



Richard Rorty

THE PHILOSOPHY OF
RICHARD RORTY

EDITED BY

RANDALL E. AUXIER

AND

LEWIS EDWIN HAHN

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CARBONDALE

INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It is hard to overestimate the role played in the genesis of metaphysics by the unconscious conviction that only one of the terms accurately describing a thing gets at what that thing "really" or "essentially" is. One might have thought that the so-called "linguistic turn," which coincided with the beginning of "analytic" philosophy, would have quickly disabused us of the idea that some terms ~~truly~~ about a thing are necessary & others contingent -- the former being those expressed in terms of a thing's "essential properties." But the suppositions Quine raised about modal notions were popular only for a generation or so. Quine's revivification of Aristotelian essentialism is often explained by philosophers having realized that Quine & others had confused the indefinite and the indefinite. But this explanation just makes the question back a step: are there in fact two orders? If there are, how do we isolate the order of being?

I have spent my life rummaging through libraries, hoping to be bowled over—transformed—by some fiercely imaginative, utterly original book. Exalted by one such book, I would then come upon another, hard to reconcile with the first. Then I would try to bridge the gap between them, to find ways of restating what was said in each so as to allow for what was said in the other, to do what Gadamer calls "fusing horizons."

In my earlier, dreamier, years, I still hoped that such projects of reconciliation would culminate in what Peirce called "the opinion that is fated to be agreed to by all who investigate." But after a time I became convinced that the idea of such a destined terminus—the idea that rational inquirers must necessarily converge to a common opinion—was just one more attempt to escape from time into eternity. That is why so much of what I have written has been dismissive of notions such as "the love of truth," "universal validity," and "getting things right."

Ideas like these, I have argued, bolster fantasies we would be better off without. These are visions of becoming destiny's tot, reality's faithful companion, truth's devoted servant, reason's guardian—rather than simply one more product of transitory circumstance. Even Hegel, that great ironist, sometimes succumbed to such fantasies. Heidegger, that great egoist, never escaped them.

Recognizing the contingency of one's own sense of what matters most to one is a good way to avoid dogmatism. I find it useful to remind myself that if I were to draw up a list of all the books I have tried to square with one another, it would seem a ludicrous farrago. This is because the thinkers and topics that have, at one time or another, captured my imagination did so because of accidental circumstances. Had I been born at other times or in other circumstances, I would have been bowled over by quite different books.

Plato thought that one could avoid premature certainty by patiently constructing airtight arguments. But what counts as a good argument is as relative to contingent circumstance as what counts as a good reading list. Argumentation is not a skyhook that can lift one out of one's particular time and place. Only imagination can do that. But imagination will simply

transport one to another location. It will not overcome one's finitude—the fact that one's own most precious beliefs are just the best one has been able to cobble together out of the materials chance has put at one's disposal.

Seen from this point of view, the so-called “problems of philosophy” are historical artifacts, created for rhetorical and pedagogical purposes by one or another original thinker. The function of unoriginal syncretists like myself is to construct narratives which, by fusing horizons, link together the products of original minds. So I have specialized in narratives recounting the rise and fall of philosophical problems—narratives that serve what Wittgenstein called a “therapeutic” function. I think of this sort of therapy not as a matter of substituting sense for nonsense, but rather of suggesting that some products of the imagination of the past have become shopworn and bedraggled, and need to be replaced.

I do not think that any such therapy will ever, as Wittgenstein put it, “give philosophy peace.” With luck, intellectual rejuvenation will never cease: the human imagination will always transcend the human past. So there will always be some new horizons to be fused, new intellectual cramps to be treated, old philosophical problems to dissolve and new ones to formulate. Of the making of boldly original and iconoclastic philosophy books there will, I hope, be no end.

Perhaps, however, a day will come when philosophers no longer think of themselves as making “contributions to knowledge.” In that day, nobody will take seriously the suggestion that a certain philosopher got something right, once and for all. Getting things right is an appropriate goal for cooks, craftspersons, lawyers, natural scientists, accountants, and others whose aims and function are not up for debate. But it is not relevant to the work of those who help create new languages, and thus new social practices. Their specialty is imagination, not inference.

This view of their function leads me to treat the philosophers I most admire not as problem-solvers but as people who suggested new ways of making things hang together. My own writings have suggested ways in which some of these suggestions hang together with one another. This is why I have spent so much time trying to coax pairs of philosophers (for instance, Nietzsche and Mill, Dewey and Heidegger, Putnam and Derrida, Sellars and Wittgenstein, Brandom and Davidson) into each other's arms—sometimes to their discomfort and annoyance.



I read my first pair of philosophers when I was thirteen. They were Plato and Nietzsche. My reaction was: these two men cannot both be right, but

surely there must be a way to see them as complementing, rather than merely contradicting, each other. Perhaps Socrates can be understood as an early version of Zarathustra? Perhaps the will to power can be thought of as an alternative description of the urge to attain the Beautiful and Good? Reading Plato and Nietzsche made me think, with some relief, that I might not have to read all the books in the library. I could just read the philosophy books, the ones that skimmed the cream off all the others.

Like most teenagers who got hooked on philosophy by reading these two authors, I started off believing that the only question that mattered was “Are there absolutes?” Hoping to find some, I went off to the University of Chicago in 1946, on the eve of my fifteenth birthday, to enter an experimental program (the so-called “Hutchins College”) that accepted students after two years of high school. Robert Maynard Hutchins was famous for insisting that there certainly *were* absolutes; he wanted the undergraduates to become acquainted with them by reading “the Great Books.” Hutchins crusaded against the pragmatist and “relativist” legacy of Dewey, and I later came to think Dewey largely right and Hutchins largely wrong, but I have always been very grateful for the education that the “Hutchins College” provided. It was exactly suited to my adolescent needs. It provided the best possible preparation for what turned out to be my professional career.

