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“This, But Unironically: Unprofessional Thoughts  
after Rorty”

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# This, But Unironically: Unprofessional Thoughts after Rorty

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“Like philosophy, anti-philosophy is for the philosophers.”

—Steven Shapin (2002)

In a well-known section of *Philosophical Investigations* (§ 309), Wittgenstein writes: “What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (Wittgenstein [1953] 1998). This is a striking image but not one whose immediate relation to either traditional or Wittgensteinian preoccupations in philosophy is obvious. This much is, perhaps, clear in the text. The principal fly bottles that Wittgenstein wishes to show flies the way out of are traditional philosophical problems. After all, he had just (in § 308) analogized a particular philosophical problem to a conjuring trick, and he had earlier analogized philosophical problems to getting “entangled in our own rules” (§ 125). Like the fly, the philosopher is beset with problems that amount to not knowing their “way about” (§ 123).<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein in these sentiments gives his own particular expression to a long-standing tradition of anti-philosophical philosophy that seeks to rescue philosophers and those under their influence from unsolvable problems of their own making. Anti-philosophical philosophies come in many varieties—scientific, commonsensical, pragmatic, analytic, . . . . When proponents of various deflationary philosophies come in contact with one another, there is often a contest to see who can be more anti-philosophically

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Wittgenstein’s goal is not to release the fly from the fly-bottle. He wishes only to show it the way out. Anyone who has tried to show a wasp the way out a window might argue for a revised goal here.

philosophical—an anti-metaphysical proponent of a semantic conception of truth might find themselves undercut by a proponent of a pragmatic account of truth, who in turn finds herself undercut by a disquotationalist, who then finds himself told that disquotationalism itself depends for its plausibility on the semantic theory of truth anyway. None of these philosophers believes in Truth or Correspondence Theory of Truth—the concepts we tilt at in philosophy are large enough to demand capital letters—but none are sure that their way of not believing in it is quite the most rigorously anti-philosophical.

This is as much as to say that when anti-philosophers meet one another, each thinks that the other is the fly and that any wall of mutual misunderstanding there is between them is part of a bottle enclosing the other. Each offers the other gestures of liberation; each is baffled that the other just stands there, gesturing back. Occasionally, one steps back to peruse their surroundings and wishes to proclaim to the other, “Far from being a fly-bottle, my house has many mansions. I shall go and prepare a place for you.”



After such an exuberant opening, we reach the confessional moment. I have studied some philosophers who have deflationary, even anti-philosophical, tendencies for long decades. Whether they live in fly-bottles or houses with many mansions, I know my way about their philosophical work. But it is precisely because I know my way about that I find myself baffled when those philosophers are accused of various philosophical mistakes that I swear they do not make. When the way out of the fly-bottle starts from a place you swear they are not and offers a path that takes them close to where they already are, something has gone awry. A metaphysical problem has the form: “Until a minute ago, I thought I knew my way about.”

Something like this bafflement is a characteristic philosophical experience, I would argue. The bafflement I have in mind is not complete lack of understanding but rather a sort of philosophical whiplash as one moves from paragraphs or sentences that seem not only reasonable but illuminating to paragraphs or sentences that allegedly follow in an argument or a train of thought that seem utterly out of place, non sequiturs that they make you wonder not just if you understood what you had read so far but whether you really understand logical consequence or the unity of thought.

Now, however common this philosophical experience may be, it is not only under-theorized but indeed under-expressed. There are good reasons for this. To give expression to this sort of experience violates the code of professional philosophy in at least two ways. First, it is contrary to professional philosophy to find any philosopher worthy of the name so puzzling.<sup>2</sup> Second, and more importantly, expressing this experience in print as part of your philosophical praxis is writing about something you admittedly (for that is the point) do not understand. This is very poor professional form—philosophy is hard enough when writing about what you understand; it is pretty much impossible to write usefully on philosophical matters you do not understand.

Here I shall undertake to exhibit this bad form. I shall here be if not proudly then at least firmly unprofessional in my philosophy.



