

BOOK REVIEW: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty (1979) Princeton University Press

This book is referenced often in the recommended epistemological literature of the HOD program, so I approached its reading as if there were some ‘foundational’ themes or concepts to be ascertained. What I discovered is that here is indeed a recurring philosophical theme relevant to HOD: the need for the scholar-practitioner to move beyond the outworn Cartesian paradigm – where epistemology is seen as the construction of a permanent, neutral, absolutely certain matrix for the justification of or claim to “Truth” – to a more reflexive, communicative, even ‘conversational’ model of epistemology. Rorty asserts that “[t]o construct an epistemology is to find the maximum amount of common ground with others. The assumption that an epistemology can be constructed is the assumption that such common ground exists” (p. 316). Elsewhere in the book, however, Rorty intimates, supported by quotes from other “edifying” philosophers, that the epistemological program needs to be completely abandoned; the very notion of “epistemology,” a purely “objective” foundation for knowledge, arose in the historical context of attempting to de-legitimize the “traditional” knowledge-beliefs of the Church.

The Cartesian program, of course, was the effort to isolate a postulated rational, reasoning “mind” as the sole instrument for legitimating claims to “Truth.” Ideally, this mind performed the function of an unclouded “Mirror of Nature,” and objective “true” knowledge was the accuracy of representations in this mirror. To set the tone of the book, Rorty states in the introduction: “I argue that the attempt (which has defined traditional philosophy) to explicate “rationality” and “objectivity” in terms of conditions of accurate representation is a self-deceptive effort to eternalize the nominal discourse of the day” (p. 11). Strong words, but that was his purpose: to demonstrate that there *is* no final, permanent, unwavering “touchstone” to truth by which all inquiry can be referenced (reduced); instead, “Truth” is dependent on the *context* of the discussions or problems of the day. ““Objective truth” is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on” (p. 385). Or, to put it another way, “Objectivity is “agreement” rather than “mirroring”” (p. 337). Ultimately, then, the quest for an undistorted Mirror of Nature is in vain, for, “[t]he notion of an unclouded Mirror of Nature is the notion of a mirror which would be indistinguishable from what was mirrored, and this would be no mirror at all” (p. 376). Alas, we are “human, all too human.”

Critics accuse Rorty of “relativism,” but I think his purpose was to move “*beyond* relativism,” to simply yet profoundly ascribe to philosophy the program of continuing an

ongoing conversation about the nature of reality – the perpetual *striving* for truth amid a perpetually changing socio-cultural background. As a tool to support this position, Rorty introduces a lengthy discussion of “hermeneutics” as a balancing counter-pole to “epistemology.” I was actually surprised at the full implications of his distinction: “[I]f the study for science’s search for truth about the physical universe is viewed hermeneutically it will be viewed as the activity of spirit – the faculty which *makes* – rather than as an application of the mirroring faculties, those which *find* what nature has already made” (p. 344). If I’m not mistaken, Rorty is insinuating **co**-evolution, where the notion of “mind” as an isolated, self-contained, purely rational instrument external to nature is “pure” deception. “Mind” must be active instead of passive. Hermeneutics is then seen as a “therapeutic” philosophical strategy to regain a sense of equilibrium, to recover, if you will, from the technical excesses of the so-called “objective rationality” instituted by the entrenchment of Cartesian-based epistemology.

As Rorty describes it, this type of “epistemology is the attempt to see the patterns of justification within normal discourse as *more* than just patterns. It is the attempt to see them as hooked on to something which demands moral commitment – Reality, Truth, Objectivity, Reason” (p. 385). In this sense, the Cartesian program merely replaced one belief system with another. “Hermeneutics is not “another way of knowing” ...It is better seen as another way of *coping*” (p. 356, emphasis added). As an interpretive, reflexive dialogue with that which is *not* known, hermeneutics becomes a viable philosophical methodology for exploring the post-Cartesian, post-Positivist era, in the sense that “*conversation* [is] the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood” (p. 389).

As with all books written by professional philosophers, this reading is often tedious – engaging in ongoing, well-developed, often intractable philosophical arguments to which the casual reader may not have been privy to previously. But the book is certainly (without being too certain) worthwhile, if only to witness that professional philosophy is entertaining, and in many ways spearheading, the transition out of the materialistic quagmire towards a more holistic, living understanding of “human in the universe,”