

History of the Human Sciences

<http://hhs.sagepub.com>

Philosophy as the mirror of time

Zygmunt Bauman

History of the Human Sciences 1992; 5; 57

DOI: 10.1177/095269519200500305

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://hhs.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *History of the Human Sciences* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://hhs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://hhs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Philosophy as the mirror of time

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Vol. 1, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, x + 226 pp.

Vol. 2, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, x + 202 pp.

Alan Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. xiv + 384 pp.

The mark of great works of art, literature or philosophy is that they impose their presence on the past as well as on the present: they redraw, simultaneously, the histories and the maps of their respective territories. Great works create their own ancestors, thereby changing the received readings of shared tradition, reshuffling the accepted hierarchies, turning around the logic of past developments and reallocating their visible destinations. The appearance of a great work is recognized by the widely felt urge, and a massive effort, to rewrite history. On the other hand, great works become the poles from which new grids are spun so that other works, extant or about to be conceived, are charted in a novel way. The appearance of a great work is recognized by renegotiating the parameters, themes and rules of the ongoing discourse. Great works, so to speak, short-circuit the past and the present: they define the sense in which the present discourse is the act of reliving the tradition, and the sense in which tradition makes the present meaningful.¹

By these standards, Richard Rorty's writings have reached the status of the 'great work of philosophy', and they did so in an incredibly short time-span; barely a decade has passed since the *Mirror of Nature* was published. Neither the

past of western philosophy nor its current agenda, not even its own understanding of both, look the same as ten years ago. The depth of Rorty's impact on the life of philosophy is truly remarkable. Even more astonishing is the immediacy of impact, the speed with which the force and importance of Rorty's ideas have been recognized far and wide and their reverberations come to be felt throughout the philosophical discourse. That latter circumstance suggests that Rorty's work appeared at a time already ripe for its reception; time already waiting for someone to perform the job Rorty will have done. Thus Rorty's work passes also another test of greatness, one set by Wilhelm Dilthey and elaborated by Lucien Goldmann: that of a cultural creation encompassing and giving expression to the most seminal 'tendency of the epoch'.

Where exactly lies the significance of Rorty's work? An orderly answer to this question is not immediately obvious, as the significance of all revolutionary acts is first lived and felt, sometimes for quite a while, before it may be sensibly theorized about. First sightings are shaped by the questions the viewers – steeped as they are in their 'unreformed' tradition – have been trained to ask in their formative period, when acquiring the skills of their profession. Most philosophical readers of Rorty have been trained to seek the ways to satisfy themselves and to convince their listeners that there are – somewhere, waiting to be found – foolproof ways to set apart the propositions everybody *can* be sure of (and *will* be sure of, if only freed of 'bias' or 'prejudice'), from propositions that do not possess this quality; and that they, philosophers, are in command (perhaps also in sole possession) of the methods which warrant and allow such a setting-apart. Elaborating the tests all knowledge is required to pass under the penalty of disqualification in case of failure, was to most practitioners of philosophical art the unquestioned purpose of philosophical activity. No wonder that the appearance of Rorty's works has been greeted with a mixture of dismay, embarrassment and irritation. Rorty struck at the heart of philosophical enterprise. Not just this or that test was questioned (and whatever had been questioned was questioned not because its efficacy or technical perfection was doubted) – but the sense and need of test-setting itself came under attack, to be in the end dismissed as a pastime both wasteful and damaging. Rorty's work, it was felt, not only made light of the philosophers' current concerns, but invalidated retrospectively the most cherished legacy of hundreds of years of philosophical labour from which the current practitioners of the art drew their confidence of doing the right, and useful, job. In other words, Rorty's work threatened to make the most coveted philosophical skills redundant, while in the bargain depriving their owners of their past glory.

'Knowledge', says Rorty, is not 'a matter of getting reality right' – but, rather, 'a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality' (1: 1). This, one would say, amounts to saying that there is no more to what one may name 'getting reality right' than to cope with it; and that – since the lay members of the public are masters supreme of 'coping' – the work assigned professionally to

trained philosophers has no edge over the skills of ordinary mortals: both are busy doing basically the same thing, though the uninitiated have the advantage of being free of delusions that haunt those ostensibly better informed. 'Getting reality right' in any other sense – and particularly in the sense favoured by the last three centuries of philosophizing, that of 'getting knowledge to *represent* reality truly' – is neither called for, nor a viable proposition ('There is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry' [1: 23]). It may be also, and it often was, pretty damaging in its consequences, political and moral ('Dewey' – Rorty notes with approval – 'thinks that muddle, compromise, and blurry syntheses are usually less perilous, politically, than Cartesian clarity' [1: 211]).

