# The tropes of Rorty: the ironist.

# (a re- description)

Abstract

After a discussion of the fundamental *tropes* of Rorty’s philosophy, in and beyond *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and after describing an imaginary conversation between Rorty, Heidegger, Derrida, and Dewey, the paper- a sort of monography in a nutshell- aims to shed new light on the strategic figure of the ironist as developed by Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.*

Who really is the Rortyan ironist? A comparison between the ironist and the Platonic character of Callicles clearly shows that Rorty’s irony does not correspond to Socratic or Platonic irony. From a close reading of relevant texts three ideas emerge: first, one can take an ironic stance despite its ability to support divergent metaphysical premises –Callicles is ironic in tone but foundationalist in metaphysics- while Rorty’s pragmatist appears ironic in tone and anti-foundationalist in metaphysics. Second, Callicles is a sort of *public* ironist; he feels *pathos* for the *demos* and the Athenian popular assembly, while the Rorty’s ironist appears as a *private* ironist looking for a hypothetical and detached conversation. And third, from the theatrical and literary point of view, Rorty’s ironist lacks the Greek character, the Greek mask, and Greek comicality.

Keywords: Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature; Rorty, Heidegger, Derrida, and Dewey; the Rortyan ironist; the comparison of Callicles and Rorty.

The agélastes [Rabelais’s word for those who do not laugh], the non- thought of received ideas, and kitsch are one and the same, the three-headed enemy of the art born as the echo of God’s laughter, the art that created the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood. That imaginative realm of tolerance was born with modern Europe, it is the very image of Europe-or at least our dream of Europe-a dream many times betrayed but nonetheless strong enough to unite us all in the fraternity that stretches far beyond the little European continent. But we know that the world where the individual is respected (the imaginative world of the novel, and the real one of Europe) is fragile and perishable…if European culture seems under threat today, if the threat from within and without hangs over what is most precious about it-its respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his right to an inviolable private life-then, I believe, that precious essence of the European spirit is being held safe as in a treasure chest inside the history of the novel, the wisdom of the novel. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*. (In *exergue* to Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity’)*

***Proemium***

”Rorty had a knack for making everything that is difficult in philosophy seems easier, more agreeable, less of a big deal.”1 This is the judgment pronounced by journalist James Ryerson after Richard Rorty’s death. To be sure, when Rorty wrote, in his clear and fluent style, ‘about abstruse thinkers likes Heidegger and Derrida, they emerged from the murk of their prose as men of interesting and comprehensible opinion. When he surveyed the philosophical landscape, he saw broad swaths of common ground where others saw thickets of difference. And, when he came to the worrisome matter of making do without the idea of *The Way Things Really Are,* his composure was flawless. Putting an untroubled face on some otherwise extreme-seeming views about truth was perhaps his defining intellectual coup.’2 Essentially, we can say that his way of writing perfectly corresponds to his thought. Rorty was ‘the philosopher of thinking cheerfully’ tells us James Ryerson; Rorty assimilated philosophy to literature; Rorty was the anti-philosopher’s philosopher or in more efficacious and chiastic way, the philosopher’s anti-philosopher.’

\*

# At the forefront of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity3, Rorty advances a personal, critical and attractive re-description of the history of philosophy, a bright feedback of the Western philosophical tradition, putting forward M. Proust, F. Nietzsche, M. Heidegger, and J. Derrida with the aim of re-writing its course according to a liberal pragmatist fashion. Starting with Nietzsche, he reminds us the famous quotation, “We simply lack any organ for knowledge, for the “truth”: we “know” (or believe or imagine) just as much as may be useful in the interests of the human heard, the species”4 and also, “It seemed that one was unable to live with [truth]: our organism was prepared for the opposite; all its higher functions, sense perception and every kind of sensation worked with those basic errors which had been incorporated since time immemorial.”5 In light of contemporary sensibility, Rorty believes, philosophy seems to acquire value only as a literary-discursive genre supplied by means of pragmatic and therapeutic function. In opposition to the traditional inquiry of truth, he writes that we need to make a distinction between the sentences ‘the world is out there’ and ‘the truth is out there’; to say that the world is out there- that it is not our creation- means, in common language, that most things in space and time are effects of causes, and do not include human mental states. Philosophy cannot tell us the way things really are, and for its survival it must only confuse into the great stream of literature, becoming nothing but ethical, friendly and conversational exchange among ironic intellectuals. By means of his neo-pragmatism, in closing Rorty admits the impossibility of any quest for the foundation of practices in justifying truth, rationality, goodness, and/or knowledge, when they take the specific form of an appeal to “Reason”.

