RICHARD RORTY has written one of the most important and challenging books to be published by an American philosopher in the past few decades. Some will find it a deeply disturbing book while others will find it liberating and exhilarating—both, as we shall see, may be right and wrong. Not since James and Dewey have we had such a devastating critique of professional philosophy. But unlike James and Dewey (two of Rorty’s heroes), who thought that once the sterility and artificiality of professional—and indeed much of modern philosophy since Descartes—had been exposed, there was an important job for philosophers to do; Rorty leaves us in a much more ambiguous and unsettled state. I will examine Rorty’s book from a variety of perspectives, beginning with a general overview and then moving to more finely meshed descriptions. My aim is not only to illuminate the power and subtlety of Rorty’s analysis and to show its inner unity, but to locate basic issues that are left unresolved.

In a book that is filled with all sorts of “jolts” and apparently outrageous claims, one of the first is Rorty’s declaration that the three most important philosophers of the twentieth century are Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey. Grouping these three together may appear to be something of a “category mistake” because according to the common wisdom, it would be hard to imagine three thinkers who are as far apart in philosophical temperament, style, and concern. What they share in common, according to Rorty, is that “each tried, in his early years, to find a new way of making philosophy ‘foundational’—a new way of formulating an ultimate context for thought.” But eventually,

Each of the three came to see his earlier effort as self-deceptive, as an attempt to retain a certain conception of philosophy after the notions needed to flesh out that conception (the seventeenth-century notions of knowledge and mind) had been discarded. Each of the three, in his later work, broke free of the Kantian conception of philosophy as found-

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dational, and spent his time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself had once succumbed. Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for sophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program (p. 5).

This passage indicates Rorty's intellectual affinities and what he wants to stress in these "three most important philosophers of our century." But he is not primarily concerned with the thought of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, except in the sense that he sees himself as doing, in a far more modest and concentrated way, the type of "philosophical therapy," "deconstruction," and "overcoming of tradition" that typifies the essential thrust of their later work. Rorty's primary focus is contemporary analytic philosophy—especially the philosophy of mind and epistemology—its historical origins, the ways in which it emerged out of the womb of seventeenth-century notions of mind and knowledge, the ways in which analytic philosophy has become increasingly sterile and remote from the "conversation of mankind," and its (possible) demise. He seeks to show that the self-image or self-conception that many analytic philosophers share—that we have finally discovered the right methods and the correct way of stating philosophical problems so that they can be solved—is a self-deception, a grand illusion. On the contrary, sophisticated analytic philosophers are themselves caught in metaphors such as "our glassy essence" and "mirroring" nature or reality that have gone stale. The very issues that seem so vital in analytic philosophy—problems of mind-body identity, whether knowledge can or cannot be characterized as justified true belief, the theory of reference and meaning—are themselves bound up with historical assumptions that can be exposed and questioned. These are "problems" not to be solved but to be dissolved or deconstructed. The way to perform this type of therapy is to dig deep into the language games in which they are embedded and to see how these language games are themselves the result of a series of historical accidents, options, and confusions. Roughly speaking, Rorty uses a two-stage strategy in carrying out his critique. The first stage is a "softening up" technique where he addresses the problems and positions that are currently being debated and shows that as we sharpen the issues and points of difference, the various controversies fall apart (and do not lead to significant new foundational philosophical truths). These are the sections that will probably capture the imagination of analytic philosophers. They will
recognize types of arguments with which they are familiar and will pounce upon—as they rightfully should—what is sound and unsound, convincing and unconvincing in Rorty’s arguments. But although the book is filled with arguments, many of which are brilliant and ingenious, Rorty at several points warns against the love of argument that has characterized one strand in philosophy ever since Plato. What is unsettling and disturbing about Rorty’s argumentative style is that he refuses to play the game that can be recognized as “normal” philosophy, i.e., he doesn’t seem to be primarily concerned with carefully stating issues in such a manner so that one can proceed to develop the strongest arguments in support of a correct “position.” Rather he wants to show that there is something wrong with the whole approach to philosophy as a discipline that deals with basic problems and advances by clarifying and solving these problems. As one follows the nuances of his arguments, it begins to dawn on the reader that just when he thinks he is getting down to the hard core of these disputes, he discovers that there is no core.

But assuming for the moment that Rorty is successful in this deconstructive technique, the question naturally arises, how did philosophers ever get themselves into a situation of thinking that something extremely important is at issue in advancing a theory of reference or meaning, or stating the necessary and sufficient conditions for what is to count as knowledge, or solving the mind-body problem. This highlights the second stage or aspect of Rorty’s strategy. He exposes the historical origins of what we now take to be standard philosophic problems and he searches for the historical roots of those philosophical “intuitions” that play such a primary role in philosophical debate. If Rorty is right, then most analytic philosophers are not only wrong, they are self-deceived about what they are doing—at least insofar as they think of “their discipline as one which discusses perennial, eternal problems—problems which arise as soon as one reflects” (p. 3). Indeed, it should be clear that if Rorty is right then most systematic philosophers—past and present—have misunderstood what they have been doing. We can already see that although Rorty focuses on recent analytic philosophy, there are much broader ramifications to his critique—a critique that finally turns into a meditation on the philosophical enterprise itself.

In order to carry out this critique, Rorty develops a historical reconstruction of modern philosophy which is the context from which analytic philosophy emerges. Rorty is sufficiently impressed by Hei-
degger to be aware of how we might trace the source of the trouble back to Plato, but for his purposes he begins his "history" with the founders of modern philosophy, Descartes, Locke, and Kant. The "ideal type" of what philosophy as a discipline is supposed to be that Rorty wants to undermine and debunk may be stated as follows:

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 and it finds these foundations in the study of man-as-knower, of the "mental processes" or the "activity of representation" which make knowledge possible. To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense to do so) (p. 3).

This conception of philosophy which may appear to be intuitive and obvious is one that has a long, complicated, and devious history.

We owe the notion of a "theory of knowledge" based on an understanding of "mental processes" to the seventeenth century, and especially to Locke. We owe the notion of "the mind" as a separate entity in which "processes" occur to the same period, and especially to Descartes. We owe the notion of philosophy as the tribunal of pure reason, upholding or denying the claims of the rest of culture to the eighteenth century, and especially to Kant, but this Kantian notion presupposed general assent to Lockean notions of mental processes and Cartesian notions of mental substance (p. 3–4).

These notions which we have inherited from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do not represent great breakthroughs or discoveries which set philosophy on a secure path. Rather they were "inventions"—the invention of distinctions and problems that were blended with potent metaphors which captured the imagination of philosophers and set the direction for "normal" philosophizing.

One of the many spinoffs of Rorty's reflections is a distinctive understanding of how the history of philosophy has developed. He rejects the view that there are perennial problems of philosophy which arise as soon as we begin to reflect. He is equally relentless in his criticism of a variant of this which takes the more "charitable" view that our philosophic ancestors were dealing with basic problems, but the trouble is that they did so in an obscure and confused manner. Rorty displaces this self-congratulatory understanding of the history of philosophy (as the dialectical unfolding of problems) which he
claims has had a distortive influence on the writing of the history of philosophy and a mystifying effect on our understanding of philosophy as a discipline.

