# Dispensing with Truthfulness: truth and liberty in Rorty's thought

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## DOI

**Abstract:** Rorty saw the course of philosophy in the twentieth century as an effort to part from two major philosophical trends, namely historicism and naturalism, only to inevitably return at the end of a tortuous path to these very same tendencies. If we can concede without major objections (although perhaps with many objections of detail) Rorty's diagnosis of the trends in contemporary continental and analytical philosophy, which seem to reveal the exhaustion of modern philosophy, based as it has been on epistemology, we must, on the other hand, examine carefully the three main questions that this diagnosis leaves open: (1) How does Rorty reconcile continental idealist subjectivism with materialistic behaviorism? (2) Is it really inevitable that philosophy (and philosophers) blinded by Geist are unable to question prevalent beliefs? (3) Finally, is the acceptance of a liberalism that is not able to give reasons for itself the most effective and pragmatic liberalism? In answering these questions, it may not be possible to avoid a non-dogmatic, but pragmatic, metaphysics: a vocabulary of vocabularies that allows Rorty (and us) to speak of the problems of justice in Plato and Rawls, of the soul in Aristotle and Descartes, of the dystopias in Moro and Orwell. On pragmatic terms, perhaps a modest version of a metaphysic's "vocabulary" turns out to be as legitimate and practical as any other vocabulary.

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**Keywords:** Metaphysics, Mind, Rorty, historicism, liberalism.

## Introduction

One of the most relevant features of contemporary societies is pervasive and intractable disagreement. It is not simply that we disagree, although we do, but that we disagree about what precisely our disagreements concern—or, to put it differently, it is not simply that we do not seem to know where to look for the answers for the most important questions, but that we are discouraged about the very possibility of pursuing these questions.

Moreover, as Bernard Williams stated in his book *Truth and Truthfulness*, even our common critical attitude towards deception finds itself suspicious of truth: "whether there is such a thing; if there is, whether it can be more than relative or subjective or something of that kind (…)" (Williams 2002: 1). The standard, critical demand thus expresses itself almost paradoxically, for as he says, "[t]he desire for truthfulness drives a process of criticism which weakens the assurance that there is any secure or unqualifiedly stateable truth" (Williams 2002: 1).

Further, scientists (in the broadest sense), despite their *practical* allegiance to the pursuit of truth, are not invulnerable to these noted features of contemporary societies. They often see "truth" as a kind of pragmatic axiom, to be used in particular situations, but one that should not, in any way, lead to a comprehensive view of man and the world.

All this should be unsurprising because our liberal societies are to an extent distinctive in that they embody the tolerance of differences and disagreements in their institutions, education, and the expected behavior of citizens in the public sphere. John Rawls, namely, in a seminal paper considered the very idea of tolerance as nothing less than the core of all political philosophy. In *Political Liberalism* (1993), he mentions a 'duty of civility' in public reasoning (Rawls 1993). The duty of civility implies expressing "equal respect" for one's co-citizens. How? by

refraining from adducing comprehensive doctrines of truth in the course of "political" justification.

But a further step, although a tempting one, is to entirely dispense with the idea of truth-seeking as a reference or ideal. We may be led to think that the culture of liberalism, as Richard Rorty says, implies a need to "(…) drop, or drastically reinterpret (…) the idea of (…) 'devotion to truth' and of 'fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit'" (Rorty 1989: 45). Liberty and social peace would have greater reassurance if we dispensed entirely with the idea of truth.

The problem we aim at addressing in this paper can be stated as follows: despite the apparent success of Rorty's strategy, which we deem widespread, politicians and public intellectuals within the liberal framework deplore the pervasive "crisis of civility", which appears to them a deeper problem than a mere lack of good manners, a problem rife with malevolent speech, or inflammatory rhetoric spewing out of certain political swamps. (Even the communitarian Michael Sandel and the liberal Jeremy Waldron now insist on the problem of civility or the harm caused by hate speech.)

And it still remains that "there is an intense commitment to truthfulness – or at any rate, a pervasive suspiciousness, a readiness against being fooled…" (Williams 2002: 1). It may very well be that the method or process by which truthfulness seeks to get beyond the veil of deception, so to say, is a method or process which apparently undermines the pursuit of the very thing which would dispel the murk and gloom of such a veil, namely, truth.

To consider this paradox, we will follow Rorty's own itinerary as the most complete, consistent, and best-argued proposal to achieve social peace and political liberty by discarding the idea of truth and truthfulness. For this, we need, first, to question his diagnostic of twentieth-century trends in philosophy and ideas; secondly, to confront this diagnostic with the proposed cure, that is, pragmatically killing, or dispensing with, truth, and navigating the wave of the future; thirdly, to weigh the arguments for and against the theoretical pursuit of truth as, in fact, the

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most pragmatic venture in the epistemological, ethical and political realm. Our goal is to uphold what most scientists in some way always knew, that is, that beyond the concrete practical tasks at hand, either through empirical research, formal reasoning, or thought experiments, there lay incurable deep metaphysical questions that are the background of their venture.

## 1. Naturalism and historicism: one diagnostic

Rorty saw the course of philosophy in the twentieth century as an effort to part from two major philosophical trends, only to inevitably return at the end of a tortuous path to these very same tendencies. These tendencies were historicism and naturalism. Historicism – that is, that everything depends on context and there are no perennial or eternal problems (Rorty 1979: 3) – and with it, nominalism, that is, the idea that we cannot speak of the nature of things and that things do not have an essence (Rorty 2000: 47-71), for there is no "truth" out there – are now bone-deep tendencies. As a starting point, we are all historicists today. And we are also prey of materialistic naturalism (Brandom 2000: xiv-xv), for unless we find comfort in religious belief or metaphysical chimeras, we find it hard to believe that there is anything in man more than (or other than) matter.

