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Analytic Philosophy of Language (Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, Davidson, Kuhn)

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Abstract: In this chapter we focus on Rorty's core commitments with respect to language, and consider their role in Rorty's stormy relations to mainstream analytic philosophy. Further, we bring out key features of Rorty's position by tracing his engagement with Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, Davidson, and Kuhn.

1. Introduction

In an interview from 2000, Gideon Lewis-Kraus asked Rorty: "Have you ever lamented the lack of interest that philosophy departments have shown toward your work?" Rorty answered:

> I don't know. Maybe I did once upon a time. By now, it seems so familiar and natural, I would be surprised if it were otherwise. Maybe twenty, thirty years ago, I thought I was going to convince analytic philosophers of my views. But I haven't thought that for at least twenty years. When I wrote *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), I didn't realize that it would be taken as a harsh polemic against analytic philosophy. I thought it was a benevolent internal reform of analytic philosophy. But nobody read it that way." (Kraus-Gideon 2003)

As we now know, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was read as an attack on the very foundations of epistemology and philosophy of mind. Far from a benevolent invitation to reform, it was received as a call for revolution, a dismissal of the very project of analytic philosophy. Prior to the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty enjoyed a considerable reputation as an accomplished philosopher of mind and a perceptive contributor to our understanding of the so-called "linguistic turn" in philosophy. Once the book was out, he was perceived by many of his colleagues as having fouled his own nest. To what extent does this turn in perception and reputation reflect a real shift in Rorty's own core

commitments? Our position is that Rorty's *Kehre* is largely a matter of changing rhetorical strategy, rather than a substantive change of his philosophical mind. After a certain point, in response to the reception of his book and to the general consolidation of metaphysics in analytic philosophy through the 1980s, Rorty's metaphilosophical vocabulary became a vocabulary of rupture rather than a vocabulary of continuity. And while he dropped elements of analytic terminology and made changes in the way in which he described his aims and ambitions, his metaphilosophical views remained stable at the core. That, at least, is our contention. A clear case for it, we think, can be made with respect to Rorty's conception of linguistic agency, that is, what we do when we communicate through words.

In this chapter, we bring out the main features of that view by considering key ideas that Rorty developed through his interpretation of a handful of his philosophical heroes. Our hope is that this also provides a gplinglimpse of what might be called Rorty's philosophical method, and of the relationship between that method and Rorty's overriding norm for philosophical thought: to keep the conversation going. The upshot of our indirect argument is that Rorty's views regarding what it is that we achieve when using language, and how it is that we achieve it, have followed a consistent trajectory throughout his career as a philosopher. His search for an intellectual basis outside analytic philosophy in the years following the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* reflects the dimming of his early hope that mainstream analytic philosophy would reconfigure itself in a manner that would make it hospitable to those views.

2. Metaphilosophy and philosophy of language

An early, succinct statement of his characteristic metaphilosophical views appears in his review-piece, "Recent metaphilosophy" from 1961:

> [P]hilosophy is the greatest game of all precisely because it is the game of 'changing the rules'. This game can be won by attending to the patterns by which these rules can be changed, and formulating rules in terms of which to judge changes of rules. […] Since any metaphysical, epistemological, or axiological arguments can be defeated by redefinition, nothing remains but to make a virtue of necessity and to study this process of redefinition itself. (Rorty 1961b, p. 301)

To study this process of redefinition as such, this means that we must seek to bring different approaches – different strategies for redefinition – into conversation with one another: "Since communication is the goal, rather than truth (or even agreement), the prospective infinite series is a progress rather than a regress: it becomes a moral duty to keep the series going, lest communication cease. To keep communication going is to win the game." Rorty 1961b, p. 301f)

As approaches governed by different sets of rules are meant to be brought into communication, commensuration cannot be a necessary condition for the interpretative activity of the philosopher. From this perspective, the choice between reform and revolution, between commensuration and incommensurability, becomes more fundamentally a choice of rhetorical strategy, a judgment as to which strategy gives the better odds of "winning the game." Critically, however, to win the game, in Rorty's perspective, is not a matter of knocking the opponents of one's views off the field. The game rather, is its own end, and so the winning move, in any given situation, is the one that "keep[s] communication going" (Rorty 1961b: 302). This conception shifts the emphasis to the creation of openings, to the expansion of communicative reach, to the maintenance of semantic flexibility—virtues which may come at the expense of both clarity of definitions and sharpness of framing assumptions.