His alternative, which can be seen as a novel blending of themes suggested by Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Kuhn, and Feyerabend, may be stated as follows: There are moments in history when, because of all sorts of historical accidents—like what is going on in some part of culture such as science or religion—a new set of metaphors, distinctions, and problems is invented and captures the imagination of followers. For a time, when a particular philosophical language game gets entrenched, it sets the direction for “normal” philosophizing. After a while, because of some other historical accidents—like the appearance of a new genius or just plain boredom and sterility—another cluster of metaphors, distinctions, and problems usurp the place of what is now seen as a dying tradition. At first the abnormal talk of some new genius may be dismissed as kookiness or as not being “genuine” or “serious” philosophy. But sometimes this abnormal talk will set philosophy off in new directions. It is an illusion to believe that we are always dealing with the same basic problems of philosophy. We must resist the Whiggish temptation to rewrite the history of philosophy in our own image—where we see our predecessors as “really” treating what we now take to be fundamental problems. The crucial point is to realize that a philosophical paradigm does not displace a former one because it can better formulate the problems of a prior paradigm. Rather, because of a set of historical contingencies, it “nudges” the former paradigm aside. This is what happened in the seventeenth century when within a relatively short period of time the entire tradition of scholasticism collapsed and no longer seemed to have much point. After such a revolution or upheaval occurs, philosophers have a difficult time figuring out what was the point of the elaborate language game that had evolved. If they don’t dismiss it out of hand, they are ineluctably tempted to reinterpret it as an anticipation of their present concerns. While Rorty refuses to make any predictions about what will happen next in philosophy, he certainly suggests that this is likely to happen again with the problematic of modern philosophy and its offspring, analytic philosophy. To understand a historical movement such as analytic philosophy or even the whole tradition of modern philosophy, one must uncover the set of metaphors, distinctions, confusions, and problems that are characteristic of the language games or the forms of life that
established the patterns for normal philosophizing. Briefly stated, the history of modern philosophy is the history of the rise and fall of the “mind” and the prized philosophical discipline—“epistemology.”

II

Rorty’s book is divided into three parts and consists of eight chapters: part 1, *Our Glassy Essence*, comprises two chapters, “The Invention of the Mind,” and “Persons Without Minds”; part 2, *Mirroring*, which is the central part of the book, contains four chapters, “The Idea of a ‘Theory of Knowledge’,” “Privileged Representations,” “Epistemology and Empirical Psychology,” and “Epistemology and Philosophy of Language”; and part 3, *Philosophy*, concludes with two chapters, “From Epistemology to Hermeneutics,” and “Philosophy Without Mirrors.” In the next three sections I will treat some of the highlights of each of these parts and show how Rorty seeks to get back to (and behind) those “intuitions” and pre-analytic distinctions that seem to arise as soon as we begin to reflect. Thus, for example, the mind-body problem is taken to be a basic problem for philosophy because it appears to be intuitively evident that there is some important distinction between what is “mental” and what is “physical,” even though we may be perplexed about how to characterize this distinction and what to make of it. But, Rorty tells us, “In my Wittgensteinian view, an intuition is never anything more or less than familiarity with a language-game, so to discover the source of our intuitions is to relive the history of the language-game we find ourselves playing” (p. 34). Now every philosopher who wants to get clear about the mind-body problem is obliged to ask what are the criteria for distinguishing the “mental” and the “physical.” In what I called the “softening up” stage of Rorty’s strategy he quickly runs through several of the major criteria that philosophers have invoked to characterize the “mental”: intentionality, nonspatiality, immateriality, temporality, the presumed “phenomenal quality” of pains and other “raw feels.” He concludes his survey with the claim that

the only way to associate the intentional with the immaterial is to identify it with the phenomenal, and that the only way to identify the phenomenal with the immaterial is to hypostatize universals and think of them as particulars rather than abstractions from particulars—thus giving them a non-spatial-temporal habitation (p. 31).
Consequently if we refuse to make this hypostatization, and see through the trap of invoking a specious metaphysical distinction, then we would have an easy dissolution of the mind-body problem. As Rorty himself points out, it is a bit too quick and easy. Furthermore, carrying out his therapeutic analogy, he tells us “What the patient needs is not a list of his mistakes and confusions but rather an understanding of how he came to make these mistakes and become involved in these confusions” (p. 33). If we are ever finally to get rid of the mind-body problem we need to be able to give a satisfactory answer to such a question as:

   How did these rather dusty little questions about the possible identity of pains and neurons ever get mixed up with the question of whether man “differed in kind” from the brutes—whether he had dignity rather than merely value? (p. 33)

Posing a question like this should already make us realize that “the mind-body” problem is a misnomer. At best it is a label for a cluster of quite distinct and different problems that have become fused and confused together. We can see this by considering the partial list that Rorty gives “of the features which philosophers have, at one time or another, taken as marks of the mental”:

1. ability to know itself incorrigibly (“privileged access”)
2. ability to exist separately from the body
3. nonspatiality (having a nonspatial part or “element”)
4. ability to grasp universals
5. ability to sustain relations to the inexistent (“intentionality”)
6. ability to use language
7. ability to act freely
8. ability to form part of our social group, to be “one of us”
9. inability to be identified with any object “in the world” (p. 35).

Confusion is compounded, because all too frequently when it is argued that a given feature simply will not serve to mark off the “mental”—the response has been that the feature in question is not the really important or essential feature. For heuristic purposes, Rorty distinguishes three clusters of issues: the problem of consciousness, the problem of reason, and the problem of personhood. Clarifying the differences and the interrelations among these problems is one of Rorty’s primary aims. In part 1, Our Glassy Essence, Rorty concentrates on the problem of consciousness, focusing on 1, 2, and 3 in his list. One reason for this is that many contemporary analytic
philosophers have written as if the problem of consciousness is the heart of the mind-body problem. One need only think of Smart's opening statement in his article that set off so much of the contemporary debate:

There does seem to be, as far as science is concerned, nothing in the world but increasingly complex arrangements of physical constituents. All except for one place; in consciousness. That is, for a full description of what is going on in man you would have to mention not only physical processes in his tissues, glands, nervous system, and so forth, but also his states of consciousness; his visual, auditory and tactile sensations, his aches and pains. . . . So sensations, states of consciousness, do seem to be the one sort of thing left outside the physicalist picture, and for various reasons I just cannot believe that this can be so. That everything should be explicable in terms of physics . . . except the occurrence of sensations seems to me to be frankly unbelievable.²

In unraveling the problem of consciousness, Rorty's task is to show how this problem arose and how we became preoccupied with "rather dusty little questions about the possible identity of pains and neurons." The story he unfolds goes back to Plato and Aristotle. But the point of his historical excursion into classical and scholastic philosophy is to make us keenly aware of how different the so-called mind-body problem was before and after Descartes—to show us that what we now (after Descartes) take to be obvious and intuitive distinctions did not exist prior to Descartes' "invention" of the mind. Descartes invented the mind in the sense that it is only after Descartes that the problem of consciousness became a central problem for philosophy. What then for Descartes was the essential feature or criterion of the "mental"? According to Rorty's reconstruction, Descartes' effective criterion is an appeal to "indubitability." Despite Descartes' own conviction that he had hit upon a rock bottom metaphysical distinction between the mind and the body, Descartes, by appealing to indubitability, sowed the seeds for transforming (or creating) the mind-body problem into an epistemological issue about the nature and consequences of indubitability—which is itself the origin of the contemporary obsession with incorrigibility and privileged access.