Moreover, in the twentieth century, philosophy – and Rorty with it – seemed ready to throw off the ladder or scaffolding that had allowed philosophy itself to build and rise it to its lofty viewpoint, namely "foundationalism," that is, the idea that we ultimately need to give reasons for our beliefs. Such an attitude was accompanied by a certain devaluation of "truth" as well as the search for truth or wisdom – with rare exceptions such as, say, Karl Popper and Alfred Tarski (Popper 1969: 223, 389-399 and Tarski 1956: 152-178).[2] Such an attitude however has not always taken so radical a form as Rorty's own approach. He was even described as "the man who killed Truth" (Tartaglia 2007: 232, n. 5).

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[2] Truth in formal languages is a horizon, not a property of (scientific) theories.

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Reading Rorty's diagnostic, we may be hardly surprised by the idea that continental philosophy since Hegel was driven by idealism and historicism, and with that idea the assertion that there is no truth out there; for, according to idealism, it is not even certain that there are "things" out there. We are also hardly surprised that, within most continental philosophy, historicism dominates, and with it the conviction that everything is relative to time and place. Both these trends have had, for a long time now, strong roots in continental philosophy. Even the attempts to go beyond perception hardly escape the atmosphere of the age: the most profound philosopher of twentieth-century science, Edmund Husserl, rejected "*das herrschende Dogma von der prinzipiellen Trennung von erkenntnistheoretischer Aufklärung und historischer Erklärung*" (Husserl 1939: 220)[3] Continental philosophy, following these trends, thus witnessed the victory of existentialism (what matters is the itself *for us*, not the itself *per se*) and hermeneutics (everything is but an interpretation). And its heroes are even today Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida and other opponents of extemporal metaphysics and all forms of such "white witchcraft" (Rorty 1982: xxii and Derrida: 1972: 247).

That a similar diagnostic was applied by Rorty anglophone analytic philosophy came to be, however, much more controversial. A "betrayal," or the loss of a believer's faith, is surely at its root (Bernstein 1991: 251). For logical positivism and the philosophy of language, had been a reaction against the idealism and subjectivism that raged on the continent; a reaction sustained by a forceful and prevailing behaviorist positivism.

For this reason, perhaps, Rorty, in spite of the multitude of themes and problems addressed in his most famous book, considered *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*[4] to be his own description of the trends in analytic philosophy (Rorty 1982:

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[3] "(…) the predominant dogma of the fundamental separation of epistemological elucidation and historical explanation." For an English translation see *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 370.

[4] Henceforth PMN.

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xviii). But if some thinkers seem to lose sight of the forest for the individual trees, this can scarcely be said of Rorty: his major books paint wide panoramas. He is a self-professed specialist in "[g]reat big pictures" (Rorty 1982: xl and Tartaglia 2007: 1-2). Reactions against his diagnostic came from the most illustrious representatives of analytical philosophy of the last century, and controversies ensued inevitably (Brandom 2000).[5] But the shock mainly concerned the landscape that these illustrious representatives would contemplate at the end of the road that they had allegedly begun to travel.

In Rorty's own view, philosophy, or merely the philosophers, are today divided between those who, in the wake of the Enlightenment, still advocate notions such as "truth," "reason," and "science," and those who, by contrast, think science is limited to "inventing" useful descriptions of the world, but that there is nothing like the "truth out there" (Rorty 1989: 4-5). We could think that philosophy and science are altogether different cases, but here they belong together. Despite the sharpness of his colleagues' responses (now former *compagnons de route*) it seems difficult to deny that the later Wittgenstein, Davidson, Quine or Sellars were more relativistic or more skeptical than the early Wittgenstein, Ayer or Carnap, and so on (Rorty 1982: xviii-xx). "Relativistic" and "skeptical" are, as Rorty points out, the epithets attributed to thinkers by those who disagree with the non-dogmatic anti-Platonists, anti-foundationalists, anti-metaphysicians (Rorty 2000: xvi).

Rorty's diagnosis and prognosis seems to us to be accurate enough, if not about every detail, at least as accurate as a landscape of modern philosophy, painted with large brushstrokes, may be.[6]

The insight that philosophy had previously turned into rigorous science based on firm epistemological foundations, and then came to be progressively discredited, is surely right. Granting this insight, however, why does Rorty infer that his – and

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[5] There is a balance by Rorty's hand in Rorty 1982: xxi-xxxi. See our paper: "Rorty and the return of realism".

[6] Rorty's stance on the historical Plato, the "complex, shifting, dubiously consistent" genius who wrote the dialogues is curiously more ambiguous, see Rorty, 2000: xii.

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ours –intellectual pursuit should be to navigate the wave of the future and to ride the historicist and nominalist tendencies – as opposed to counteract them, or question them? It is important to realize Rorty's motivation. Why does he strive so hard to kill "truth," to eliminate consciousness, and to replace philosophy with uplifting literature (or "edifying" philosophy whose boundaries with literature are blurred)?

Rorty is a pragmatist. His greatest books, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*[7] include his most complete statements about the relation between philosophy and political life, while *Achieving our Country*[8] includes the program for a cultural re-education of American left (a current and, for some, even prophetic book). The essential motivation is perhaps this: democracy is more important than philosophy (Rorty 1991: 175-196). "Truth", conscience, and philosophy itself (insofar as it tries to be more than a conversation) are not only useless ideas whose validities have expired. "Truth" and "Philosophy" (Rorty 1982: xiv) are notions that, when written down with capital letters, are dangerous for democracy.