\*

Before expanding the concept of Rortyan irony, which particularly interests us, in this essay I think it useful to pause for a while on the first, significant work by Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, published in 1979, a philosophical classic of canonical status in which Rorty argues that the end of re-presentationalism means the end of epistemologically-centered philosophy. For Rorty systematic and foundational philosophy had already ended with Hegel. After him, all attempts to construct epistemic bases, packages or bodies of essences for philosophy, failed as Plato failed by returning to mathematics in his late dialogues. In the last century, B. Russell tried to refer to logical forms, as E. Husserl did with the essences, believing he could identify pure, rigorous, privileged representations, “But, in the end, heretical followers of Husserl (Sartre, Heidegger) and heretical followers of Russell (Sellars, Quine), raised the same sorts of questions about the possibility of apodictic truth which Hegel had raised about Kant. “6 Decades after the attempts of Russell and Husserl, we are again facing the same doubts and difficulties. We understand that the correspondence of mind and reality, *adaequatio rei and intellectus*, is not a matter of special relation between or representation of ideas (or words) and objects, but a matter of friendly conversation of social practice. Rorty does not accept a principle as the transcendental one of Apel- the ideal community of communication- nor the statement that it is possible to overcome skepticism by a sort of transcendental, pragmatic, human, mental structure for speaking and thinking. Rorty does not despise the epistemological efforts made time and again. He firmly believes that we will never succeed in isolating basic elements from prior knowledge of the whole fabric within which these elements occur. We will never succeed in substituting the notion of ‘accurate representation’(element-by-element) for that of the successful accomplishment of a practice, “the holist line of argument says that we shall never be able to avoid the hermeneutical circle- the fact that we cannot understand the parts of a strange culture, practice, theory, language, or whatever, unless we know something about how the whole works until we have some understanding of its parts.”7 Rortyan *hermeneutics* resembles making the acquaintance of a person, not giving a demonstration. This understanding means acquiring new abilities and skills learned by imitation, analogy, and association; it does not entail the *episteme*; it regards the *phronēsis*, the wisdom. This kind of understanding weakens the classic *caesura* between *doxa* and *episteme* as well as the line that divides epistemology and hermeneutics, Naturwissenschaft and Geisteswissenschaft, deeds and values, objective or subjective knowledge. It is the same hermeneutical practice that failed in Kuhn ’reconstruction of episodes in the history of science in part similar to that of historians’ ‘practice - reconstruction ex *post facto* - which, being provisional, and strongly inscribed into the temporal dimension and being not rigorously well-grounded, cannot boast the pretension of universality. According to Rorty, Kuhn unwillingly entangled himself in a kind of ambiguous and misleading oscillation between realism and idealism.

The place in which the contemporary philosopher is torn today, Rorty warns, is that of the eventual passage from epistemology to hermeneutics; “The demise of foundational epistemology, however, is often felt to leave a vacuum which needs to be filled […] I want to make clear at the outset that I am *not* putting hermeneutics forward as “successor subject” to epistemology, as an activity which fills the cultural vacancy once filled by epistemologically centered philosophy.”8 The vacuum must remain empty, not filled. That is what we learn from philosophers such as Dewey, Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars and Davidson who can be defined as relativists because they renounced the rule of commensurability, ill-disposed to accept a common *rational*, even *metaphysical,* ground on which humans can agree. In addition, let me remind us of the Rortyan polemical use of the term *hermeneutics* to designate every attempt to set aside epistemologically centered philosophy. In subsequent Rortyan writings, the concept of hermeneutics no longer plays a significant role.

Rorty refers to a kind of neo-pragmatism in cultural conversation that supports above all the de-legitimating and abolishing of all sorts of encyclopedias or distinction between genera as in the past ( Plato; Aristotle; trivium and quadrivium in the Middle Ages; Enlightenment, Hegelism in art, religion and philosophy; Positivism). The role of the hermeneutical intellectual turned ironic is “that of the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses. In his salon, so to speak, the hermeneutic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation”. 9

Plato cultivated a distinction between algorithm and the lack of algorithm, between reason and passion. In the *Republic,* he used the Parable of Line to distinguish the total area as *noetos topos,* the area of the intelligible, and *noeton genos*, the genus of intelligible. He dramatized the antithesis between the visible and intelligible world. In his view, the human mind has to enter a new syntactical condition, the mathematical equation instead of the syntax of story. After his stay in Syracuse, where he spent considerable time with Pythagorean philosophers, including Archytas of Tarentum, “a perfectly brilliant mathematician . . . [and] a leading statesman of his city”, Plato was so impressed by political wit and mathematical genius of Archytas that he resolved to incorporate the mathematical principles of Pythagorean metaphysics within his system of the four degrees of human knowledge.”10 He situated the *mathema* on the side of *dianoia*, marking discontinuity with the immediacy of *doxa*. He situated the *mathema* as the preamble to philosophy and even to political and philosophical investigations. It was a sort of turning point within Plato’s philosophical development. But, according to Rorty, the dividing line is nevertheless faint. Algorithms change and exchange from the sphere of knowledge to the sphere of human activities and viceversa. Thus, if *conversation* cannot be about truth, if it is going to be genuine or to be ‘going’ at all, any line of demarcation between the conversation that ‘goes’, and the one that does not, between genuine conversation and simply chatting or ‘going through the motions’ remains wavy, tortuous and useless.

