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Philosophy as an Instrument of Anti-Authoritarianism: On Ramberg's Dialogical Metaphilosophy

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This paper centres on an analysis of Ramberg's early paper, "Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy", which I see as presenting Ramberg's own original and explicitly Platonic dialogical metaphilosophy, one which I have been greatly influenced by. This metaphilosophy is designed to overcome the main blind spot Ramberg saw in Rorty, namely that he lacked a positive conception of philosophy, and hence provided no sustainable vision of how philosophy could serve pragmatic, anti-authoritarian ends. Despite Ramberg's charitable attribution of this metaphilosophy to Rorty, I argue that this is not plausible, and that Ramberg should in fact further distance it from Rorty with commitments to philosophy having a subject-matter and to the reality of experience. I end by questioning Ramberg's loyalty to naturalism, which I see as a tactic of materialism, and hence contrary to his pragmatic and anti-authoritarian aims.

1. Ramberg on Conversational Openness

Bjørn Ramberg is a pragmatic naturalist who was at one time, and perhaps still is, concerned with "overcoming the metaphor of inner space and the reifications associated with the concept of mind" (Ramberg, 2006, 226),

just like Wittgenstein, Ryle, Dennett and Rorty before him. My *Inner Space Philosophy* (Tartaglia, 2024) is a celebration of that very metaphor. It is not just the idea of mind as inner space that has concerned Ramberg, however, but metaphysics and ontology generally, which, like his mentor Rorty (Ramberg, 2023), he has seen as an outdated project of trying to rank descriptions from best to worst (Ramberg, 2013; 2018). I think the traditional metaphysical project of trying to work out what kind of reality we belong to, and what we fundamentally are, is not only perfectly legitimate, but, when done right, one of the most attractive features that philosophy has to offer to a world that currently cares little for it, to our detriment. And to bring up a third conspicuous point of apparent disagreement, Ramberg has taken seriously Rorty's anti-essentialism about philosophy, and so has thought there might be something wrong with saying that it has its own distinctive subject-matter (Ramberg, 2001, 39). I think it has a subject-matter, just as chemistry, history and criminology do (Tartaglia, 2016a: chapter 3; Tartaglia, 2016b). Our views seem rather divergent, then, and I am afraid I may even count as one of Ramberg's "die-hard Platonists, or (non-exclusive) fearmongers with chips on their shoulders and beams in their eyes" (Ramberg, 2001, 18). I am finding myself increasingly attracted to Platonist traditions of philosophy, I wrote a book about technological advances which might uncharitably be described as fearmongering (Tartaglia, 2020), and I may even have some chips and beams.

On the two occasions when I met Ramberg at conferences, however, I cannot remember our disagreeing about anything, and we were enthusiastically in agreement over our shared opposition to metaphysical materialism and scientism. Admiration for Rorty was the other main thing we had in common, Rorty himself having also been opposed to metaphysical materialism and scientism, of course. Rorty was Ramberg's mentor, whereas I never met him, but Rorty is still among my very favourite post-wwII philosophers and is certainly the one whose writings I have learned most from, by far. Ramberg is an insightful and imaginative interpreter of Rorty who usually looks for favourable interpretations, while being perfectly prepared to criticise and reject, whereas my own work on Rorty has primarily been in what Ramberg calls the "demonizing" camp (Ramberg, 2001), as you would expect from a die-hard Platonist fearmonger. But all I really oppose is the anti-metaphysical currents of the 20th century philosophy which Rorty channelled. Like Ramberg, I love his romantic, world-historical pictures, his determination to make philos-

ophy useful, that he wrote clearly and with style, and above all, his anti-authoritarianism; all features I find in Ramberg's work too.

Anti-authoritarianism is a central theme of the paper Ramberg very generously contributed to a symposium on my *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. I made no mention of that idea in the book, but did say "the truth of nihilism [i.e. human life's ultimate meaninglessness] provides no platform for bossiness" (Tartaglia, 2016a, 172), a remark Ramberg picked up on, observing that "'Bossiness' in this context is exactly the sort of intellectual authoritarianism that also is Rorty's target" (Ramberg, 2017, 149). This is how he explains the target:

For Rorty, intellectual authoritarianism is the impulse to short-circuit the effort to seek a communicative resolution of differences of views and interests, by invoking a justification to act on, or against, or in spite of, others, without conversing with them. His counter-position is to advance a view of democracy centred on the idea that our most important obligation is to ensure the widest possible effective access to deliberative political conversation. One important aspect of that effort was to counteract theoretical impulses that threaten to reduce our willingness or ability to listen to others Ramberg, 2017, 148

I find that a very plausible reading of Rorty. Why was he so concerned about representationalism in *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature*? Because it can be used to close conversations: "this is an accurate representation so there's nothing more to say, you're not at liberty to disagree". What is his concern in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*? For people to realise the contingency of their beliefs and be ironic about them, rather than authoritarian, and then to take those beliefs out into open public conversations, in search of solidarity with other ironists and non-ironists alike. What was his problem with religion? It can be a "conversation-stopper" (Rorty, 1999, 168–74). And with the phenomenal conception of consciousness common to Descartes, Nagel and Chalmers? The same (Rorty, 2007, 12); although in that particular case I think he could not have been more wrong.