True, statements to this effect are not entirely unfamiliar. They have been made before from sites marginal to academic philosophy (remember Simmel, and more recently Schütz, Garfinkel and the massive ethno-methodological practice they spawned; remember as well less boldly articulated, yet consistently 'non-representationalist' activity of most cultural anthropologists). They have been, for some time now, ensconced *in potentia* in the increasingly mainstream currents of philosophy (think of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault; in America, the country of Dewey, James and Peirce, the distance from mainstream was never great). Rorty himself repeatedly quotes Sellars, Quine and Davidson as his most immediate intellectual creditors. But it was left to Rorty to give an unmistakable and uncompromising formulation to intuitions, inclinations and unreflected-upon practices, to forge out of the 'anti-representationalist' stance the programme of philosophy, and to disavow bluntly the crusade against 'anti-realism' and 'relativism' as sacred mission of philosophers. As Alan R. Malachowski observed, 'Rorty should be given credit for putting his own slant on things. The rich sources for some of his main ideas may create the flavouring, but the brew is his own' (RR: 140).

No wonder many a philosopher responded in anger (most notably, philosophers of the analytical philosophy denomination; for a characteristic sample, see 'Auto-da-Fé: Consequences of Pragmatism' by Bernard Williams, in Malachowski's collection). No wonder – as together with the truth hovering above the practices of life off went the elevated status of truth-priesthood. Or so it may have seemed, as long as that status continued to be argued, justified and legitimized by pointing to a privileged, direct hot-line to Platonic ideas and to however articulated practice of censuring and correcting common sense, 'mere opinions', and all and sundry 'local', 'parochial' views, from the standpoint of supra-temporal and supra-communal universality; as long as the cultural centrality of philosophy, and thus of the philosophers, was held to be synonymical with the extra-territorial status, non-partisanship and global reach of the Supreme Court of truth and moral rectitude.

And yet it can be shown that Rorty is not in the business of undermining the

importance of the philosopher's job. He only suggests the revision of the job-description. Or is it rather the updating? Bringing it in line with the mood and longings of new times? Making it, if anything, more reliably settled in a world which displays less and less interest in the kind of services the philosophers thus far promised to render? Salvaging the philosophical profession from the debacle threatened by the waning of modern hopes and ambitions?

Rorty denies the existence of 'skyhooks' and derides the philosophers' pining for finding them as well as their pretensions of having found them. He does all this, however, not in the name of a philosophy without a hold (as his most dismayed critics feared), but in the name of a hold more solid and reliable than any thus far discovered or, rather, imagined. Skyhooks are not to be just disposed of: they are to be *replaced* – by 'toeholds'. The metaphors are illuminating. As Lévi-Strauss has admirably shown, in the eternal binary ordering of the universe the sky stands for everything too high and lofty to be reached by ordinary mortals, something meant to be admired but not possessed; while toes tread the lowly ground, which stands for everything 'down here', familiar and homely, not noble perhaps yet instead assuringly accessible, solid, reliable. The hooks philosophers try earnestly, yet in vain, to grasp, are indeed *skyhooks* in as far as they are viewed from the vantage point of the *toeholds*.

Disposing of the skyhooks, Rorty suggests, is called for not because of our disinterest in truth or objectivity, but because unless we are Gods we cannot grasp them, and not being Gods we cannot even imagine what grasping them would feel like. Disposing of the skyhooks is not an act of surrender, but a manifestation of sobriety and good sense. If we know how to cope (or, rather, if we cope without necessarily knowing) it is because we *belong* to a *community*, and we belong there not because of our decision to belong, but before any decision can be made and the decision-making itself appears on our agenda. 'Our acculturation is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional' (1: 13). Whatever may follow, can only belie, never refute, this plight. The resilience and incorrigibly 'foundational' status of acculturation, of communal determination, was denied in theory by Kantian–Cartesian–Lockean philosophical enterprise, while the nation-states, bent on eradicating locally rooted and thus obstreperous powers in practice and smothering them in the uniformity of legislated rights and duties, had to dress up their own particularity as universality of human rights or human nature. The theory has been discredited, while the practice has been, at least in our part of the world, abandoned. Resistance, nay immunity, of communal roots to the artifice of legislation has been proved and vindicated.

To communal rootedness – an existential situation, not a choice – Rorty gives the name of 'ethnocentrism'. Perhaps, to avoid ambiguity, he should have chosen the name of 'ethnicity' instead. It would be thus clear that what he meant was a *description*, not a *prescription*. But then it may be that the ambiguity has been intended and the choice of the name is deliberate. At any rate, on this point Rorty

keeps his readers in the dark, offering abundant evidence for both interpretations. And so we read that 'To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group – one's *ethnos* – comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. In this sense, everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate, no matter how much realist rhetoric about objectivity he produces in his study' (1: 30). But we also read that because of that circumstance we should be concerned with questions like 'What are the limits of our community?' and that the question 'What sort of human being do you want to become?' translates then into the query 'With what communities should you identify, of which you should think of yourself as a member?' (1: 13).