Richard McKeon, an admirer of Aristotle, dominated the philosophy department at Chicago in those days. A committee he headed had dreamt up a nonstandard introductory philosophy course called “Observation, Interpretation and Integration.” I was anxious to start studying philosophy, so I signed up to take OII in my second year at Chicago. In preparation, I read the Platonic dialogues (in Jowett's translation) over the preceding summer—getting through them all except *Laws* (a book I still cannot believe the author of *Phaedrus* could have written, and which I have yet to finish). I hoped that taking OII would enable me to overcome the doubts I had accumulated about the Platonic Forms, and, more generally, about the existence of absolutes.

Pulling off an “A” in that rather baffling, yet very exciting, course made me think that perhaps I could handle further work in philosophy. So the following summer I began teaching myself Greek, and in the fall I signed up for Alan Gewirth's history of philosophy course. In the three academic years after getting my B.A. (1949–1952), I studied for an M.A., taking philosophy courses with McKeon, Gewirth, Rudolf Carnap, Charles Hartshorne, and Manley Thompson, among others, as well as courses on Plato in Greek with Benedict Einarson, intellectual history courses with John Nef and Arnold Bergstrasser, and literature courses with David Grene.

The philosophers who made the greatest impression on me during

these years were Hegel and Whitehead. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas*, and Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* gave me a taste for ambitious, swooshy, *Geistesgeschichte* that I have never lost. This taste was gratified in later years by such writers as Etienne Gilson, Hans Blumenberg, and, above all, the later Heidegger.

My taste for synoptic narratives has sometimes made me think that my real *métier* was intellectual history, and that I might have been better off in that discipline than in philosophy. But if I had switched out of philosophy I might never have read, or at least never understood, the authors upon whose work my own has been parasitic—notably, Wittgenstein, Sellars, Davidson, and Brandom. These are writers whose importance one can grasp only if one comes to them (as I did) after having read the philosophers against whom they were reacting: Russell, Carnap, and Ayer. Had I not read these twentieth-century philosophers, I would not have had much to say about earlier figures. Sellars's maxim that "history of philosophy without philosophy is blind" gets it exactly right: unless you take part in the philosophical controversies of your own time you cannot figure out what is living and what is dead in the work of earlier philosophers.

At the same time that I was being swept up in these grand historical narratives I was being discouraged by Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (a book that Carnap assigned in one of his courses). I found Ayer's arguments convincing, and did not know how to refute him. Yet I still hankered after metaphysical system-building of the sort exemplified by Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. During my late teens and early twenties, the opposition between Ayer and Whitehead replaced that between Nietzsche and Plato. It became the principal focus of my horizon-fusing efforts.

The fellow-students I admired most at Chicago were followers of Leo Strauss—students in the Committee on Social Thought such as Allan Bloom, Victor Gourevitch, Stanley Rosen, and the incomparably learned Seth Benardete. But I was never able to understand why they found Strauss so fascinating. His *Natural Right and History* left me as cold as his lectures on Plato. Strauss kept hinting at the existence of some kind of hermetic wisdom, possession of which was beyond the imagination of the naively optimistic Deweyites who were his colleagues in Chicago's political science department. But I was never able to figure out what that wisdom might look like. The phenomenon of "Straussianism" has baffled me ever since.

The students in the McKeon-dominated philosophy department at Chicago were less interesting than those in Social Thought, and I had less contact with them. Among the philosophy teachers, my preferred guru was Hartshorne, a student of Whitehead's. This may have been, at least in part, because he was an exceptionally lovable person—neither as frightening

as McKeon (who used his detailed acquaintance with the entire history of philosophy to intimidate his students and colleagues) nor as intellectually ascetic as Carnap (whose views, like Ayer's, I found both unwelcome and irrefutable).

Hartshorne and I shared Whitehead's enthusiasm for Wordsworth, as well as his Bergson-like unwillingness to take physical science as the last word. But, despite my hope someday to sense "something far more deeply interfused," I was dubious about Hartshorne's attempts to follow up on Whitehead's theological speculations. I finally decided that if I ever got religion, Whitehead's finite deity—"the fellow-sufferer who understands"—was the one I would worship. But it never happened. I sat through Hartshorne's course on "Six proofs for the existence of God" with deferential respect and bemused skepticism. By the time I left Chicago, when I was twenty, I no longer felt the religious yearnings that had occasionally troubled my teens, and fell back into the casual atheism in which my parents had raised me. Hartshorne directed my M.A. thesis, a tedious little academic exercise in which I criticized Whitehead's notion of "conceptual prehension."

In the fall of 1951 I decided to apply to Ph.D. programs in philosophy, for lack of any better idea about what to do with myself. David Grene, a superb teacher who made a great impression on me, suggested that I do a Ph.D. with the Committee on Social Thought. I was tempted, particularly because it might have meant getting a fellowship to Paris to work with Kojève, following in Allan Bloom's footsteps. In the end, however, I decided that six bitterly cold winters in Chicago had been enough. I applied to Harvard and Yale, in almost complete ignorance of what sort of philosophy was being taught at either university. I only knew that they were prestigious places, and that getting a doctorate from either might be a good career move.

Yale gave me a fellowship and Harvard did not, so I went to Yale. Had I gone to Harvard I would have gotten acquainted with analytic philosophy sooner. The only representative of that brand of philosophy when I arrived at Yale was Carl Gustav ("Peter") Hempel, later a cherished colleague at Princeton. After Hempel left, Arthur Pap took his place. Hempel and Pap were marginalized in the Yale department, just as the nonanalytic philosophers at Harvard were marginalized by Quine and his followers.

The philosophy teachers at Yale who made the greatest impression on me were Brand Blanshard, a very able defender of the brand of absolute idealism common to Royce and Joachim, and Paul Weiss (who, like Hartshorne, had been a student of Whitehead's). I never took a course with Blanshard, but I filled the margins of his *The Nature of Thought* with arguments and objections. Weiss wanted to bring Whitehead and Hegel

together, as did I. But in the end I decided that Weiss's way of dealing with traditional philosophical antinomies was, for the most part, empty verbal maneuvers.

