

COMMENT ON RORTY

Hesse and Pettit present somewhat different reconstructions of Rorty's suggestions about the discipline that might survive the collapse of foundationalistic epistemology. They both treat Rorty's argument very respectfully, as opening the way to an interesting new possibility. I think that they are both too charitable to him; I think that there are a lot of bad arguments in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and a quantity of simple silliness. This is not to say that the openings up of the subject that Hesse and Pettit derive from Rorty are not genuinely attractive. What I would challenge is the suggestion that they are forced upon us by the collapse of the rest of the subject. I see no reason to believe this.

According to Rorty, something central disappears from philosophy if (a) we cease to see human knowledge as based on indubitable evidence, and (b) we accept that intellectual life inevitably divides into different more-or-less autonomous currents, traditions, or discourses, each with its own presuppositions and procedures, and between which translation is beset with difficulties of principle. It is pretty clear why if both of these are true then a certain 'Cartesian' enterprise of grounding all we know on foundations no-one would doubt is hopeless. The truth of either of them would be fatal enough. But this is a pretty small target: Descartes on a traditional but historically by no means uncontroversial interpretation,<sup>1</sup> Russell for a few moments during the 1920's, perhaps, a few incautious people in Vienna between the wars, ... Most of the enterprise of trying to sort out how people do acquire their knowledge of the world, and how they can best do so, is not directly incriminated. Several of the papers of this conference have shown how wide and open the live questions about scientific method in seventeenth and early eighteenth century Europe were. An orthodoxy defined by the Descartes of first-year philosophy certainly did not rule then. And the issues that were broached then have obviously developed into questions which continue to have a place in the scientific enterprise. Real questions of method are an intrinsic part of our situation; we attack them from within; this is worth doing; it is called epistemology.

How does Rorty get from his attack on foundationalism to his rejection of all of epistemology? I'm afraid I have trouble avoiding libel here. As far

as I can make out, he does it with three manoeuvres: (i) identifying foundationalism with Descartes, describing Descartes' position in terms of a Rylean optical metaphor, and then refocussing the optics so that the metaphor encompasses a much more comprehensive project; (ii) saddling non-foundationalistic epistemology with a 'realist' programme in the analysis of truth and reference, and then launching a free-wheeling attack on this programme; (iii) appealing to the authority of a number of modern masters, particularly Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, all of whom are supposed to have expressed the same exhortation to abandon philosophy as we know it and move over to some sort of hermeneutics.

Briefly: (i) needs no comment. (ii) is potentially interesting. I don't think that Rorty says enough to show that the epistemologist *must* adopt any particular theory of truth or reference. And I think that his attacks on Field, Putnam, and others are confused. But there is an intelligible strategy here, and if it succeeded something significant would have been shown. (iii) seems to me to turn the fact that these thinkers had enemies in common into a claim that they were making the same attacks on these enemies. It would be easier to settle this if Rorty's taste in heroes did not focus so consistently on such elusive writers.

So you can see why I am not impressed. That is not to say that Rorty's alternatives to philosophy are illusions. What seems to me an obvious illusion is just the suggestion that they are alternatives we *must* follow.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> See for example Margaret D. Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge, 1978), especially Chapter 1, Sec. 8, Chapter 4, Sec. 1, and the Conclusion. As I read Wilson, Descartes, as she reads him, does not possess a working notion of evidence, and sees the grounds for assent in more archaic terms. Descartes, if this is right, did not really take a stand with respect to (a). He does not deny (b) either, as I have stated it, though he certainly thinks that all systems except one are (demonstrably) wrong.