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On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished papers, 1960-2000 by Richard Rorty

Daniel C. Dennett on the Richard Rorty Factor.

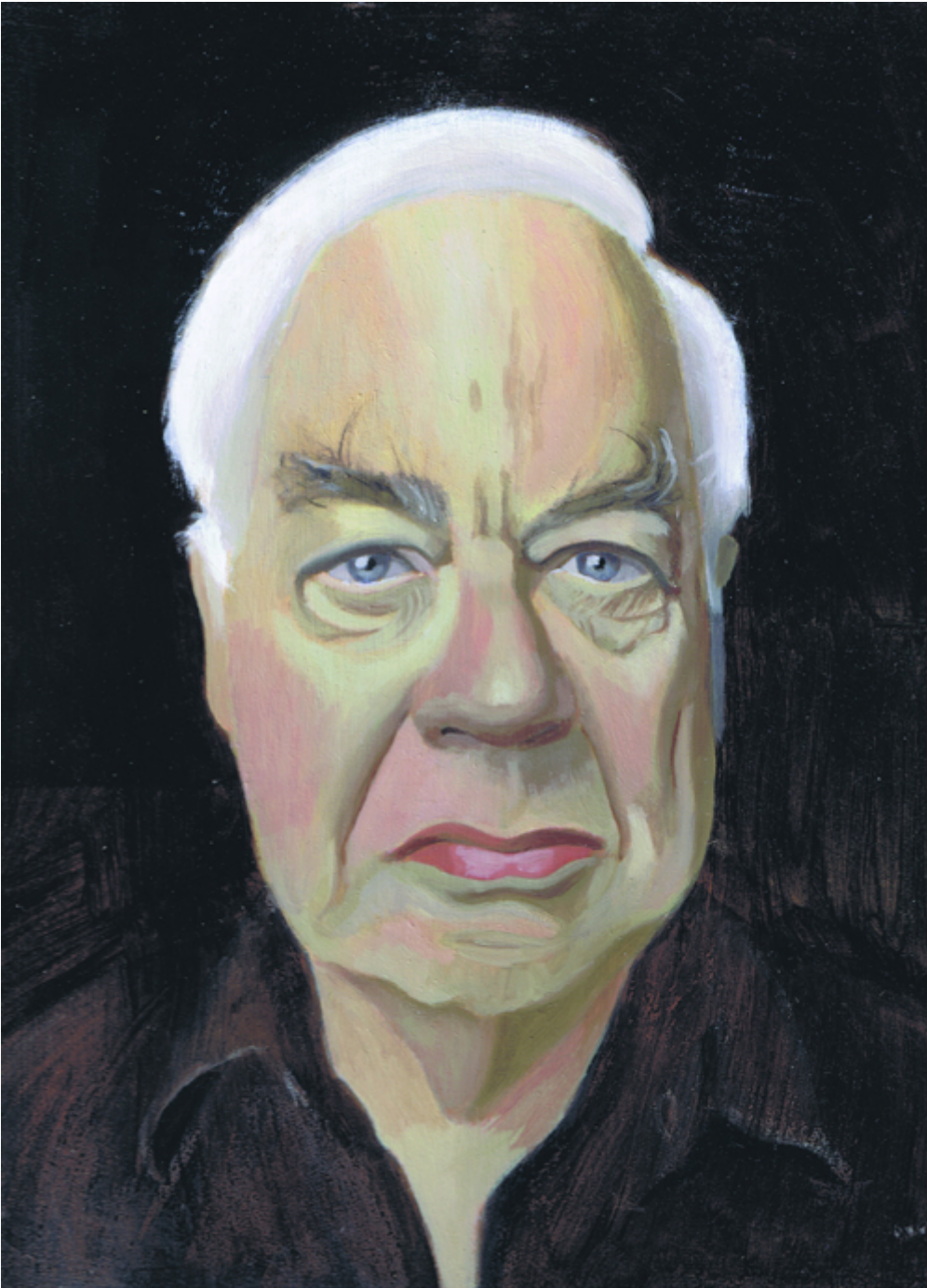
In a paper published in *Synthese* (#53) in 1982, ‘Contemporary Philosophy of Mind’, Richard Rorty wrote an enthusiastic account of the revolutionary ‘Ryle-Dennett tradition’. Was I really as radical a revolutionary as he said I was? I responded mischievously, perhaps rudely:

“Since I, as an irremediably narrow-minded and unhistorical analytic philosopher, am always looking for a good excuse not to have to read Hegel or Heidegger or Derrida or those other chaps who don’t have the decency to think in English, I am tempted by Rorty’s performance on this occasion to enunciate a useful hermeneutical principle, the Rorty Factor:

Take whatever Rorty says about anyone’s views and multiply it by .742.