Why might it be philosophically useful to do this? There is something useful in exploring the varieties of philosophical experience. That might be enough. But I think there is more than this. Confronting this sort of mismatch between philosophical sensibilities or this sense of not knowing your way about in reading a philosopher as they locate themselves with respect to philosophical projects that you understand very differently can help one interrogate one's own sensibilities; it might also lead that other philosopher or their advocates to try additional, different ways of inviting such puzzled philosophers into their philosophy. This is less a place for philosophical argumentation and more a place for philosophical invitation. Exploring this sort of philosophical mismatch can help us overcome the philosophy-is-argumentation bias so rife in academic philosophy. It can also bring philosophical pedagogy closer to the practices of written philosophical research.<sup>3</sup>

So far, the experience I have in mind has been very abstractly characterized. Let us now characterize it more exactly in a single case. In an

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<sup>2</sup> From this it follows, that those who we find so puzzling are not worthy of being called philosophers. And then the experience I mention is not an experience internal to the community of philosophers but what happens when we travel to other intellectual lands and meet strange, unexpected people, often incorrectly called "philosophers" by others. In analytic parlance, "Continental philosopher" often no more designates a type of philosopher than "alleged criminal" designates a type of criminal.

<sup>3</sup> One does not introduce, say, Spinoza's philosophy by arguing for it. Indeed, in teaching it one might never argue for it.

essay warmly received by Richard Rorty, Bjørn Ramberg characterizes one aspect of Rorty's project as a rejection of "representationalism," which has a "grip on analytic philosophy" and consists of two assumptions:

The first is the Kantian idea that knowledge, or thinking generally, must be understood in terms of some relation between what the world offers up to the thinker, on the one side, and on the other the active subjective capacities by which the thinker structures for cognitive use what the world provides. The second is the Platonic conviction that there must be some particular form of description of things, which, by virtue of its ability to accurately map, reflect, or otherwise latch onto just those kinds through which the world presents itself to would-be knowers, is the form in which any literally true—or cognitively significant, or ontologically ingenuous—statement must be couched.

Ramberg, 2000, 351<sup>4</sup>

Now, I must admit to an intense feeling of philosophical vertigo here. I understand the sentences but they do not describe any philosophical reality I am familiar with. Here is a list of the most important things I do not understand:

First, it seems odd that analytic philosophy combines a Kantian and Platonic sentiment into its very "problem-defining assumptions" (Ramberg, 2000, 351). An initial problem is that the very Kantian move that is the first assumption of representationalism was, in Kant's own work, a rejection of Platonic accounts of a priori knowledge. The inability of any account of a priori knowledge to succeed if it begins from the mind needing to grasp a form that objects have entirely independently of how our minds grasp those objects is the starting point of Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy. Transcendental idealism replaces Platonic idealism. Now, the second, allegedly Platonic, assumption is not exactly that objects have forms themselves independently of the mind but rather they have forms by which they "present" to the mind. But Kant rejects this also—there are forms of pure intuition but nothing is an object of knowledge for us simply by conforming to the forms of intuition—the manifold of intuition must be synthesized by the categories of the pure understanding to the unity of the object. Both a strict Platonist and a strict Kantian would reject the second assumption as stated, but it is an assumption, we are told, of the very broad project of analytic philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> For the warmth of Rorty's reception see Rorty, 2000, 370.

Now, let us set Herr Kant aside; what is Herr Kant is us, us analytic philosophers? This leads straight-away to my second set of bafflements. I find these assumptions hard to find in analytic philosophy. There are, I suppose, some Kantian philosophers in the articulated sense in analytic philosophy; there are some Platonist philosophers in the articulated sense in analytic philosophy. But there are also a lot of analytic philosophers who are neither. Which is as much as to say that within analytic philosophy as I understand it, there is a great deal of interest in knowledge and language but not always in knowledge or language as representational in the precise sense articulated by Ramberg.

Allow me an example not entirely at random. Rudolf Carnap began his philosophy in a very neo-Kantian manner. I do not merely admit this; I insist upon it. But the neo-Kantianism that he was influenced by had already traveled a far way from strict Kantianism and he took it so much further that he no longer saw his work as Kantian at all. A key moment in Carnap's sense that his philosophy was in no interesting sense Kantian was precisely when the last remnant of the transcendental mind left his philosophy. This happened when in his own reflections on the failure of the *Aufbau* project he decided that the problem was the ambiguity and vagueness of traditional epistemological vocabulary and rejected his own epistemological vocabulary of subjective experience and objective knowledge. In the formal mode of speech, there is no talk of the mind and its forms of knowledge; there is only talk of the logical forms of language. From 1934, at just the moment Carnap becomes the sort of philosopher who importantly influences the future course of analytic philosophy, Carnap very explicitly rejects Ramberg's Kantian assumption as stated. And he also rejects the Platonic assumption at the same time and for the same reason—there is no unique language that expresses how the world really is. There is an infinite plurality of languages that can be investigated for their logical consequences and potentially adopted for certain purposes.<sup>5</sup>