Conversation-stopping authoritarianism is what I was driving at when I wrote that, "the truth of nihilism provides no platform for bossiness", as Ramberg saw better than I did at the time. The meaning of life is a very bossy idea, since it provides a supposedly non-negotiable cosmic standard against which everything we do is to be judged. The trend of discussions of the meaning of life throughout the 20th century was one of

subjectification exactly because this traditional idea started to seem too authoritarian (there was also the matter of its extreme evidential precariousness), so philosophers gradually started talking more about meaning *in* life (Baier, 1957), the kind you can supposedly have without a cosmic purpose. This more individualistic notion of meaning is now the dominant discourse and still has plenty of authoritarian potential if the “meaning” in question is thought to be something objective and precisely measurable. I’m not sure I want meaning of that kind in my life, I’d have to examine the ingredients carefully, and yet upholders of meaning in life always take it for granted that to not have any meaning in your life would be a terribly bad thing. Well, nobody can condemn my life as meaningless without going to a lot of conversational effort, because I have said I think it’s meaningless, while explaining why I do not think “meaningless” counts as a condemnation. Nihilism blocks all “meaning” approaches to authoritarianism and does not open up a new one, such as that we must be defiant in the face of nihilism (Camus, 1940) or treat life with indifference (Attoe, 2023), for instance. Nihilism does not tell you how to live.

I said “*the truth* of nihilism”, however, which Rorty would not like in the sense I meant it, namely the full-bodied, objective sense he campaigned against. If nihilism is true, as I think it most probably is, then there is no cosmic meaning binding our lives, so if you represent reality as containing such a meaning you are wrong. Although Ramberg is right that I share Rorty’s commitment to anti-authoritarianism, then, his was far more radical: he might have agreed that nihilism has anti-authoritarian implications compared to purported truths about the meaning of life, but he would presumably have to insist that at a deeper level (could Rorty allow for such a thing?) *all* supposedly objective truths are authoritarian.

I think there is something to that, but not much. What little there is to it is that if nihilism is true, then the believer in a meaning of life is not allowed to disagree with nihilism. Reality is not being authoritarian by preventing this, however, it is just being what it is; similarly, my car is not being authoritarian by preventing me from lifting it, it is just too heavy. It is not reality that does not allow people to disagree, it is people. I find this kind of “authoritarianism” not only harmless but sensible. You can go around saying you can lift the car if you want—so the authoritarianism in question is quite unlike the political kind—but you are liable to look silly if asked to prove it. The “authoritarianism” is just that you are not allowed to say things like that (i.e. deny well-known objective truths) unless you want to look silly—so it is for your own good. And the norm can protect

us in more serious ways, of course, such as against liars and manipulators. Since lying and manipulating has never been easier than it is now, due to the rise of the information and communications technology which chains us down to watch the shadow-show, I find Rorty's anti-truth philosophy spectacularly off-message and, in the current climate, as unpragmatic as it could possibly be (Tartaglia, 2020: chapter 8), although I am sure it sounded promising in the 1960s.

In metaphysical matters, there is little risk of running afoul of the truth norm because the truths are never well-known. It is an area of inquiry—one which comes naturally to us, and hence has continuous history stretching back to the ancient world in all the major world traditions of philosophy—in which the evidence is so sketchy that you can believe all kinds of falsehoods without much risk of looking silly. Nevertheless, philosophers should always try their best to get to the truth. That is part of the job description: to advocate what you take to be the best possible candidate for truth in an area, not the best possible candidate for drawing attention to yourself, or getting into that prestigious journal to progress your career. I see no incompatibility between being focused on truth and being a pragmatist. Pragmatist philosophers focus only on truths they think might prove useful, in accordance with Peirce's Pragmatic Maxim, while avoiding pedantic ones which can barely sustain interest within insular discussions among specialists. If that is all the word means then I want to be a pragmatist, but unfortunately, I find it too often associated with anti-philosophy and naturalism—"Philosophy Critical Pragmatic Naturalism" as Ramberg dubs it (Ramberg, 2018).

Another problem with Rorty's approach to anti-authoritarianism, one which Ramberg often brings up, as have I, is that "the power of philosophy to serve the moral ends of the philosopher is weakened by the fact that philosophy is not acknowledged as a substantive project" (Ramberg, 2017, 150). For a pragmatist, someone concerned to have positive effects with their philosophical thought, the problem could hardly be bigger. For who wants to listen to a philosopher who says philosophy is rubbish, except perhaps when they are talking about how rubbish philosophy is? A member of the public might heed this anti-philosopher's advice and thereby avoid wasting time on philosophy, but that would give them no reason to take the anti-philosopher's views on political or moral issues any more seriously than those of an intelligent journalist. And they ought to take them less seriously than those of academics from legitimate disciplines, whose expertise might have some bearing on the issues.

