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Series in Philosophy

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Bridging Languages and Scholarship

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Remembering Richard Rorty: An Interview with Robert Brandom

Pedro Góis Moreira, Catholic University of Portugal

In this interview, Robert Brandom discusses his friend and former mentor Richard Rorty, both his thought and the man himself. He talks about the prospects of anti-foundationalism today, the ways in which Rorty's thought has been used by other authors and Rorty's use of other authors, and he assesses Rorty's impact ten years after his passing.

Q: Why did you pick Rorty as advisor at the university?

I went to Princeton because Rorty was there and because I was so impressed with the account he gave of what Sellars was doing in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* and with [his view on] why it was important to set a view of the development of the history of philosophy. The way Rorty thought about things was not just driven by the most recent contributions to the journal literature, but by getting a running start historically, by starting a hundred years before and seeing how the discussions and how the profession had evolved and how pragmatism arose. [He did this] by, coming to appreciate the manifold contingencies involved such that we might have gone this other way, but for contingent reasons we went this other way. Now, Louis Menand taught us that, together with the later contingency of refugee German philosophers finding a haven in America, American pragmatism was a product of our Civil War, just as jazz was dependent on the war surplus of horns and brass instruments that flooded the American South after the war. Rorty very much appreciated the ways in which those contingencies altered the course of intellectual discussion. He came to think not 'oh, this a bad thing, it's bent out of shape,' but, rather, 'this is what disciplinary development is like.'

I found this combination of sharp analytic appreciation of what was going on now, together with a more distanced historical perspective, [to be] very compelling. And the choice I had to make was to go to Pittsburgh to work with Sellars, or to go to Princeton work with Rorty. Since I too was committed to the project of a scientific formal semantics ([I was] coming out of mathematics as much as out of philosophy), and [since] Princeton was the

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center of that, it seemed to me I could have both things. And, indeed, during my years in Princeton, I worked at both: with David Lewis in formal semantics and with Rorty in trying to get a larger, historically nuanced picture of how we got to where we are. So they were my co-supervisors, my *Doktorväter*. But it was politically fraught in Princeton of those years. The main department that Lewis came to speak for, by large, didn't speak to Rorty. And it was sort of understood that their very best students were expected *not* to be working with him. And so it was anomalous and, even if they continued to treat me respectfully, they could never understand why, given that I could do the sort of thing that they did care about, I would do something else. And Rorty himself was a little bit amused by this. He had sort of gotten used to the department discouraging their students they thought best of [from] working with him. But we ended up having a fabulous relationship. I was the only occasion for Rorty and Lewis to talk to each other when they needed to.

Q: How would you introduce Richard Rorty to someone completely outside of academia?

B: Rorty usefully distinguished 'researchers' in the high culture, that is, people who have a *fach* in the German sense. The word 'faculty' comes from 'those who have a research discipline' that they pursue and that requires them to push the boundaries of our understanding in some field or, more often, some subfield. So, 'researchers' in that sense is distinguished from 'intellectuals': the characteristic and defining job of the intellectual is to think about how, to begin with, the high culture hangs together – how the specialist in membrane physiology, or the specialist in nineteenth-century Russia educational theory, how what they are doing is contributing to furthering our understanding of human being. But then the intellectual is to be using this understanding of our best and most disciplinary understandings of the human being. Then to think how that can be brought to bear on political decisions which, in sufficiently advanced liberal democracies and sufficiently stable and prosperous parts of the world, we are privileged to have some say, however small it is, about who we are, what we're trying to do.

Rorty is someone who's *fach* was traditional philosophy. There is nothing he enjoyed reading more than the mighty dead philosophers: that was what he mastered. He was a writer who wrote about those writers. But he also always had a commitment as an intellectual, and he was one of the premier Anglophone public intellectuals of his generation who tried to bring to bear what he understood from working within the philosophical tradition: first of all, on how to think about the high culture and where we are in our understanding of ourselves and, then, on how to broaden our perspective to

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think about the issues of public moment. He weighed in weightily and wittily on those issues. Perhaps the work that speaks most immediately to that vocation of his is *Achieving our Country*, which is still not so much a work of contemporary politics as of advice for contemporary, politically active intellectuals. But if one is coming completely from outside of academia, one will appreciate his work within his *fach,* but his work as a public intellectual is very accessible and worthwhile.