Weiss was my dissertation advisor, but the dissertation owed less to his influence than to McKeon's. An ungainly six hundred pages, it was titled "The Concept of Potentiality" and discussed Aristotle's account of *dynamis* in the ninth book of his *Metaphysics*, Descartes's dismissive treatment of the Aristotelian potency-act distinction, and Carnap's and Goodman's treatment of subjunctive conditionals and of nomologicality. McKeon had specialized in such comparisons and contrasts between philosophers of different epochs. At Yale I was applying techniques I had learned at Chicago.

During my four years at Yale I was fortunate to have Milton Fisk, Roger Hancock, and Richard Schmitt as fellow graduate students and companions. I spent a lot of time exercising my dialectical abilities on these patient friends, priding myself on my McKeon-taught ability to show how any philosophical position could be rendered impregnable to criticism by redefining terms and adopting alternative first principles. Schmitt finally pointed out to me that I was turning into a monomaniacal bore, and this rebuke encouraged me to look for some more constructive way of doing philosophy. Analytic philosophy was the obvious candidate.

Even at Yale the suspicion was growing that Carnap and Quine were the contemporary philosophers who mattered most. So I began looking around for analytic philosophers who were less reductionistic and less positivistic. This led me to Sellars, whose "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" set me on paths that I spent the following decades trying to broaden and extend. Sellars combined a Carnapian style (lots of numbered premises, all set about with quantifiers) with a thorough knowledge of the history of philosophy and an exuberant metaphysical imagination. That mixture of logic-worship, erudition, and romance was reminiscent of Peirce, with whose writings I had spent a lot of time, hoping to discover the nonexistent secret of his nonexistent "System" (and, in particular, to figure out what he meant by saying that Thirdness was real). Sellars and Peirce are alike in the diversity and richness of their talents, as well as in the cryptic style in which they wrote. But Sellars, unlike Peirce, preached a coherent set of doctrines.

Sellars became my new philosophical hero, and for the next twenty years most of what I published was an attempt to capitalize on his achievements. His ideas are still, to my mind, insufficiently appreciated, despite the efforts of John McDowell, Robert Brandom, and Michael Williams. I was, however, never Sellars's student. Having stupidly turned in my dissertation before turning twenty-six (the age at which one became exempt

from the draft), in 1957 I was snatched out of a post-Ph.D. instructorship at Yale into military service. Sellars came to teach at Yale only in the fall of that year (and left in disgust for Pittsburgh a few years later).

Serving in the peacetime army, between the Korean and Vietnam Wars, I never managed to rise to the rank of Specialist Third Class (a promotion that would have freed me from KP and similar chores). But I did get myself transferred to the computer development department of the Army Signal Corps. There I learned how to program an early generation of computers (the IBM 704). I was awarded the National Service Ribbon With Metal Pendant (not quite a medal, but almost) for advising my superiors to use parenthesis-free "Polish" notation rather than "Principia" notation when writing information-search-and-retrieval programs.

I spent most of my time in the Army being bored silly and wondering whether I would get a teaching job when I was released from active duty. Being still obsessed by the need to read, if not every book in the library, at least everything on the philosophy shelves, I had imagined that military service would provide enough free time for me to get through all the philosophical classics I had not yet had time for (Ockham, Malebranche, and Schelling, for example). In the event, I was always too tired to read anything (except thrillers) once the day's work was done.

In those days, hiring was largely a matter of behind-the-scenes networking. Advertising for college teaching jobs came along only a decade or so later. Weiss helped me get a job at Wellesley, where I taught from 1958 to 1961. My colleagues there, especially Ellen Haring and Virginia Onderdonk, were exceptionally helpful to, and patient with, a conceited and aggressively ambitious twenty-seven-year-old.

The Wellesley faculty of those pre-1960s days contained many women who had voluntarily cut their own salaries during the Great Depression in order that the college might survive. They held fast to the old New England ideal of plain living and high thinking, and their loyalty and hard work made Wellesley a very impressive institution. It took in a lot of spoiled WASP princesses as freshmen, but by the time they graduated many of them were on the way to becoming strong, independent, self-aware, socially useful women. My memory of those premeritocratic days is that the women's colleges of the US did a better job of educating the upper classes than was done at Yale and Princeton, where all the undergraduates were still male.

The teaching load at Wellesley was three courses a semester, so I taught a bit of everything, including introductory ethics and philosophy of religion. I also pasted together a course on Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. I was not well read in the work of any of these figures (especially Heidegger, whom I was then unable to read in German, and who had barely

begun to be translated) but the course was fun, and I think the students enjoyed it. That brief attempt to get a grip on what was coming to be called "Continental" philosophy left me with considerable admiration for Sartre, a permanent distaste for Husserl, and a desire to learn a lot more about Heidegger. I only began to gratify that desire some ten years later when, having acquired both tenure and greater self-confidence, I felt more at liberty to follow my nose.



In December of 1960 I was interviewed by Gregory Vlastos, at the American Philosophical Association meetings. He had recently taken over the chairmanship of the philosophy department at Princeton, and had heard about my dissertation from Blanshard. He asked me whether I thought I could make a contribution to American philosophy. I stoutly replied that I certainly hoped to do so—a response that was less a product of self-assurance than of the hunch that any other answer would ruin my chances of an offer. To my very considerable surprise, Vlastos offered me a visiting one-year job at Princeton, teaching Greek philosophy (and, in particular, Aristotle, leaving Vlastos himself free to concentrate on Plato).

As soon as I got to Princeton in the fall of 1961 I realized that I did not know nearly enough Greek for Vlastos's purposes, and that I was probably not the man he wanted. So I assumed I would be back at Wellesley the following fall. But, again to my surprise, I was offered a three-year further appointment—and, a few years later (in 1965), tenure. I stayed at Princeton until 1982. Vlastos apparently thought well enough of me to keep me on, even after he had employed a more accomplished Hellenist to do the job for which I had originally been hired.