Rorty often said that he did not intend *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as an attempt to undermine the philosophical tradition, and indeed, that he was surprised it had been read that way. I find it unsurprising given that he leaves it until the final few pages of the book to say that philosophy *will* have a future, while remaining conspicuously less committal on whether it *should*, after hundreds of pages of arguing that the Western philosophical tradition had become an obstacle to progress, that it had undermined itself in the 20th century, and that attempts to resuscitate the beast were highly inadvisable.¹ This impression of anti-philosophy was cemented by *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in which he talks less about philosophers and more about novelists; and by this time he had undergone a career change, so was no longer a professor of philosophy but rather a professor of humanities, subsequently a professor of comparative literature. I think one might be forgiven for mistaking Rorty for an anti-philosopher.

He did not intend to undermine philosophy, but he clearly did have very serious, lifelong doubts about it. A similar phenomenon can be found in others of his generation, such as Dennett, whose doubts came from a different place, namely his admiration for science, such that he took great pride in being both a philosopher *and* a cognitive scientist, eventually losing his patience with philosophers who make no effort to put forward scientifically testable hypotheses (Dennett, 2016, 67–8). I think the common cause was that the success of science and technology in the 20th century gave some philosophers the gut instinct that materialism must be true, and hence that the history of metaphysical philosophy, in which materialism is just one option among many, must be a source of illusion—aeroplanes and space rockets had created a strong faith that the materialism of the Stoic and Epicurean schools should never be questioned again (Tartaglia, 2020: chapters 2 and 3). Nevertheless, Rorty's metaphilosophical self-doubts did not prevent him from having social impact—he was one of the most successful public philosophers of his era. He earned his platform by being a famous philosopher, however, and that platform will not last if philosophers cannot think of anything they can bring to the conversation which a layman could not.

Ramberg, unlike Rorty, sees that if philosophy is going to be sustainably pragmatic in the cause of anti-authoritarianism, then it must bring something distinctive to the table. He saw this pragmatic concern in my

¹ The effort he put into the latter task (Rorty, 1979: chapters 5 and 6) makes me suspicious of attempts to portray him as a reformer.

metaphysical account of nihilism, and contrasted it with Rorty's purely instrumental and political approach, saying that in my case,

the concern with openness goes beyond the instrumental and the political, it is an inherently philosophical concern. There is no guarantee that philosophy will serve openness. But when it does, it does so on terms that are genuinely its own. And that serves, not entirely paradoxically, to increase its potential for instrumental and political effect. Ramberg, 2017, 150²

After reading Ramberg's commentary I started to think in terms of philosophy being valuable for maintaining conversational *openness*. The word was just right, so I used it to explain why philosophers and scientists impressed by invidious comparisons between progress in science and in philosophy are missing the point:

Judged by the standards of closure, philosophy has had little or no success: because it still asks its ancient questions. But these are not the standards of philosophy. By its own standards, it has succeeded magnificently because it *kept the conversation open*. We never let it close down, and so have managed to maintain a rational conversation that stretches throughout our history; one anyone can join, at some level at least, without the need for specialist training or equipment. That conversation pervades our history: idealism, materialism, scepticism, stoicism, rationalism, empiricism, romanticism, utilitarianism, feminism, postmodernism—these are just some of the many currents of thought which were born of philosophy and which have had an incalculable influence on people's lives, for better or for worse. Philosophy is a conversation of intellectual freedom: one which answers to natural curiosity, relies on ordinary reasoning and sense-making, and concerns reality itself.

² Is the air of paradox caused by an association of traditional metaphysics with lack of concern for instrumental and political matters? Rorty would make that connection, as would Dewey; perhaps most pragmatists would. I have my doubts about whether the history bears it out, however. Otherworldly prioritising of spiritual life was typically coupled with moral and political agendas for how to deal with less important and less real daily life, sometimes ingenious and sensible agendas. Plotinus was said to be ashamed to have a body, but he still set up and ran the most successful school of philosophy of his day, which doubled as an orphanage. His student Porphyry, no less otherworldly, advocated for veganism, and against a trendy new religious movement that was becoming very popular, Christianity.

But it is inconclusive, never-ending and wearying.

Tartaglia, 2020, 44; *italics in the original*

The closure of finding the right answer is relaxing because then you no longer have to think. For example, if we take it for granted that the mind must be physical *in some sense* (does it really matter which?), then we can leave it to the neuroscientists to acquire the knowledge needed by technologists to replicate the semblance of our cognitive functions in AI robots, then mass-produce them to transform human life. The problem is that the need for philosophical thought tends to reemerge of its own accord as our technology advances without philosophical reflection: when the AI robot gladiators scream in agony in the Colosseum, for instance, should we feel sorry for them? Can you have an affair with a robot, or are they just sex toys partners should tolerate?