In *Consequences of Pragmatism,* 11 a book in defense of pragmatism, Rorty sums up the same *leitmotif*, that pragmatism is the doctrine without constraints on inquiry save conversational ones, without wholesale constraints derived from the nature of objects, mind, or language. The fortune of philosophy- of ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary epistemologically centered philosophy- constitutes, thus, only a path, an episode of the much wider history of Western culture and civilization.

Toward the end of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty suggests a new kind of formation neither *paideia* nor *bildung*, more properly a new *conversation* for our time. It remains that with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty performed an extremely valuable service to the English-speaking philosophical community. According to Gary Brent Madison, ‘What is liberating and exhilarating about the book is the way in which it was able to open so many people’ eyes to the utter bankruptcy of traditional, foundationalist philosophizing. ’12

*Rorty/Heidegger/Derrida/* *Dewey. An imaginary-ironic conversation.*

In *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Rorty observes that the doctrine of the ontological priority of the social- that *quasi-fundamentally* concerns him- is strangely ascribable to the *quasi-pragmatist* philosophical efforts of M. Heidegger. In his view, at issue is that “all matters of social authority or privilege, in particular *epistemic* authority, are matters of social practice, and not objective matters of fact’’13 Either from the epistemological point of view or from the social perspective, Rorty’s statement is an invitation to adopt a sound and pragmatist vision in order to understand the three controversial domains: the linguistic, the mental, and the social. In *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, through an imaginary, intense, closed dialogue with Heidegger, Rorty writes: “Heidegger claims that to understand what is going on here at the bottom of the escalator, in the twentieth century, the age in which philosophy has exhausted its possibilities[…] ‘we must free ourselves from the technical interpretation of thinking’’’. 14 Shortly after, in his historical sketch he closes thus: ” Each stage in the history of metaphysics- and in particular the Cartesian turn toward subjectivity, from exterior to interior objects of inquiry-has been an attempt to re-describe things so that this certainty might become possible. But, after many fits and starts, it has turned out that the only thing we can be certain about is what we want, the only things that are really evident to us are our own desires”.15  Even the quasi-metaphysical Kantian conception announces the afore-mentioned sentence of Nietzsche ‘the categories of reason are just means toward the adjustment of the world for utilitarian ends’16. In the end, pragmatism has (re) turned to be all that the West can hope for, all that we have the right to expect. Pragmatism is “the only way to answer the skeptic. So, if the only choice is between Platonism and pragmatism, Heidegger would wryly and ironically opt for pragmatism”.17

Let us return briefly to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* for further reflections. Rorty seems to suggest a sort of problem solving and learning by trials and error à la Popper, but on the condition that the different vocabularies are discussed in a *conversational* context, “the gradual trial-and-error creation of a new, third, vocabulary- the sort of vocabulary developed by people like Galileo, Hegel, or the later Yeats- is not a discovery about how old vocabularies fit together” (Cis, 12). One step later, he adds ‘Such creations are not the result of successfully fitting together pieces of a puzzle. They are not discoveries of a reality behind the appearances, of an undistorted view of the whole picture with which to replace myopic views of its parts. The proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools” (*CIS*, 12). In other words, the Rortyan pragmatist thinks he must use tradition as we use the utensils for the tool-bag; he must treat science as equal to technique, as an instrument.

Although Heidegger takes seriously Nietzsche’s exhortation to overcome nihilism and searches an exit from the labyrinth of Platonic metaphysics, he remains, nevertheless, incapable of think technology in a non metaphysical way (see: *What is Called Thinking?*). In the essay *Anaximander's Saying* (Spruce des Anaximander), Heidegger writes: “We are bound to the language of the saying [of Anaximander] and we are bound to our own native language […]. This bond is stronger and further- reaching, although less conspicuous, than the standard provided by all the philological and historical facts - which only derive their factuality from it. As long as we fail to experience this bond, every translation of the saying must come to light as something completely arbitrary”.18 In defining *Dasein*, Heidegger emphasizes that it speaks an idiom of another subject, an idiom that neither lets him escape from the box, nor allows him to be inspired by *Being.* So, on the one hand, Heidegger remarks on the inability of Dasein to create himself; on the other he wants ‘to preserve the strength of the most elementary words Being *pronounced* at the very beginning’. But, Heidegger’s appeal to elementary words remains a myth; an outdated myth, the myth of the transcendental signified. Just the opposite of what the ironist thinks. J. Derrida, a kind of ironist, for instance, claims that cannot there be a unique name for Sein (‘das dem Sein zugesprochen wird’), nor can there be a definitive litany. The Derridean deconstruction is always looking for the difference(s) between signifiers, without a purely syntactic level and without the need of the transcendental signified that comes to be with language as foundation. For the loss of the metaphysics of presence, which Heidegger never fully overcame, Derrida does not feel any nostalgia. He is not interested in discovering “the originary words in the languages of the world by learning to waylay the other side of nostalgia, which I will call Heideggerian hope[…] I shall relate it to what seems to me to be retained of metaphysics in (Heidegger’s work)”.19 Derrida thinks that Heidegger’s ontological difference, behind the apparent radical departure from Western onto-theology, retains and perpetuates, in its specific ‘openness’, a conception of Being, that does not hide its inclination toward totalization. In Derrida’s view, any attempt to think about Being involves making distinctions, ultimately arbitrary, and self-contradictory. In short, Heidegger’s definition of human in terms of *Dasein* treats the human being without sufficient regard for difference, and as such is erroneous. At the end of his criticism, the ironic Derrida explains that, in writing his thesis, he never looked for the reduction of language, or to always say the same things. He searched for the proliferation, for the liberty of the mixed, for the matrix, for the grid of multiplies: never telling the same story twice, avoiding the simple and the universal.