It is against this background that we must consider Rorty's conception of language, which he developed and refined by interpreting and radicalizing positions from Wittgenstein (4), Sellars (5), Quine (6), Davidson (7), and Kuhn (8). The common thread to all these thinkers is that language is not a freestanding subject matter. Language is not a *tertium* that mediates between speakers and their surroundings by supplying the former with correct representations of the latter. Rather, language arises from our ability to sustain regularities in our linguistic behavior that are susceptible to interpretation by our fellows, and which thereby allow us to make utterances rather than just noise (see for instance Rorty 1991b). As such language is a part of our larger behavioral apparatus, a tool amongst others that allows us to coordinate our actions with others in a common environment, and, when things go well, to realize new and richer versions of ourselves through feats of cooperation and imagination.

In sum, what counts for metaphilosophy counts for language as well: there are no fixed rules, but the game is to change the rules: For Rorty language is a tool that we are actively reshaping

as our needs, interests and ideals evolve. Rorty's term for this process of adaptation is "redescription". This is the place of imagination and freedom, where linguistic and political agency converge. We return to this point in the final section (9).

3. Analytic philosophy of language and the *linguistic turn*

Rorty's first widely recognized contribution is the volume, *The linguistic turn* (1967). This collection of seminal papers included contributions by some of the most important philosophers of language of the time, and Rorty's introduction was held in high regard. The book was reissued twice, after ten and 25 years, providing Rorty with the opportunity, in the form of two afterwords, to re-evaluate the impact and the project of the linguistic turn as such.

What are the salient changes over these years? While the introduction from 1967 is optimistic and assertive in tone, Rorty is deeply skeptical of the ambition to establish philosophy of language as first philosophy. As we have already seen, he resists the idea that the developments to which the volume attests should be taken as methodological advances towards definite answers to first-order philosophical questions. This key point is reiterated in his later assessments. Rorty sees no hope of presuppositionless starting points for reflection and, accordingly, no free-standing non-circular arguments that may provide definitive answers. At this level of philosophical abstraction, Rorty points out, "to know what method to adopt, one must already have arrived at some metaphysical and some epistemological conclusions." (Rorty 1992a, p.1) This restates the point from "Recent Metaphilosophy" (Rorty 1961b) cited above in (2.): "redefinition" can be applied to the different strands of philosophy of language as well. The idea of winning a philosophical argument, in Rorty's view, is a matter of successful technical construction, rather than a matter of getting us closer to reality.[1]

To what extent does this place Rorty on a collision course with analytic philosophy as such? According to Michael Dummett, analytic philosophy is born from philosophy of language (Dummett 1996, p. 5), and is based on two premises: (1) "a philosophic account of thought can be attained through a philosophic account of language;" (2) "a comprehensive account can only be so attained" (Dummett 1996, p. 4). Rorty dismisses both premises. Premise (1) is rejected because, while language may in some sense be an uncircumventable starting point

for inquiry (see sections 5 and 6), what Rorty calls "pure philosophy of language" (Rorty 1979, p. 257) does not provide answers to the philosophy of mind when the aspirations of the latter are of an a priori nature. And regarding premise (2), the point of Dummett's methodological restriction disappears once the very notion of "a comprehensive account" is abandoned as vacuous. In his afterword to *The linguistic turn* from 1992, Rorty writes: "The slogan that 'the problems of philosophy are problems of language' now strikes me as confused, for two reasons." (Rorty 1992b, p. 371) First, because philosophy is not a natural kind, and secondly, because, "I no longer think that there is such a thing as 'language' in any sense which makes it possible to speak of 'problems of language'." (Rorty 1992b, p. 371)

What, then, is the right way to describe Rorty's persistent attitude toward analytic philosophy? Did he, in the end, dismiss analytic philosophy as a dead-end? That conclusion would be hard to avoid, if we take analytic philosophy to be the very project described by Dummett. However, there are other conceptions and definitions available (see., e.g. Penelas 2010, Cappelen 2018).[2]