Ramberg's reading of my work is now central to how I think of philosophical progress, namely as a matter of expanding the open conversation of philosophy among the worldwide public. The ultimate and very idealistic aim of this is for human beings to become a "philosophical species", as I like to put it (Tartaglia, 2024), together with the more immediate political aim, as advocated by Hans Jonas (1979), of bringing technological development into the remit of ordinary democratically chosen policy and decision-making, so that philosophically illiterate and unelected superrich people do not get to shape our future with their dreams and hunches.

Given my debt to Ramberg, then, let us return to the apparently striking points of disagreement in the first paragraph of this essay. In each case I just picked out an apparently incriminating (from my perspective) remark which shows nothing more than that Ramberg has thought through some of Rorty's key ideas, taken them seriously. Nevertheless, he does want to be a naturalist, whereas I do not, so that is something we shall have to return to. We are both aiming for conversational openness, and so both good Rortyans in that crucial respect, but can Pragmatic Naturalists and Pragmatic Metaphysicians peacefully co-exist? To begin unlocking the answer, let us turn to the paper from which I found the "die-hard Platonist" quote. It originates from the 1998 conference in Brazil which Ramberg talks very fondly about in his recollections of being mentored by Rorty (Ramberg, 2023), so this is a very early Ramberg paper, even earlier than the legendary one in which he persuaded Rorty to change his mind (Ramberg, 2000).³

³ I reviewed the book it appeared in, announcing with great excitement: "The final essay by Bjørn Ramberg (mysteriously missing from the list of Notes on Contributors) persuades

2. Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy

I have named this section after Ramberg's paper, which might more aptly have been called "Plato and the Instruments of Philosophy", given that he comes down in favour of Plato; it is from Plato that he takes the metaphor of argument being the "instrument" of the philosopher (*Rep.* 582E). This shows admirable independence of mind when you consider the circumstances in which it was written, namely for a prestigious conference in a glamorous destination during which it became clear to him, as an aspiring academic, that one of the world's most important philosophers, known for his vehemently anti-Platonist views, had decided to take him under his wing to help him get into the profession. Ramberg was risking it!

He starts by quoting Rorty's response to Putnam's argument that Rorty's rejection of objective truth undermines itself, with the response being that he wanted to move, "everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics" (Rorty, 1998, 57). I always found that an odd one: surely the contradiction shows the theorizing went wrong, so why expect any social benefits? If Rorty cannot provide a coherent reason to believe there is something wrong with objective truth and representation, why care about his unresearchable hunches about the social benefits of abandoning those ideas? If they are real features of our world—if we perceptually and cognitively represent a world about which objective truths can be known—then disbelieving in those features would not benefit us, rather as disbelieving in brick walls would not benefit us.

I think it was just wishful thinking. Rorty wanted to be talking about cultural politics, it was what he really cared about, so he wanted to think his expertise in philosophy had led him there, which, as Putnam's argument shows, it cannot have done. Ramberg's more charitable interpretation is that,

Construing traditional epistemology as unselfconscious sociology, and metaphysics, with Nietzsche, as an oddly alienated species of literature of self-creation, Rorty suggests that there are no deeper terms of assessment for philosophical theorizing

Rorty to abandon some of his best-known views!" (Tartaglia, 2003). I found it suspicious there would be information about all the other writers, but nothing about the star who achieved the big result—perhaps "Bjørn Ramberg" was a pseudonym being used to disguise the identity of somebody famous, perhaps even Rorty himself. I should have known that nothing that exciting happens in philosophy anymore.

than those expressing moral and political values.

Ramberg, 2001, 15

But if you think of epistemology and metaphysics like that, then you must be taking for granted some kind of materialist or naturalistic worldview, one which has been rejected on epistemological and metaphysical grounds by most of our philosophical traditions. You might even say that the Western philosophical tradition began with a rejection of naturalism, when Plato's philosopher stopped chasing shadows and emerged from the cave; or perhaps when Parmenides dealt with science under the category of "opinion" rather than "truth". In any case, if Rorty's worldview has not been coherently argued for, as I think Putnam's argument proves, then he was not entitled to regard epistemology and metaphysics as he did. He did indeed see epistemology as "unselfconscious sociology" and metaphysics as "an oddly alienated species of literature of self-creation", as Ramberg so elegantly puts it, but if Putnam's argument works then we have no reason to follow suit—which is the Protagorean predicament that Plato saw so clearly (*Tht.* 161D–162A; *Crat.* 386A–E).