Were not the wars of the twentieth century, according to Nietzsche's prophecy, held in the name of philosophies? Once philosophy is successfully replaced by literary criticism, the hero of Rorty's moral uplifting literature / philosophy, the figure of the liberal ironist, would be revealed. This figure recognizes the contingency of all values and all vocabularies in which values express themselves, while maintaining a commitment to a decent democracy. Such are the traits that define the attitude and culture of the "liberal ironist." The liberal ironist also conciliates the awareness of the contingency of his own (private) vocabulary with the commitment to reduce suffering – especially with a commitment to combat cruelty.[9] The ironist promotes these causes through re-descriptions, rather than arguments, be they fictitious social contracts or original positions — for what

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[7] Henceforth CIS.
[8] Henceforth AOC.

[9] See essay 4 of Rorty 1989 as well as Part III.

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matters is effectiveness. The intellectual's task in relation to social justice is not to provide a social theory based on arguments, but using "narratives" to make us sensitive to the suffering of others, and help us to identify with others, to think of others as equals.[10]

But such avoidance of cruelty is unrelated to personal flourishing or "morality." These are two entirely different and even conflicting realms. Their vocabularies are different. We must "treat the requirements of self-creation and human solidarity as equally valid, but as incommensurable" (Rorty 1989: 15). Vocabularies for deliberation about public and social goods and political arrangements, on the one hand, and the vocabularies of personal fulfillment, self-creation, and self-actualization, on the other, are separate and distinct practical programs.

The question of the relation of theory to practice, specifically what Rorty thinks is the task of intellectuals had surfaced in his 1989 book, PMN. There he laments that philosophy as such has become prey to the Platonic-Kantian approach – even if Platonic-Kantian approach has been in the past a humanizing quest for the eternal order or a pure source of human inspiration and aspiration – for its questions are the bad questions. Rorty despises as much morality that it is based on a law of the cosmos governed by God as its secularized Enlightenment version, based on "human rights" founded on human nature and dignity.

If we can concede without major objections (although perhaps with many objections of detail) Rorty's diagnosis of the trends in contemporary continental and analytical philosophy, which seem to reveal the exhaustion of modern philosophy, based as it has been on epistemology, we must, on the other hand, examine carefully the three main questions that this diagnosis leaves open: (1) How does Rorty reconcile continental idealist subjectivism with materialistic behaviorism? (2) Is it really inevitable that philosophy (and philosophers) blinded by *Geist* are unable to

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[10] See Rorty 1991 Part III, as well as Part III of Rorty 1989.

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question prevalent beliefs? (3) Finally, is the acceptance of a liberalism that is not able to give reasons for itself the most effective and pragmatic liberalism?

Before stating and addressing the problems raised by each of these issues, however, it is important to understand how Rorty articulates contemporary tendencies within analytic philosophy with liberal "ironism," for at first sight these belong to completely different universes or vocabularies.

Rorty believes radically discredited the idea that there is an ideal vocabulary, or a natural language, or even a vocabulary that is able to convey permanent ideas or problems throughout the ages. His introduction to CIS begins with a narrative of the successive waves of ideas in the modern era: The French revolution has shown that, if not society itself, the "whole vocabulary of social relations" (Rorty 1989: 3) has been turned inside out, like a glove. After the French revolution, intellectuals defended utopian politics, and the will of God and the nature of man were put aside. Just after, the Romantics claimed for art the role (formerly) occupied by science as a guide to action. Rorty in this book (and his most recent books) is not trying to offer arguments against the vocabulary that he wants to replace, but rather to propose an attractive alternative vocabulary (Rorty 1989: 9). He summons Davidson's treatment of "truth ties" (Rorty 1989: 10, chap 1).[11] His response is to make advance against any attempts to replace "language" by "mind" as an intermediary medium between the "self" and the "world" (Rorty 1989: 10).

In his previous major book, PMN (1979), written about ten years before CIS, he famously resorted science fiction to suggest how it would be possible (in a distant future, on another planet) to think without recourse to the idea of mind, as the "Antipodeans" before their first contact with us (Tartaglia 2007: chap 4, 71-79).

Rorty imagines a planet "inhabited by beings like ourselves—featherless bipeds who built houses and bombs, and wrote poems and computer programs," (Rorty 1979: 70) but who do not know that they have minds and therefore do not

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[11] See also Davidson 1984. But Davidson does not want to help him to kill truth: see Davidson 2000: 65-80 and Davidson 1990: 87.

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speak of mental states nor explain the differences between "persons," and "non-persons" through notions such as "mind," "awareness," or "spirit.". Even those who believe in their immortality – or that of animals and robots – speak only of the resurrection of the body.

Their knowledge of physiology was such that each well-formed sentence in the language which anybody bothered to form could easily be correlated with a readily identifiable neural state.

> Neurology and biochemistry had been the first disciplines in which technological breakthroughs had been achieved, and a large part of the conversation of these people concerned the state of their nerves. When their infants veered toward hot stoves, mothers cried out 'He'll stimulate his C-fibers' (...)
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> Their knowledge of physiology was such that each well-formed sentence in the language which anybody bothered to form could easily be correlated with a readily identifiable neural state. This state occurred whenever someone uttered, or was tempted to utter, or heard, the sentence. This state also sometimes occurred in solitude and people reported such occasions with remarks like 'I was suddenly in state S-296, so I put out the milk bottles.' (Rorty 1979: 70-71)

Until the arrival of a planetary expedition from Earth, the antipodeans had never been aware of their lack of a concept of mind. The terrestrial beings were not, however, demoted from their prejudices and insisted on asking themselves: "Do they really have minds?" – like how the Spanish conquerors wondered whether the newly encountered American Indians had a soul or original sin.