What in any case is beyond contention, is that Rorty, from the very start of his professional career, was deeply and vocally skeptical of the ambition of analytic philosophy to establish philosophy of language as first philosophy, of the stylistic professional unity and predilection for atomism over holism (Rorty 2007a, p. 128), and of the faith in the idea of method modelled on the sciences (Rorty 2007a, p. 126). At the same time, though, it is clear that Rorty did not regard these ambitions as essential to professional philosophy as it was carried out in the Anglo-American academic world and its ambit. Indeed, it should be stressed that Rorty engaged all through his career in professional philosophical debates with notable contemporary analytic philosophers like Hilary Putnam, John McDowell, Donald Davidson, Michael Williams and many others. His presentational style remained, as critics rightly state, "well within the stylistic conventions of contemporary analytic philosophy" (Staten 1986, p. 458). As we have already noted, Rorty took his project in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to fall well within the self-critical remit of analytic philosophy. His aim was to enable us—through philosophical therapy—to back out of and away from certain philosophical dead-ends that arose, in Rorty's account, with the ocular metaphors of cognition that we inherited from

the Greeks and that were naturalized in key works of the early modern era. As Rorty observes, though,

> The therapy offered is, nevertheless, parasitic upon the constructive efforts of the very analytic philosophers whose frame of reference I am trying to put in question. […] I hope to convince the reader that the dialectic within analytic philosophy, which has carried philosophy of mind from Broad to Smart, philosophy of language from Frege to Davidson, epistemology from Russel to Sellars, and philosophy of science from Carnap to Kuhn, needs to be carried a few steps further. (Rorty 1979, p. 7)

Rorty intended his efforts as a contribution to this ongoing conversation, indeed, as prolonging it by enriching the available perspectives on what philosophy could be. As we have stressed, this was not the way his work was generally taken.

4. Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein is an enduring source of inspiration and philosophical orientation for Rorty. He figures centrally in papers both early and late (1961a, 1970, 1998a, 2007c), in which Rorty sets out to retrieve key insights from Wittgenstein from a context of distorting interpretations by other readers. Most importantly, he is a central hero of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* where Rorty designates "the three most important philosophers of our century – Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey." (Rorty 1979, p. 5) Rorty's rhetorical appropriation of Wittgenstein endures, and is apparent in his later use of expressions like "we Wittgensteinians" (e.g., Rorty 1998a). According to Rorty, what connects the three heroes of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is their antirepresentationalism. They are "in agreement that the notion of knowledge as accurate representation made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned." (Rorty 1979, p. 6) All three make it their business to show us what philosophy looks like without this guiding thought.

The specific attraction of the later Wittgenstein for Rorty is the "Wittgensteinian analogy between vocabularies and tools" (Rorty 1989, p.12). On this picture of language use, we no longer think of that activity as anchored by the goal of representation—either as depicting objective reality or as permitting the authentic expression of the subject. Accordingly, sources of normativity, regularity-inducing constraints, as well as conditions of semantic success, these

must all now be traced back in some way to dynamics of social interaction, and be made tractable as features of such interaction. This is exactly the purpose to which Wittgenstein deploys his notion of "language games", and here Rorty finds a view of linguistic communication that breaks completely free of the representationalist framework that has shackled reflection on language since the 17th Century.

For Rorty, Wittgenstein's approach to language has profound ramifications for the remit of philosophy. Speaking of *Philosophical Investigations*, Rorty says: "The book, like the writings of the philosophers I most admire, is therapeutic rather than constructive." (Rorty 1997, p. 7) What Wittgenstein makes conspicuous, is that the most fruitful response to the problem of other minds, or to the skeptical challenge to our knowledge of the external world, is to sketch an alternative picture of language. Replacing the "picture" picture of language with the "tool" picture, Wittgenstein offers a view of language on which "problems of access" simply cannot get a grip. The central idea of *therapy* that Rorty adopts from Wittgenstein, consists in the application of this move to specific problems rooted in representationalist assumptions.