This is not to deny a certain attractiveness to the idea that there are "no deeper terms of assessment for philosophical theorizing than those expressing moral and political values"—for if we are philosophizing, perhaps we should not consider anything more important than whether the philosophizing promotes moral and political progress. The problem with this reasoning, however, is that once epistemology and metaphysics have been disavowed, the blood runs out of "deeper" and "philosophical", the statement drops dead, and we find ourselves struggling to remember what we thought we meant by it. Rorty is proposing that philosophers do something more important and better than epistemology and metaphysics, something which contributes to moral and political progress... What? Until we know that, we will not know what "deeper" and "philosophical" mean. It is a bit like saying that football should no longer have goals, that goals have hitherto ruined the game. If you want me to take that idea seriously, you will need a good suggestion for how it can work better without goals while remaining football.

Ramberg seeks to solve this problem for Rorty by showing that his "metaphilosophical critique is itself a distinctively philosophical activity", one which "offers us a possibility for the kind of self-renewing interpretation that philosophy has been performing on itself since Plato opened the chasm between appearance and reality" (Ramberg, 2001, 15). This

is a Rortyan interpretation of Rorty. Rorty never showed much interest in what “the Aristotle who walked the streets of Athens” had in mind (Rorty, 1998, 250), his primary interest in other philosophers, past and present, was always in the use he could put their writings to. Ramberg owns up to this immediately, saying that to present Rorty as providing “a pragmatist view of what philosophy is” might be considered “a form of co-option” (op. cit, 16), given his commitment to anti-essentialism. Too right, and the thought Rorty is being co-opted into is Ramberg's own, namely that to serve the social purpose of promoting conversational openness over closure requires openness to have something to do with the nature of philosophy—the very same thought he influenced me with some two decades later.

Ramberg contrasts “deflationist” and “demonizing” interpretations of Rorty with his own. The deflationist sees Rorty as a reformer rather than an anti-philosopher, one who had some good points but was prone to rhetorical hyperbole, and hence brought the anti-philosopher misinterpretation upon himself. The demonizer, by contrast, “correctly” sees the radicalness of Rorty's opposition to “still prevalent conceptions of the tasks of philosophy” (ibid., 16). We demonizers do indeed see that, and I personally do not think he ever came up with a better recommendation to philosophers wanting to follow him into a rosier era of philosophy than: “try to think of something completely different, preferably something closer to literature, poetry and politics—oh yes, and talk about the historical greats of philosophy if you can, some of them were useful in their time, but you'll have to interpret them as saying things they obviously didn't mean, which is okay since I like that radical new French philosophy”. From Dennett the recommendation was the much simpler: “become scientists”, whereas from Carnap it was: “become logicians”. They all had the same 20th century affliction, just different outside interests.

Ramberg might not agree with my dismissive assessment of Rorty's positive agenda, but he certainly sees that the demonizers are onto something. What Ramberg thinks they have failed to see, however, is that philosophy is “a practice which depends on just the sort of confrontation with itself that Rorty engages us in” (ibid., 16). So, it turns out that deflationists and demonizers alike have missed “Rorty's key contribution to philosophical thought” (ibid.), his “greatest contribution to pragmatism and to philosophy” (ibid., 21). He did have a “positive view of philosophical reflection” after all (ibid., 17), an important one, but his anti-essentialism blinded him to it. I am sceptical of this as an interpretation of “the Rorty

who walked the streets of Stanford”, but we are in the realms of Rortyan interpretation now. Ramberg uses imaginative interpretation of Rorty’s writings as a method for putting his own views forward, just as Rorty did with Sellars, Quine, Kuhn and Davidson; and just as Plotinus and Proclus did with Plato, for that matter.

Rorty’s “greatest contribution” developed from his view, which Ramberg goes on to reject, that argument should not be made central to our notion of philosophy because of its inherent conservatism. Philosophy, he thought, should be a matter of looking for innovative ways to redescribe the world to drive moral and political progress, which would be impossible if the new way of seeing the world must be argued for in the terms of the old one. Here we see the influence of Thomas Kuhn’s sceptical view of scientific progress, which Rorty made central to the metaphilosophy of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where essentialist metaphysics and representational epistemology are held responsible for the authoritarian ideal of universal commensuration to which even natural science could not live up, as Rorty thought Kuhn had shown. Since the impossible ideal of universal commensuration is an obstacle to linguistic innovation, then, Rorty wanted philosophy to reinvent itself as an engine of linguistic innovation. And that is why he was opposed to making rational argument integral to the philosophical enterprise.

Ramberg sees that Rorty is thereby committing himself to a view about the nature of philosophy, one “rooted in romanticism” (ibid., 28), which he needed in order to challenge argument-based, commensuration-seeking conceptions of philosophy without falling into the “bland pluralism” (ibid., 38) of saying that philosophy is whatever philosophers do; which is what he often did say, as did Quine. I think a reasonable response to bland pluralism, given Rorty’s dire assessment of the history of philosophy, would be to not care what philosophers do. However, if Rorty has a positive alternative then perhaps the situation is not so dire. Perhaps people could learn to be positive about philosophers, despite their having held back linguistic innovation for millennia with their awful representational thinking and authoritarian ideal of commensuration—for at least they eventually saw the error of their ways and are now working hard at promoting linguistic innovation. Good luck to them, everyone makes mistakes, they might be worth listening to these days, give them another chance.