At first glance, the behaviorism that Rorty describes among the Antipodes is merely the fulfillment of Gilbert Ryle's promise to wash away such impurities of our vocabulary as the "concept of mind." Indeed, it is difficult not to recognize some truth in the description which Gilbert Ryle gives as he introduces his book on the

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subject: "There is a doctrine about the nature and place of minds which is so prevalent among theorists and even among laymen that it deserves to be described as the official theory" (Ryle 2009: 1). In short, according to the author of *The Concept of Mind*, most philosophers, psychologists and believers, although admitting difficulties and reservations as to details (which they assume "can be overcome without serious modifications being made to the architecture of the theory" (Ryle 2009: 1), adhere today to a creed or doctrine which springs mainly from Descartes. It states approximately the following:

> With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind. Some would prefer to say that every human being is both a body and a mind. His body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function. Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space. Bodily processes and states can be inspected by external observers. So, a man's bodily life is as much a public affair as are the lives of animals and reptiles and even as the careers of trees, crystals, and planets.
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> But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one mind are not witnessable by other observers; its career is private. Only I can take direct cognizance of the states and processes of my own mind (Ryle 2009: 1-2).[12]

Consequently, we tend to think as if there was a ghost in the famous "machine man" presented by La Mettrie – a relapse heir of Descartes.[13] Although today we realize that most philosophers, or at least those who are irreligious, tend to think that the mind does not exist and does not function after death. But even the "physicalists"

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[12] By shortening the text, we also removed some paragraphs.

[13] He declares about Descartes "It is true that this famous philosopher made many mistakes, as nobody denies; but he understood animal nature and was the first to demonstrate perfectly that animals were mere machines. (…) how can we, without ingratitude, not pardon all his errors!" La Mettrie 1996: 35.

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narrate two parallel histories, that of the body and that of the mind, and they seek through "consciousness," self-awareness, and introspection the source of answers about their inner self. To think otherwise would be more than problematic, almost unthinkable. Ryle's efforts to describe man through his behavior, without reference to the intentions, thoughts, and sensations that precede, accompany, and succeed man's actions, were only relatively successful. His materialistic "monism" has not been able to eliminate the dualism of "common sense." But the trend of contemporary philosophy of mind was heading in the right direction,[14] and some of the ill-solved problems in Ryle's proposal were in the process of being "dissolved" (Rorty Nov. 1982). Whatever we think about these ill-solved problems, it seems certain that Ryle correctly identifies his "culprit," the author of the "official doctrine": Descartes.

Descartes' intention was to "geometrically" prove the "spirituality" of the mind. He began by replacing the scholastic soul with a mind without a body. The mathematical Cartesianism requires the fission of reality into substances as different as the ideas that we have about them, in such a way that when the *philosopher is busy with metaphysical notions he should not know that he has a body*, and when the *scientist is busy with physics it is best that he forgets that he has a mind*. The Cartesian mind is essentially thought. It is a thinking thing (*res cogitans*). It is "a thing which doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels," (Descartes 1927: 100) but not something that feeds or moves because such notions refer to the body, which is an altogether different idea, clear but distinct.

Of course, as Étienne Gilson reports in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Gilson 1937: 164), when Voltaire crossed the English Channel in 1728, he met the flourishing of the moderate empiricism of Locke, instead of the mathematical Cartesian "dreamers" who were emmeshed in the mind-body problem, or in the

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[14] At least up to a certain dualistic reversal by Thomas Nagel. See Rorty 1989: 21, note 12.

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problem of the "communication of substances" (Voltaire 1917, vol. II: 1 and 5). Locke's empiricism was moderate because he did not ignore facts, nor he did derive a law from a single fact.

Locke, however, in the first chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1877, vol. I: 129), even though he denies innate ideas, does assert that we come across things through sensations (external or bodily) and reflection (about the inner workings of the mind). Thus, we are still facing two sources of knowledge and two realities or representations. Of course, the mind travels in the same carriage that moves the body, and Locke does not rule out the existence of a "thinking matter" as the essence of the mind, a solution that obviates the problem of the communication between two completely different "natures" of kinds of things (Locke 1877, vol. 2: 339-411). Voltaire was drawn to Locke's hypothetical materialism (Gilson 1937: 172), but Locke's idea revealed that the fissure between internal and external *fora* was to last.[15] Locke's notion of "idea" does not solve, indeed aggravates the fissure (Tartaglia 2007: 100-106). Not even Kant, after waking from his dogmatic slumber, could free himself of the notion of the mind as a Regulatory Idea — though he was unable to demonstrate its existence — since thoughts and feelings have what he called an "apodictic" character: they are self-evident to us (Kant 2004: Preface).

Is Rorty able to throw a bridge over the English Channel (Rorty 1982: xxi-xxii) and close the gap between continental and analytical trends in philosophy of mind? A mere approximation of the positions or the convergence of trends, as diagnosed, does not entail an intersection of these tendency lines, which may not in the end be compatible (a doubt that a nominalist cannot help but raising, since if all ideas are but *flatus vocis*, even a realist may think these ideas are not on the same plane).

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[15] A fissure larger than the fissure of the two brain halves of the mental experiences of analytic philosophy of mind. See our paper "Identity."

For Rorty, however, the problem of our inner (or mental) and outer (or corporeal) intuitions is only a problem of vocabulary, which is born with modern philosophy.

> We seem to have no doubt that pains, moods, images, and sentences which 'flash before the mind,' dreams, hallucinations, beliefs, attitudes, desires, and intentions all count as 'mental' whereas the contractions of the stomach which cause the pain, the neural processes which accompany it, and everything else which can be given a firm location within the body count as nonmental. Our unhesitating classification suggests that not only have we a clear intuition of what 'mentality' is, but that it has something to do with non-spatiality and with the notion that even if the body were destroyed the mental entities or states might somehow linger on. Even if we discard the notion of 'mind-stuff,' even if we drop the notion of *res cogitans* as subject of predication, we seem able to distinguish mind from body nonetheless, and to do so in a more or less Cartesian way (Rorty 1989: 17).

