an essential part of pragmatism, *radical* skepticism is rooted in the very epistemological ideas that pragmatists reject" (2003, p. 76; italics mine). Rorty generally sees this, especially in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, but he at times forgets it in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. The culprits here are his talk of "ultimate commitments," "final vocabularies," and his conception of irony. Rorty holds in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* that everyone subscribes to some ultimate set of commitments which they articulate in what is for them a "final vocabulary." Rorty puts it thus:

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs and their lives. . . . I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary." It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force. (1989, p. 73)

Pragmatists (including Rorty) should have nothing to do with "*final* vocabularies," "*ultimate* commitments," "sets of *ultimate* commitments," or even the idea of an ironist as someone who "has radical doubts about her final vocabulary" and with these radical and continuing doubts, becomes a *radical* skeptic. This sounds more like existentialism or logical positivism where decision and commitment is king and is arbitrary. But a fallibilist (which is what a good pragmatist is, and Rorty usually is) and a logical holist are not like that; they have no final vocabulary. They will, as everyone will, carry about a set of words which they will employ to justify their actions, their beliefs,

and their lives. *At a given time* their spade *may* be turned, but later they may come to view things differently. For a fallibilist this can go on indefinitely. There is no point at which she *must* stop with some ultimate commitment and say, "Here I stand. I can do no other." We do not have to go into circular arguments and, even if we do, if the circle is big enough, as Quine noted, no harm will be done. Faced with an argument or a rejection of what she (the fallibilist) says, she just keeps the conversation going. She may be in what at least is an apparent head-on conflict and not know on a given occasion what to say. But there are no "last words" or ultimate commitments functioning like axioms or ultimate postulates which for each person becomes her "ultimate vocabulary" which can in no way be challenged and from which everything follows. That such, or indeed anything, is a "last word" is not at all the fallibilist and holist picture. Williams well says, in good pragmatist fashion, "all we ever do is reweave the web of belief as best we know how in the light of whatever considerations we deem to be relevant. . . . Nothing is immune to revision" (2003, p. 78). We, of course, get tired, impatient, bored, or sometimes do not know what further to say. But we, or others later, may always pick up the conversation. There is no point at which it *must* halt: where the *final* word has been said.

Williams remarks: "As a pragmatist, Rorty should have no truck with the language of 'finality'" (ibid.). There are, to be sure, situations which can "arise that reveal differences of opinion that are deep and apparently irresolvable" (ibid.). Williams's remarks concerning this, in closing his essay, are very perceptive and I quote them in full:

But the sort of holist Rorty generally claims to be should treat such irresolvability as always relative to our current argumentative resources, which are in constant flux. If we see no way to resolve a dispute maybe we should look for one. We may find one or we may not. It depends on ingenuity and luck. But whether a dispute can be resolved (or creatively transcended) is a thoroughly contingent affair. It offers no reason to think that there is a theoretically interesting, epistemically based partition of our commitments into those that involve elements of a final vocabulary and those that do not. For a holist, there is no such thing as a commitment that is ultimate in the sense that it *can* only be defended in a circular way, for there is no way of saying once and for all what our dialectical resources may turn out to comprise. Recognizing the contingency of our dialectical situation is the antidote to the virus of finality and thus the cure for the skeptical diseases it induces. Contingency is the friend of fallibilism but the sworn enemy of skepticism: that is of irony. As we have seen this is Rorty's own insight. That he loses track of it is the most ironic result of all. (Ibid., p. 79)

Williams's criticisms of Rorty amount to a friendly amendment of Rorty's thought which strengthens Rorty's account and takes out an important tension from his account. Sticking with fallibilism while eschewing radical skepticism brings out Rorty's better pragmatist self.

Rorty's achievements are radical and innovative. He has given us a rationale for the setting aside of epistemology and the philosophy of mind. He has told a story of the development of modern philosophy from Cartesianism, to Locke, to Kant's transcendentalism synthesizing Cartesian rationalism with Lockean empiricism, and then he trenchantly criticized Kantian transcendentalism. He has also shown us how neo-Kantianism finally transformed itself into the foundationalism of logical empiricism

with *language* replacing *mind* as the key philosophical category. Rorty then went on to depict how the holism and logical behaviorism of Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, and Davidson radically transformed analytic philosophy and, in reality if not intent, brought about its demise except as a certain style of writing. With this, Rorty has it, we move from systematic philosophy aspiring to be a scientific discipline to edifying or therapeutic philosophy without such disciplinary or scientific applications or rationale. This transformation from Philosophy to philosophy is a transformation from a *discipline* which would, being the “guardian of rationality,” *ground* all knowledge in all areas of culture, to an *activity* which aids individuals or society as a whole to “break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes” (1979, p. 12). The activity of philosophy would permit people to see a little better how things hang together and with this to somewhat more adequately make sense of their lives, eschewing the search for something unconditional and thus unattainable and perhaps even incoherent: some skyhook which provides “a ‘grounding’ for the intuitions and customs of the present” (1982, p. xiv). This plainly is a de-scientization and de-professionalization of philosophy, but it is a de-theoreticization of it as well. The novelist becomes closer to the philosopher than the physicist. The philosopher’s very self-image changes. Without falling into blabber or metaphysical moonshine, it is seen with clarity that the very notion of “exact philosophy” becomes an oxymoron. Philosophy comes to have a very different rationale from what “scientific realists” dreamed of.

## References and further reading

### Works by Rorty

- 1979: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.  
 1982: *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.  
 1987: “Thugs and theorists.” *Political Theory* 15, 564–80.  
 1989: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 1990: “Pragmatism as anti-representationalism.” In John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder, CO: Westview), pp. 1–6.  
 1991: *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 1996: “Pragmatism.” In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge), vol. 7, pp. 632–40.  
 1998: *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 1999: *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin.  
 2000: “Universality and truth” and “Response to Habermas.” In *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandon (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 1–30 and 56–69.

### Works by other authors

- Bloom, Allan. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.  
 Brandom, Robert B., ed. 2000. *Rorty and His Critics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.  
 Conant, James. 1994. “Introduction.” In Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. xi–xxvi.  
 Crosby, Donald A., and Hardwick, Charley D., eds. 1997. *Pragmatism, Neo-pragmatism, and Religion: Conversations with Richard Rorty*. New York: Peter Lang.

KAI NIELSEN

- Festenstein, Matthew, and Thompson, Simon. eds. 2001. *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Kolakoswki, Leszek. 1996. "A Remark on Rorty" and "A Remark on our relative relativism." In *The State of Philosophy*, eds. Józef Niznik and John Sanders (London: Praeger), pp. 52–7, 67–76.
- Lewis, David. 1984. "Putnam's paradox." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62, 225–9.
- Nielsen, Kai. 1991. *After the Demise of the Tradition: Rorty, Critical Theory and the Fate of Philosophy*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Nielsen, Kai. 1996. *Naturalism Without Foundations*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Nielsen, Kai. 1999. "Taking Rorty seriously." *Dialogue* 37, 503–18.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1990. *Realism with a Human Face*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rumana, Richard. 2002. *Richard Rorty: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Literature*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Saatkamp, Herman, Jr., ed. 1995. *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Williams, Michael. 2003. "Rorty on knowledge and truth." In *Richard Rorty*, eds. Charles Guignon and David Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 61–80.