Rorty will not say he has a positive alternative, however, according to Ramberg’s diagnosis, because of his commitment to anti-essentialism,

which is what forced him to fall back on bland pluralism and hence be mistaken for an anti-philosopher. Essentialism is indeed the cardinal sin of philosophy for Rorty, of which representationalism was only one particular manifestation (Rorty, 1979, 357). Ramberg does not criticise Rorty by defending an essentialist view of philosophy, however (I would), but rather for not being anti-essentialist enough, saying we need to “flush out” his “residual essentialism regarding argument and rationality that reveals itself in the dualistic elements in Rorty’s account of intellectual progress” (op. cit., 29).

Rorty portrays argument as a paradigm-bound “straightjacket” (ibid.) that inhibits creative redescription by imposing methodological constraints on how redescription is permitted to proceed. Ramberg, however, prefers Plato’s view according to which argument is “dialogical, and thereby transcends methodology” (ibid.). It is because Rorty thinks in a dualistic and essentialist way about redescription, which in his romantic book is the “most important thing we can do” (Rorty, 1979, 358–9), that he sets up a false dichotomy between the bad, conformist approach of only accepting redescription when good argument calls for it, and the good, creative approach of redescribing the world however we like, so long as a social benefit can be envisaged. Rorty called Kuhn the “most influential philosopher to write in English since the Second World War” (Rorty, 1999, 175), and here we see the profound influence he had on Rorty. Rorty thought the paradigm of philosophy was obsolete because it served obsolete social purposes and expressed a socially damaging desire to be obsequious towards a higher authority called “Reality”. As such, he obviously did not want to be seen to be presenting philosophical arguments, and hence working within the very paradigm he was out to demolish. Good “science” in the paradigm of philosophy (an exclusively Western phenomenon, according to one of his most implausible views⁴) could only ever be of the abnormal kind, that is, creative redescription aimed at moral and political progress, such as his own creative redescription of the traditional Protagorean relativist position as the laudable characteristic of taking an ironic attitude to one’s most deeply held beliefs.

Rorty could only justify calling that redescription “philosophical” by appealing to the bland pluralist observation that a philosopher penned it. That is because he did not realise he was updating Protagorean relativism. Rorty was not only committed to constructive redescription, how-

⁴ See Tartaglia, 2014.

ever, he engaged in the destructive kind too, with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* his great achievement in that idiom. The destructive kind is the abnormal science of undermining traditional philosophical views, which Rorty used his Protagorean philosophical views to achieve, while granting a notable exemption for the equally traditional philosophical doctrine of materialism, which he endorsed throughout his career, while always insisting that it should be understood in a strictly non-metaphysical and non-reductive sense. This is because Rorty combined some Epicureanism with his Protagorean relativism; ancient philosophical schools often adopted each other's doctrines, and there is indeed a strong dose of scepticism in the atomism of the Epicureans.

If Rorty had not set himself against argument because of his dualist, essentialist thinking about redescription, as Ramberg sees it, then he might have realised that he himself argued, "Rortyan redescription" being a kind of philosophical argumentation (op. cit., 30). It was philosophical because it accorded with Plato's dialogical and non-methodological notion of argument as the instrument of the philosopher. As artificial intelligence has recently informed us, by reading previously unreadable papyrus scrolls, Plato spent his last night on earth listening to a "flute girl" (Latzka Nadeau, 2024)—the flute was her instrument, argument was his.⁵ Plato's notion of argument accommodates not only the Rorty/Kuhn notion of argument-based normal science, but also the creative, non-methodological process of redescription in abnormal science, which Rorty preferred. It is the latter inclusion which allows Ramberg to solve the problem which Rorty's blind spot created, namely that of draining all the blood out of philosophy.

The Platonic notion of argument includes, while being wider than, the sense in which I tell you my argument to hopefully persuade you of a truth. Plato and the Platonists went in for plenty of this, of course, but at least as important, as Ramberg sees it, is Plato's notion of argument as the dialogical process of running through your reasoning process to explain to others why you believe what you believe. This helps us understand each other so we can work together in the rational pursuit of truth and understanding—and pleasure too, to accommodate Epicureans like Rorty. This wider notion of argument has moral value because it allows us to rationally and equitably resolve disagreements, rather than having to resort to brute force or more subtle forms of coercive manipulation. Ramberg

⁵ Unfortunately, he did not think she was very good; you could not get the staff in Athens in those days.

thinks this makes good on Rorty's view that there are "no deeper terms of assessment for philosophical theorizing than those expressing moral and political values". Plato would say that the deepest term for philosophical theorizing is the truth, but since The One is the same as The Good, they are not so far apart on these matters.