The first part of PMN, by examining with insight the problem of our prevailing intuition of the chasm between two worlds, discusses the current situation of epistemological dualists and points out the paradoxes which implicate them. The liberation from Cartesian dualism to which Rorty leads us, however, depends on the acceptance of philosophical *arguments* against a rooted intuition. The burden of proof falls on the neo-dualists, who must explain how it is that two "entities fall under two irreducibly distinct ontological species" (Rorty 1989: 19). Nonetheless, a survey of our concepts and "language games" shows Rorty that we do not really know what "divine," "infinity," "immateriality," "temporal but non-spatiality," "intentionality," "universality" may be and that therefore (*ergo*) we should discard them as misleading. Let us say, to synthesize, that the question "what is the mind?" was reduced to a question of vocabulary in order to prevent us from continually stumbling into that ontological dichotomy. As Rorty states near the end of his

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survey: "I would hope further to have incited the suspicion that our so-called intuition about what is mental may be merely our readiness to fall in with a specifically philosophical language-game" (Rorty 1989: 22).

Given that his writings are supposedly a defense of pragmatism which raises suspicions about all kinds of theories, Rorty's texts are curiously construed as the kind of logical and philosophical arguments that he intends to dispense with. He proceeds by the successive examination of questions like "How can we convince ourselves that the intentional must be immaterial?" (Rorty 1989: 27); "Why should the mental be thought of as immaterial?" (Rorty 1989: 28); "Why should the epistemic privilege we all have of being incorrigible about how things seem to us reflect a distinction between two realms of being?" (Rorty 1989: 29)

Owing to the strength of dualistic (delusional, not merely "apparent") intuitions of us modern men, we may be led to think that only what Ryle called its "metaphysical status" has changed: after Rorty there is no longer an ontological gap because we are materialistic and behavioristic. One speaks today of brain (formerly Locke's "thinking matter"), because the mind is a fruit or a re-description of the brain inside the body. Rorty however claims to have dissolved the problem, "[f]or, roughly speaking, all that is needed to find this problem unintelligible is for us to be nominalists, to refuse firmly to hypostatize individual properties" (Rorty 1989: 32).

Our first question was asked and answered: if and how does Rorty reconcile (and to what extent) idealistic subjectivism with materialistic behaviorism? He does not. Neither conciliation, nor approximation is attempted. It is actually a landslide victory of materialistic naturalism. Matter is all there is out there, and immateriality a delusion due to hypostatizing of mental states into substances. Hegelian and post-Hegelian historicists, subjectivists or idealists would hardly be deceived by Rorty's refusal to hypostatize mental properties for what he is in fact doing is merely denying its existence. Reducing philosophical questions to "language games" still allow him to fulfill the program of logical positivism and philosophy of language in everything except in name.

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## 2. To kill Truth and to navigate the wave of the future

But let us grant that all that philosophy and science do is but to invent useful description of the world. Is it unavoidable that philosophy (or just the philosophers) are always blinded by *Geist* and therefore unable to question the resulting "worldviews", namely the "official doctrine"? In the present and on this planet, unlike among the Antipodeans, the question of the non-corporality of the "mind" is still (but only temporarily) an issue that we cannot avoid entirely, since we are bound not only by the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, but by a deeper magic we need to reject entirely: ocular epistemology as defined by the Plato-Kant standard.

According to Rorty, the metaphysics that departs from the self and language must both be discarded. In a collection of texts from the late 1960s this was already evident. It is that, even in terms of Gustave Bergman's "linguistic turn," (Rorty 1982: xxi) analytical metaphysics has not yet abandoned some very objectionable traits: the search for a neutral or impartial point of view; the idea of an ideal or precise language instead of the current language (now all languages are contingent, *ergo*…); the idea of discovery rather than the pragmatic idea of a proposal. In short, the ideas of "representation" and "self" as light in a glassy medium is at the root of all evil. And it was necessary to cut the Gordian knot that binds the philosophers and wash away the idea of both the self and of truth.

That the question thus arises to us seems all the more paradoxical as the notion of the "self" emerged for modern thinkers as the sure and undeniable foundation upon which a new and rigorous philosophy could be based. The disputes between philosophers would cease as the result of philosophical ideas being as clear and distinct as mathematical universals.

It is true that the great variety of experiences and categories of thought (or vocabularies) paved the way for Montaigne's brand of skepticism, from which René Descartes and Edmund Husserl tried to flee. These thinkers also raised doubts, but

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doubting was a professional duty, not a moral attitude. In modern history, many thinkers considered the contradiction between philosophical positions so deep that only a radical doubt allowed to them clear the slate, and to begin to build on solid foundations rather than on the sand. Beginning with a method of universal doubt, it would, on the contrary, be a horn of abundance from which would flow not only the mind and its ideas (among which God), but also the whole world, including all pairs of animals that may be contained in Noah's Ark. Their failure seems to disappoint us.

What is Rorty's solution? We simply have to abandon philosophy altogether and replace it with poems, novels and films. In conclusion, we must assume failure, or rather the futility of effort, and define as the main task of philosophy the dissolution of philosophical problems. Philosophical problems, in fact, are not permanent, but always changing.