Now I am aware that Rorty from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* onward argues that the move to a preoccupation with forms of the mind and with epistemology to linguistic forms and semantics or philosophy of language is not really a new philosophical project, when that project continued to be interested in, say, the recommendation of linguistic forms for empirical science or a concern with empirical meaningfulness (Rorty, 1979, pp. 259ff). But then we have a conundrum. Carnap argues that his project

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<sup>5</sup> This is all too quickly stated but the arguments can be found in many of my publications, especially Richardson, 1996, 1997.

in 1934 is a new philosophical project and indeed the old project was confused and not viable while the new project is scientifically sound. Carnap seems entirely right about this. After the move to metalogic, to the formal mode of speech, and to logical pluralism, the epistemological point of the *Aufbau* project can no longer even be expressed and the logical presuppositions of the project have been set aside. A large scale metaphilosophical project that says that despite all this Carnap in 1928 and Carnap in 1934 is engaged in the same project seems to be operating at such a high level of abstraction that it does not and cannot illuminate either the details of the development of Carnap's thought or the way in which specifically his mature philosophical project came to inform analytic philosophical practice.

Now, if you wish to reject Carnap's project, that is your choice and I can only offer you my best wishes. But Rorty, it seems to me, wishes to do more than this—he wishes to expose the errors of Carnapian thinking, to locate the project in a large-scale set of projects aimed at a form of foundational epistemology, and to provide you, the reader, with the tools you need to escape such projects. And this is where my bafflement comes in. For in the diagnosis Carnap seems to be misplaced, the route out seems unavailable, and the desire to escape comes itself from a mistaken, indeed very uncharitably mistaken, account of Carnap's philosophical motives.

Poor, lost Carnap is bad enough, but this essay is actually about me, poor me. These are thoughts I have reading just the first three sentences of Ramberg's paper. Reflecting on them, I am aware of two things. First, there is a large literature by and about Rorty that I could work hard to understand to get a better sense of what is being claimed here and why. This I freely admit. I also admit to not feeling, however, particularly motivated to read it. This is because, second, in the cost-benefit analysis of academic life I cannot imagine that this is an efficient way for me to understand *what I want to understand* in the history of analytic philosophy and of philosophy of science. I don't feel much trapped inside my fly-bottle. It isn't so much that it is cozy here as that it is interesting here—far more interesting than it seems to be from the vantage point to which Rorty himself escaped.

I suspect that many philosophers have figures in their scholarly lives whose work they ought in principle be interested in and are, indeed, in fact, interested in, but into whose work they find it almost impossible to delve. Rorty is such a figure to me. His work is not wholly unintelligible and at times seems quite insightful. But the experience of reading it is so slow because there are so many things in it that seem strange—extremely

bold historical vision with a commensurate lack of attention to even some of the most salient aspects of the philosophical work whose history he wishes to explore, odd juxtapositions of work he finds either inspiring or incorrect, offhand remarks that border on or sometimes fully embrace being off putting.<sup>6</sup> His philosophical sensibility and mine have combined to make it impossible for me to engage seriously with his philosophy. This wouldn't really be a problem for anyone except perhaps me if it were not the case that I am philosophically interested in some of the things Rorty is doing—and I think many philosophers ought to be interested in Rorty's work—and I cannot help but think Rorty has muddled things up more than a little bit. That is, I find it impossible to discharge my professional obligations with respect to his work but I don't wish simply to leave it aside. Hence my need to treat him unprofessionally.