The target of such therapeutic administrations is specifically philosophical. For Wittgenstein's hostility to "privacy" and "immediacy" (Rorty 1979, p. 109), pertaining both to inner psychological states as well as to the notion of meaning, is no threat to the common-sense notion that we each have a first-person perspective on the world. As Rorty says, "we can have privileged access without paradox", if "we drop the notion that the only way in which we can have 'direct knowledge' of an entity is by being acquainted with its 'special, felt, incommunicable qualities'" (Rorty 1979, p. 110). What Wittgenstein sheds are the weighty epistemological and metaphysical implications of inner states, not the notion of sensation as such; "the artificial uncanniness produced by too much epistemology should not lead us […] to think that there can be nothing inside at all." (Rorty 1979, p. 108) If we resist the idea that a sensation is a medium of information, a messenger from reality to inner space, we can "let a sensation be as much a something as a table" (Rorty 1979, p. 109) – both, sensations and tables, are parts of our lives.

For Wittgenstein, "pain" and "table" get their meanings from their places in language games: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 43). Such use is

subject to public standards and criteria of correctness. Yet, the “language-as-game”-metaphor also makes it evident that these standards and criteria are not settled or defined once and for all. In fact, on Rorty’s reading, Wittgenstein is not offering a theory of meaning of any kind at all, if we conceive of such a theory as a method for determining the semantic content of the constitutive bits of language. As he says, “It is not a ‘use-theory of meaning,’ but rather a repudiation of the idea that we need a way of determining meanings.” (Rorty 2007c, p. 171) The point, is to view language principally as a social practice, rather than as a representational device, a practice that inherits the plasticity and malleability of the human endeavours of which it is a part. This is where Wittgenstein’s picture of linguistic behavior connects with Rorty’s metaphilosophical views: we ourselves are responsible for the rules of the game, and as we play the game we may also change the rules.

5. Sellars

A critical part of the representational picture that Rorty sets out to deconstruct is the idea of an identifiably point of epistemic delivery. Sensations (at least for empiricists) are the natural candidate—that is the interface where the would-be knower stands ready to receive what the world gives up. It is this metaphor that Wilfrid Sellars subjects to devastating scrutiny in his celebrated essay from 1956, “Empiricism and The Philosophy of Mind” (Sellars 1997), attacking what he calls “The Myth of the Given.” The proper way to take Sellars’ insights has been the subject of intense debate in recent years, and here, too, Rorty’s reading is controversial (see for instance Levine 2019). [3] What Rorty takes away from Sellars’s attack on empiricist metaphysics is a picture of rationality and knowledge as social achievements, without foundations outside social practice. Specifically, Rorty relies on Sellars to re-enforce his Wittgenstein-inspired case against the philosophical picture of inner life that carries the seeds of a skeptical or solipsistic representationalist epistemology.

For Sellars, famously, “all awareness […] is a linguistic affair. Not even […] so-called immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of language […].” (Sellars 1997, p. 63) Rorty incorporates this dictum into the position he terms “epistemological behaviorism”, which takes it that “assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express”, and where “epistemic authority” is explained “by reference to what society lets us say” (Rorty 1979, p. 174). Here he gives

Sellars's point about awareness a distinctive interpretation: "Sellars's psychological nominalism is […] a remark about the difference between facts and rules, a remark to the effect that we can only come under epistemic rules when we have entered the community where the game governed by these rules is played." (Rorty 1979, p. 187)

Rorty thus reads Sellars in a way that brings his ideas into proximity with those of the later Wittgenstein. Conversely, Rorty claims, "Wittgenstein's critique of 'pure ostensive definition' can be generalized into Sellars's doctrine that we cannot know the meaning of one word without knowing the meaning of a lot of others." (Rorty 1979, p. 109 n. 16) Both thinkers, on Rorty's account, provide grist for the mill of semantic holism. Yet, Sellars never draws the philosophical consequences of the kind of holism that for Rorty seems inevitable once you take questions of epistemology and meaning to be questions of social practice. And so his epistemological behaviorism remains, to Rorty's mind, half baked, until it is treated with a dose of Quinean holism.

As Rorty develops his argument for epistemological behaviorism, he draws frequently and heavily on both Sellars and Quine (Rorty 1979, p. 167-188). For in spite of their commonalities, neither arrives at the conclusions about knowledge and theory of knowledge for the sake of which Rorty engages with their work. Rorty observes that "it is as if Quine, having renounced the conceptual-empirical, analytic-synthetic, and language-fact distinction, were still not quite able to renounce that between the given and the postulated. Conversely, Sellars, having triumphed over the latter distinction, cannot quite renounce the former cluster." (Rorty 1979, p. 171) While thoroughly discrediting the idea of empirical epistemic purity, Sellars still writes, Rorty argues, as if the conceptual or logical realm might somehow preserve its autonomy intact. To undermine that idea, Rorty turns to Quine's attack on the notion of meaning.