To support such dissolution of philosophy, Rorty proceeds to a fine analysis of the Thomist (and possibly Aristotelian) arguments about the capacity of something to exist separately from the body. The prior, at least, inferred the "immaterial character of nous from a hylomorphic conception of knowledge – a conception according to which knowledge is not the possession of accurate representations of an object but rather the subject's becoming identical with the object" (Rorty 1989: 44). This argument differs from the various contemporary Cartesian and neo-dualist arguments, such as Nagel's. But for this we must realize

> how very different these two epistemologies are. Both lend themselves to the imagery of the Mirror of Nature. But in Aristotle's conception intellect is not a mirror inspected by an inner eye. It is both mirror and eye in one. The retinal image is itself the model for the 'intellect which becomes all things, whereas in the Cartesian model, the intellect inspects entities modeled on retinal images. The substantial forms of *frogness* and *starness* get right into the Aristotelian intellect, and are there in just the same way they are in the frogs and the stars-not in the

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way in which frogs and stars are reflected in mirrors. In Descartes's conception-the one which became the basis for "modern" epistemology-it is representations which are in the 'mind.' The Inner Eye surveys these representations hoping to find some mark which will testify to their fidelity (Rorty 1989: 44-45).

The questions that philosophers raise are therefore (*ergo*) not even the same: "The notion of knowledge as inner representation is so natural to us that Aristotle's model may seem merely quaint, and Cartesian (as opposed to Pyrrhonean 'practical') skepticism seems to us so much a part of what it is to 'think philosophically' that we are amazed that Plato and Aristotle never confronted it directly" (Rorty 1989: 45).

But how can Rorty (or how can Wallace Matson, Rorty's main source for the Ancients), know any answer to "Why Is not the Mind-Body Problem Ancient?" How, further, can he know that, unlike the Antipodeans, "[t]he Greeks did not lack a concept of mind, even of a mind separable from the body"? Or that "from Homer to Aristotle, the line between mind and body, when drawn at all, was drawn so as to put the processes of sense perception on the body side" (Rorty 1989: 46)? Rorty's nominalism does not prevent him from understanding these problems even those that are almost impossible to "translate," as in the absence of the Greek equivalent notion to "sensory," which belongs to another language game.

As Rorty concedes:

There were, to be sure, the notions of taking tacit thought, forming resolutions in *foro interno*, and the like. The novelty was the notion of a single inner space in which bodily and perceptual sensations ("confused ideas of sense and imagination" in Descartes's phrase), mathematical truths, moral rules, the idea of God, moods of depression, and all the rest of what we now call "mental" were objects of quasi-observation. Such an inner arena with its inner observer had been suggested at various points in ancient and medieval thought but it had

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never been taken seriously long enough to form the basis for a problematic. But the seventeenth century took it seriously enough to permit it to pose the problem of the veil of ideas, the problem which made epistemology central to philosophy. Once Descartes had invented that "precise sense" of "feeling" in which it was "no other than thinking," we began to lose touch with the Aristotelian distinction between reason-as-grasp-of-universals and the living body which takes care of sensation and motion (Rorty 1979: 50 – 51).

To sum up, in the modern age, "science, rather than living, became philosophy's subject, and epistemology its center" (Rorty 1979: 61). Why is the solution not a return to Aristotle, as Alasdair Macintyre, another contemporary historicist, thinks?

How strong is Rorty's case in favor of nominalism and historicism against Plato-Kant white witchcraft? Rorty's case seems strong, to the extent that modern philosophy and epistemology are related, but other than that only seems to scratch the surface of any deeper Plato-Kant magic.[16] Small surprise, since before him both John Dewey and William James' versions of anti-Platonism were considered insufficiently rigorous (by analytics' standards) *or* insufficiently radical (by the continentals). Rorty may be both insufficiently radical and insufficiently rigorous (Rorty 1982: xvii).

Since Rorty threw away the ladder or the scaffolding of foundationalism, he is prevented from answering the very questions he raised before about what is out there. How does he know that there is no mind and the sole task of his arguments is to dispense with the concept of the mind? Or that mind is the subject of Aristotle, Kant, and Ryle's respective conversations? Is not this a case of a man who knows too much?

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[16] Rorty should not wish to know any answers anyway, since these questions / answers outlived their usefulness (see Rorty 1982: xiv).

### 3. Vocabulary and incurable, deep metaphysical needs

For the difficulty is: how does Rorty even know that the Greeks and Descartes, the Antipodeans and modern earthly explorers, speak of the same "stuff" (they don't), trying to solve the same (false) problem of the mind? For according to him, there are no permanent problems. "Soul," "mind," "body," and "matter" are mere *flatus vocis* and only understandable within a tradition or within the spirit of the age.

Consistent historicists, as their Straussian foes (Rorty 2000: 14-15) said,

> are very exacting people. They forbid themselves many easygoing habits of the former generations. They forbid themselves to speak of a system of philosophy if the author of a philosophic doctrine did not consider his doctrine a "system"; or to speak of Plato's "metaphysics" or of Socrates as the founder of "ethics," or of the Greek "theory of the State," or of Greek "religion," or of the "religion" of the Bible or of the "philosophy of history" of the Bible, since terms such as these do not occur in the vocabulary of the books or men in question. For Plato never spoke of "metaphysics," Socrates apparently never spoke of "ethics," the Greek language has no words which could be translated by "State" or "religion," nor are there words in biblical Hebrew which could be translated by "religion" or "philosophy" or "history" (Strauss 2018: 72).

Are not these different vocabularies? Is the chasm truly unbridgeable? We can declare the effort of tackling the question of the mind useless, but if we want, as Rorty, to argue about, or just re-describe, this Plato-Kant standard that crosses the ages, do we not need such a meta-vocabulary as would allow this almost impossible translation? Obviously, a vocabulary is as far as we go without overcoming the

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examination of language. But it is not to go beyond language what metaphysics, perhaps in a futile effort, seeks?