To illustrate Ramberg's distinction between argument in the narrower, truth-seeking sense and argument in the wider, dialogical sense, take the reasons I give you for why I think there is an intellectual reality of Forms that transcends the spatiotemporal illusion that the unenlightened call the "world". I am trying to persuade you of something I think is true and important. You may not be persuaded, but I can still succeed in my dialogical task, which is to explain to you why I think what I do. Arguing in this wider sense, which Ramberg calls "process argumentation" (op. cit., 35), helps us to better understand each other and our differences in belief, intuition and reasoning, as we work together for the common good of continually being in possession of the best descriptions of reality we can manage to produce. This process of argumentation allows us to better argue in the narrower and more immediately truth-seeking sense too, such that if you will not accept my reasons for believing in a transcendent world of The Forms, then you ought to say why, so we can carry on having a rational conversation on the topic. When you explain why I have failed to persuade you, I am given an opportunity to overturn your reasoning, which you would hope I could do if I am indeed right. For Plato and the Platonists, except perhaps during the period of the Sceptical Academy, the truth directing function of argument was its most important, even though they clearly thought the dialogical function very important too. For a contemporary pragmatist like Ramberg, who is nowhere near as sceptical about full-blooded Platonist truth as Rorty was, but still a little suspicious, the dialogical function is at least as important as the truth directing one, perhaps more so.

Plato's conception of argument as both truth-revealing and edifying, with the two instrumental effects combining to create a beautiful and moral harmony, reveals to Ramberg the main problem with the Kuhnian model of intellectual progress which so influenced Rorty. This is that it has no practical application. At the time when radical new redescrptions start to look viable, nobody can be sure whether they are in the vanguard doing abnormal science, or a mad dog whom normal scientists should dismiss to uphold public rationality. Only historians can decide this. If we are all engaged in rational Platonic argument, however, and hence are

genuinely trying to understand each other for the purposes of settling on the best available description of human experience, then those aspiring to be in the vanguard of a new paradigm will still be trying to give rational arguments for what they believe—they will not disown argument, as Rorty did in words, if not deeds.⁶ They will engage in a “discourse where efforts to articulate features of human experience and ends engage with, and are shaped by, one another. That is how new ways of describing the world and our place in it come to be, new modes of description which allow us to see new possibilities for experience, which in turn provide us with new reference points for evaluations of those very descriptive strategies.” (ibid., 32)

What Ramberg has in mind is creative attempts at redescription guided by “human experience”, rather than a method that has been developed by attending to past successes. This is my favourite kind too. As an improvising jazz musician, I know there are methodological formulae you can follow which make you sound better. I have been working on a certain altered scale pattern all year because I know that when I play it at an appropriate moment it will make my improvised solo sound more sophisticated. If I learned lots of methods like that, as more dedicated players do, then I would sound better, of this I have no doubt. Nevertheless, the moments that make jazz great are not the result of virtuoso methodological applications, they are the spontaneous ones—it is not for nothing that jazz has been called the “sound of surprise”. The highlights in jazz improvisation happen when inspiration lifts the performance—as a player you know when that is happening, and if you listen back you are surprised and pleased. The methods make that sort of thing happen more often, both by improving technique and instilling jazz instinct, and they also make your solos sound better when things are not happening yet, or anymore, or tonight. All the main methods in jazz began when “that sort of thing” happened to a pioneering improviser. Ramberg says, “there is something profoundly anti-philosophical about methodological conceptions of philosophical rationality” (ibid., 36). I agree, the best philo-

⁶ That would be Ramberg’s charitable interpretation. I think Rorty sometimes disowned argument in both words and deeds, since I accept Putnam’s argument. For example, the main argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* depends on two objective truths: that there is a myth of the given and that there is no analytic / synthetic distinction. But the conclusion this is supposed to establish is that there are no objective truths. How are we supposed to move that “over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics”? How do you gauge the social benefits of believing that Wilfrid Sellars was right about the myth of the given?

sophical rationality happens mysteriously in the moment, and I bet it was like that for Parmenides, Plato and Rorty too.

To endorse Ramberg's Platonic, anti-Kuhnian, anti-Rortyan conception of argument as the instrument of the philosopher, is to think that philosophy is a valuable and continuous ancient tradition of explaining to each other the reasons for our disagreements, as we work towards the twin goals of better understanding the world and each other. This is what I am calling Ramberg's dialogical metaphilosophy. It has contemporary resonance, since the view that philosophy aims at understanding rather than truth has been gaining momentum in recent years; it received a very strong defence from Michael Hannon and James Nguyen (2022), for example. Nevertheless, I think philosophy aims at both understanding *and* truth, which seems to be a commitment of Ramberg's dialogical metaphilosophy too, given that it understands philosophical rationality as a matter of trying to "articulate features of human experience".