Q: Do you think that Rorty's work was used in ways that Rorty himself would not expect? Did he end up having strange bedfellows, so to say?

B: By Rorty's own account – and this is seconded in Neil Gross's important intellectual biography of Rorty – he came to be disillusioned with analytic philosophy, along many dimensions and for many reasons, and became more interested in reading the path that was not taken by analytic philosophy. In the great divide after Kant, he took the Hegelian path instead of, as we could say, the Fregean path that Russel and Moore recommended. It was a Hegelian path that led through giants such as Heidegger – though it was always the early Heidegger, the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, that Rorty esteemed, – as well as Anglophone figures he had championed, particularly Dewey. And, though there basically were no heirs of Dewey anymore, there were Dewey scholars and strong philosophers in the Deweyan tradition, although not a critical mass of them. He did find smart people reading Hegel and Heidegger, in particular, Jacques Derrida who, like Rorty, was trained as a hard-nosed historian of philosophy, as a philosopher and historian of philosophy, and was essentially omniscient about the mighty philosophical dead. And Rorty thought: well, the people who – inspired by Derrida – are reading Hegel and Heidegger, are not in American philosophy departments anymore: they are in literature departments. These are the people I want to converse with, because these are the topics I want to converse about. So he moved into a literature department in 1982.

Around that time, he won the MacArthur prize – the so-called 'young genius prize' – and so there was $244,000, which he used to buy a house in Charlottesville and move out of the Princeton department, which had been uncomfortable for him for seven or eight years at that point. This coincided with the dissolution of his first marriage. It was generally a change in life for him. He moved not into the philosophy department but became, more generally, a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia with very few duties. So he could travel and talk to a much wider range of philosophers and philosophy departments than most of his American philosophical colleagues did at the

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time. It coincidently had the consequence that he never again directed a philosophy dissertation. And, on the one hand, that pained him but, on the other hand, it liberated him. He wasn't tied down by having to do that either.

But as he had come to be disillusioned with analytic philosophy, he was desperately disappointed by the way capital 'T' Theorists, downstream from Derrida, deconstruction and cultural studies, became. But it happened that Derrida gave rise to a generation of thinkers who did not spend the time that Rorty and Derrida himself had spent doing what you needed to do to master Hegel, Heidegger and the philosophical tradition that they were imbued with. They combined an increasingly shallow sloganeering with a basically metaphysical ambition and pride that was, he thought, *exactly* what deconstruction was deconstructing, if one understood it properly. So he came desperately to regret having, as it were, thrown his lot in with this rising movement in the American humanities. Because he came to see it as a degenerating movement that did not give rise to anyone with the knowledge of the tradition that he was deconstructing, the one that Derrida and Rorty had. This movement was without the appreciation that you need to be, you need to live and move and have your being *within* a tradition in order to make the kind of move to it that Derrida was making. And the people were, on the one hand, raised with no such tradition. No body of canonical writings that gave a common conversational base to everyone. And, on the other hand, with the kind of over-winning hubris, intellectual hubris, rooted in what they took to be a deeper understanding of human being and of the high culture. That was exactly the deconstruction that he'd found joined: his pragmatist heroes with the possibilities of deconstruction.

So Rorty esteemed nothing so much as philosophical and intellectual conversation. He remained in conversation with a tradition that he had come to be disillusioned with, fighting the good fight for what he saw as the unrealized possibilities of Derrida's playful undercutting of the ultra-serious French literary culture – for example, the sort of physical humor/Jerry Lewis move where, when writing an article about Hegel, one's intellectual premise turns on the fact that in French his name rhymes with 'eagle,' or another essay that turns on how wide the margins are in a printed version of two essays. This ought to be seen as playfully refusing to take itself seriously or to take seriously a literary culture – the French café literary culture, in particular, took itself more seriously than anyone has ever taken themselves. And yet [deconstruction] was turned into the form of a metaphysical theory that even needed a capital 'T' to say how serious it was. Parenthetically, Rorty only capitalized concepts to make fun of them. Reality with a capital 'R' is something you should be *embarrassed* to identify. But they needed a capital

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'T' so as to pursue exactly the sort of metaphysics that Rorty and, he was convinced, Derrida himself had seen through.