According to Rorty, after so many centuries we must assume the failure of modern philosophy, or rather the futility of its effort, which effort has now survived its usefulness. Such a statement seems credible. Metaphysics, in fact, seems the unsuccessful part of the modern project. The successful part is obviously science, even if the goodness of the effects of its application on genetic improvement, or nuclear weaponry, or the goodness of its results in climate change, pollution, or shocks to the financial system, sometimes seem questionable. But according to Rorty, both metaphysics and science are together, because they share the illusion of representing reality.

The prestige of science, however, remains untouched, and it is from science that the answers to current problems and questions are expected. Philosophy, on the contrary, does not seem like cumulative knowledge, but instead is permanently entangled in the same issues. If there is an illusion of "truth" in the matter of metaphysics, it seems inevitable to conclude that the history of philosophy is the history of its errors and failed attempts.

Rorty had devoted the last part of his review of the then-current trends of analytic and continental philosophy of the twentieth century as converging towards a liberation from illusions. Pursuing this path, we may be able to mount a case against the learning of "philosophy." We can re-describe the negative case of Rorty (that we can learn nothing of philosophy which would be useful in public deliberation) according to three arguments: (1) there are many contradictory philosophies, all prey to the Platonic-Kantian paradigm; reifying ideas or principles. Philosophy does not offer responses to social life and therefore cannot be a safe guide to action; (2) "ironic" detachment, instead of philosophy, is necessary for a reasonable political life, and we should only try to lessen suffering and avoid cruelty; and (3) furthermore, philosophy is dangerous as well as ineffective, since all meaningful political ideas come from prophets, poets and not from political

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philosophers. Life in a liberal society risks agitation or even *stasis* if people maintain their views using flags bearing titles such as God, Nature and Truth — in capital letters.

The culture of liberalism, as Rorty says,

> (…) drop, or drastically reinterpret, not only the idea of holiness but those of 'devotion to truth' and of 'fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit.' The process of de-divinization (…) would, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings. In such a culture, warnings of 'relativism,' queries whether social institutions had become increasingly 'rational' in modern times, and doubts about whether the aims of liberal society were 'objective moral values' would seem merely quaint (Rorty 1989: 45).

Having first sketched the negative case, we should, in good scholastic fashion, present an argument "from authority." According to Rorty, liberalism in the public realm doesn't need "justification" or foundations. Rorty tries "to give some initial plausibility" to his claim that this view "is well adapted to a liberal polity" noting "some parallels between it and Isaiah Berlin's defense of 'negative liberty' against telic conceptions of human perfection" (Rorty 1989: 45). In fact, in the famous essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin says, like Rorty, "that we need to give up the jigsaw puzzle approach to vocabularies, practices, and values."[17] In Berlin's words, we need to abandon "the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail each other" (Berlin 2005: 212).

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[17] In CIS, 45, Rorty acknowledges nuances and important differences: "Freud's claim that we should think of ourselves as just one more among Nature's experiments, not as the culmination of Nature's design" is unique to him, but even so he is echoing (Berlin's use of) J. S. Mill's phrase "experiments in living."

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In the same vein, Rorty "inveighed[18] against the Platonic-Kantian attempt to do what Berlin called "splitting [our] personality into two: the transcendent, dominant controller from the empirical bundle of desires" (Rorty 1989: 45-46).

Berlin famously ended his essay by quoting Joseph Schumpeter's remark that "[t]o realize the relative validity of one's convictions (…) and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian" (Berlin 2005: 217). Berlin comments, as Rorty emphasizes, that "[t]o demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity" (Berlin 2005: 217). Rorty goes onto to "claim that such recognition is the chief virtue of the members of a liberal society, and that the culture of such a society should aim at curing us of our "deep metaphysical need" (Rorty 1989: 46).

Rorty, however, in spite of his more extreme statements, makes room for 'positive' arguments as to the practical utility of what is revealed as a philosophy of a certain kind -- edifying philosophy. After all, he abandoned his claim to end with philosophy to discard only basic or vulgar philosophy and continued to write philosophy treatises and gather *philosophical papers* instead of writing novels or plot lines for movies. It is necessary to give force to the first two negative statements (1) that philosophy is not cumulative knowledge and (2) that common sense is often a mere set of "unquestioned" prejudices.

Rorty's point here seems to be that the personal flourishing of humans is not related to the public sphere since they use/belong to different vocabularies. But is it not reasonable to think that if we are to accept a reasonably decent liberal society, this requires some intellectual vigilance and even a new vocabulary to maintain civil liberties? Such is, after all, Rorty's avowed goal. Sometimes the most practical thing is a good theory. (Often even a bad theory does the trick.)

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[18] In chap. 2 of CIS.

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Yet another positive argument that may be consistent with Rorty's perspective may be that while reasonable political life is the product of liberal ironists and poets, dispensing with the need for philosophy, philosophy is still needed to defend this life when it is challenged by cruel political teachings with philosophical origins. Such policies are often presented not only by those who shy away from the burdens of "a decent liberal society," but by infinitely generous political thinkers with utopian visions of human nature (or praxis). Heidegger, Foucault, Sartre, even Habermas, belong to the number of those who did not disdain to criticize liberal society and supported Nazism, the Iranian theocracy, Stalinist prisons. Nietzsche belongs to those that were appropriated by the Nazis. Rorty ironist bedfellows cannot be said to have always sided with the avoidance of cruelty. A sentimental education may protect against utopian illusions with a true political philosophy which reminds us of the limits set for all human hopes and desires, as Pascal declared.

The vocabulary that Pascal used was a vocabulary completely different from Rorty's. The construction of scholastic arguments turned out not to be so different form the way arguments appear in PMN. Do we need a meta-vocabulary to understand all these arguments? We can certainly limit ourselves to translating arguments into narratives. For example, instead of arguing about the usefulness of philosophy, we could build a narrative of how the policy of religious toleration inaugurated by reasonable statesmen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would not have been accepted if political philosophers had not enlightened public opinion and persuaded people that it was not a religious or moral duty to rebel against heretical governments.