6. Quine

In Rorty's narrative, Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine 1951) sounds the death knell for any notion of meaning required to prop up the representationalist picture of language. In 1972 Rorty writes, "Quine's suggestion that the difference between a priori and empirical truth is merely that between the relatively difficult to give up and the relatively easy brings in

its train the notion that there is no clear distinction to be drawn between questions of meaning and questions of fact." (Rorty 1982, p. 5)

The significance of Quine's contribution is not that he stirred up heated discussions about what this distinction really amounts to and whether the distinction could nevertheless survive in some form. Rather, for Rorty, the critical point to extract is Quine's thoroughgoing anti-essentialism in "Two Dogmas", which is what drives his critical arguments against both the analytic-synthetic distinction (the first dogma) and the related idea of reductionism (the second dogma). As Quine puts it: "Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word." (Quine 1951, p. 22) Much of the argument of "Two Dogmas" is the demonstration that without some basic essentialist assumption about meaning, the notion remains entrapped in a small circle of mutually dependent semantic concepts. Quine concludes:

> It is obvious that truth in general depends on both language and extralinguistic fact. […] [F]or all its a priori reasonableness, a boundary between analytic and synthetic statements simply has not been drawn. That there is such a distinction to be drawn at all is an unempirical dogma of empiricists, a metaphysical article of faith. (Quine 1951, p. 34)

Instead, Quine proposes that we illuminate linguistic communication as an interactive empirical phenomenon, through the notion of *radical translation*. This program is carried out in *Word and Object* (Quine 1960), where Quine introduces us to an ethnographer charged with devising a way to understand the speech of a local group without prior knowledge of any of the particulars of either language or cultural context. When thus hearing a local speaker utter "Gavagai" (Quine 1960, p. 29) while pointing to a rabbit, this radical translator is faced with a variety of interpretive options, from "Lo, a rabbit", via "Lo, undetached rabbit parts," to "food", "let's go hunting", or perhaps, "there will be a storm tonight" (our local speaker may well have reason to relate the presence they are witnessing to states of the weather). Some of these are more likely than others, and many will be excluded by further interaction. However, even as evidence mounts, different possible accommodations will remain for the constructor of a translation manual. Moreover, this will be true no matter how much observational evidence is gathered. The point isn't that the radical translator is doomed to fail to uncover what the local speaker really means, but rather, as Quine observes already in "Two

Dogmas" that this notion of meaning becomes "obscure" and "may well be abandoned" (Quine 1951, p. 23).

In spite of his holistic externalism, however, Quine holds on to a distinction between the relation of theories of linguistic behavior (translation manuals, for instance) to the evidence supporting them, on the one hand, and the way in which standard empirical theories always outrun their evidence, on the other. While theories in general are under-determined by evidence, Quine tells us, translation manuals are *indeterminate*. This distinction trades on the idea that well-formed empirical theories indicate some matter of fact, even though it remains under-determined exactly what that matter is, whereas theories about what people mean by their utterances indicate no underlying ontology. In Rorty's view, as we have cited at the end of (5.), this Quinean distinction reflects a failure to heed the lessons of Sellars's attack on the myth of the given. Referring back to an early article on Quine (Rorty 1972), Rorty explains that he there was

> "criticizing Quine's claim that the indeterminacy of translation was different from the ordinary underdetermination of empirical theories. I argued that Quine had never given a satisfactory sense to the term 'fact of the matter', and that the contrast he invoked between the factual and the non-factual seemed to be the same contrast that he had been concerned to blur in the concluding paragraphs of 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'." (Rorty 1998a, p. 52)

In his readings of Quine, Rorty tries to dispense with remaining physicalist ontological qualms, while elaborating the idea that we can illuminate the nature of linguistic communication by paying attention to the conditions required for interpretation as an empirical endeavor. From this perspective, the notion of "sameness of meaning" does no explanatory work at all, and "[s]uccess in communication is judged by smoothness of conversation, by frequent predictability of verbal and nonverbal reactions, and by coherence and plausibility of native testimony" (Quine 1990, p. 43).