Dewey, the principal and coherent pragmatist and the hero of Rorty, has spoken of the dependence of theory on praxis. Like Heidegger, he rejected scientism, but unlike him, he followed the procedure of trials and errors to advance human liberty and social welfare. Heidegger speaks of the *essence* of technique -see his famous ‘technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology’-; heargues that the essence of technique is not technological and judges technique as an extreme out-come of metaphysics. Dewey, alternatively, says that our epoch could be the epoch in which the democratic community becomes mistress, not servant, of technical rationality. While Heidegger does not acknowledge sufficiently the benefits of technology, thanks to both the commodities that technical rationality provides us and the liberty the man of our epoch enjoys, Dewey holds that technique could help humankind to create a better future. Used properly, technique might serve to repair the damaged relationship between human beings and the world. Along with Dewey, Rorty adopts the traditional liberal view of technology as a neutral set of tools that can be used for either good or for ill, and hopes that life will be freer, less cruel, and richer in goods and experiences.

Heidegger calls man Dasein, and tells us, “Dasein as such is guilty […] Dasein is guilty is to say that it speaks somebody else’s language, and so lives in a world it never made-a world which, just for this reason, is not its *Heim”* (CIS, 109). For no discernible reason, the fundamental and radical feature of Dasein is to belong to a world into which it is ‘thrown’. Claiming the influential authority of tradition and performing the deconstruction of metaphysics, Heidegger tries to open up an absolute mediation between history and truth, and seeks to overtake empiricist and the technological issues. However, with an essentialist approach, even if he distinguishes the modern from the ancient technology, he is unable to explain ancient, modern and contemporary technology, or the difference between handwork technology and scientific technology. His idea of the essence of technique hardly regards the contemporary technological world. Heidegger’s example of the technology of the hydroelectric plant built on the Rhine river is well-known: ‘The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River, as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank forth hundreds of years. Rather the river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station.’20 Here, the river has been reduced to slavery. Heidegger wants to *comprehend* a change~~,~~ governed and destined by means of an origin/reality given full power and as such, he wants to interpret it as an emanated whole. Heidegger remains at the level of the a-temporal essence, within an ontological conception regardless of what happens or will happen next. Finally, in addressing the issue of technique, which is wrapped up in the concern of language, he does not succeed in maintaining the connection/disconnection or the continuity/difference of *techne* and *logos*.

Yet, as a philosopher, Heidegger viewed the rise of the ironic intellectual as symptomatic of the degeneracy of world-picture “He thought the ironist culture of our century, the high culture in which Proust and Freud are central figures, merely the unthinking self-satisfaction of a post-metaphysical nihilism. Heidegger wanted to find a way of being neither metaphysical nor aesthetic; he wanted to see metaphysics as the true and fateful destiny of Europe, rather than simply brushing it off (as Proust and Freud did). (CIS, 112). In the end, *Dasein* is the name of the ironist, and so, to speak of ironic human condition is nothing but to speak of the penultimate stage of the history of Europe.

*The Rortyan ironist.*

In the Introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty defines the ironist thus: ”I use ‘ironist’ to name the sort of person who faces up the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires-someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance’ (Cis, Int. Xv). The liberal ironists “include among these ungroundable desires his own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease’ (Ibid).

In Rorty’s view of the philosopher of our time, we first see that the *conversationist* embodies the well- known Nietzschean attitude, “We simply lack any organ for knowledge, for the “truth”: we “know” (or believe or imagine) just as much as may be useful in the interests of the human heard, the species”. Second, we find that Rorty is certain that the current dictionary is argumentatively weak, and that it has questionable value. Third, he questions the ‘hypothesis of mirror’ between reality and thought both for himself and for the others. Endowed with a sort of light-mindedness, this intellectual is a man who does not take himself seriously- he knows he does not know- and is certain that the words by which he describes himself and describes the world are destined to change, are spoken in temporary contexts, and drop along a Heraclitean flux, *παντα ρει.* The ironist’s pleasure is to feel free, to discover vanity in the world and even to spur it on to a greater and greater vanity merely in order to heighten his or her sense of negative freedom. He does not take himself or the others seriously; he democratically accepts their conversation in the spirit of tolerance.