Now one can imagine a critic of Rorty objecting at this point (at the end of his first chapter) as follows: Despite the historical learning

and imagination that is evidenced in Rorty's history of the origin of the problem of consciousness, and despite the rhetoric about "dusty little questons," the tables can easily be turned on Rorty. For this exercise in historical reconstruction doesn't dissolve anything. On the contrary, Rorty's narrative can be read as showing just why the problem of consciousness is the nub of the mind-body problem—why it is so important to clarify the relation between pains and neurons. Nothing Rorty has said thus far indicates that the problem is either unimportant or has yet been satisfactorily resolved.

I think that Rorty is perfectly aware that this is the "natural" objection to make at this point. The aim of his second chapter, "Persons Without Minds," is to meet the objection squarely—to show that when we work through all the major twists and turns in contemporary analytic debates about the status of consciousness the entire problematic dissolves. He does this in a most ingenious fashion. He invents a science fiction tale where the general characters are Antipodeans who live on the other side of the galaxy and seem to be just like us in all respects with one great difference. For them neurology and biochemistry had been the first disciplines in which technological breakthroughs were achieved. Unlike us they do not make any first person or third person reports about pains, "raw feels," and minds. Where we use "mentalese" they speak about the stimulation of neurons and C-fibers. In the twenty-first century some of our tough-minded analytic philosophers visit the Antipodeans and confront the problem of trying to figure out whether the Antipodeans have minds, and whether they experience consciousness in the way in which we do. The device is imaginative and playful but the point is deadly serious. For Rorty uses it to work through virtually all the major moves that have been made by philosophers—both substantive and metaphysical—in the debate that has gone on from Feigl to Kripke. In what is one of the densest chapters of the book, we have nothing less than a re-enactment of the attempts by analytic philosophers to state and solve the problem of consciousness. Rorty argues that all attempts to invent imaginative thought-experiments or resolve the issues by an appeal to the analysis of meanings fail. As the discussion gets more heated and sharper, Rorty focuses on the notion of a "phenomenal property" and smokes out what he takes to be the key principle involved:

P) Whenever we make an incorrigible report on a state of ourselves, there must be a property we are presented with which induces us to make the report (p. 84).
As he phrases it, this principle “enshrines the Cartesian notion that ‘nothing is closer to the mind’ than itself, and involves an entire epistemology and metaphysics, a specifically dualistic one” (p. 84). So the problem becomes what to make of and what to do with this principle (P). Indeed most of the positions that have been taken on the mind-body problem (as the problem of consciousness) can be characterized in relation to the stand that they take to (P)—including behaviorism, various forms of materialism, and linguistic dualisms. So Rorty runs through the various “positions” in order to show that while they can be interpreted as containing important insights, none of them bring us any closer to a resolution of the outstanding issues.

Despite Rorty’s disclaimers, it begins to look as if he himself is doing what he keeps telling us we should not do—that he is in effect advocating a “substantive” position on the mind-body problem—a position that looks like a sophisticated form of materialism. In a way he is and in a way he isn’t.

What the principle (P) shows is how the contemporary problem of consciousness depends on the status of incorrigibility and privileged access. But at this point, Rorty makes what might seem to be a surprising move. He claims that the proper response is not to argue for or against principle (P), but to drop it altogether “and thus be neither dualists, skeptics, behaviorists, nor ‘identity theorists’” (p. 97). The denouement comes when Rorty declares:

The real difficulty we encounter is, once again, that we are trying to set aside the image of man as possessor of a Glassy Essence, suitable for mirroring nature with one hand while holding on to it with the other. If we could ever drop the whole cluster of images which Antipodeans do not share with us, we would not be able to infer that matter had triumphed over spirit, science over privacy, or anything over anything else. These warring opposites are notions which do not make sense outside a cluster of images inherited from the Terran seventeenth century. No one except philosophers, who are professionally obligated to take these images seriously, will be scandalized if people start saying “The machine told me it didn’t really hurt—it only, very horribly, seemed to. Philosophers are too involved with notions like “ontological status” to take such developments lightly, but no other part of culture is. . . . Only the notion that philosophy should provide a permanent matrix of categories into which every possible empirical discovery and cultural development should be fitted without strain impels us to ask unanswerable questions like “Would this mean that there were no minds?” “Were the Antipodeans right in saying ‘There never were any of these things you call “raw feels”’?” (p. 123)

The above passage sums up the substance of what Rorty has to say about the problem of consciousness. But one might still want to ob-
ject that this only shows that Rorty is really a materialist (and the passage appears in a section entitled “Materialism without Mind-Body Identity”). Such a claim would not be wrong, but it would certainly miss the point. For the triumphal verdict that Rorty is a materialist manqué only gains its rhetorical force because we are infected by a set of images and categories that Rorty is urging us to set aside. If we insist on clinging to talk about materialism (and Rorty might ask, why bother?) then the point is to realize how innocuous and how unphilosophical “materialism” really is. It amounts to the unphilosophical claim that someday our great-grandchildren may talk and act like Antipodeans and relegate the problem of consciousness to the dustbin of historical curiosities.

III

Part 2, Mirroring, deals with the rise, nature, and demise (and some recent attempts to salvage) epistemology. The moral of this part is a variation on part 1 and deepens Rorty’s argument. Just as the modern notion of “mind” has its origins in the seventeenth century, so does epistemology which is so frequently taken to be either identical with philosophy or the heart of philosophy. Just as we can already envision the passing of the obsession with the “mind,” so Rorty argues that we already have the grounds for envisioning the collapse of epistemology.

Rorty begins his examination of epistemology by probing its origins and the way in which it has thrived upon a central confusion that has plagued the theory of knowledge ever since—the confusion between the causal conditions of the genesis of knowledge and the justification of knowledge claims. He also argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, epistemology became so well fixed that it became virtually identical with philosophy as a discipline. For the past hundred years, it has seemed that the first task of philosophers is to resolve epistemological issues before any progress can be made with other problems and areas of philosophy. The historical probing of the origins of epistemology is followed by what Rorty himself considers to be the central chapter of the book, “Privileged Representations” which deals with the work of Sellars and Quine. Once we fully appreciate the force and consequences of Sellars’s critique of the “Myth of the Given” and Quine’s skeptical arguments about the lan-
language-fact distinction, then we have grounds for not only abandoning the major distinctions that have set the context for modern philosophy but also questioning analytical philosophy. But Rorty isn’t finished. The final two chapters of this part examine what he considers two misguided attempts to “save” epistemology by finding successor disciplines—empirical psychology and the philosophy of language—which might replace traditional epistemology and presumably answer the “real” problems that our epistemological predecessors were trying to answer.

Since Rorty considers his discussion of Sellars and Quine as the centerpiece of his book, I want to concentrate on the novel interpretation that he offers of their work. According to Rorty’s historical reconstruction of epistemology, it is basically the “Kantian picture of concepts and intuitions getting together to produce knowledge” (p. 168) that makes sense of the idea of a “theory of knowledge” as a specifically philosophical discipline distinct from psychology.

This is equivalent to saying that if we do not have the distinction between what is “given” and what is “added by the mind” or that between the contingent (because influenced by what is given) and the “necessary” (because entirely “within” the mind and under its control), then we will not know what would count as a “rational reconstruction” of our knowledge (p. 169).