Of course, the dialogical metaphilosophy I am calling "anti-Rortyan" is attributed to Rorty by Ramberg; he risked it in writing a Platonist paper for that conference but was not suicidal. Nevertheless, I see no desire to vindicate the philosophical tradition in Rorty, to show that philosophy has something unique to offer the world, something which binds our current efforts proudly to the philosophers of the ancient world. Rorty said the philosophical tradition either had nothing binding it together (bland pluralism) or that the bond was rubbish (representationalism, truth, commensuration, essentialism). He had the 20th century philosopher's affliction. Ramberg has argued that *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* moved beyond destructive metaphilosophy to provide us with a positive vision of what edifying philosophy could amount to (Ramberg, 2013).⁷ But did it really? The references to the history of philosophy in that book are just as negative as before, and now he is talking more about other, less problematic "genres of literature", especially novels. His views on irony and solidarity are of course informed by his understanding of the history of philosophy, but he would deny they were specifically philosophical. His aim was not to revive the history of philosophy with a creative redescription, it was to serve a public purpose by arguing for some of his own original ideas. He was trying to do something different and useful, for sure, but not in order to revitalise his tradition; the latter is just an abstract something which he said he wanted to happen whenever he had to defend himself against the charge of anti-philosophy.

⁷ As was pointed out by a reviewer of the book in which this article appeared, however, Rorty later renounced edifying philosophy; see Maher, 2013.

Ramberg's dialogical metaphilosophy is a perfect antidote to Rorty's blind spot, then, but it needs some supplements. It needs a commitment to philosophy having a subject matter, because you cannot continue an academic tradition by redescribing it unless you are talking about recognisably the same topics. You cannot redescribe mathematics as not concerned with numbers. It also needs a commitment to human experience and its ability to guide our descriptions, such as the experience of the impossible heaviness of the car if I were to foolishly try to lift it. I am not sure naturalists want to accept that reality, however, so to end this piece let us turn briefly to the thorny issue I raised earlier, that of whether pragmatist naturalists and pragmatist metaphysicians can peacefully co-exist. I started with some fabricated tension and shall end with the real thing.

3. Why Naturalism?

To answer that on Rorty's behalf: because he was a materialist. This is not controversial, he said he was, and he pioneered eliminative materialism, the most extreme kind. Rorty knew he was not supposed to think of his Epicurean materialism metaphysically, or even realistically, because his Protagorean relativism always came first, so he had to issue qualifications—he denied that he thought physical descriptions captured the nature of reality better than others and he gestured to there being social benefits to believing materialism. After he gave up on eliminative materialism, he advertised these qualifications as non-metaphysical materialism (Rorty, 1979, 120–25), then non-reductive physicalism (Rorty, 1991, 113–25), then naturalism (Rorty, 2007:147–59). At the end of the day, however, he was an ordinary materialist who thought “the mind is just the central nervous system under an alternative description” (Rorty, 1998, 248), as he lets slip so tellingly when needing an example to make a point on a different topic.

“Naturalism” is a great word for Rorty, since it conveys the materialist idea, but without historical and metaphysical baggage. It does this by not meaning very much, which is the context in which Roy Wood Sellars originally attracted philosophical attention to the word (Sellars, 1922: vii). It suggests materialism while hinting at something different, something more innocent, less philosophically heavyweight, a simple matter of having respect for what science tells us about the world. This has been its number one selling point in an era in which philosophy has lost its confidence and dearly hopes science will allow it to continue, so long as it

renounces its past and keeps its head down. But really, naturalism is just materialism flourishing as a belief-system, for now that it is the world's dominant metaphysics, it is not in the interest of its believers for metaphysical discussion to continue. Naturalism ends the philosophical discussion at a point in history when materialism is doing better than ever before, thereby making the weary keen to accept that it won. We must not talk about metaphysics because materialism is naturalism's disowned inner self.

It is because "naturalism" has so little content, apart from the bit its advocates do not want it to have, that efforts have been made to give it some, most notably with Ramberg's "pragmatic naturalism" and Huw Price's "subject naturalism", which Rorty equated. The pragmatic naturalist, as Rorty explained it, does not ask "What features does the world *really* have?" but rather "What topics are worth discussing?" (Rorty, 2007, 152). Rorty thought that whether phenomenal consciousness is a real feature of our world is not worth discussing, and yet virtual reality and artificial intelligence are set to make fundamental changes to human life. For genuine pragmatists, this traditional metaphysical topic has become a top priority. Ignore that one, because you have been taken in by an authoritarian, anti-philosophical tactic for preserving the metaphysical dominance of materialism, namely naturalism, and you prevent philosophy from intervening in an area in which it could be of genuine social worth. Worse still, you commit us to working morally and politically with a certain metaphysical answer, the wrong one, namely that AI robots will be just like us in respect of their "consciousness", which could make future patterns of societal interaction develop incoherently. Ramberg wants to "maintain a continuous discursive fight against subjection and obliteration" (Ramberg, 2013, 69), as do I, but says "pragmatists understand that things just may not go our way; metaphysics may prevail" (ibid., 72). The prevalence of metaphysics, such that materialism returns to its rightful place as only *one* of the options in a rational and open conversation, strikes me as the best hope philosophy has at present for becoming pragmatic rather than remaining insular.

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