As I write this in the early weeks of the second Trump presidency, the example of a baffling and exasperating piece of Rortian philosophy that is most salient in my mind is his 1998 book, *Achieving Our Nation*. The book is currently celebrated for a passage in which Rorty, utilizing the work of Edward Luttwak, imagines that fascism might be the future state of America. Rorty (1998, 89–90) considers a situation of an American working class losing faith that anyone in the American political system is looking after their dwindling prospects or concerned for their interests. Then, he writes:

Something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodern professors will no longer be calling the shots [...]. One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion [...]. All the

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<sup>6</sup> Consider, on the last point, this strange claim (Rorty, 1998, 95): “The ubiquity of Foucauldian power is reminiscent of the ubiquity of Satan, and thus the ubiquity of original sin—the diabolical stain on every human soul.” Why is it not reminiscent, instead, of the ubiquity of oxygen or of our fellow humans? It seems quintessentially American not only to read Foucault through the story of Genesis but to take God's side in doing so.

resentments which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet. Rorty, 1998, 90

But for a few terms that now seem quaint (substitute “woke” for “post-modern”) and a few missing equity-deserving groups now at the centre of attention (transgender people, most particularly) nearly all of this passage seems to have come to pass. If, however, you are looking in the book for any way out of the imagined situation you might find yourself, as I do, sadly disappointed. Rorty, by and large, joins with other leftist intellectuals in blaming the situation on leftist intellectuals. The main move of the argument is to argue that a reformist American left interested in using the means of politics to better the estate of the working classes was replaced in the aftermath of the 1960s by a cultural left, given to writing books and theorizing Otherness. This left, given its theoretical, philosophical proclivities—its adoption of a spectator rather than an activist stance—is eventually deemed incapable of being a “political Left” (Rorty, 1998, 104). Rorty calls for a reinvigorated reformist left, one that goes “back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy” (Rorty, 1998, 105).

It would be cheap—not inaccurate, but cheap—to criticize Rorty for writing a philosophical book decrying the philosophical books of the cultural left and calling for a return to piecemeal reforms while not proposing any such reforms. It would be less cheap and more philosophically telling perhaps to note how little Rorty seems to value the political aspect of what he calls the cultural left. He limits the political value of the cultural left to a reduction of sadism, which he of course indicates is no small thing. But he seems to fail to note that a cultural commitment to being less cruel to black people or gay people or women or trans people can be, indeed has been, a driver of piecemeal legislative reform. Thus, while he makes a long-term prediction of possible fascism in reaction to a cultural left, he fails to imagine, for example, the legalization of gay marriage. Indeed, but for one dismissive remark about Tony Kushner, gay activism, including the stunning successes of gay people to get treatments for AIDS approved by the US government, is, in a book published in 1998, wholly unmentioned. One wonders indeed if the Voting Rights Act or Title IX really count for Rorty as piecemeal reform, coming as they did from the civil rights and women’s liberation movements. Or indeed whether

the whole of the regulatory state doesn't count because the reforms occur within already existing legislation.

There is a larger problem that I have with the diagnosis of the ills of the American left in the book, however. A clue to this problem is found in the famous passage we quoted above. Rorty's prediction is importantly wrong in one crucial way: despite continuing beliefs to the contrary, when fascism came to America, the population that led the change wasn't the "nonsuburban" population—that is, the urban working class people or indeed working class people more generally. The rise of Trumpism was not in the first instance a turning from the cultural left by working-class people who felt betrayed by the cultural left; it is a movement led by white middle-class men, and most especially middle to upper-middle class men without advanced education (Pew, 2024). These men seem less betrayed by the cultural left than challenged by it and angry at it. This suggests two things philosophically impoverished about the book: the discussion of the cultural left as ultimately not a political left seems entirely to misread just how controversial the image of a society with human rights for all and acceptance of racial, sexual, and gender minorities continues to be in the USA and, relatedly, a remarkable lack of curiosity about the images of America in various versions of right-wing politics.

On the latter issue, here is a remarkably bland passage that indicates to me the lacuna at the heart of the book:

As long as our country has a politically active Right and a politically active Left, this argument will continue. It is at the heart of the nation's political life, but the Left is responsible for keeping it going. For the Right never thinks anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left's struggle for social justice as mere trouble-making, as utopian foolishness.

Rorty, 1998, 14

In the era of Trump, this passage reads as astonishingly naïve: the American Right in the 2020s thinks pretty much everything needs to be changed. The Trumpian agenda is dismantling the government while reveling in the utter sadism of reversing gains in human rights. Far from being foolish trouble-makers, the Cultural Left, for Trumpists, have betrayed their country. But this understanding of the Left didn't come from nowhere—there is a clear throughline from Reaganism to Trumpism, from McCarthyism

to Trumpism, indeed from KuKluxKlanism to Trumpism. The deep historical anxiety of the American Right about the legacy of slavery and the treatment of Black people, about each new wave of immigrants, about gender relations, and so much more—all these things find no expression in Rorty's book. Rorty seems to believe that there is nothing interesting here. Rightism is, for Rorty, it seems, just complacency, ringed by nostalgia. All of which is to say, the historical framing of the book neglects how deeply different cultural visions have informed the American Left and Right since at least the rise of abolitionism.