So he came desperately to regret having his name associated with this movement, although he always thought that there was a reason in continuing to believe that there were insights here. I edited my book on Rorty [*Rorty and his Critics*] because he expressed frustration, in the late eighties, with being thought of as the poet and the prophet of pragmatism – the title of a collection that had just emerged. Not that he was *unhappy* being a poet and a prophet of pragmatism, but he said he wished, just once, people would look back over his most serious contributions to the discipline of philosophy – to his *fach* narrowly conceived – and talk about what he contributed, as the analytic philosopher, to analytic philosophy. And that was the charge that I used as an animating motif of the book I edited, asking the most serious and influential analytic philosophers of the day to write, not about his turn to deconstruction or his literary turn or his incendiary suggestion that, because philosophy was the kind of thing Kant did, philosophy was dead as a discipline, but rather to focus on the arguments he made in the narrower analytic context. And he always maintained that this was the set of commentaries on his work that he found most satisfying and gratifying. And I think one sees that in the replies that he wrote. Where, inter alia, he articulates his disenchantment with this aspect of analytic philosophy.

One of the essays in that volume that he was most moved by – in a sort of larger disciplinary sense – took him to task for not appreciating the sociocultural difference between the way philosophy was conducted in France and the way it was conducted in the Anglophone world. In the Anglophone world, some academic generations down the road from the logical positivists had instituted a philosophical culture modeled on the natural scientific intellectual culture where it doesn't matter who's mouth a remark comes out of: one looks at the evidence for it, assesses the consequences, takes it seriously, thinks of one's interlocutors as all serious and able people, and thinks of the enterprises as cooperative. Each treats the other with the respect that colleagues in a cooperative undertaking have. [This is] by contrast to a café culture where who you know mattered at least as much as what you knew, where what sort of a figure one could cut, the style in which one could express oneself, [mattered]. In particular, a competitive intellectual culture where, in order to make room for your own reputation, you had to undercut another's and one of the ways to advance your own was with a particularly cutting remark about someone else. And, while Rorty had esteemed, participated in, identified with, and really came to take for granted the intellectual environment which analytic philosophy both created and thrived in, he failed to realize how different it was and how corrosive was the

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culture that he admired of Derrida and Foucault. Even though, at least in the case of Derrida, he was desperately trying to rise above that, he had no visceral experience with an alternative to it. Rorty was criticized for not appreciating this tremendous sociocultural difference. And Rorty really took that criticism to heart. He came to think this is what was behind the sort of mistake he made in the way he engaged in conversation with people he continued to think were worth engaging with. But he, culturally, threw his lot in with them for the better part of the decade in a way he came to regret.

And people would not infrequently ask Rorty how he felt about having been excommunicated from analytic philosophy. And he always responded the same way: characteristically, he shrugged and would say he wasn't really aware it was a church! But there was some genuine pain behind that insouciant remark. What he came to discover was: it had been a church, and he had been excommunicated from it, and he needn't have been. It pained him that he was because that was, for better or for worse, his culture. For contingent reasons, he always intellectually identified, in his style and his way of thinking, with the analytic philosophy he had come to be a master of, and it was desperately unfair and unfortunate that he was read out of that culture in the way he was. He knew as well as anyone that he bore considerable responsibility for that, with the incendiary remarks he made and postures he adopted. He assumed that people would understand when he was and when he wasn't being serious, and they didn't! They took everything at the same level of seriousness. Jacques Bouveresse, in his essay [in *Rorty and his Critics*], more in sorrow than in anger, criticized Dick in this regard. But Dick meant to be – and he was – speaking socioculturally for what was good about the way in which analytic philosophers regard each other. But they felt he had put himself outside the fence.