In the paper *Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,* as a joke Rorty ironically presents the ironist thus, “I shall define an intellectual as someone who yearns for Bloomian autonomy, and is lucky enough to have the money and leisure to do something about it: to visit different churches or gurus, go to different theatres or museums, and, above all, to read a lot of different books.”21

But, is the Rortyan ironist really the personification of irony? And, what kind of irony? Irony means dissimulation, fiction (*ειρωνια* derives from Greek *ειρων*), and, by definition, the dissembler (the ironist) is the man who questions simulating ignorance. Within ancient Greek scholarship, Gregory Vlastos’ work for example, the Platonic irony has been understood in a favorable sense. Vlastos once said that there is ‘nothing’ about Socrates that has been ‘less well understood’ than his irony. The irony of Thrasymachus in the Republic 337a or of Callicles in the Gorgias 489e, nevertheless has a negative connotation. In addition, the close reading of relevant passages from Aristotle’s ethical framework shows that irony signifies a kind of willful disdain of convention, no more favorably understood than the other extreme of *άλαζоνεία*.

In our discussion, we come now to a critical point. Rorty’s irony is not Socratic or Platonic irony. Socrates is surely an ironist, and irony remains something that may complement matters of substance, but is never itself constitutive of that substance. Socrates’ ignorance is both genuine ignorance and a fundamental philosophic stance. According many scholars Socratic irony aims at a universal project; it represents the moment of critical and confutative premise for the philosophical discourse. Socratic irony consists in not saying anything, in declaring that we do not have any knowledge at all, and seems thus to lead to uncertain results. In seeking to pursue a pre-determined aim, however, Socrates remains a fundamentalist in metaphysics. He presents himself with a discursive traits, an anxiety, a foundational enlightenment, and a serious and dramatic spirit that, the anti-metaphysic Rortian ironist certainly lacks. By renouncing knowledge, and by being continually in balance between nominalism, contingentism, and transiency, the Rortian ironist neither worries about any criterion for knowing, nor looks for disciplinary criteria. He thinks that institutions for human knowledge, the cultural institutions and the directors of libraries must erase the thematic labels of the bookcases, including those of philosophy, melting them all into a great literary set.

*From irony to literature and philosophy.*

The hermeneutics of Rorty, if I may still use this phrase, cannot be confused with other hermeneutics, for example the strong hermeneutics of Heidegger or Gadamer. Though similar to the deconstructionism of Derrida, is even more destabilizing. It includes epistemology, all that epistemologists have written without knowing it to be hermeneutics. The hermeneutics of Rorty is a kind of writing, a literary genre in which the attitude of the skeptical man prevails, i.e. the attitude of the intellectual who has finally closed up with the epistemological researches of the past.

In his essay *Private irony and liberal hope* Rorty considers the possibility of the end of philosophy through the figure of the ironist. The ironist, as a nominalist and historicist *sui generis*, believes that there “is no reason to think that Socrates inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationality will take one much beyond the language games of one’s time. The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game (Cis, 74-75) “. The ironist thinks that nothing has an intrinsic nature or essence; he cannot accept the Socratic inquiry *(ti-estin), what is this?* Comparing the ironist with the metaphysician, Rorty concludes thus: “The ironist’s preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is re-description rather than inference. Ironists specialize in re-describing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon. An ironist hopes that by the time she has finished using old words in new senses, not to mention introducing brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions phrased in the old words (Cis, 78). ”

It may seem strange, but Hegel perceived this issue in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here is what Rorty tells us “I think of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* both as the beginning of the end of the Plato-Kant tradition and as a paradigm of the ironist ability to exploit the possibilities of massive re-description. In this view, Hegel so-called dialectical method is not an argumentative procedure or a way of unifying subject and object, but simply a literary skill, skill at producing surprising gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology to another (ibid.). ” Hegel criticized his predecessors for their obsolete language. It is not unreasonable to say that his dialectic resembles literary criticism, ‘Hegel began a tradition of ironic philosophy (the so-called hermeneutics of suspicion, which continued through Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida)’ (CIS, 79). This is the lesson Nietzsche bequeathed us when he did not take a position in favor of the Apollonian spirit, but rather in favor of the Dionysian, creative, libertarian spirit.