It is impossible to overestimate the effect of this move to Princeton on my career and my writing. It was an incredibly lucky break to be hired into an expanding department which was to house, during my years there, not only Vlastos and Hempel but Stuart Hampshire, Donald Davidson, David Lewis, Thomas Kuhn, and Saul Kripke. From the early sixties onwards, Princeton attracted more and more of the best graduate students of philosophy. The students in my seminars (on, among other things, Aristotle, Kant, philosophy of mind, Quine, Sellars and, eventually, Heidegger) included some of the best people now working in the discipline. I learned an enormous amount from them in the course of teaching those seminars, and some of them remain close friends.

My feelings for Vlastos combined astonished gratitude for his personal kindness with considerable awe. He was a very remarkable man, who had started off as a student of Whitehead's. In his early years he was

a part-time Congregational minister who wrote for *The Christian Century*. But in the course of teaching at Cornell he had had a sort of conversion experience. His colleague Max Black had convinced him that analytic philosophy was the way to go, and that incisive criticism of specific theses put forward by other philosophers—Black's own preferred mode of philosophizing—was the mark of a true professional. When Vlastos moved to Princeton he did his best to model the philosophy department (which had been in the doldrums for decades) on Harvard's and Oxford's.

On my arrival at Princeton I had to scramble very hard to find out what my disturbingly brilliant, amazingly quick-witted, new colleagues were talking about. I was desperate to find out what I had missed by going to Yale. If I was going to win my colleagues' respect, I felt, I had to speak to some of the issues with which they were concerned and to write in somewhat the same vein as they did.

While striving to make myself over into some sort of analytic philosopher, I was also doing my best to publish enough to make a case for tenure look plausible. My choice of what to write about was dictated by the tension I was still experiencing between the attractions of metaphysical system-building and those of analytic debunking. The only two articles I published in the sixties that I still like are one on Peirce and Wittgenstein ("Pragmatism, Categories and Language," 1961) and another on Whitehead and Sellars ("The Subjectivist Principle and the Linguistic Turn," 1963).

These articles set the pattern that, as I have remarked, runs through much of my writing: comparing and contrasting people who might be thought to have little in common, pointing to areas of agreement between them in order to throw their residual disagreements into sharper relief. Peirce and Whitehead represented the system-building sort of philosophy and Wittgenstein and Sellars the debunking sort. In these early papers, I was still using McKeonite strategies to fuse the horizons of seemingly opposed philosophers.

My first article that was not of this compare-and-contrast sort was an application of Sellars's doctrine that "all awareness is a linguistic affair" to the question of whether sensations are identical with brain-processes. ("Mind-body Identity, Privacy, and Categories," 1965). This piece was an attempt to please Vlastos, and my Harvard- or Oxford-trained colleagues, by contributing to an ongoing debate in the philosophical journals, eschewing historical retrospection. I hoped to write something that would not give away the fact that I had been trained at Chicago and Yale, rather than at more fashionable places.

That article attracted some favorable notice, and made me feel that perhaps I had a future in the analytic philosophy business. It became the

template for some further articles, and eventually for Part I of my first book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). Another attempt to break into that business was a long "Introduction" to an anthology that I compiled: *The Linguistic Turn* (1967). In order to choose which items to include, I read every metaphilosophical article I could find by an "analytic" or "linguistic" philosopher in an unsuccessful attempt to find a plausible answer to the question "What does it mean to claim that philosophy is, or should become, the analysis of language?"

People stopped making that claim just about the time I published my collection, so *The Linguistic Turn* is now a quaint historical artifact. It did, however, serve some purpose: it was read with interest in non-Anglophone countries by philosophy professors trying to puzzle out what their British and American colleagues thought they were doing. I learned quite a bit from putting it together, particularly from trying to adjudicate the issues between "ideal language philosophy" (Carnap, Quine) and "ordinary language philosophy" (Austin, Wittgenstein). These two terms were, however, dropping out of use just about the time *The Linguistic Turn* was published.

In the course of figuring out what Carnap and Wittgenstein agreed about, the better to highlight their obvious differences, I bolstered my own preference for Wittgensteinian dissolutions of philosophical problems over constructive solutions. But I also began to realize that the whole idea of "linguistic method in philosophy" was misguided—a view I made explicit in some later, retrospective, essays that I included in the revised (1992) edition of *The Linguistic Turn*. The very idea of "philosophical method" now seems to me one more by-product of the recurrent, and misguided, attempt to put philosophy on what Kant called "the secure path of a science."

Post-Kuhnian "sociologizing" historians and philosophers of science have taught us not to confuse successful professionalization (what Kuhn called "normalization") with ascent to a higher epistemic level. Kuhn's suggestion that we talk about different paradigms rather than different methods—about imitating exemplars rather than applying methodological criteria—was a very important demystifying move. The ambition to model one's own work on that of a predecessor makes sense. But attempts to formulate and apply "the method of modern science" or "the method of phenomenological description" or "the method of linguistic analysis" only lead one into quagmires. Many of the articles I included in *The Linguistic Turn* now strike me as invitations to stride briskly into such bogs.

In the course of the nineteen-sixties I became more and more struck by the fact that Wittgenstein's debunking approach to philosophical problems could as easily be applied to what my Princeton colleagues thought

of as the "principal problems of analytic philosophy" as to the problems of the metaphysicians at whom Ayer had jeered. Both sets of problems, I began to think, were equally artificial. As I saw it, Wittgenstein's attempt in his *Tractatus* to produce a self-consuming artifact had failed, for the reasons he was later to give in *Philosophical Investigations*. That latter book, however, seemed to me entirely successful. So I began to construct a historical narrative about the development of modern philosophy designed to support Wittgenstein's suggestion that philosophical problems were just cul-de-sacs down which philosophers had wandered.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature argued that the mind-body problem was an artifact of Descartes's unhappy way of describing human beings. It went on to claim that the "problem of knowledge," as formulated by Kant, could be dissolved by abandoning the Cartesian way of describing the human situation. I tried to develop the consequences of the claim that "all awareness is a linguistic affair"—a claim I found in Wittgenstein as well as in Sellars—by showing how various philosophical problems came into and went out of existence with changes in such descriptions.