Q: Where do you see anti-foundationalism going? And do you think it's heading the right way?

B: Epistemological foundationalism in the twentieth century is essentially coextensive with empiricism, and Empiricism has fallen severely out of favor in Anglophone philosophy and was never dominant outside of analytic philosophy. One of Rorty's deep historical insights into the situation he found himself in in the '60s was that he saw, with a clarity that no one else did, that two big things happened in analytic philosophy in the '50s: Quine's 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' and Sellars' *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. They destroyed the two pillars of traditional empiricist foundationalism, in particular in its twentieth-century logical empiricist form: that regresses of justification were to be stopped by foundations of

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unjustified justifiers, on the side of premises, by what was sensorially given; and that the regresses on the side of the inferences were to be stopped by inferences that were good in virtue of meaning alone, i.e., by analytic inferences. And then Quine had destroyed the one kind of foundation, and Sellars had destroyed the other. Though Rorty himself was less influenced by this one, one could mention Austin also as destroying the notion of sensory givenness as a foundation for knowledge.

Now, whether it was for exactly the reasons that Rorty recommended or not, that sort of epistemological empiricism is no longer the dominant view in analytic philosophy. There certainly are foundationalists, but that is no longer the consensus view. Quine reproduced in his own work and bequeathed to his many philosophical heirs twin commandments to epistemological empiricism and to ontological naturalism. Those are the twin commitments that nearly tore the Vienna Circle apart. What they divided over was the question of when your empiricist epistemology collides with your naturalist ontology, which do you hold on to? The Schlick wing said 'hold on to the empiricism,' and the Neurath wing said 'hold on to the naturalism.' And Carnap, powerful figure that he was, sat as the bird's body between these two wings, trying to keep them from flying off in different directions. They were reproduced in Quine and never sat easily with one another, as his empiricist rejection of modality was always in tension with his naturalist endorsement of scientific laws. But, in the wake of Quine's tremendous influence, felt nowhere more strongly than in the Princeton school of philosophy of my graduate school years, empiricism went by the board and naturalism won the day.

Foundationalism became, I think, not so much seen through in the way Rorty hoped it would be, as simply ignored. Rorty used to say that the final episode that drove a stake through the heart of his love affair with analytic philosophy was when, in the wake of the incipient modal revolution of the late 60s, Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* led, overnight, to a shift of philosophical winds: from Quinean disdain for modality to the appeal to modal primitives to address whatever was philosophically puzzling. Rorty said this confirmed his view that fashion was more determinative of philosophical commitments than anything else: that, on an issue of this importance, there could be a shift of this significance, sort of overnight, and that the old would be swept away as though it had never existed… forgotten, really. What exactly was the refutation of Quine's epistemological criticism of modality? There was no consensus about that; they just weren't interested in playing that game anymore, as he put it. And, though he had always thought that that was true of the discipline – at any rate, that it moved for contingent reasons, and that problems went in fashion and went out of

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fashion – this was such a ferocious and cynical shift that he could no longer take it seriously. He could no longer unironically play this game, as he had with distinction and indeed brilliance for a decade.

Q: Steven Miller has this article called 'John Dewey is a Tool: Lessons from Rorty and Brandom,'[1] on the history of pragmatism. There, he argues that you follow Rorty in not confining certain authors – for instance, those of the classical pragmatic tradition – to a circle of specialists. And that you took those authors in other directions, which infuriated those specialists.

B: Well that's all true [laughs].

Q: Exactly. And he says that you're trying to take them out of those circles and use them for other productive purposes. Would you agree that you take this from Rorty and use this method as well?

B: I do agree with that – both that I do that and that I absolutely learned that from Rorty. I mean, there are some things that I think I ended up doing better than Rorty, and I think he ended up thinking I do those things better than he does. [For example,] the technical philosophy of language, which he was a practitioner of and a distinguished one, but I think that this was more my focus and I took some ideas that Rorty had and did things within that narrow subset field that go beyond the sort of thing he was able to do.