Although these two related distinctions were attacked throughout the history of the analytic movement, it is only with the arguments of Sellars and Quine that they have been fully discredited. Sellars and Quine invoke the same argument in their critiques, “one which bears equally against the given-versus-nongiven and the necessary-versus-contingent distinctions. The crucial premise of this argument is that we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation” (p. 170). Unlike many critics of Sellars and Quine who think they have gone too far with their holistic tendencies, Rorty claims that they have not gone far enough. The consequence of their arguments is not to advocate a better way of doing epistemology, or even to see that epistemology can now be replaced by a “legitimate” scientific inquiry, but simply to put an end to epistemology tout court.

It is as if Quine, having renounced the conceptual-empirical, analytic-synthetic, and language-fact distinctions, were still not quite able to renounce that between the given and the postulated. Conversely Sel-
lars having triumphed over the later distinction, cannot quite renounce the former cluster. Despite courteous acknowledgement of Quine’s triumph over analyticity, Sellars’s writing is still permeated
with the notion of “giving the analysis” of various terms or sentences, and with a tacit use of the distinction between the necessary and the contingent, the structural and the empirical, the philosophical and the scientific. Each of these two men tends to make continual, unofficial, tacit, heuristic use of the distinction which the other has transcended. It is as if analytic philosophy could not be written without at least one of the two great Kantian distinctions, and as if neither Quine nor Sellars were willing to cut the last links which bind them to Russell, Carnap, and “logic as the essence of philosophy” (pp. 171–72).

I cannot go into the details of Rorty’s interpretation, defense, and critique of Sellars and Quine. Rorty develops an extremely perceptive analysis of their work, a strong defense of their claims against many of the objections that have been raised by others, and at the same time a penetrating critique. For example, many critics have argued that Quine’s later work, especially his reflections on the indeterminacy of translation, reveals a blatant contradiction—or at least a deep tension—with his own pragmatic and holistic arguments. Rorty locates and specifies this tension better than anyone else (see p. 202). I am primarily interested in how Rorty “uses” Sellars and Quine—the role that they play in the dramatic narrative he is unfolding. Sellars and Quine complete the critique of the Kantian legacy of epistemology and lead us to a “holistic” view of knowledge, to what Rorty labels “epistemological behaviorism.” (The choice of these terms “holism” and “epistemological behaviorism” are unfortunate because they suggest that we are dealing with a new and better epistemological position. Every time we are tempted to make this move, i.e., to replace one position by what now seems to be a better philosophical position, Rorty pulls the rug from under our feet.) How then are we to understand what Rorty means by “epistemological behaviorism” and “holism”?

Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call “epistemological behaviorism,” an attitude common to Dewey and Wittgenstein. This sort of behaviorism can best be seen as a species of holism—but one which requires no idealist metaphysical underpinnings. It claims that if we understand the rules of a language-game, we understand all that there is to understand about why the moves in that language-game are made. . . . If we are behaviorist in this sense, then it will not occur to us to invoke either of the traditional Kantian distinctions (p. 174).

In short, to advocate “epistemological behaviorism” is not to advocate a new subtle epistemological position; rather it is to see through and to abandon epistemology, to see that the whole project only makes sense if we accept some form of the Kantian distinctions
which have now been rejected. As for “holism,” Rorty warns us that “A holistic approach to knowledge is not a matter of antifoundationalist polemic, but a distrust of the whole epistemological enterprise” (p. 181). Consequently “to be a behaviorist in epistemology . . . is to look at the normal scientific discourse of our day bifocally, both as patterns adopted for various historical reasons, and as the achievement of objective truth, where “objective truth” is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on” (p. 385).

Anticipating the charge that epistemological behaviorism and holism require abandoning objectivity, truth, and the growth of knowledge, Rorty insists:

For the Quine-Sellars approach to epistemology, to say that truth and knowledge can only be judged by the standards of the inquirers of our own day is not to say that human knowledge is less noble or important, or more “cut off from the world” than we had thought. It is merely to say that nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.

To say that the True and the Right are matters of social practice may seem to condemn us to a relativism which all by itself, is a redutio of a behaviorist approach to either knowledge or morals. . . . Here I shall simply remark that only the image of a discipline—philosophy—which will pick out a given set of scientific or moral views as more “rational” than the alternatives by appeal to something which forms a permanent neutral matrix for all inquiry and all history, makes it possible to think that such relativism must automatically rule out coherence theories of intellectual and practical justification. One reason why professional philosophers recoil from the claim that knowledge may not have foundations, or rights and duties an ontological ground, is that the kind of behaviorism which dispenses with foundations is in a fair way toward dispensing with philosophy (pp. 178–79).

There are many analytic philosophers who share Rorty’s skepticism about traditional epistemology. But for them the basic trouble is that genuine philosophic issues have been obscured by epistemological formulations. We need to reformulate the relevant issues in a “purified” philosophy of language or a scientific empirical psychology. But Rorty is relentless in his critique of those who think epistemology can be salvaged in this way. In the last two chapters of Mirroring, he exposes two attempts to found successor disciplines to epistemology. Neither “empirical psychology” nor the “new philosophy of language” help to solve epistemological problems. Once again there are striking inversions. (Rorty’s use of this technique, where he shows how things turn out to be the very opposite of what they
purport to be, is variant of Hegel’s own use of this dialectical strategy.) From Rorty’s perspective, the new concern with the issue of “realism” and the belief that the way to deal with the foundations of philosophy is through “formal semantics” do not represent advances in philosophy. On the contrary, Putnam insofar as he temporarily misled us into thinking that the issue of metaphysical realism is an important one for philosophy, and Dummett insofar as he thinks that Frege has shown us the way to get at the foundations of philosophy turn out to be arch reactionaries. It would be hard to imagine a more antithetical understanding of modern philosophy and analytic philosophy than that presented by Dummett and Rorty. Dummett, acknowledging that philosophers have mistakenly claimed that they have discovered the “real” foundations of philosophy, is nevertheless convinced that there are real foundations and that we have now discovered how to go about finding them. From Rorty’s point of view this is a despairing attempt to save analytic philosophy—one that can’t quite give up holding on to the “problem of representation” and the belief that there is something to be preserved from the metaphor of mirroring reality.

IV

There will be some readers who when they reach this point in Rorty’s book (after 311 densely argued pages) will breathe a sigh of relief. They may not be acquainted with the latest subtleties in the analytic controversies about the mind-body problem, or the pros and cons of a causal theory of reference, or why so many professionals are excited by the work of Davidson, Putnam, Kripke, Dummett, and their colleagues. But they may have felt that somehow philosophy took a wrong turn with the analytic movement. They may feel some satisfaction that Rorty has written the type of critique that could only

3 In his essay, “Can Analytical Philosophy be Systematic, and Ought It To Be?” Dummett says, “Only with Frege was the proper object of philosophy finally established; namely, first that thought, secondly that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking; and finally, that the only proper method for analyzing thought consists in the analysis of language . . . it has taken nearly a half century since his death for us to apprehend clearly what the real task of philosophy, as conceived by him involves.” Truth and Other Enigmas (London: Duckworth, 1978), p. 458.
be written by an "insider," and that he has shown that the emperor has no clothes—or at least is scantily clad. If only Anglo-American philosophers had taken a different turn; if only, for example, they had followed the lead of Husserl who opened up the field of phenomenology, then we might have avoided the tangled mess which has consumed so much technical competence. But if this is the way they have read Rorty, they have misread him and they have missed the real sting of his critique. Rorty is not denigrating the contribution of analytic philosophers, despite the severity of his critique. The first two parts of the book employ (with novel twists) the insights and arguments of analytic philosophers to show how they lead to surprising and unexpected conclusions. But even more important, Rorty has dropped enough hints along the way to show how his critique can be generalized. "Professional philosophy" is not to be identified with any school in philosophy but cuts across schools. Many of Rorty's most incisive criticisms are just as relevant to those continental philosophers who think of themselves as having taken the "transcendental turn." From Rorty's perspective, the differences between Russell and Husserl are insignificant when compared with what they share in common. Each in his distinctive way played a crucial role in reinforcing the image of philosophy as a foundational discipline. Furthermore, it should now be clear that Rorty's primary object of attack is any form of systematic philosophy which shares the conviction that there are real foundations that philosophy must discover and that philosophy as a discipline can transcend history and adumbrate a permanent neutral matrix for assessing all forms of inquiry and all types of knowledge.