The ironist moves through the pages of many large and various encyclopedias, and answers a re-description with other re-redescriptions. However, some critics hold that his kind of encyclopedia(s) is (are) too far from people who have not read books. Hence, the question concerns politics. Even if philosophy is politics and politics is philosophy, and even if political philosophy is central to philosophy (see Habermas), Rorty suggests we must avoid thinking of philosophy as a ‘discipline’ with ‘core problems’ or with a social function. In his view, what unites societies together most of all are common vocabularies and common hopes. He adds that common social hopes do not derive from an abstract conception of man; they derive rather from real inter-subjective decisions. Apparently irony seems incompatible with universalistic ethics and *prima facie* seems inherently a private matter. Yet, we know that Rorty was always interested in the status of philosophy within society; he always denied any eventuality of total disenchantment and disengagement. Like his hero John Dewey before him, Rorty sought to displace philosophy from the heavens and brought it down to earth, in order to make philosophy more germane to the problems of the world. Rather than asking how our political institutions, scientific methods and ethical notions might be justified philosophically, he asked what philosophy might do for politics, science and ethics. This is the focus, the core of the Rortyan doctrine of ontological priority of the social that ‘quasi-fundamentally’ concerns him. Hence, his recall for solidarity, the recognition of the other as equal and as entitled to our sympathy (see Hume), as the natural companion of irony, and calls for a return to the true basis of social and political life (man is not alone).

In the last years of his life, Rorty spent much more of his time with the wild orchids and nurturing his love of the outdoors. With this he made an eloquent political gesture, both private and public.

*The comparison of Rorty and Callicles*

The concept of irony is difficult to pin down. One thinks of the multiple forms of human poses*.* In the philosophical scene, we have seen different kinds of irony: Socratic irony, Kierkegaardian irony, Schlegel’s concept of irony, Heideggerian sarcasm, as well as literary and rhetorical simulation, parody, masquerade, masks and actors. Let us come back again to Plato, to the figure of Callicles in the Gorgias 489e, where we find a negative form of irony. Here, at issue is the act of evading one’s share in discussion by pretending there is no answer to the questions asked. ‘Evasion’ is probably what *eirôneia* refers to, and is understood as a deliberate tactic to get the better of one’s opponents. The more favorable sense of ’Socratic irony’ is a modern invention, partly based on the positive use of the term by Cicero and Quintilian. For a contemporary interpretive reading, the most difficult element in Socratic irony emerges when Socrates tells us that he intends to argue *against*. Such a diffuse irony, remains in the Platonic dialogues, allow me to add, thanks to the mimetic play of the great philosopher and writer.

Let us get nearer to the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias* as a whole. C. H. Kahn focuses his critical study *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* on the *Gorgias;* in his view, this dialogue is the very key for understanding the whole platonic production. According to Kahn it is significant that Plato’s contemporaries clearly perceived that Plato, in writing the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*, had produced literary masterpieces. At the time, the assertion of philosophy’s superiority over sophistry and rhetoric was of no small political importance. With the rise of democracy in the 5th century B. C., Athenian citizens were looking for a new education to prepare for participating in the public assemblies. In response, a number of self-styled teachers of rhetoric, called ‘Sophists’, appeared on scene offering training for political success.

However, what particularly interests us is the Platonic *ειρωνια*. In the dialogue, at a certain point, Socrates is near to anger when Callicles seems to ascribe to rhetoric an ambiguous, even if fascinating technique, the primacy due to philosophy. Callicles, as Nietzsche wrote, appears to be a real man, in flesh and bones, a man who wants to keep his feet on the ground. Here, the reader is confronted with a paradoxical scene and finds it difficult to understand which of two, Callicles or Socrates, is the wise man; which of two is the ironist. To the joke of the Thracian servant provoked by Thales falling into the well, we-must now add the irony of Callicles who dictates, with his barbs, another definition of philosophy. When we think it over, we find that Callicles appears substantially ironic in tone, but foundationalist in metaphysics. Rorty, instead, appears ironic in tone and anti-foundationalist in metaphysics. Yet, in a subtle interpretation, some scholars maintain that Callicles wants to think of himself as an amoral hedonist not because he genuinely admires and emulates ruthless, self-serving, powerful types, but because he admits that one is concerned with virtue. One thing is certain, the Rortyan ironist engages himself in dialogue with the aim of making a redescription. Callicles uses arguments for his dialectic, the Rortyan ironist for his re-descriptions.

*Like a re- description*

Rorty’s critical re-description of the history of philosophy, as mentioned at the beginning, is personal, constructed on the assumption that theories, systems and critiques necessarily need be "foundationalist". Yet, in the long run, some philosophers did not raise the same assumption. In our new, postmodern, globalist, multipolar and polycentric era, foundationalism and not foundationalism, universality and particularity are no longer metaphysical opposites. In our era the paradox of mutual implication of singularity and universality cannot be mastered by a transcendental or quasi- transcendental reconstruction. If that is the current condition, as Brent Madison writes, then Rorty ‘is not so much a *post*foundationalist as he is a mere *anti*foundationalist who has simply (as Searle said of Derrida) ‘turned the world upside down’. In, as is his wont, merely ‘changing the subject’, he has failed to work out any viable *theoretical alternative* to the bankrupt conceptuality of philosophical modernity. 22 Like Nietzsche, Rorty ‘has not succeeded in ‘overcoming metaphysics’ although he has at least managed, willy-nilly, to find a way of coping with the nihilism which, as Nietzsche pointed out, tends inevitably to follow upon the overthrowing of metaphysics.’23