It is not surprising, then, that Rorty is stirred by Donald Davidson's post-ontological development of the Quinean third-person approach to interpretation. In Davidson's work Rorty finds a theoretical account of linguistic communication that fully integrates the

Sellarsian and the Quinean critique of empiricism, allowing a decisive break with the framework of ontology and the metaphysics of representation.

7. Davidson

Rorty writes, "In 1971 my philosophical views were shaken up" (Rorty 1998b, p. 51) by the encounter with Davidson's piece "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme" (Davidson 1984a). In this paper, Davidson deploys arguments that derive from the third-person approach to communication to dismantle what he calls the Third Dogma of Empiricism, i.e. "the dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized" (Davidson 1984a, p. 189). In Rorty's words, Davidson undermines "the idea that different languages represent the world from different perspectives" (Rorty 1992b, p. 372).
Together with Quine's attack on the first two dogmas and Sellars's attack on the empirical given, this provides the basis for Rorty's anti-representationalist account of language. [4]

With Davidson the divorce between epistemology and philosophy of language is complete. According to Rorty, once we take up Davidson's perspective, "the question of 'how language works' has no special connection with the question of 'how knowledge works'." (Rorty 1979, p. 259). So, the idea of philosophy of language as first philosophy, or as the basis for an account of the proper formulation of the problems of philosophy, can be put aside. This is because, on the empirical, third-person account of linguistic communication, "no road leads from the project of giving truth-conditions for the sentences of English […] to criteria for theory-choice or to the construction of a canonical notation which limns the true and ultimate structure of reality" (Rorty 1979, p. 300). Truth is still an important theoretical concept in Davidson's account, because we can use it to illuminate how it is that communicators can move successfully from one utterance to another. Once, however, we accept the Davidsonian point that this is all it does, that we "have no understanding of truth that is distinct from our understanding of translation" (Rorty 1998b, p. 3), then we will no longer look to the notion of truth to bridge language and world, because we will no longer think that such a bridge was ever needed.

Semantic truth then, in the perspective that Rorty appropriates from Davidson, is an artefact of interpretation, not the other way around. The point is brought to fruition when Davidson

later concludes that, “there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed.” (Davidson 2005, p. 107)

Davidson’s emphasis on the dynamic and plastic nature of the resources deployed in successful communicative exchanges is readily apparent in two ideas that were of particular importance to Rorty. The first of these is Davidson’s original account of metaphors, offered in the paper, “What Metaphors Mean” (Davidson 1984b). The novelty of the view offered there lies in the suggestion that we treat metaphors on a par with causal stimuli, and not as a special kind of meaning. This removes metaphor from the domain of the semantic. A capacity for metaphor is indeed a part of our communicative repertoire, but to make a metaphor is not, at least not, in a narrow sense, a manifestation of semantic competence. Accordingly, to “get it”, is not to decipher its meaning, but to be nudged into seeing the matter at hand from the point of view towards which the metaphor is aimed. For Rorty, this picture of metaphor allows him to develop an account of how language changes—namely through the gradual incorporation into language games of novel metaphors. Successful redescription, then, is a matter of incorporating into our linguistic repertoire new metaphors that, as they are domesticated—taken up and used—change what we are able to say and think (Rorty 1991b).

The other idea of great significance to Rorty is Davidson’s metaphor of triangulation. This figure appears in a number of essays, notably in “Three Varieties of Knowledge” (Davidson 2001). The key point of Davidson’s argument there is that “our propositional knowledge has its basis not in the impersonal but in the interpersonal.” (Davidson 2001, p. 219) Thinking and meaning, Davidson suggests, is something that can happen only among creatures who are relating themselves to each other as inhabitants of a common world, coordinating their behavior and keeping track of shifting perspectives. This way of making the social aspect of thought and language central to an account of the nature of the intentional, is exactly what Rorty needs to synthesize the Wittgensteinian social-practice view with the naturalistic holism he extracts from Sellars and Quine. It dispenses completely with the idea of language as a *tertium*, as medium between mind and world.

Davidson persisted, however, in thinking that we can illuminate the nature of communicative success through the idea of truth-theories for languages—even if the “languages” thus

characterized are fleeting idiolects rather than structured systems. On this point, Rorty diverges (Rorty 1998a). He thinks that for philosophical purposes the idea of a theory of meaning has outlasted its point. For Rorty, once we accept Davidson's own conclusion—"We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases." (Davidson 2005, p. 107)—there is nothing of interest to which such formal structures may apply.