I still believe most of what I wrote in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. But that book is now out of date. My discussion of the mind-body problem in Part I was rendered obsolete by Daniel Dennett's far more careful and detailed work (particularly in his *The Intentional Stance*). My criticisms of epistemology in Part II were superseded by Michael Williams's brilliantly original *Unnatural Doubts*. Part III now strikes me as a false start: the contrast I drew there between "systematic" and "edifying" philosophy was not the one I wanted.

The problem with Part III is that when I wrote it I was just beginning to get acquainted with the line of thought that leads from Hegel through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Derrida. I vaguely sensed that the trouble with analytic philosophy was that it had never advanced from Kant's eternalization of the intellectual situation of eighteenth-century Europe to Hegel's historicism. But I had not yet made myself sufficiently familiar with the post-Hegelian European philosophers who had resisted the temptation to go "back to Kant." My invocation of Gadamerian hermeneutics was feeble and unproductive.

Although I had begun to read the later Heidegger in the course of the 1970s, and had become convinced of his importance and of Derrida's, I had not, at the time I was finishing *Mirror*, been able to tell myself a coherent story about the relation between postpositivistic analytic philosophy, American pragmatism, and Heidegger's "history of Being." The essays I wrote in the 1980s (published in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* and in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, both of which appeared in 1991), were attempts to piece together such a story. I came to think that the crucial

turning point in modern philosophy was Hegel's off-hand, yet pregnant, claim that philosophy is "its time held in thought." So in those pieces I dropped the awkward "systematic" versus "edifying" distinction I had drawn in *Mirror*, and instead simply opposed bad ahistoricist to good historicist philosophizing.

My main concern in those two volumes was to weave together Heidegger's story about how we got from Plato to Nietzsche with Dewey's neo-Hegelian account of our progress toward liberal, social democratic, institutions. Realizing that Heidegger, like my younger self, was preoccupied by the tension between Plato and Nietzsche gave me a way of circling back, after thirty years, to my juvenile preoccupation with "absolutes." I read Heidegger's account of the history of metaphysics—from the Platonic Ideas at one end to the Will to Power at the other—as complementing Sartre's account of our attempts to be what he called a "for-itself-in-itself." Even though I thought Heidegger unfair to Nietzsche in treating him as merely one more metaphysician, the story Heidegger told was nevertheless sufficiently persuasive to transform my sense of the relation between ancient and modern philosophy. I now saw Cartesian and Kantian descriptions of the human situation as minor variants on the Platonic "other-worldliness" that Nietzsche and Dewey had both lamented.

Heidegger's "History of Being" is, on my reading, an account of the vicissitudes of what Dewey called "the quest for certainty." Its account of Nietzsche as the destined inversion of Plato seems to me, with all its flaws (particularly Heidegger's overestimation of the historical role of the philosophical canon, and his oddly fatalistic notion of *Seinsgeschichte*) one of the most original and exciting intellectual achievements of recent times. Martin Heidegger was a miserable specimen of a human being, but it is no accident that he has become the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century. By rethinking the Plato-Nietzsche contrast, he opened up new possibilities for philosophical reflection.

Fascination with Heidegger, and with Derrida's readings of Heidegger, gradually took the place of my ambition to become a fully professionalized, fully respectable, analytic philosopher. That this hope was never going to be realized had become fairly clear from the reviews of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in the philosophical journals. They were almost all negative. Many of them suggested, implicitly or explicitly, that I was proposing "the end of philosophy," or at least of analytic philosophy. Some reviewers implied that I was, pointlessly and perversely, fouling my own nest.

My reaction to these reviews was to protest that I was only trying to carry through on Wittgenstein's skeptical approach to philosophical problems. But this did not get me very far, since the typical rejoinder was "If

that is what Wittgenstein leads to, then so much the worse for Wittgenstein." The reaction to my book helped me realize that as long as philosophers viewed themselves as belonging to a profession in which one applied "methods" in order to solve perennial, ahistorical problems, they might never be able to come to terms with Wittgenstein's mockery of his own *Tractatus*.

This realization was confirmed as I watched *Philosophical Investigations* gradually fall off the Princeton graduate students' radar screens, partly as a result of their enthusiasm for Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*. Kripke's brilliant, and astonishingly successful, attempt to restore respectability to talk of real essences and of modalities (talk of the sort that Quine and Wittgenstein had both scorned) seemed to me a move in precisely the wrong direction.

I relished the deprofessionalization of philosophy that Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach to philosophical problems encouraged. So I came to think of the increasing neglect of his work by my students and colleagues as evidence that the professionalizing tail was wagging the philosophical dog. In the course of the 1970s, I came to see the analytic philosophy "establishment" as defensively reactionary. Having once wanted to be as much like my Princeton colleagues as possible, I began to pride myself on my differences from them. I am still not sure whether this switch was insight, or rather sour grapes. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

During these years I found myself becoming increasingly irritated by the idea that a student of philosophy need only find out what problems were being discussed in the current journals in order to begin philosophizing, and also with the disparagement of metaphilosophy—loftily expressed as a preference for work on "hard, first-order, philosophical problems." Sellars's other maxim—"philosophy without the history of philosophy is dumb"—seemed to me well illustrated by the assumption (widespread among my colleagues) that would-be philosophy professors did not need to read old books, and that they could safely take their teachers' word for what counted as an important philosophical problem.

I still find it disturbing that so many young analytic philosophers see no need to ask where the problems they work on came from, and to regard study of the history of philosophy as a tiresome curricular requirement. Philosophy students who eschew historical study and metaphilosophical reflection are, I think, dooming themselves to become specialists on the ephemeral problems that their teachers happened to be writing about when they were in graduate school. This often leaves them wondering, in their later years, why nobody is any longer interested in the topics to which they have devoted most of their careers. There is, of course, no sure way for an enthusiastic young philosopher to avoid being side-tracked by short-lived

academic fashions. But metaphilosophy and historical study help.