The retrospective, rational reconstruction of a tradition meant to vindicate a contemporary view (so really, the creating of a canon and a tradition); that the view one is now recommending is the natural culmination of and the natural next step in [the tradition] – Rorty was the unparalleled master of that. I think the lasting fascination and admiration that I have for Rorty is principally focused on the extent that he had mastered, essentially, the entire philosophical tradition that he inherited and that he could use it to tell philosophically edifying stories and discern minority traditions and strands of thought in it and [that he could] use that re-telling of the history to recommend a way of thinking these days. I was absolutely in awe of the mastery that Rorty had of the Kantian corpus, the Wittgensteinian corpus, the

[1] Steven A. Miller, 'John Dewey is a Tool: Lessons from Rorty and Brandom,' *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 50, N°2 (Spring 2014), pp. 246-264.

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Heideggerian corpus, and the art with which he could then deploy these intellectual raw materials to recharacterize what was going on.

I'm going to give an example of the sort of thing that seems to me… a remark that continues to enlighten, but I don't know that he's ever put it in print. He said it was dispiriting to see that, by the nineteenth century [there] had been the progressive triumph of historicist ideas, historicizing of philosophy from Hegel to Dilthey and of the growing appreciation of the significance of institutionalized social practices within which concepts were deployed. And then, just when those ideas were on the verge of triumphing, Bertrand Russel and Edmund Husserl, each in their own way, reinvented things for philosophy to be apodictic about, to be a historicist, to be removed from the social hurly-burly to the philosopher's armchair. And it [took us] us most of the twentieth century, in the traditions that Russel founded and that Husserl founded, to work our way back, to embody social practices and the historicizing appreciation. Now, as I say, I don't know that he actually gave that characterization in print, but I think that's a very good framework for thinking about nineteenth to twentieth-century philosophy. His view was, in a sort of Walter Pater, art for art's sake way, that the thing to do was to take an *aperçu*, an insight like that, work it out with apposite quotations, sort of showing how certain views fit into it, and then walk away and leave it behind and come up with a completely different one, that cuts in different ways. And this is an art form that he was the unsurpassed master at; he was just brilliant at doing that. And that is the art form that I, in a small way, practice.

I have different raw materials, but it entails the mighty dead. I'm self-consciously excavating a minority tradition. That’s really retrospectively constituting a tradition that didn't exist until it was retrospectively discerned. It is inferentialist rather than representationalist, functionalist rather than atomistic. It's a rereading of most of the rationalist tradition that emphasizes completely different features of their thought than other great retrospective reconstructions of them – I think of Kant's. And I think this was one of Rorty's paradigms of this art, of Kant looking at the philosophies he inherited, dividing them into rationalist and empiricists – the rationalists assimilating all representations to thoughts and the empiricists assimilating all to sensations – and saying really what you should do is have concepts and intuitions. The concepts without intuitions are empty, and the intuitions without concepts are blind. That's an ideal retrospective reconstruction as a vindication of a view looking forward. Think of Kant as the great historian of philosophy, [even though] he was a practitioner. That's what inspired Hegel, who is, of course, the greatest practitioner of this.

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Q: Four years before he passed, Rorty gave an interview to *The Believer*. The interviewer asked Rorty if he thought he had had any impact on the analytical philosophy establishment, to which Rorty answered 'I don't think any larger proportion of the population is persuaded of my line of thought than was thirty years ago.'[2] Do you think that we can, retrospectively, review this assessment?

B: Well, I think Rorty is unusual among analytic philosophers, in that I think his influence is growing after his death. In analytic philosophy, we're accustomed to ideas that influence programs having rather short shelf lives. I mentioned Gilbert Harman being steeped in history of philosophy and how everything he thought grew out of his understanding of the history of philosophy – it's just that he thought it started with Quine. My teachers in graduate schools thought of philosophy in a Quinean framework. They were brilliant original thinkers and were by no means simply parading a Quinean line, but the framework they were working in was certainly shaped by his. Even in David Lewis, in his book *Convention*, one can see the Quinean antecedents of this view. It's a line of thought that, I believe, grew out of Lewis' Harvard dissertation, and originated in deeply thinking about Quine's 1936's Carnapian and logical truth and his subsequent 'truth by convention' essays. *Word and Object* was published in 1960. By 1980, Quine was not being taught in major graduate programs in the Anglophone world. Having dominated the discussion for fifteen years, five years after that period, he was really only of antiquarian interest. It was felt that graduate students should know about him because he was influent, not because he was actually still influential. And Quine, I would say, was *the* Anglophone philosopher, *the* most influential Anglophone philosopher of his generation, [and he] wasn't safe. After dominating the discussion for fifteen years, a further five years and he's just another one of the mighty dead who one might study for historical insight.