Let me add two final remarks on the Rortyan reading of Plato. First, Rorty seems to have not made up his mind about Platonic irony. Plato is not properly the founding figure of philosophy that many think he is. This is particularly significant when we speak of *philosophy after philosophy* and of philosophy before philosophy. Philosophy, as a discipline, is born with Aristotle; Plato, as philosopher, must be set alongside Heraclitus. It is towards the pre-platonic standpoint that philosophy, now in its post-philosophical dotage, might revert. In passing, let me quote the enlightening judgement of Kahn in reference to Heraclitus: “His real subject is not the physical world but the human condition, the condition of mortality. However, by its participation in the eternal life cycle of nature also by its capacity to master this pattern in cognition, the structure of the psyche is unlimited […]. It is the life of mankind that is the subject of his discourse, not the theory of knowledge and perception.”24 Secondly, I ask, what is ‘thinking’ for Plato? This question is distinct from, and more important than, the subordinate question what is knowledge. In philosophy irony was used as a way to free oneself from all content, to move between the contingent and the universal. But, Rorty neither succeeded in, nor did he wish to, appreciate Plato, as a writer. Yet, a more careful look at Platonic irony would have allowed him to define better the somewhat abstract and controversial figure of the ironist. This reading of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, indeed reveals a sort of coldness towards the irony and the Attic comicality circulating in Platonic dialogues.

*Conclusion*

Plato established epistemological skepticism as the recurrent setback for philosophical reflection. In such a way, it is allowed to interpret the course of philosophy, from Plato to Nietzsche and beyond, as the continuous answering and criticizing epistemology. This course depends above all on the primordial inner character of philosophy. The various philosophical systems are brought out mostly through a clash with skeptical attitudes. Rorty declares that pragmatism is the only way to answer the skeptic. Recently, Michael Williams made an objection arguing that Rorty cannot have it both ways by being a skeptic *and* a pragmatist. After, Williams added that the so-called Rorty’s anti-foundationalism has a lot in common with Hume’s skepticism. However, though we do not forget that skepticism corresponds to what Rorty calls ‘irony’-and a dual stance about knowledge is impossible- the point of criticism is that the neo-pragmatism of Rorty, adverse to the system and the systems, is not properly skeptical.

All in all, Rorty betrays a family resemblance with the well-known Western philosophical tradition of Agrippa and Carneades, Aenesidemus and Academicians, Montaigne, Hume, and so forth. He wants, above all, to bracket/close all arguments about truth and epistemological certainty in order to question the classical way of knowing and, at the same time, to question these same doubts.