Nevertheless, for those who think in terms of Anglo-American philosophy and Continental philosophy, it will be noticeable that in the final part, Philosophy, a new set of characters and a new set of problems enter the stage. Heidegger, Gadamer, Sartre, Habermas, Apel, Foucault, and Derrida are discussed along with Kuhn and Feyerabend. Rorty now takes up such familiar "continental" distinctions as that between Spirit and Nature, Geisteswissenschaften and Naturwissenschaften. But there is no change of theme. In this carefully orchestrated work all this material is integrated into a reflection on philosophy itself—a reflection that emerges from the first two parts of the book. What is provocative and refreshing about Rorty is that he cuts across the stale polemic and the irritable defensiveness that characterize much of the nondialogue between Anglo-
American and Continental philosophy. He is equally devastating and equally illuminating about both sides of this great divide.

In order to get this last part into clear focus, it may be helpful to raise a number of doubts and suspicions that will surely have occurred to many readers. Is Rorty simply engaging in a destructive critique or does he have anything constructive to say? It certainly looks as if he is leading us to historicism, skepticism, relativism, and nihilism. At times, Rorty even uses these labels to characterize his project. Presumably we all know that these are philosophic dead ends and can be refuted by carefully constructed self-referential arguments. How then does Rorty get out of this bind? How does he meet the objection that any critique must take a stand someplace on what is True and Right—and this stance itself demands some sort of philosophic justification? One of the main purposes of the final part of his book is to answer these doubts and to adumbrate an alternative understanding of philosophy as a voice in the conversation of mankind. But before turning to Rorty’s own self-understanding of the philosophical enterprise, I want to clarify the sense in which the above “labels” do and do not apply to Rorty.

If by historicism we mean that history itself is a foundational discipline, that the explanations that philosophers seek can only be found in the study of history, or even if we understand by historicism the curious variant that Popper attacked where a historicist is supposed to be someone who believes that there are laws of history which enable us to predict the future, then Rorty is certainly not a historicist. On the contrary, he has presented some of the strongest arguments against such a position. For he has been arguing and trying to show us that there is no foundational discipline—neither history, nor philosophy, nor science, nor poetry. There is no part of culture that is more privileged than any other part—and the illusion that there must be such a discipline is one that needs to be exorcised. Further, given Rorty’s insistence on historical accidents, contingencies, and options, it doesn’t make any sense to think that history could ever aspire to be a predictive discipline. But if by historicism we mean that a healthy historical sense of how philosophic language games arise, get entrenched, and pass away may cure us of the belief that there are perennial philosophical problems, then Rorty is certainly a historicist and tells us that this is the moral of his book.

If by skepticism we mean the type of epistemological doctrine that insists that we can never really know what is beyond the “veil of
ideas” and that our claims to knowledge can never “really” be justiﬁed, then it is difﬁcult to imagine a more forceful attack on such skepticism. Such an epistemological skepticism gains its force from accepting the very metaphors that Rorty urges us to abandon. If Rorty’s therapy were successful, if we could rid ourselves of the desire for constraint and compulsion and the fear that unless we discover the (nonexistent) foundations of knowledge we are faced with intellectual and moral chaos, then epistemological skepticism would no longer be a position to be “refuted”—it would simply wither away. If by skepticism we mean that we have grounds for being suspicious of all attempts to escape history, to discover the foundations of knowledge, language, or philosophy, and to delineate a permanent neutral framework for evaluating all claims to knowledge, then this is what Rorty has been advocating.

If by relativism we mean that there is no truth, objectivity, and standards for judging better and worse arguments or moral positions, then Rorty is certainly not a relativist, and suggests that such a relativism has become something of a straw man for philosophers to attack. Rorty’s aim is not to deny or denigrate “truth” and “objectivity” but to demystify these “honorific” labels. If by relativism we mean epistemological behaviorism, that there is no other way to justify knowledge claims or claims to truth than by appealing to those social practices which have been hammered out in the course of human history and are the forms of inquiry within which we distinguish what is true and false, what is objective and idiosyncratic, then Rorty advocates such a relativism. But this does not mean that “anything goes.”

If by nihilism we mean that whether we are dealing with knowledge or morals, anything is just as good or as true as anything else, then again Rorty is not a nihilist. On the contrary, such a position is frequently adopted by those who think this is the only alternative to the claim that knowledge and morals have foundations. But if nihilism means being liberated from the illusion that there is something to which we can appeal which will or ought to command universal assent, that there is no way of escaping from human freedom and responsibility in making moral decisions, and no ultimate support to which we can appeal in making such decisions, then Rorty happily thinks of himself as a nihilist.

The point I am emphasizing can be stated in a slightly different way. “Historicism,” “Skepticism,” “Relativism,” and “Nihilism,” are
typically thought to be so objectionable because they are taken to be positions to which we are driven when we give up the claim that there are “real” foundations for truth, objectivity, knowledge, and morals. They are all shaped in the image of what might be called the “Cartesian Anxiety”—the grand Either/Or—either there is some basic foundational constraint or we are confronted with intellectual and moral chaos. Rorty is not advocating that we take sides on this fundamental dichotomy that has shaped the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition. Rorty’s main therapeutic point is to liberate us from this Either/Or, to help us to see through it, and to set it aside.

But still we want to know what function, if any, philosophers can perform and what type of self-understanding of philosophy emerges if we give up these various “self-deceptions” that Rorty exposes. In the final part of the book where Rorty seeks to answer this question, he “works through” what initially seems to be a bewildering array of distinctions: Spirit and Nature, Geisteswissenschaften and Naturwissenschaften, commensurability and incommensurability, normal and abnormal discourse, familiarity and unfamiliarity, epistemology and hermeneutics, systematic and edifying philosophy, and philosophy as inquiry and philosophy as conversation. Rorty’s “asides” are frequently as illuminating and incisive as his main points. But I want to touch on the significance of some of these distinctions only insofar as they enable us to grasp Rorty’s own understanding of philosophy.

By “commensurable” Rorty means “able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict. These rules tell us how to construct an ideal situation, in which all residual disagreements will be seen to be ‘noncognitive’ or merely verbal, or else merely temporary—capable of being resolved by doing something further” (p. 316). Modern philosophy shaped by the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition in both its analytic and continental forms has been obsessed with the search for commensuration. This is the quest that is characteristic of epistemology. Hermeneutics, as Rorty understands it, is not the name of a new method or discipline, an alternative way to achieve commensuration, but rather largely a struggle against the assumption that all contributions to culture are commensurable. Hermeneutics “is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the de-
mand for constraint is no longer felt” (p. 315). The distinction between the “commensurable” and the “incommensurable,” which Rorty takes over from recent debates in the philosophy of science, is one that he generalizes. It is applicable to all domains of discourse, whether they be science, philosophy, poetry, or literary criticism.