Though renouncing philosophical theories of meaning, Rorty is not suggesting that philosophers should stop paying attention to language. In the third and final part of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Rorty launches an effort that will occupy him for the rest of his career, that is, philosophy of linguistic communication conducted in ethical and political terms, conceived as a contribution to cultural politics (Rorty 2007b).

8. Kuhn

An important source of initial inspiration in this endeavor is Thomas Kuhn's ground-breaking book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962). In this work, Kuhn gives a two-stage account of the development of science, as oscillating between longer periods of steady work within contexts governed by agreed-upon rules, common problems and a shared sense of defining achievements, and disruptive periods in which the cumulative weight of anomalies breaks open implicit and explicit agreement and convergence. In such periods – Kuhn terms them phases of *revolutionary science* – new paradigms may emerge, setting the stage for further chapters of *normal* science, where the practical and theoretical agreements undergirding common progress are once again in place, though now in a form that is conceptually and theoretically dislocated from the pre-revolutionary history of the field. Kuhn deployed the idea of incommensurability to describe the consequences of this kind of dislocation.

What does it mean to say that two paradigms are incommensurable? According to Kuhn, the meaning of Newton's term "mass" is not the same as Einstein's term "mass." And given a holistic approach this goes for the whole bunch of terms that make up the basic theories in play. Hence, Kuhn suggests, Einstein's universe is not Newton's universe. The meaning of "mass" has changed and with it the whole worldview constructed around the term. For claims

of this sort, Kuhn was attacked as relativist and idealist, and his ideas were regarded by many critics as incompatible with the basic rationality of scientific progress. Though Kuhn gradually downplays the significance of reference, he continues to struggle with difficulties arising around the notion of meaning change that seems to play a significant role in his initial account.

When Rorty appropriates Kuhn's contrast between normal and revolutionary science into his antirepresentational setting, generalizing it into the opposition between normal and abnormal discourse, he is able to transpose Kuhn's opposition into a context where worries about semantic incoherence and different ontologies attached to referential semantic bits are nipped in the bud. In Rorty's version, "normal discourse […] embodies agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement; abnormal discourse is any which lacks such criteria." (Rorty 1979, p. 11). Set in the context of a Davidsonian approach to linguistic competence, the idea of incommensurability is operationalized in a manner that makes no reference to conceptual structures or semantic entities: it is the kind of discourse that proceeds without agreed-upon-criteria for settling disagreements (Rorty 1979, p. 316).

The problems into which critics dragged Kuhn during the 1960s regarding "incommensurability" are a corollary of the unfortunate integration of epistemology and semantics that Rorty terms "'impure' philosophy of language" (Rorty 1979, p. 257). In the context of Davidson's "pure" philosophy of language, we can liberate the idea of incommensurability from this baggage, as long as we are careful to distinguish it from the notion of untranslatability. The notion of untranslatable conceptual schemes is precisely the target of Davidson's critique, fully endorsed by Rorty. On Rorty's definition, however, incommensurability entails no such impossible relation. Instead, it designates a certain state in the fluctuating dynamics of linguistic practice. On the view Rorty develops, then, manifestations of incommensurability do not call for translation, in any literal sense, but for reflection upon and choices regarding strategies of linguistic behavior. It is exactly in this sense that Rorty deploys the idea, when he contrasts epistemology with hermeneutics:

> For epistemology, to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all the contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible. For epistemology, conversation is implicit inquiry. For hermeneutics, inquiry is routine conversation. Epistemology views the participants as united in what Oakeshott calls an

> *universitas* – a group united by mutual interests in achieving a common end. Hermeneutics views them as united in what he calls a *societas* – persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground. (Rorty 1979, p. 318)