There is little doubt as to Rorty's own choice. Time and again he spells out the meaning of those 'we' who entail the 'I' of his own: 'Our community – the community of the liberal intellectuals of the secular modern West' (1: 29); 'we postmodernist bourgeois liberals' who 'no longer tag our central beliefs as "necessary" or "natural" and our peripheral ones as "contingent" and "cultural"', and who 'are going to have to work out the limits case by case' (1: 208). Rorty's confidence that community is not only the inevitability one has to put up with, but also a good thing, a blessing even (particularly if compared with the cold, dehumanized artifice of the promoters of objective truth, where 'institutional backups for beliefs take the form of bureaucrats and policemen' [1: 26]) stems ultimately from his unclouded satisfaction with the concrete community to which he assigns himself, one of 'increased tolerance and decreased suffering' (1: 213). This very special community is indeed – there is little question about it – a humane, civilized place, pleasant and comfortable to be in, one that mixes the security of the family home with the anonymous freedom of a five-star international hotel and where a drawerful of airline tickets insures the pleasures of homeliness against turning into the agony of parochiality. One may say that Rorty's celebration of communalism is an obverse of Kantian categorical imperative: one would wish to make a universal rule out of the way of life one finds palatable and gratifying for oneself.

For the most, if not all, of its residents, this particular community of Rorty's birth/choice is preferable to any other known or imaginable. For this reason, communalism – known to the residents in the only experiential mode available to them, their own – is a blessing and a privilege. No wonder the boundary between description and prescription is blurred. No wonder either that the question about transcendental, community-free proofs and foundations seems both bizarre and superfluous. With such a nice toehold who needs skyhooks? And for what conceivable benefit? We know this community of ours is good when we look at it. There can be nothing wrong with communal roots as such. All things nasty and contemptible – like pugnacious tribalism, intolerance, cruelty, moral numbness, refusal of humanity to the 'community' round the

corner – have nothing to do with communalism, and everything to do with inferiority of other communities when compared to the remarkable qualities of our own. . . .

Rorty's communalism (philosophical code name: 'anti-representationalism') is a defensive policy, in opposition to its universalist adversary bent on offensive. Our task is to protect the precious form of life which by fortunate yet fortuitous coincidence happens to be our own. Intercommunal differences are to be resolved, if at all, by being thrashed out in civilized discussion, instead of through invasions and annexation. Most importantly, our own community no more believes that differences present a challenge and require action. It is up to the others to make the effort. By the way (accidentally?), this change of mood chimes well with the waning of proselytizing ambitions of nation-states – those characteristically modern forms of social power which legitimized their exclusiveness in universalist terms. Peter Drucker's recent slogan – 'no more salvation by society' – fits neatly into a world in which societies (thus far synonyms for nation-states) no more promise or contemplate salvation. This leaves communities free from threat, but also bereaved. They may count on their own resources only. If there is to be an emancipation, it can be done only, Baron Münchhausen-style, by pulling one's own hair. Some hairs need more pulling than others, but this would hardly irritate those whose hair needs no pulling at all.

Rorty's revision of the philosophical agenda is, in other words, made to the measure of our time: *our* time, complete with the chosen and enviable space it has allotted us, the 'postmodern bourgeois intellectuals' (this is why the possessive pronoun 'ours' conveys more than mere chronological technicality). Hence its remarkable success, the truly wildfire-like spread of its popularity and influence. Giving the thus-far fullest and sharpest articulation to the momentum of our communal culture, it has become an instant classic of that culture. 'When tolerance and comfortable togetherness become the watchwords of a society, one should no longer hope for world-historical greatness. If such greatness – radical difference from the past, a dazzlingly unimaginable future – is what one wants, ascetic priests like Plato, Heidegger, and Suslov will fill the bill' (2: 81). Our time, and above all we whom our time pampered, think of the 'radical watersheds' and 'new starts' of the past with incredulity, and those of the future with revulsion. Our time, and above all we as its spokesmen, want rather more of the same. To this mood, itself such a 'radical difference' from the modern spirit, Rorty has given philosophical articulation.

In the light of the above, Rorty's late disavowal of self-definition as a 'postmodern philosopher' comes as a surprise. 'I now wish that I had not' used 'postmodern' to describe myself, says Rorty. 'I have given up on the attempt to find something common to Michael Graves's buildings, Pynchon's and Rushdie's novels, Ashberry's poems, various sorts of popular music, and the writings of Heidegger and Derrida' (2: 1). Well – to be sure, one can hardly imagine a phrase

more postmodern than the one quoted above. Rorty is at his 'most postmodern' in his denial of his postmodernity. What is postmodernity about, if not about resolute refusal to see connections in things, and above all about inability to conceive of itself as an entity, and a *historical* entity with that; to think of itself as a product and a correlate of selfsame processes which determined the autonomy it mistakes for indeterminateness?

University of Leeds

NOTES

- 1 One cannot avoid the temptation to recall in this context George Orwell's memorable description of the 'inside the whale' complex, to which intellectuals with singed fingers must want to succumb: 'The creature that swallowed Jonah was a fish . . . but children naturally confuse it with a whale, and this fragment of baby-talk is habitually carried into later life. . . . For the fact is that being inside a whale is a very comfortable, cosy, homelike thought. The historical Jonah, if he can be so called, was glad enough to escape, but in imagination, in day-dream, countless people have envied him. It is, of course, quite obvious why. The whale's belly is simply a womb big enough for an adult. There you are, in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens. A storm that would sink all the battleships in the world would hardly reach you as an echo. Even the whale's own movements would probably be imperceptible to you. . . . Short of being dead, it is the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility' (*Inside The Whale and Other Essays*, Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin, 1986: pp. 42–3).