By the beginning of the 1980s, I was doing my best to get further acquainted with so-called “Continental” philosophy, and also trying to find a new job. I figured that, if I intended to teach a lot of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, it would be best not to do so in a Ph.D. program in philosophy. In those days, for a graduate student at an “establishment” department to display an interest in such figures as these, and especially to make them her dissertation subject, was to decrease her chances of a successful professional career. Most of the philosophy departments in the great US research universities thought of “Continental philosophy” as an optional extra, included in the curriculum only to pander to the low tastes of the undergraduates. So it was often taught by cannon fodder, assistant professors who were not taken seriously by their colleagues as contributors to the discipline, and were typically let go after six years. I did not want to risk producing Ph.D.’s who would be treated with this sort of contempt.

So I trailed my coat, explaining that I would prefer to be hired in some sort of interdisciplinary program rather than in a philosophy department. I wound up taking a job at the University of Virginia that was created ad hoc for me by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who was at that time chair of the English Department. Hirsch, whom I had known while at Yale, thought that it would be useful to the graduate students of literature at Virginia to have somebody trained in philosophy teach figures like Foucault and Derrida, whose writings were then being taught under the rubric “literary theory.” In the early 1980s, when “theory” was still the watchword (before the advent of “cultural studies”), graduate students in English were willing to sweat their way through lots of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, in a way that graduate students in philosophy typically were not. “Literary theory” became the disguise under which “Continental” philosophy crept into Anglophone universities.

I was University Professor of the Humanities at Virginia from 1982 until 1998 (when I moved to Stanford, where I spent the last seven years of my teaching career as Professor of Comparative Literature). The move to Virginia worked out very well, and I have always been grateful to Hirsch for making it possible. Although I missed the brilliant philosophy students I had taught at Princeton, there were many compensations. I was able to avoid the problem of having to find jobs for advisees who had written on unfashionable topics. My nondepartmental appointment left me free to teach pretty much anything I pleased, to whomever felt like showing up to learn about it. At Virginia, and later at Stanford, I gave a sort of survey

course for undergraduates (sometimes called “Kant to Nietzsche,” sometimes “Hegel to Derrida,” sometimes “From Religion through Philosophy to Literature”), designed to fill some gaps left by the curriculum of the philosophy department. I also offered graduate seminars on such topics as “Theories of Interpretation” and “Non-representationalist Philosophies of Language: Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Derrida.”

After moving to Virginia, I worked on two tracks. I continued to take part in controversies between analytic philosophers—mostly defending the people I admired most (such as Davidson and Dennett) against their critics. But I also began writing quite a bit about authors and topics outside of analytic philosophy—for example, Freud, Derrida, Nabokov, Heidegger, Castoriadis, the role of the novel in moral education, the fate of socialism, and the relation between cultural politics and socio-economic politics. Citing Derrida when in Oxford and Davidson when in Paris, I practiced what Stephen Potter calls “the two-club approach.”²¹

Following this second track led to writing *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, published in 1989 and still my favorite among my own books. It is also the favorite of my readers: the one that has been translated most often, and about which I receive the most letters. The first part of that book brings together the Sellarsian doctrine that all awareness is a linguistic affair with the Hegelian and Heideggerian claim that the history of human thought is a series of changes in the words that make up our self-descriptions. As in *Mirror*, but on a larger scale, I was trying to fold what I had learned from Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Davidson into a big swooshy narrative of the history of Western thought.

Contingency argued that philosophy has, since Hegel, largely been displaced by literature, art, and the kind of writing that has come to be called “culture criticism.” The sort of moral education that young people received from argumentative treatises in the centuries before the French Revolution had been, I claimed, pretty well taken over by works of the imagination—in particular, by novels and by projected socio-political utopias.

Although its initial chapter, titled “The Contingency of Language,” was greatly indebted to Davidson, *Contingency* paid less attention to analytic philosophy than had *Mirror*, and was written with a different audience in mind. By the time I was writing it, I had come to think of the philosophical canon not as providing a springboard for the quasi-scientific research programs to which analytic philosophers typically devote themselves, but rather as a sequence of imaginative redescriptions of the human situation, a sequence that had reached its acme in the time of Kant and Hegel. I now thought of academic philosophy as a discipline which should try to make its peace with the literary culture that had grown up in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries, rather than continuing (rather desperately, and with little success) to ape the natural sciences. The “Continental” philosophers seemed to me to be making a much better adjustment to the changed intellectual environment than the analytic ones.

In Britain and the US *Contingency* has, unsurprisingly, been more popular with people in other disciplines than with my fellow philosophy teachers. It got devastatingly bad reviews from some prominent Anglophone philosophers. In non-Anglophone countries, however, it has proved easier to assimilate into the philosophy curriculum. In those countries there is less resistance to historicism—to the claim that philosophy is not so much a matter of solving problems as of telling a story about the relation between the human past and possible human futures.

Historicism was more prevalent in America when Dewey was in his heyday, prior to the advent of analytic philosophy. So one may be tempted to see analytic philosophy as an unfortunate, and temporary, regression from Hegel to Kant. But that would be a mistake. The sheer imaginative brilliance one finds in Sellars’s critique of what Russell called “knowledge by acquaintance,” Quine’s of the analytic-synthetic distinction, Davidson’s of the scheme-content distinction, and Brandom’s of the representationalist account of sentential content, is more than enough to justify analytic philosophy’s existence. These men owed their inspiration, directly or indirectly, to the work of Russell and Carnap, the men whose most cherished doctrines they proceeded to demolish. Taking these logical empiricists as exemplars produced “immanent” criticisms of the empiricist tradition that were far more acute and far-reaching than any that could have been produced by students of Dewey or of Whitehead.

After I moved out of a philosophy department, and especially after the publication of *Contingency*, I grew accustomed to being asked whether I still consider myself a philosopher. My reply was: “Sure. What else can I call myself? I have read too little outside of philosophy to qualify as a member of any other discipline.” When asked whether I am still an analytic philosopher, I reply “Only on Tuesdays and Thursdays”—the point being that I work on both of the tracks I distinguished earlier.