Earlier, when characterizing Rorty’s understanding of the history of philosophy, I indicated that he sees it as consisting of periods of “normal discourse” where there is agreement about problems, procedures, and the “correct” way of finding solutions followed by periods of abnormal discourse when strange and new ways of speaking and writing appear. He radicalizes Kuhn’s distinction of “normal” and “abnormal” discourse because Rorty sees this as a feature of all discourse and culture (as Kuhn himself sometimes suggests). It is during periods of “normal” discourse that epistemology thrives, because these are the times when there is agreement, when it does appear as if all discourse might be commensurable and philosophy might be able to clarify the rules of commensuration. But there is always a danger of confusing what is historically stable with the permanent and eternal, or in thinking that the domain in which such stability has been achieved is the measure for all other domains. (Rorty even envisions the possibility that other parts of culture such as morals or poetry might be taken as our paradigms of normality rather than science, just as there was a time in the West when theological discourse played this role.) By introducing such bland distinctions as the “normal” and the “abnormal” or the “familiar” and the “unfamiliar,” Rorty deliberately wants to make us aware of how “relative” these distinctions are to the changing scene of culture.

Throughout his book Rorty has been attacking the “Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian” tradition of modern philosophy, but implicitly and explicitly he has been contrasting this tradition with another attitude toward philosophy. He speaks of

figures who, without forming a “tradition,” resemble each other in their distrust of the notion that man’s essence is to be a knower of essences. Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, the later Heidegger are figures of this sort . . . These writers have kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day. They have kept alive the historicist sense that this century’s “superstition” was last century’s triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described (p. 367).
The mainstream of philosophers Rorty calls "systematic philosophers," and the peripheral ones—following Kierkegaard—he calls "edifying philosophers." What is common to edifying philosophers is that they use every means they can to voice their skepticism about the "whole project of commensuration."

In our time, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger are the great edifying, peripheral thinkers. All three make it as difficult as possible to take their thought as expressing views on traditional philosophical problems, or as making constructive proposals for philosophy as a co-operative and progressive discipline. They make fun of the classic picture of man, the picture which contains systematic philosophy, the search for universal commensuration in a final vocabulary. They hammer away at the holistic point that words take their meaning from other words rather than by virtue of their representative character, and the corollary that vocabularies acquire their privileges from the men who use them rather than from their transparency to the real.

Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described (pp. 368–70).

Now it might seem as if Rorty is casting his lot with edifying philosophy (although he realizes that there is something paradoxical about the very notion of an edifying philosopher). Edifying philosophy is always reactive and parasitic upon the pretentions of systematic philosophy. Edifying philosophers are frequently Rorty's heroes, and he himself admires and emulates their use of satire, ridicule, and paradox. But this is not quite where Rorty leaves us. He suggests a new metaphor for understanding philosophy and the role that it can play in culture—philosophy as conversation rather than philosophy as inquiry. Rorty is alluding to Oakeshott's conception of conversation in "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." Philosophy like poetry is best understood as one of the many voices in the conversation of mankind. A conversation can be civilized, illuminating, intelligent, revealing, exciting. Truth may be relevant to a conversation, but so can many other things, and a conversation is not to be thought of as a disguised inquiry into truth or the discovery of foundations. To view philosophy as a form of conversation which is itself part of the larger conversation of mankind is to begin "to get the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphors out of speech altogether" (p. 371). It also means recognizing that as culture changes one or another voice may play a more significant role in the conversation. From this perspective we can view edifying philosophers as
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Rorty never becomes shrill or strident in his critique of “professional philosophy,” “modern philosophy,” and “analytic philosophy.” With the possible exception of Quine, there hasn’t been an American philosopher since William James who has written with as much wit, humor, playfulness, and seductive eloquence. All this is combined with a moral seriousness and passion that seeks to unmask pretensions, illusions, and self-deceptions, that seeks to make us aware of our historical limitations—or to use a classical turn of phrase—to make us aware of our human finitude. Although I am sympathetic with his powerful and challenging critique, there is something fundamentally wrong with where Rorty leaves us. In this final section I want to argue that the moral of the tale he tells is not quite the one that he suggests. In a manner similar to the way in which Rorty uses Sellars and Quine (against themselves) I want to show that Rorty himself does not quite see where his best insights and arguments are
leading him. Much of this book is about the obsessions of philosophers and the pictures that hold them captive. But there is a sense in which Rorty himself is obsessed. It is almost as if he can’t quite “let go” and accept the force of his own critique. It is as if Rorty himself has been more deeply touched by what he is attacking than he realizes. Rorty keeps pointing to and hinting at an alternative to the foundationalism that has preoccupied modern philosophy without ever fully exploring this alternative. Earlier I suggested that one way of reading Rorty is to interpret him as trying to help us to set aside the Cartesian anxiety—the Cartesian Either/Or—that underlies so much of modern philosophy. But there is a variation of this Either/Or that haunts this book—Either we are ineluctably tempted by foundational metaphors and the desperate attempt to escape from history or we must frankly recognize that philosophy itself is at best a form of “kibbutzing.” Suppose, however, that Rorty’s therapy were really successful; suppose we were no longer held captive by metaphors of “our glassy essence” and “mirroring,” suppose we accepted that knowledge claims can never be justified in any other way than by an appeal to social practices, suppose we were purged of the desire for constraint and compulsion, then what? The scene of culture and the voice of philosophy in the conversation of mankind look very different from the one that Rorty proposes. To flesh out what I mean, I will begin with what might seem to be external and peripheral matters and then move closer to the heart of Rorty’s vision.

I can isolate Rorty’s obsession by comparing him with one of his heroes, John Dewey. Rorty thinks that Dewey is one of the three most important philosophers of our century because while in his early work he tried to provide a new foundation for philosophy, he—like Heidegger and Wittgenstein—came to see this earlier effort as self-deceptive. Dewey in his later work “spent his time warning us against these very temptations to which he had succumbed.” From what Rorty says here and in other places, the story is a bit more complicated, for according to Rorty, Dewey himself was briefly tempted—or bullied—into thinking he had to supply a new metaphysical foundation for his own naturalistic vision.4 But as might be suspected, this is the “bad” Dewey, and his lasting contribution is

“therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than supply him with a philosophical program.” But this interpretation of Dewey is a gross distortion, one that is more revealing about Rorty than it is about Dewey. It is true as far as it goes, but Dewey was not nearly as obsessed with attacking epistemology and the “spectator theory of knowledge” as is Rorty. What Rorty leaves out—or fails to give its just due—is that Dewey was primarily concerned with the role that philosophy might play after one had been liberated from the obsessions and tyrannies of the “problems of philosophy.” Dewey would certainly agree with Rorty that all justification involves reference to existing social practices and that philosophy is not a discipline that has any special knowledge of knowing or access to more fundamental foundations. But for Dewey this is where the real problems begin. What are the social practices to which we should appeal? How do we discriminate the better from the worse? Which ones need to be discarded, criticized and reconstructed? Dewey sought to deal with these problems without any appeal to “our glassy essence,” “mirroring,” or foundational metaphors. According to Rorty’s own analysis, these are genuine problems, but Rorty never quite gets around to asking these and related questions. He tells us, of course, that there is no special philosophical method for dealing with such issues and no ahistorical matrix to which we can appeal. But accepting this claim does not make these issues disappear. Whatever our final judgment of Dewey’s success or failure in dealing with what he called the “problems of men,” Dewey constantly struggled with questions which Rorty never quite faces—although his whole reading of modern philosophy is one that points to the need for reflective intellectuals to examine them. Sometimes Rorty writes as if any philosophic attempt to sort out the better from the worse, the rational from the irrational (even assuming that this is historically relative) must lead us back to foundationalism and the search for an ahistorical perspective. But Rorty has also shown us that there is nothing inevitable about such a move. Following Rorty, we do not have to see this enterprise as finding a successor foundational discipline to epistemology, but rather as changing the direction of philosophy, of giving the conversation a different turn. Ironically, for all his critique of the desire of philosophers to escape from history and to see the world sub species aeternitatis, there is a curious way in which Rorty himself slides into this
stance. He keeps telling us that the history of philosophy, like the history of all culture, is a series of contingencies, accidents, of the rise and demise of various language games and forms of life. But suppose we place ourselves back into our historical situation. Then a primary task is one of trying to deal with present conflicts and confusions, of trying to sort out the better from the worse, of focusing on which social practices ought to endure and which demand reconstruction, of what types of justification are acceptable and which are not. Rorty might reply that there is no reason to think that the professional philosopher is more suited for such a task than representatives of other aspects of culture. But even this need not be disputed. We can nevertheless recognize the importance and the legitimacy of the task of “understanding how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”

In saying this, I do not think that I am saying anything that Rorty himself doesn’t suggest, but he does not grapple with these issues. In part, I think this is due to his own unwarranted anxiety that philosophers can’t quite help getting caught in the snares of the type of foundationalism which he has so devastatingly criticized. This is why Rorty himself is still not liberated from the types of obsessions which he claims have plagued most modern philosophers. The point that can be approached from a slightly different perspective by examining a central example that Rorty gives to support his type of historicism.

In his discussion of Kuhn’s work and in sorting out what he takes to be right and wrong in the controversies between Kuhn and his critics, Rorty takes up what might be considered the hard case—the controversy between Galileo and Bellarmine.

But can we then find a way of saying that the considerations advanced against the Copernican theory by Cardinal Bellarmine—the scriptural descriptions of the fabric of the heavens—were “illogical or unscientific”? This, perhaps, is the point at which the battle lines between Kuhn and his critics can be drawn most sharply. Much of the seventeenth century’s notion of what it was to be a “philosopher” and much of the Enlightenment’s notion of what it was to be “rational” turns on Galileo’s being absolutely right and the church absolutely wrong. To suggest that there is room for rational disagreement here—not simply for a black-and-white struggle with reason and superstition—is to endanger the very notion of “philosophy” (p. 328).

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Rorty points out that Kuhn does not give an explicit answer to the question. However, Kuhn’s writings provide an “arsenal of argument for a negative answer.” “In any case, a negative answer is implied by the argument of the present book” (p. 328). It is important to clarify just what Rorty is and is not claiming. He is certainly not suggesting that the issues raised in the dispute between Galileo and Bellarmine are unimportant. On the contrary, the fate of European culture was affected by the resolution of issues raised in this debate. But Rorty argues that there are no permanent standards, criteria, or decision procedures to which one could univocally appeal which would declare Galileo on the side of truth, objectivity, and rationality, and sharply distinguish Galileo’s arguments from Bellarmine’s “irrationality.”

The conclusion I wish to draw is that the “grid” [to use Foucault’s term] which emerged in the later seventeenth century and eighteenth century was not there to be appealed to in the early seventeenth century, at the time that Galileo was on the trial. No conceivable epistemology, no study of the nature of human knowledge, could have “discovered” it before it was hammered out. The notion of what it was to be “scientific” was in the process of being formed. If one endorses the values—or perhaps the ranking of competing values—common to Galileo and Kant, then indeed Bellarmine was being “unscientific.” We are heirs of three hundred years of rhetoric about the importance of distinguishing sharply between science and religion, science and politics, science and art, science and philosophy, and so on. This rhetoric has formed the culture of Europe. It made us what we are today. We are fortunate that no little perplexity within epistemology, or within the historiography of science, is enough to defeat it. But to proclaim our loyalty to these distinctions is not to say that there are “objective” and “rational” standards for adopting them (pp. 330–31).

Rorty insists that it is an illusion to think that philosophers stand as neutral third parties to this significant debate, and that they are able to score points for one side or the other by appealing to ahistorical standards of rationality and objectivity. But it is instructive to see what Rorty passes over all too rapidly. Suppose we try the thought experiment of imagining ourselves back into the context of this debate, and suppose too that we are liberated from thinking that the issues can be resolved by an appeal to permanent epistemological standards. What then? Certainly the issues don’t disappear. Our task is precisely to “hammer out” the relevant issues involved, to clarify them and to try to sort out what are the better and worse arguments. This is not a matter of arbitrarily endorsing one set of values over competing values, but rather trying to give the strongest
“historical reasons” to support one side or the other. The issues cannot be resolved simply by appealing to existing social practices, for the heart of the controversy is the genuine and serious conflict of competing social practices. How are we to understand what are the relevant “historical reasons”—or even what we mean by “historical reasons”? What is revealing about the above passage is the way in which Rorty’s language itself reflects what he is presumably opposing. When he places “objective” and “rational” in scare quotes and contrasts this with “three hundred years of rhetoric” he is implicitly aping those who think that either there are rock bottom permanent standards of objectivity and rationality or there is only “mere” rhetoric. But Rorty himself has deconstructed this sense of objectivity and rationality. He distinguishes two senses of “objective” and “subjective.”

“Objectivity” in the first sense was a property of theories, which, having been thoroughly discussed, are chosen by a consensus of rational discussants. By contrast, a “subjective” consideration is one which has been, or would be, or should be, set aside by rational discussants—one which is seen to be, or should be seen to be, irrelevant to the subject matter of the theory. . . . For a consideration to be subjective, in this sense, is simply for it to be unfamiliar. So judging subjectivity is as hazardous as judging relevance.

In a more traditional sense of “subjective,” on the other hand, “subjective” contrasts with “corresponding to what is out there” and thus means something like “a product only of what is in here” (in the heart, or in the “confused” portion of the mind which does not contain privileged representations and thus does not accurately reflect what is out there). In this sense “subjective” is associated with “emotional” or “fantastical,” for our hearts and our imaginations are idiosyncratic, while our intellects are, at their best, identical mirrors of the self-same external objects (pp. 338–39).

Throughout the history of philosophy these two different senses of “objective” and “subjective” have been confused and tangled together. “In this way, the tradition since Plato has run together the ‘algorithm versus no algorithm’ distinction with the ‘reason versus passion’ distinction” (p. 339). While there is an innocuous sense in which we employ the second distinction, Rorty has argued that we are on the very brink of misunderstanding when philosophers try to blow this up into something like the issue of realism versus idealism. It is the first distinction that is the effective distinction for sorting out what is “objective” and “subjective.” This is a variable and changeable distinction both with respect to different historical epochs and with respect to different fields of inquiry. But the key reference here is to a consensus chosen by rational discussants. How are we to de-
cide who are the rational discussants and in what sense they are “ra-
tional”? This is not “merely” a rhetorical question, but frequently
the most vital question to be confronted. What we learn from Rorty
is that philosophers do not have any special knowledge or any special
access to permanent standards to answer this question. Sorting out
rational discussants from those who are judged to be irrational is pre-
cisely the type of issue that needs to be “hammered out.” But
nothing that Rorty says lessens the importance of the question. In-
deed everything he says and shows indicates that this is the sort of
question that philosophers or, if one prefers, “reflective intellectuals”
ought to be addressing.