Rorty's vision for achieving the promise of America is a vision of pride and hope. He draws inspiration from John Dewey and Walt Whitman in articulating this vision. He reminds us that the point of such visions is not description and thus the appropriate way to judge them is not through concerns with adequate representation or truth. We must, of course, accept this. Moreover, he says that the point of such visions is to "forge a moral identity" (Rorty, 1998, 13), indeed a national moral identity. Rorty also wishes to warn us off "sin" as a notion to use in such stories. Again, that seems reasonable. My counter-suggestion is that leaving aside the notion of "sin" should not blind us to the dangers of moral vice and that our stories of national identity should provide tactics and strategies to rise from vice into virtue. Hope and pride, I submit, are not sufficient.

So, let me sketch the beginnings of an alternative vision of America, one that like Rorty's looks for historical inspiration in the world of American philosophy, but one that is more alive to the institutional obstacles and moral vices to be overcome. In lieu of Dewey and Whitman, my choice of inspirations is Jane Addams and Horace Kallen, two towering figures of left politics and philosophy in the early twentieth century.

From Addams I take the sensibility that the situation in her time—an increasingly urban, immigrant, industrialized America—was a situation that required substantially new thinking, a new political philosophy, because the political philosophy embedded in America's founding documents and its immigration and naturalization practices was insufficient for the genuine problems and promises of the moment. Here is a characteristic quotation to this effect:

Were we not in the midst of a certain intellectual dearth and apathy, of a skepticism in regard to the ideals of self-government

which have ceased to charm men, we would see that we are testing our national life by a tradition too provincial and limited to meet its present motley and cosmopolitan character; that we lack mental energy, adequate knowledge, and a sense of the youth of the earth. The constant cry that American institutions are in danger betrays a spiritual waste, not due to our infidelity to national ideals, but arising from the fact that we fail to enlarge those ideals in accord with our faithful experience of life. Our political machinery devised for quite other conditions, has not been readjusted and adapted to the successive changes resulting from our development.

Addams, 1906, 39–40

The principal concern Addams expresses about the eighteenth-century republican and agrarian ideals in the urban, industrialized, and immigrant America of the turn of the twentieth-century is a limitation on the proper roles of government. She accuses the American government of two main failures in this regard. First, new immigrants are admitted to the United States with some lofty language about the sanctity of citizenship and a few abstract rights such as the right to vote. But they are given very little else—in particular, they are given no skills or training in the intelligent use of those rights. Second, the republican limitation of government to protection of the citizenry is turned inward in American cities and becomes the use of militarized police in the governance of the urban population. This positive neglect and militarized policing leads to an immigrant community that is not up to the task of participating as desired in the political or social life of their new country. It was to the task of doing better by the immigrant community in the settlement houses of Chicago that Addams dedicated the greatest amount of her energy.

Nonetheless, Addams did not blandly talk about the immigrant community as “nonsuburban” nor did she configure them as they incipient threat to American democracy. On the contrary, the vibrancy and specificity of the immigrant community leaps off every page as she lists (Addams, 1906, 41) “Italian lazzaroni, the peasants from the Carpathian foothills, and the proscribed traders from Galatia,” Irish, Germans, Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Finns, Jews, and so on. More importantly, the interaction among these subcommunities of urban immigrants is for Addams the source of new ideals of governance:

They are laying the simple and inevitable foundations for an international order as the foundations of tribal and national morality have already been laid. They are developing the only sort of patriotism consistent with the intermingling of the nations; for the citizens of a cosmopolitan quarter find an insuperable difficulty when they attempt to hem in their conception of patriotism either to the "old country" or to their adopted one. There arises the hope that when this newer patriotism becomes large enough, it will overcome arbitrary boundaries and soak up the notion of nationalism. Addams, 1906, 18–9

In Addams's vision it is precisely the cultural life of the cities of her time—the complicated relations of immigrant communities one to another, their economic stresses and opportunities under industrialization, their fractious relations with local government and law enforcement—that provide both the need for and the promise of reforming the American sense of governance. She finds her inspiration in the spontaneous working of immigrant neighbourhoods but also in the greater projects of sanitation, protection of children, disease control, and other social programs. This is less Rorty's imagined piecemeal federal legislative agenda than the hard, dedicated work of citizens and government from the civic to the international for the greater good.