A question I am asked even more frequently is “What is the future of philosophy?” I answer that its future is as contingent as the future of the novel: both depend entirely on what the next genius to come down the road will do. It is a mistake to think that there is an internal dynamic to philosophical inquiry, one that can be relied upon to take us to some predictable destination. Nobody could have predicted Dostoevsky or Hegel, Proust or Heidegger, Kafka or Wittgenstein, Vladimir Nabokov or Donald Davidson. They are all genuine originals, writers who make us aware of new possibilities.

Often, however, that question about the future of philosophy is intended as a question about whether analytic philosophy will “win” by taking over the countries in which it is not yet entrenched, or will wither away. I have no idea which will happen, but I do not think that the question is of much importance. If all the philosophy professors in Italy and Japan and Brazil turn analytic—if they all undergo the same sort of conversion as Vlastos did at Cornell—other professors in those countries will take advantage of the situation to teach and write about Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida (as professors of literature, politics, and intellectual history have already done in the US and Britain). It does not matter in which academic departments books are studied, as long as students can find some teacher, somewhere in the university, with whom to discuss whatever books they find interesting and puzzling.

Conversely, should all the philosophy students in Britain, the US, Canada, Australia, and Scandinavia be swept off their feet by some genius whose work makes analytic philosophy look hopelessly passé, this will not be a disaster either. The achievements of Sellars, Davidson, and the rest will not be forgotten. Academic fashions change for inscrutable reasons, but stunningly imaginative works, the products of genuinely original minds, will be rediscovered and devoured as long as intellectual freedom lasts. Neither Wittgenstein nor Heidegger will ever lack readers.

Should analytic philosophy wither away, the amount of sterile scholasticism in British and US philosophy would, I suspect, remain approximately the same. Should analytic philosophy take over every philosophy department in the world, the amount of fruitful intellectual work done in those departments would neither increase nor diminish. The proportion of original minds to unoriginal placeholders will remain constant, no matter which philosophers serve as exemplars. Every genius who arises within an academic discipline makes a new scholasticism possible. But, given intellectual freedom, no amount of hide-bound sluggishness will prevent the next genius from eventually displacing his or her predecessors.

In the Introduction to *Mirror* I listed Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger as the three most important philosophers of the century. I gave Dewey a kind of pre-eminence by describing him as the philosopher who helps us put the work of the other two in context. He does so by treating them as contributing to a new form of cultural life—one in which, as I wrote in *Mirror*, “culture is no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement.” By the time I was writing *Contingency* I realized that it would have been better to have written “but by those of social cooperation in public life and of aesthetic enhancement in private life.” So in that book I argued that we should think of objectivity, in the sense of intersubjective agreement, as what is needed to carry

out cooperative social projects, and of aesthetic enhancement as a matter of idiosyncratic self-creation. A great deal of what I have written since *Contingency* develops this point, and tries to reinforce my claim that we should not try too hard to integrate these two—not struggle to bring the private together with the public.

This claim was an attempt to synthesize the historicist claim that there is no such thing as “human nature” or “man’s true place in the universe” to be discovered once and for all—and hence no need for a foundational discipline such as theology or metaphysics—with the Rawlsian point that political argument should bypass discussion of the Good Life for Man. In *Contingency* I was, yet again, trying to fuse two lines of thought, and two sets of books, that I found equally appealing. One was the idea common to Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde, that aesthetic enhancement is the aim of human life. The other was the belief, common to Kant, Mill, Rawls, and Dewey, that our responsibility for other people comes first. It seems to me that Wilde’s dictum “Socialism is for the sake of individualism” does a lot to resolve the tension between these two claims.

Yes, our first duty is to others, but we also have duties to ourselves. If we did not, if we were not the sort of beings who are capable of self-creation, we would not be worth caring about. We would be, like the inhabitants of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, less than human. It is not because we are rational agents that we should strive to create a democratic utopia. The Alphas and Betas whom Huxley describes, like the bourgeois conformists satirized by Sinclair Lewis and anathematized by Horkheimer and Adorno, reason perfectly well. Rather, we humans are worth caring about because we all have, given sufficient security, wealth, education and leisure, the capacity to be the artists of our own lives. The point of creating just social institutions is to make possible a world in which everybody gets to fulfill both sets of duties—gets a chance to be both rational and imaginative.

Because of my insistence on a public-private distinction, I have often been accused of ignoring the feminist slogan that “the personal is the political.” But I do not think that anything I wrote can be cited in support of the view that men have the right to beat their wives in the privacy of their homes, without state interference. I was not trying to define limits on state power, but rather to say what, in the long run, states are good for. I agree with Hegel (and with his contemporary interpreter Robert Pippin) that the modern state, and bourgeois society, are the best environments yet developed for nurturing the kind of self-creating, free, human being that has become a Western specialty. Maybe someday still better environments will be developed, but the modern West’s are pretty good.

Nor did the views expressed in *Contingency* entail the absurd claim that politics and art, the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of idiosyncratic

bliss, have, or should have, no effects upon one another. My point was not that there is a barrier, but that there is often irrelevance. To follow Rawls in setting aside the question of the good when we enter the sphere of politics amounts to saying: the extent of your cooperation in social projects is a proper object of public concern, but your private projects are your own business, as long as they can be carried out within the framework of just laws and institutions.

One way to break the grip that Kantian priggishness has had on recent Anglophone moral philosophy is to remind ourselves that although the right is prior to the good when it comes to choosing social arrangements, the good is prior to the right when it comes to figuring out why we want a just society. Justice is indeed, as Rawls says, the first virtue of a society. But societies are means to an end—namely, aesthetic enhancement, the creation of a world in which, as Dewey wrote, “the arts and the sciences will be the unforced flowers of life.” In that world, every human being will be able, as Whitman said, to invite his or her soul.

Dewey’s insistence that politics should be seen as experimental rather than based on principles was both cause and effect of his involvement in the Progressive Movement. My maternal grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch was also part of that movement, and I was brought up on the political left.² My parents’ socialist convictions, together with the novels of Zola, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell, made me into exactly the sort of bourgeois liberal Marxists and Foucauldians despise.