There is something askew in Rorty’s emphasis. Throughout he
argues as if we are confronted with two alternatives: Either all justifi-
cation, whether in matters of knowledge or morals, appeals to social
practices or to illusory foundations. He has been primarily con-
cerned with criticizing the second alternative because he rightly
thinks that this is the one to which most modern philosophers have
been drawn—disputing only what are the foundations and how they
are to be known. But suppose we reject this second alternative and
concentrate on the one that Rorty advocates. As Rorty well knows
any defense of a consensus view is open to the criticism of how are we
to distinguish a rational from an irrational consensus. His constant
references to the “best” social practices and to what “rational” discus-
sants would accept indicates his awareness of this problem. But he
has very little to say about it. For to deny that there is some abso-
lute or definitive way of making this distinction is not to deny that
there is a vital distinction to be made. Sometimes it seems as if
Rorty himself is guilty of a version of the “Myth of the Given”—as if
social practices are the sort of thing that are given, and that all we
need to do is to look and see what they are. But surely this is an
illusion. To tell us, as Rorty does over and over again, that “to say
the True and Right are matters of social practice” (p. 179) or that
“justification is a matter of social practice” (p. 186) or that “objectivity
should be seen as conformity to norms of justification we find about
us” (p. 361), will not do. We want to know how we are to understand
“social practices,” how they are generated, sustained, and pass
away. But even more important we want to know how they are to be
criticized. For in any historical period we are confronted not only
with a tangle of social practices, but with practices that make compet-
ing and conflicting demands upon us. There is danger here of reify-
ing the very idea of a social practice and failing to appreciate that our very criticisms and arguments about what is rational and irrational are constitutive of traditions and social practices.

Rorty seems to be deeply ambivalent about the prospects for philosophy. The moral of his work is to suggest and to advocate a need for a turn in the role that philosophy plays in the conversation of mankind. Even his “historicism” points to a way in which philosophy can play a much more vital and central role when we accept our historical limitations but nevertheless try to make sense of the conflicts and confusions that confront us and to gain a critical perspective. At the same time he draws back from taking this seriously, from entering the very area of problems that he has opened up for us.

There is the same lack of balance in the moral decisionism that runs through the book. For all his criticism of Kant, Rorty praises Kant for helping us to see that the attempt to answer questions of justification by discovering new objective truths, to answer the moral agent’s request for justifications by descriptions of a privileged domain, is the philosopher’s form of bad faith—his special way of substituting pseudo-cognition for moral choice. Kant’s greatness was to have seen through the “metaphysical” form of this attempt, and to have destroyed the traditional conception of reason to make room for moral faith. Kant gave us a way of seeing scientific truth as something which can never supply an answer to our demand for a point, a justification, a way of claiming our moral decision about what to do is based on knowledge of the nature of the world (p. 383).

Unfortunately, according to Rorty, Kant misled us into thinking that there is nevertheless a decision procedure for moral choice. But here too Rorty seems to be presupposing what he has so effectively criticized, viz., that “justifying” moral (and social and political choices) is either a matter of deceiving ourselves into thinking there is some ultimate ground to which we can appeal or a matter of personal (arbitrary?) decision. One would have thought that this is just the type of misleading either/or that he wants to expose. For sometimes we can and do try to justify or warrant our moral decisions by giving the best reasons we can give to support them even when we recognize that there can be disagreements about what constitutes good reasons. And sometimes we are forced to reflect on what does and ought to count as good reasons even when we recognize that there is no algorithm or eternal standards to which we can appeal to settle the relevant issues. If we accept Rorty’s claim that all justification, whether of knowledge or moral choices, cannot hope to escape from history
and only makes sense with reference to social practices, we are still faced with the critical task of determining which social practices are relevant, which ones ought to prevail, be modified, or abandoned. "Hammering this out" is not a matter of "mere" rhetoric or "arbitrary" decision, but requires argumentation.

One perspective for understanding the moral of Rorty's book is to see his work as an attempt to recover the notion of phronesis—the type of practical reasoning that Aristotle sketched for us which doesn't make any appeal to ultimate foundations, eternal standards, or algorithms. But Aristotle also sowed the seeds for the distrust that philosophers have of phronesis by contrasting it in the strongest possible way with the contemplative understanding of noesis. Rorty not only questions this contrast, but more significantly, he shows us that the more we understand what goes on in theoretical and scientific reasoning, the more we realize how closely it resembles the forms of reasoning and decision making exemplified by the person who exhibits phronesis. This is a major reversal or an inversion. For typically philosophers have taken theoria—or more accurately their images of what theoria is supposed to be like—to be the standard by which practical wisdom is to be judged. Once we make the turn Rorty advocates, once we realize that we are dealing with forms of discourse which differ from each other in degree and not in kind, once we realize that effective rationality is always a form of rational persuasion which can never attain a definitive ahistorical closure, then the reflective task would seem to be to clarify the different forms of phronesis and rational persuasion.

One might imagine Rorty replying that it is not his intention to deny that there are genuine conflicts, problems created by competing social practices, and uncertainties that demand reflective understanding. These are all involved in the image of philosophy as conversation that he wants to substitute for philosophy as the inquiry into foundations. Rather his main point is to challenge the presumption that philosophers have some special knowledge or method which enables them to do this better than anyone else. He also claims that a healthy historical sense reveals that there have been times when theologians, poets, scientists, and literary critics have performed this function better than professional philosophers. But I do not want to dispute these claims nor even Rorty's skepticism about the way in which professional philosophy has become a marginal voice in the conversation of mankind. I do want to urge that we can give a very dif-
different twist to Rorty’s critique of philosophy. We can see it as a type of therapy that can liberate us from stale metaphors and fundamental misconceptions about what philosophy can achieve. Despite many rearguard actions and misguided attempts to salvage traditional problems or to reformulate them in new and sophisticated ways, we can see that there are many signs of playing out the legacy of notions inherited from the seventeenth century. Underneath the polemic between various advocates of “objectivism” and “relativism,” one can detect that philosophers themselves are increasingly coming to realize that there is something wrong with the entire framework and the categorial distinctions that keep these debates alive.

The choice that confronts us is not one of opting for philosophy as “kibbutzing” or playing out a few more variations on the same old tired themes. Rorty worries about and warns against the temptation of philosophers to think that they must come up with “constructive programs” which turn out to be new self-deceptive apologies for foundational disciplines. He himself is obsessed with the obsessions of philosophers. But he has shown us that we can set aside these obsessions and need not be tempted to answer unanswerable questions. But there are plenty of questions concerning justification, objectivity, the scope of disciplines, the proper way of distinguishing rational from irrational discussants, and praxis that are answerable and demand our attention—even when we concede that any answers are themselves subject to historical limitations. Rorty’s book can be read as helping to bring about a turning in philosophy and in seeing how ideas which were once liberating have become intellectual straitjackets. But once we make this turning, once we are liberated from the metaphors and pictures that have held us captive, once we set aside the anxieties about constraint and compulsion that have been so powerful in philosophy, then the scene of culture and the potential contribution of the voice of philosophy in the conversation of mankind becomes far more alive and dramatic.

_Haverford College._