9. Conclusion: Rorty, language, and semantic agency

Rorty's approach to the linguistic turn was, fundamentally, to ask, "so, what's new?"—not in a dismissive tone of voice, but with engaged interest. It was fairly immediately apparent that the shift of philosophical attention that Rorty chronicled and re-chronicled over the years would not all by itself contribute to the demise of metaphysics in the sense that young Rorty cared about. For the very idea of a suitable method for correctly formulating and finally solving (or dissolving) the problems of philosophy remains tethered to the appearance-reality distinction, which for Rorty is where metaphysics begins and ends. Still, a genuine sense of opportunity is present at this early stage, in so far as Rorty sees in the idiom of the linguistic turn a fresh possibility to argue philosophy out of its Platonic ambition. For if language isn't a scheme of representations, a system of conventions, a body of rules, and, in particular, if meaning isn't a fixed entity that we can come through analysis to know, then language just isn't the sort of medium that we can rely on to make sense of the special philosophical distance between cognitive subject and cognitive object. And if that special philosophical distance goes, then so does the defining ambition of metaphysics.

If this is on the right track, then we may see Rorty's work from the 1960's up until the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as an attempt to seize on the innovative potential of the linguistic turn and snatch it out from under the weight of the metaphysical tradition—a tradition which, no sooner had it engendered the linguistic turn, then it threatened to engulf it. The engagements that we have briefly sketched—with Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, Davidson, and Kuhn — fall into place as a part of this struggle to take advantage of opportunities presented by the linguistic turn to make something new of philosophy.

Invoking a rough contrast, we might say that what Rorty appropriated from these thinkers is a view of language as something we do, together, rather than as something that we each individually might possess, or an entity that we might come to master or to know. The point

of this contrast, for Rorty, is to deplete of philosophical force all those concepts—content, rules, reference, structure—that language-focused metaphysicians might deploy in an effort to trace definitive constraints on what we may know and say, and how we may know it and say it. On the view Rorty extracts from his interlocutors, language is just what we make of it, and it holds no power beyond what we put into it. For roughly two decades of his career, Rorty may have conceived of this struggle for a demetaphysicalized notion of language as a campaign of friendly persuasion conducted from within the sites of analytic philosophy. The reactions to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, however, made it clear to him that he had underestimated the opposition.

In spite of what we have just said, however, we believe it would be misleading to frame the stakes for Rorty here principally in terms of a struggle against representationalist metaphysics. Rather, the point, for Rorty, which becomes increasingly explicit in later decades, is to secure philosophy's part in a historical process of *Bildung*, of transforming ourselves into beings who recognize no authority, no source of normative force, beyond that embedded in the practices we engage in with our fellows. This process, as we intimated near the beginning of our chapter, is a task of redescription. But redescription is not a feat of linguistic magic. It is the hard work of extending, bending, and recalibrating our linguistic habits. And that, in turn, is not something we are able to do without also attending to who we are, to the world, and to what we are doing in it and to it. Successful redescription, then, is also a material change, in that it changes how we perceive what is our reality and, therewith, our space of agency.

We have mentioned Rorty's claim that we should think of the end of philosophy as simply to keep the conversation going (Rorty 1979, p. 394)—that to win the game, is to keep communication going (1961b). As becomes apparent from Rorty's appropriation of the notion of incommensurability, actively to keep the conversation going is to work to extend the possibilities for life available to us, and, as Rorty emphasized, to expand the sense of *we* to whom such possibilities pertain (Rorty 1989). More than talking, this requires listening, across semantic distance and in active engagement with voices that we perhaps may hear, but not yet understand. In this sense, to keep the conversation going is an imperative of expansive solidarity.

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End Notes

[1] “With the examples of Aquinas and Hegel before him, any philosopher who can neither distinguish away, nor *aufheben*, his opponent’s heuristic terms may fairly be judged to be incompetent. The existence of such incompetence […] is the only reason for ever losing a philosophical argument” (Rorty 1961b, p. 299).

[2] Herman Cappelen makes openly reference to Rorty: Though in Rorty’s time “conceptual engineering” was not a topic, Cappelen states that Rorty uses his points for “somewhat tangential purposes.” “Rorty is, at least on one reading, saying that old school philosophy should be replaced by conceptual engineering“ (Cappelen 2018, p. 69).

[3] Rorty is aware to be an idiosyncratic reader. Regarding his appropriation of Davdison’s thought, he states: “I should remark that Davidson cannot be held responsible for the interpretation I am putting on his views, nor for the further views I extrapolate form his.” (Rorty 1989, p. 10 n. 3)

[4] See on this in detail the chapter on realism, antirealism, and antirepresentationalism.