Viewed in the light of my adolescent concern with the question “Are there absolutes?” my later attempts to defend bourgeois liberalism against its cultured despisers can be seen as a way of saying “No, there are no absolutes, but who needs them?” The “universal validity” beloved by Kant (and by Habermas, a philosopher with whom I agree on almost every issue save this) is, on my view, an etiolated version of divine law. Insofar as philosophers remain concerned with the question of whether there is some nonhuman touchstone (the reality to which true propositions are said to correspond, the moral law that human institutions should embody) by which human decisions can be tested, they risk rendering their work irrelevant to moral and cultural progress. They also risk being ignored by the intellectuals who are actually facilitating such progress.

A culture able to take Dewey’s experimentalism with full seriousness would have no use for the Platonic idea that we are less than fully rational if we are unable to trace our justifications back to unquestionable first principles—to “absolutes.” It would see experimentalism as itself one more experiment, and none the worse for that. So I hope that the intellectuals of the West, a millennium or so hence, will have as little interest in the question of whether there are absolutes as they now have in the true name of

God. In such a culture, issues about “realism” and about “relativism” will no longer intrigue people like my teen-age self. Many fewer footnotes to Plato and Kant will be written.

The most useful sorts of philosophers are those who persuade us not to care about problems that no longer have practical importance. Almost two hundred years ago Hegel’s *Phenomenology* suggested a new way of writing footnotes to Plato—one that set aside metaphysical and epistemological puzzles. Reading that book helps us think of philosophy as the study of the relations between the human past, the human present, and possible human futures, rather than of those between the human and the nonhuman. But most of the philosophy professors of the following two centuries feared that thinking of philosophy in this way would make it impossible for them to think of themselves as practicing a quasi-science, as contributing to knowledge. They were afraid that following Hegel’s lead would blur the lines between philosophy and intellectual history, that their discipline would become a matter of writing footnotes to footnotes rather than of dealing with *die Sache selbst*.

I think that this line should indeed be blurred, because there is no distinctively philosophical *Sache* save that very heap of footnotes. The important philosophers, on my view, are the people who look back over history and say: the reason people think that there is a philosophical problem about X is that we have been describing X as Y, whereas we would do better to describe it as Z. They are the ones who stop moving the old pieces around, and instead suggest new language-games for us to play.

This is what Plato did when he suggested that the divine be thought of as more like a number than like a person. It is also what Kant did: his achievement was not to have put an old discipline on a new, scientific, path, but to have shown how certain old problems looked once we abandon the notion of knowledge common to Locke and Leibniz. It was what the logical empiricists did when they urged that we start asking of every sentence whether it was analytic, empirical, or meaningless. The point of these new suggestions is to twist the kaleidoscope in such a way that what looked to past thinkers like “hard, first-order, philosophical problems” simply vanish from view. There is no right way in which the bits of glass in the kaleidoscope should be arranged, because there is no right language for human beings to speak. There are only languages that serve some human purposes better than others. Human purposes and human languages change in tandem with each other.

Hegel evaded the implications of his own claim that “philosophy is its time held in thought” insofar as he pictured history as predestined to converge to a point, a point at which Spirit becomes fully self-conscious. A consistently historicist view would envisage intellectual and moral progress not as getting closer to anything but as the process by which the

kaleidoscope keeps getting bigger and more colorful. To hope that such progress will continue is to hope that the human imagination will keep inserting new bits of glass, of previously undreamt-of hues. Goethe was right when he said that we live our life in colored reflections. That is not, as Plato thought, our misfortune. It is our glory.

Those who remain convinced that Kant was right to seek the secure path of a science will reject both Shelley’s claim that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world and Hegel’s replacement of argument by narrative. His historicist turn—as well as his strikingly un-Kantian claim that Art, as well as Religion and Philosophy, is one of the forms in which Spirit becomes fully self-conscious—enabled Hegel to produce the *Phenomenology*, the most original book in the canon of modern Western philosophy. As long as we take Kant as our model, we shall continue to talk as if reason (the ability to make justifiable inferences) rather than imagination (the ability to come up with new ways of talking) were the most important human faculty. But if we switched to Hegel, things would change. This is the sort of change I had in mind when I suggested, in *Contingency*, that we philosophers should stop aping science and should cease to view the literary culture askance.

In the metaphilosophical essays included in *Truth and Progress* (1998) and in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007) I may seem to be giving additional plausibility to the charge of being an “end of philosophy” philosopher—the charge that was levied against *Mirror*. For in them I campaign not only against the Cartesian-Kantian problematic that has been the principal focus of analytic philosophy but against the cast of mind that led me to search for absolutes when I was young. I look forward to an era in which the question “Are there absolutes?” has no resonance. To ask that question betrays an inability to live with one’s own finitude, and I should like to think that someday human beings will no longer try to escape the historicity and contingency of their existence. If that day comes, the opposition between Plato and Nietzsche that led me to study philosophy in the first place will no longer fire the imagination of the young.

But even if that happens there will still be philosophy, because there will still be cultural politics. As long as there is intellectual freedom there will be people who want an overview of the culture in which they grew up, because doing so helps them sketch the outlines of a better culture. “Philosophy” is as good a name as any for the attempt to get such an overview, and “cultural politics” as good a name as any for the attempt to create a change in the intellectual world.

RICHARD RORTY

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
APRIL 16, 2007

NOTES

1. "It is essential," Potter advised, "if you belong to one club to belong to two. . . . The essence of the technique is to maintain the condition of being, as F. H. Bradley, genial old Mertonian, once wrote in a different context—'the other in the other'." Stephen Potter, *One-upmanship* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 124.

2. I have described this upbringing in an autobiographical memoir called "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids" (included in my *Philosophy and Social Hope*) and also at pages 58–64 of my *Achieving Our Country* (1998).

PART TWO

DESCRIPTIVE AND
CRITICAL ESSAYS
WITH REPLIES
