**Rorty and Metaphilosophy**

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*Richard Rorty: On philosophy and philosophers: unpublished papers*, 1960-2000, edited by [W. P. Małecki](https://www.cambridge.org/core/search?filters%5BauthorTerms%5D=W.%20P.%20Ma%C5%82ecki&eventCode=SE-AU) and [Chris Voparil](https://www.cambridge.org/core/search?filters%5BauthorTerms%5D=Chris%20Voparil&eventCode=SE-AU). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, $19.00 e-book

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The papers by Richard Rorty collected in *On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished Papers, 1960-2000* and edited by W.P. Małecki and Chris Voparil represent a very welcome addition to Rorty’s corpus. They will be of interest to scholars who specialize in Rorty’s work, to those invested in the nature and development of neopragmatism, and to any philosophical audience who enjoys bracing, clear, and unique perspectives on a range of philosophical topics—from the interpretation of Kant, to discussions of contemporary metasemantics, to, above all, the nature of philosophy itself.

The papers are drawn from print and electronic records from the Richard Rorty Papers housed at the UC Irvine Libraries. Małecki and Voparil have done an excellent job selecting and curating the collection, and I would agree with their judgment that “the papers match the general standard of work that appeared in print during [Rorty’s] lifetime” (viii). In the remainder of this review, I will highlight various papers in the collection that I think will be of interest to different audiences. I will then sketch how the papers help to flesh out our understanding of Rorty’s work and his metaphilosophical views.

For Rorty scholars and neopragmatism scholars specifically, the inclusion of Rorty’s previously unpublished replies to Jaegwon Kim’s and Ian Hacking’s reviews of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, both published in *The Journal of Philosophy* as part of an APA symposium on the book, are invaluable. Rorty deftly identifies his key differences from Kim’s and Hacking’s views and corrects certain misinterpretations. Kim’s charge, for example, that “if the language in which philosophical discourse is to be carried out is robbed of its representational function, then it becomes impossible to make any *assertions* or state any *views* in that language” (Kim 1980, 596) overlooks how Rorty believes that the language game of assertion is not inherently tied to representationalism. For Rorty, we have philosophical precedent in both the analytic and continental traditions for getting “accustomed to truth without truth-makers” or assertion without representationalism (151).

The collection includes Rorty’s most detailed engagement with existentialism in “Philosophy as Spectatorship and Participation” and with non-Western philosophical views in “Remarks on Nishida and Nishitani”. Both papers are also evidence of Rorty’s admirable desire and ability to engage with various philosophical traditions, including those outside of the mainstream of analytic philosophy, particularly at the time he was writing. But the collection also provides examples of Rorty’s engagement and novel insight into the contemporary analytic tradition. “Kripke on Mind-Body Identity” is a fascinating analysis well worth reading for anyone interested in the arguments against identity theory in *Naming and Necessity*. Rorty points out that Kripke seems to lack the courage of his own convictions. On Rorty’s view, the fact that, intuitively, we can imagine brain states without corresponding pain states does not tell us anything about metaphysical necessity. In fact, Kripke’s own arguments about rigidity show us that scientific investigation often reveals the nature of the world to be radically different than what we thought (e.g. that Hesperus and Phosphorus are one and the same entity), and the same insight should be carried through to reject dualist intuitions.

“Naturalized Epistemology and Norms: Replies to Goldman and Fodor” provides us with further insight into how Rorty wants to situate his views in philosophy of mind, and what he takes to be Dennett’s kindred views, relative to Searle, Dreyfus, and Fodor. In addition to helpful discussion of his own views, Rorty’s way of carving up the philosophical terrain here, and in many of the essays, is itself illuminating. “Brandom’s Conversationalism: Davidson and *Making It Explicit*” and “Bald Naturalism and McDowell’s Hylomorphism” both help build on Rorty’s previously published work on Brandom’s and McDowell’s projects and crystallize where Rorty wants to depart from both philosophers—specifically, their inability, on Rorty’s view, to let go of a desire to remain answerable to a world independent of any human conceptualization or interests.