**Critical Note**

\* With reactions ranging from the thoughtful critique to the thoughtless rebuff, Richard Rorty has generated abundant criticism in the philosophical literature, so that the books, the papers, the reviews on his work are numerous and have provoked many discussions. Here I shall mention only the books: Alan Malachowski’s *Richard Rorty*, Princeton University Press, 2002, Guignon, Charles and Hiley, David (eds.), Richard Rorty**,** Cambridge University Press, 2003. Malachowski gives us a comprehensive introduction in which he deals with texts spanning the whole of Rorty’s career. The Malachowski’s conclusion is that according to Rorty philosophy is ultimately “a matter of out-describing the last philosopher.” While philosophy as practiced since Plato is a failure, the skills associated with it may only put a sort of good use to “weave the conceptual fabric of a freer, better, more just society”. In reference to the book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* discussing the Rorty’s notion of contingency, Malachowski points out that the fact that a problem is contingent does not imply that the problem ought to be abandoned. The volume by Guignon et and Al. contains two papers devoted to Rorty’s views on epistemology (Gary Gutting and Michael Williams); Joseph Rouse’s paper which examines Rorty’s views on science and its relations to society and culture; three papers (Georgia Warnke, Richard Bernstein and Jean Bethke Elshtain) deal with his political views; Charles Taylor closes the volume with an analysis of Rorty’s views in philosophy. I agree with Guignon in that there are many difficulties in criticizing Rorty and playing with him the usual game of exchanging arguments. Rorty attempts to undercut some traditional philosophical thesis – Platonism, Foundationalism, Representationalism, etc. (always capital letter!) – with the intention to show that philosophy rests upon some mythological conception or upon some false dualism by taking an extreme counter-position, perhaps tactic, and he seems to suggest that all positions on the topic are somewhat arbitrary. Gary Gutting lucidly describes the main themes of Rorty’s critique of epistemology. According to Gutting, Rorty would be more inspired if he had adopted a form of common-sense realism by accepting both the platitudinous truths of everyday life and the platitudinous truths about truth. Gutting suggests that Arthur Fine’s “natural ontological attitude” or Horwich’s minimalism are views along this line. Rorty himself has often expressed his commitment to some deflationist theory of truth, the so-called “performative” version that he nicely expressed by saying that truth is but a “compliment” that we pay to our assertions. In particular it is not clear that truth-minimalism, especially in Rorty’s form, is able to account for the fact that truth is a norm of assertion. As Michael Williams, mentioned at the end of my paper, observes Rorty does not accept any form of humdrum or commonsense realism, for the simple reason that “the opposite of irony is commonsense”. Michael Williams objects that Rorty cannot have it both ways by being skeptic *and* pragmatist, and reminds us that skepticism is what Rorty calls “irony”. Rather, there is a tension between this kind of skepticism and Rorty’s commitment to pragmatism and liberalism, as well as between it and Rorty’s acceptance of Davidson’s response to skepticism (most of our beliefs *could not* be false). In my view, Williams is right. The problem does not lie simply in Rorty’s kind of skepticism, but in his kind of pragmatism. Joseph Rouse gives a sympathetic account of Rorty’s arguments against scientific realism and his attempt to replace truth by solidarity. The ambiguity of Rorty’s stance on truth shows up here, too. Rouse quotes a passage where Rorty tells us that we should praise scientific institutions because they flesh out the idea of a “free and open encounter”, the sort of encounter in which truth cannot fail to win. Though, Rorty immediately adds as if he had made a lapse: “To say that truth will win in such an encounter is not to make a metaphysical claim about the connection between human reason and the nature of things. It is merely to say that the best way to find out what to believe is to listen to as many suggestions and arguments as you can” (*Objectivity, Relativity and* *Truth*, ). For the most part, Georgia Warnke analysis approves Rorty’s appeal to Gadamerian hermeneutics in this field. We should not consider ourselves as transcending our historical situation, and we should consider our attempt at “achieving our country” as a form of self-understanding in the conversational form. Warnke, however, finds this “implausibly self referential”. She points out that we should also reject some interpretations of our past instead of taking them on board. Richard Bernstein agrees for the most part with Rorty’s “inspirational liberalism”. The most critical and brilliantly polemical position is that one of Jean Bethke Elshtain in the essay entitled “*Don’t be cruel: Reflections on Rortyan liberalism”*. The essay is not written from the point of view of the analytic philosopher. On the contrary, Elshtain regrets that Rorty is still too much of analytic philosopher, and prisoner of the choice between irony and representation. She accuses Rorty the ironist of frivolity and of verbalism. She points out that Rorty should pay more attention to details of history. Like many critics, Charles Taylor objects that Rorty has not completely succeeded in freeing himself from the illusions of representationalism.

**End notes**

1. James Ryerson, *Thinking Cheerfully*, New York Times, July 22- 2007
2. James Ryerson, Ibid.
3. Richard Rorty, Contingency, irony, and solidarity-, Cambridge University Press, 1989. Hereafter referred parenthetically in the text as *CIS.*

4) F. Nietzsche, *The Gay science*, New York, Random House 1974, section 354

5) F. Nietzsche, *The Gay science*, New York, Random House 1974, section 110

6) R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*- Princeton University Press- Princeton- New Jersey 1979 p. 170.

7) Ibid. p. 319

8) Ibid. p. 315

9) Ibid. p. 317

10) Gregory Vlastos, Elenchus and mathematics: A turning- point in Plato’s philosophical development. In *Essays on the philosophy of Socrates*, edited by Hugh H. Benson, 137-61. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 1992 p. 148

11) R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. Cambridge University Press 1982.

12) Gary Brent Madison, *The Politics of Postmodernity: Essays in Applied Hermeneutics-Coping with Nietzsche’s Legacy: Rorty, Derrida, and Gadamer*, p. 16.

13) Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural politics*, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4, Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 7

14) R. Rorty, Essays on Heidegger and Others-Heidgger, contingency, and pragmatism-Cambridge University Press 1991 p. 28

15) R. Rorty, ibid. p. 29

16)R. Rorty, ibid. p.30

17)R. Rorty, ibid. p.32

18) Martin Heidegger, *Anaximander's Saying* in *Of the Beaten Track*, Edited and Translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 247. For "a threat of irony" that haunts the texts of this "most serious of philosophers" see: Andrew Haas, The Irony of Heidegger**,** Continuum, 2007

19) J. Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, Translated with Additional Notes by Alan Bass- The University of Chicago Press 1982, p. 29

20) Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, W. Lovitt, trans. New York Harper and Row 1977 p.16.

21) Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural politics*, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4, p. 90

22) Gary Brent Madison, *The Politics of Postmodernity: Essays in Applied Hermeneutics,* p. 18.

23) Madison, Brent Madison’s book *The Politics of Postmodernity: Essays in Applied Hermeneutics*, p. 19

24) C. H. Kahn, The art and Thought of Heraclitus. Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 100.