More recently, I think we've seen a figure who, in some ways, rivals Quine for his influence at the time, Donald Davidson. I don't believe there are any Davidsonians anymore. Insofar as there are, they're students of his and they're getting long in the tooth themselves. But Davidson is not someone that, as a systematic thinker, is studied or influential. Certain works on agency, other particular things, will come up, but Davidson is much less influential

[2] Richard Rorty, 'Richard Rorty: "pragmatism is a philosophical therapy. It helps you stop asking the unhelpful questions,"' interview by Gideon Lewis-Kraus, in *The Believer*, vol. 1, nº3 (June 2003), https://www.believermag.com/issues/200306/?read=interview_rorty

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now than he was ten years ago, less then than he was twenty years ago. I would say the same thing is true of one of my great heroes, Michael Dummett, in the British tradition. Eminent and accomplished students like Crispin Wright, [maybe,] but Dummett himself? Not much studied in Anglophone philosophy departments. I think this short shelf life is of a piece with the thought that, at any rate, in an ideological heyday of analytic philosophy, the appropriate form to produce and disseminate work was the gem-like journal article rather than a book that you spent years writing. Years was too long to wait to communicate your next new thought and too much trouble to read. And I think that the short form of the gem-like analytic philosophy journal article is much of a piece with the short shelf life of the analytic philosophical, if not career, anyway, post-career influence.

Now, for some figures, and Rorty is surely one of them, one worries about a waning of his influence after his death because his personal presence was so overwhelming. Anyone who ever heard Rorty talk knew they were listening to a distinctive voice, a voice in the literary sense. But he gave *literal* voice to that literary voice. Many, many people came to Rorty not knowing what to expect, not having a lot of background, and just being so compelled by the personality that comes through in his lectures. No one who ever heard him speak can read anything he wrote without hearing it in his voice, and it reads differently that way. One would have thought that this was a particular voice that would have trouble surviving his own spokesmanship, his own voicing of it. And indeed we've lost that. We don't have that and it's our loss. But I think that he continues to get new readers at a rate greater than Quine and Davidson and Dummett, who were all, within analytic philosophy, more mainstream, more appreciated, and more influential than Rorty was. His influence is growing and has continued to grow.

Rorty was much less active in the last decade of his life, when he was fighting the cancer that killed him. He continued to write, but did not travel, did not speak as much. His influence on his audience continued to grow during that time and has continued to grow since his death. We're [coming up on] the anniversary of the founding of the Richard Rorty Society,[3] an international society who's had as a principal activity running group meetings with the American Philosophical Association where scholars of Rorty's work can share their work with each other. We've had a Wilfrid Sellars Society for only about five years, and he died twenty years before Rorty did. It took fifteen

[3] The Richard Rorty Society held its inaugural session in September 8-10, 2016, at Hamilton College in New York. More information: https://richardrortysociety.org/

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years to get a Sellars Society. I think Sellars is another figure whose influence has grown since his death. He was never as influential as Quine was during his life, though always appreciated as original and important.

I think there's a crucial divide among philosophers as to whether their writings continue to inspire new generations of young philosophers or whether they were contributors to their moment. Hegel said philosophy was its time captured in thought. And that's an honorable function to perform – one should not be unhappy to have performed that function. I don't think that's the function Rorty performed. I think his was a contribution to what Sellars called perennial philosophy, to a treatment of concerns of continuing interest, with each new generation finding inspiration in reading the things that he wrote.

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