As the title of the collection indicates, a recurring theme is Rorty’s own metaphilosophical views. Rorty of course had a special penchant for metaphilosophy. For some readers, this emphasis on and “creeping metaphilosophy” was a mistake; “for Rorty, metaphilosophy isn’t merely First Philosophy; it’s all the philosophy there could be” (Aikin and Talisse 2018, 145). It is easy to come away from Rorty’s work with this impression. Seemingly oracular pronouncements about what, for example, *the* pragmatist thinks or *the* pragmatist will argue are a favorite rhetorical move. But what the essays in *On Philosophy and Philosophers* help to draw out is more of the background for Rorty’s programmatic work—namely, very careful readings of first-order philosophical disputes that inform Rorty’s broader metaphilosophical orientation. We leave the collection less with a picture of a thinker with antecedent metaphilosophical views imposed top-down on first-order philosophical debates and more of a rich, complex process of metaphilosophical reflective equilibrium. Rorty repeatedly probes unexamined assumptions in first-order philosophical disputes and then shows how light can be shed on these debates by making these assumptions explicit, determining whether they stand up to scrutiny, and recasting the debate, if needed, in novel terms in order to make progress.

Here are several examples. In “Phenomenology, Linguistic Analysis, and Cartesianism: Comments on Ricoeur”, Rorty analyzes various claims from Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty and raises the questions of how exactly we should understand the status of phenomenological claims: “I wish rather to ask: if we really are remaking our lived experience” in phenomenological inquiry, “then in what sense can” this inquiry “be thought of as discovery, rather than invention? How do we know whether a remade lived experience was ever lived at all?” (113). Such questioning is prompted by a genuine ambiguity: how exactly should we understand the phenomenologist’s claims? Rorty’s metaphilosophical questions and observations here, and throughout the collection, grow out of careful attention to such first-order philosophical claims and their often-unexamined status. Consider another example: Rorty questions Fodor’s use of “inherited” to explain how “the intentional properties of mental states are inherited from the semantic properties of … mental representations” (Fodor 1990, 313). Rorty points out that it is unclear just what “inherited” means here. This ambiguity, in turn, casts doubt on whether there is in fact a genuine question about the source of intentionality—a question beyond the latter being strategically useful for creatures like us to attribute to certain systems. Fodor, Rorty concedes, is unlikely to be satisfied with this response because it will not explain what makes it the case that such properties exist and are therefore rightly or wrongly ascribed. But “the burden is on Fodor and other Realists to explain what kind of additional reason you have given for using theory when you say ‘and furthermore I assume that it corresponds to reality’” (170). In other words, the burden is on the philosopher to explain precisely what the status and motivation are for their philosophical claims, and Rorty is using this lack of clarity to then draw out broader lessons about realist views and about philosophical methodology.

In his essay on McDowell, Rorty carefully identifies “the circle of interdefinable terms whose utility McDowell takes for granted”, for example, “friction against something external to thinking” or “rational answerability to the world” or “rational control”, among others (218). But, again, for Rorty, the worryingly vague nature of this terminology is not a coincidence. It is a product of a certain underlying assumption—that we must preserve a robust notion of answerability to a world untainted by human beings. Rorty does not think such assumptions should remain in the background: they must be brought to the fore, analyzed and either successfully defended or, if not, dispensed with. His subsequent metaphilosophical positions—for example, that certain philosophers may have uncritically taken over a theologically inflected need to be answerable to a non-human reality—follow from these careful readings. In “Kant as a Critical Philosopher”, Rorty raises the question of the status of Kant’s own claims in the first *Critique*. After analyzing different possibilities, he argues that Kant’s claims regarding ‘concept’ and ‘intuition’, are best read as “covert analytic statements” rather than reports of empirical or metaphysical discoveries. They are designed to get us to talk and think in novel ways to dissolve otherwise intractable problems (58).

Rorty may of course be wrong about either the particular philosophers he examines or about the conclusions and lessons he draws. But we consistently observe in this collection a rigorous, voracious reader developing and refining his metaphilosophical views via analysis of first-order debates and their hidden assumptions. Rorty still has much to teach us about both these debates and about metaphilosophy itself.

**References**

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