## 4. Concluding remarks: a modest recovery of metaphysics?

Narratives are powerful, but it may not be possible to avoid a non-dogmatic, but pragmatic, metaphysics: a vocabulary of vocabulary that allows us to speak of the problems of justice in Plato and Rawls, of the soul in Aristotle and Descartes, of the dystopias in Moro and Orwell. How may eventually Rorty talk about the

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stimulation of the C-Fibers in the mind of the Greeks and the pain in the soul of the Antipodeans as related? What meta-vocabulary would make it possible?

We do not want Rorty to be as a "conversation stopper" (as religion is according to him). And as a historicist he cannot fail to know that his theory would be washed away with the change of the world, since like all other theories, it is dependent on *Geist*.

A non-dogmatic metaphysics does not have to pretend to be suitable for all kinds of uses of the vocabulary, nor to say what can be said under penalty of being silent. It may be rather an effort of "non-fiction literature" that codes for contingent vocabulary,[19] but does not cut off the most important access to the reality of things that are first to us (and not in itself).

Can we fight against what Berlin calls "incurable deep metaphysical needs"? One fundamental political concept, the concept of "nature," is of philosophic origin. Metaphysics seems, in effect, an enterprise subject to serious objections. The phrase coined by Aristotle's editors to assign a set of books that address questions beyond physics may ultimately have no other subject than to clarify the terms and concepts that science used as language, or at the least according to some illustrious representatives of analytic philosophy. Nothing exists beyond languages, or vocabularies, including science. So, after all, maybe we should just settle for it and give up a useless effort to seek substantive answers. Three centuries confirm the total loss of common-sense prestige in favor of a rigorous science. Socrates could find nothing by asking his commonsensical interlocutors "what is F," because opinion is no longer the point of access to the principles of things, or an inspiration about how to live, but at its best only a semi-coherent set of practical aphorisms that allows us to guide our daily lives and, at worst, petrified prejudices.

But "nature" was not just a theoretical notion. Nature is the standard by which Plato-Kantian philosophers judged all actual political orders and was their guide for

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[19] See the "afterword" in Brandom 2008.

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reform and improvements. By contrast to nature, all real orders are imperfect. Rorty asserts that we must assume failure, or rather the futility of the effort. The history of its (failed) attempts is what we call philosophy (Rorty 1982: xiv).

Nonetheless, if the history of philosophy is the narrative of a progressive separation from a radiant but vaporous sun of new and more solid planets, the different scientific fields, fragmented but verifiable empirically, as Isaiah Berlin thinks, we still cannot ignore the fact that certain questions appear irreducibly philosophical: Why does the world have three dimensions? What is time? What should we do? (Berlin 2013: see 3-4, etc.). These problems may remain as a question mark, according to Berlin, but this should not prevent us from seeking an answer, since saying that a question has no right answer, or that we don't know how to look for it, is different from saying that it is *meaningless*. These questions, like other similar metaphysical questions, have the embarrassing habit of coming back in through the window when we try to throw them out to the door. Is it not unpragmatic to seek the dismissal of whatever fulfills "the deepest needs of the spirit?"

The problematic nature of the effort is nowhere more apparent as when we note that questions such as "Who am I?"; What is the "Self?"; or "where am I?"; "where did I come from?" or "how did I get here?"; "what should I do here?" – such questions that refer to the principles of things or *archē* – are in fact very similar to the questions raised by someone, unbalanced and disoriented, who lost his memory, was perhaps beaten, kidnapped, and left in a dark place with neither memory of, nor clues about, what happened to him. He also seeks reasons, asking the same questions that we expect from an idiot or a child (those who, according the "official doctrine," may have no mind).

This "nudity", however, is precisely the symbol of the human condition, a situation in which from time to time, perhaps in moments of deep pain, or demoralization, we cannot avoid. It may also be rooted not in an individual shock but of that of a group or a nation "mugged by history." These questions may arise in those situations where we do not know what to do and where it seems that there is

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no alternative but the anguished of choosing in face of nothingness or in face to death (Heidegger 1962: 279), but our attempts to go beyond the empirical are nonetheless irresistible.

In other people, or in other moments, this propensity easily yields to Candide's appeals to cultivate our garden. We should instead embrace a post-philosophical culture (Rorty 1982: xxxvii and ff), since these questions belong to a dead vocabulary. We may grant that it is probably true that we cannot live in a permanent state of anxiety involved in such nudity, unless we have the character of a Schopenhauer or a Nietzsche, but equally probably that most people at some point in their lives raise questions as these and that no one can keep them at bay for ever. Therefore, on pragmatic terms, perhaps a modest version of a metaphysic's "vocabulary" – outside the "totalitarian" Plato-Kant tradition – turns out to be as legitimate and practical as any other vocabulary.

Such a "vocabulary of vocabularies" need not be defined by exactness, nor be justified by a system, since for most practical purposes a simplification may be enough. But it should not just restore truth-seeking as a regulative goal. It should also do justice to the intense commitment to the truth-seeking that is indispensable to the philosophical and scientific endeavors; it may not be able to secure "unqualifiedly stateable truths," but it should reopen access to comprehensive views which start from the viewpoint of the common man, the citizen, and the statesman – just enough to allow the conversation between soulless specialists, politicians and metaphysical dreamers. It should, moreover, acknowledge that the conversation between past thinkers and modern philosophers is both possible and desirable. Mainly, it should make us aware that this uninterrupted conversation goes on behind and beyond the concrete practical tasks at hand, whether led through empirical research, formal reasoning, or thought experiments, as the background of the philosophical and scientific ventures.

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