Horace Kallen, writing in the wake of the First World War, reminds us that the political turn from legislative reform to culture was not a uniquely left phenomenon nor was it new in the 1960s. He writes:

What this war did was to turn the anxiety about property into one about people. It now became people, qualities of race, heritage and attitude, not law, which was the menace to property and to the status it signified [...]. A widespread hysterical taking of stock began. Immigration, formerly more than welcomed as an economic boon, was now scrutinized as a eugenic menace. The stuff and form of the American being were reexamined, not by visitors from abroad any longer, but by scared lodgers at home. Racial theories were promulgated descending variously upon the magical superiority of the Nordic stock. In the decade 1914–1924 a succession of manifestos appeared, each painting a blacker and blacker picture, until finally, the faint new patterns of association generated by the

industrial development of the United States were represented as an assault upon civilization. Kallen, 1924, 23–4

Which is to say that Kallen reminds us that the right-wing sadism of American culture has long had a political cast—and the very people to whom Addams looked on as the future of American democracy were, among the right, represented as its enemies. Kallen reminds us that the right does not wait for the left to carry politics forward and does not always seek simply to preserve the good of the present day. Kallen is writing specifically about both intellectuals and citizens who both projected a mythical past and offered a vision of the future, but one predicated upon resentments of the end of slavery and the defeat of the south, fear of immigrants, distaste for women’s suffrage. This view is theorized and practiced by the Ku Klux Klan, which

seeks social and intellectual conformity and economic and political rascality. Such an objective, brought in reflection down to its primary logical postulates and up to its ultimate social consequences, would eventuate in a philosophy of *Kultur*. Unopposed, it would render culture impossible in the United States. Kallen, 1924, 41

It is not against mere complacency and nostalgia that Kallen develops his own positive view, but upon a violent American cultural right that had then a very large impact on national life. His own vision—which he called “cultural pluralism”—not only is intellectually related to the project of Rorty’s cultural left, but indeed is among its intellectual progenitors. Like Addams, Kallen finds the strength and promise of America in precisely the populations despised by the cultural right. Indeed Kallen stresses that his vision is of a social and cultural democracy borne from the variety within the American community:

This democracy—in character and constitution social and intellectual rather than political—for its principle is, not one man one vote, but one temperament, one point of view, one vote—is that which is to-day at stake in the United States. It lies—as the history of the culture of any land makes amply clear—at the foundation of culture everywhere. It is the indispensable prerequisite to the existence and growth of culture in the United States. In manyness, variety, differentiation, lies the vitality

of such oneness as they may compose. Cultural growth is founded upon Cultural Pluralism. Cultural Pluralism is possible only in a democratic society whose institutions encourage individuality in groups, in persons, in temperaments, whose program liberates these individualities and guides them into a fellowship of freedom and cooperation. The alternative before Americans is Kultur Klux Klan or Cultural Pluralism.

Kallen, 1924, 43

Again, my points against Rorty are these: Addams and Kallen had a far more historically-informed and clear-eyed sense than did Rorty of where the antidemocratic tendency of the American people is located. They also saw that piecemeal legislative reform was insufficient for the political troubles of America—America needed to understand the source of its specific strength as a nation in its pluralism and in the mechanism by which pluralistic communities negotiated their complications. Addams argued strongly that this fact of American urban life required a new political philosophy and a rewrite of its very founding documents, while Kallen stressed that American unity was a choice between pluralism and active discrimination and sadism. Together, I submit, they give a better sense of the obstacles to achieving America and a more robust vision of an America worth achieving than one finds in Rorty.



Having ventured out to America allow me to conclude by returning to philosophy. My deepest sense of unease with Rorty's positions stems from what we might call the practical lessons of the rejection of representationism and the moral psychology of irony. In a passage of the book most relevant to professional philosophers, Rorty writes:

We can still be old-fashioned reformist liberals even if, like Dewey, we give up the correspondence theory of truth and start treating moral and scientific beliefs as tools for achieving greater human happiness, rather than as representations of the intrinsic nature of reality. We can be this kind of liberal even after we turn our backs on Descartes, linguistify subjectivity, and see everything around us and within us as one more replaceable social construction.

Rorty, 1998, 96

Reading this as an historian of analytic philosophy, I again find it strange not in the sense of a radical divergence from the tradition, but as a rather unremarkable stance within the tradition. Take again our friend Rudolf Carnap. He was perhaps not an old-fashioned liberal but more of a social democrat his whole life. He gave up the correspondence theory of truth and the idea of “representing the intrinsic nature of reality” as meaningless. He didn’t endorse any form of Cartesian epistemological or metaphysical sentiments. What is the move to the formal mode of speech and to “protocol sentences” if not linguistically eliminating any appeal to subjectivity in philosophy? Carnap was not one to speak the language of “social construction” but given the practical nature of choice of language and the inner dependence of ontology on language choice, the general idea of social construction is not far from his views. He frequently spoke the language of “tools” or “instruments” in discussing scientific theories. (He wasn’t big on talking about scientific beliefs; see the move to the formal mode of speech.) These were moves common to most logical empiricists and they all also thought these philosophical moves had no bearing on one’s political commitments.

What is different about Rorty’s position is the articulation and endorsement of the character of the liberal ironist. In a passage that is among the most cited in his work, Rorty introduces the “ironist” by listing three conditions the ironist fulfills:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.

Rorty, 1989, 173

Rorty’s own attempt, I suppose, to distinguish this view from Carnap’s comes in the next sentence: “Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one’s way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old” (Rorty 1989, 73).

Carnap is often understood to offer a perspective of general syntax or semantics in which various language forms can be cast and then to offer arguments from within that language for the adoption of one or the other among them. But there are technical reasons why this does not work and Carnap appears to have been fully aware of those reasons. Instead, Carnap seems rather to believe that in any given dispute about the adoption of languages in principle the disputants might be about to find a metalanguage that they'd both be willing to speak for the purposes of mutually intelligibility.<sup>7</sup>

A better sense of Rorty's distance from Carnap and the other logical empiricists is to be found elsewhere, I submit. I find it in phrases like the above "radical and continuing doubts." Or when he goes on to say that ironists realize that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" or when he says ironists are "never quite able to take themselves seriously" (Rorty, 1989, 73) because their language is subject to change and their lives are fragile. Some of these anxieties of the ironists seem fairly incoherent—what is the source of her radical doubts about her language if she has given up representationalism? Being uncertain whether your language is the best tool you could use to pursue your projects seems to be less in a position of doubt than of one of open-mindedness and experimentation. (One is tempted to say "pragmatism.") And, forgive me, but I cannot imagine a logical empiricist such as an Otto Neurath or a Hans Reichenbach pausing in their own positive philosophical efforts due to the knowledge that someone else with different values and different vocabulary redescribes their project as bad, mistaken, or silly. Nor can I imagine them not taking themselves seriously because language is changeable and life is fragile.

Indeed, on this last point Reichenbach was utterly insistent. Once we have given up any illusions that our philosophy is secured by the nature of reason or language, by the will of God or the fundamental nature of the universe, Reichenbach insists that all we have to count on is ourselves. The final lesson of his version of voluntarist noncognitivism in ethics is this:

We try to pursue our own volitional ends, not with the fanaticism of the prophet of absolute truth, but with the firmness of the man who trusts his own will. We do not know whether we shall reach our aim. Like the problem of prediction of the future, the problem of moral

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<sup>7</sup> This is, again, too quick. I have given more details in Richardson 2008, which is substantially indebted to Friedman 1999.

action cannot be solved by the construction of rules that guarantee success. There are no such rules. Reichenbach, 1951, 301

Life is fragile, society can be remade, vocabularies change, and everything depends on us. Reichenbach finds no reason to fail to take yourself seriously because of merely possible doubts, the potential availability of better tools, the “humiliation” of redescription (Rorty, 1989, 92), or one’s own fragility.

American society is currently being remade and, with it, so too is the whole world. Cruelty and sadism are ascendent; human rights are in retreat. I have argued here that what Rorty foresaw he foresaw through a glass darkly. In what he got wrong predictively, he failed to heed the warnings of classic American philosophers of the cultural left. In what lies ahead we cannot adopt the irony of philosophical liberalism. Those of us currently living the human comedy must take ourselves as seriously as our political enemies do. We must commit to the bit.

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