After all, if Rorty can find so much more in my own writing than I put there, he’s probably done the same or better for Heidegger – which means I can save myself the trouble of reading Heidegger; I can just read [Rorty’s book] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979) and come out about 40% ahead while enjoying my reading at the same time.”

Rorty took this in good spirits and continued his amiable practice of highlighting the connections he saw between analytic philosophers’ arguments and the grand march of isms that constitute Western philosophy. Part of his optimistic genius was seeing how other people’s hard work in the trenches might be seen as major steps of genuine philosophical progress. This collection of previously unpublished works, most of them lectures delivered on multiple occasions, shows his power, his insight, his constructive spirit throughout. It is indeed enjoyable and enlightening philosophical reading, although I now believe that philosophers really shouldn’t rely on Rorty and other like-minded scholars of the field to frame our projects.



Richard Rorty by Darren McAndrew

Among these essays are grand overviews presenting sweeping vistas of Aristotle, Plato, Democritus, Kant, Leibniz, and Hume, together with responses to interpretations of them later philosophers have cobbled together, always with the goal of explaining why their visions were valuable but flawed. Other papers home in on very specific targets – the paradox of definition, or Kripke’s anti-materialism, for example – framing Rorty’s close-up investigation with deft and often surprising observations about the history of thinking on the topic. One of the main messages to take from this collection is its demonstration of the value of knowing much more of the history of philosophy than is usually required for a PhD today. Again and again Rorty reveals a perspective on current work to which I had been oblivious, including on topics I thought I had mastered.

I’m also a bit chagrined to now acknowledge that the definition in my *Philosophical Lexicon* of ‘*a rortiori*’ (*adj.* ‘for even more obscure and fashionable Continental reasons’) has probably contributed to a caricature of Rorty’s work that is all too convenient: an idea of the analytic philosopher turned Continental *belle-lettrist*. On the contrary, as this volume shows, Rorty was always keenly alert to the historically-blinkered vision of his fellow

analytic philosophers, and after his ‘Continental turn’ he continued to compose masterful analyses of later stars of the analytic discipline – Kripke, McDowell, Mackie, Hacking, Kim, Brandom, Davidson, Searle, Nagel, Goldman and Fodor, to name a few highlights – well seasoned with his growing confidence about how they fit into the larger project of human inquiry. His 1994 paper, ‘The Current State of Philosophy in the United States’ should be required reading for every graduate or prospective graduate student in philosophy in the US (and elsewhere), since it’s full of observations that I believe are as true today as they were twenty-seven years ago: for instance, about the attempt by philosophers to escape the humanities and join forces with the sciences; about the gravitational attraction of problems that can be addressed with little or no historical understanding; and about the pinched perspective on the issues that has resulted from this trend.

The collection also provides examples of Rorty’s mastery of tactical philosophical infighting. His astute and generous analysis of Kripke’s argument in a 1973 paper, ‘Kripke on Mind-Body Identity’, is analytic philosophy at its best. I have often disparaged the sort of training in analytic tactics our graduate students get – where they learn which *moves* are available to counter which *defenses* – but Rorty in his dissection of Kripke gives a master class in the fine art of position-mongering, listing and distinguishing the response options, and acknowledging where he may be misinterpreting him. Quiet, polite zingers abound. I shall certainly quote “one man’s changed subject is another man’s metaphysical discovery”, but I will change ‘man’ to philosopher’, with some regret at the loss of connection with ‘one man’s meat’.

His verdicts are not always convincing, but are always worth serious reflection. Consider a pair of typically inviting opening sentences:

From ‘What is Dead in Plato’:

“It is quite true that the history of philosophy is a series of footnotes on Plato, but in the last few centuries, many of these footnotes have been saying, ‘Notice how much harm this particular bad Platonic idea has done’.”

From ‘The Paradox of Definition’:

“One way of describing what happened when, in the Renaissance, philosophy deserted Aristotle and became ‘modern’ is to say that their notions of the location of indefiniteness changed.”

Some of Rorty’s best discussion of his own philosophical position, pragmatism (following the pragmatism of Dewey and Sellars), comes in the final selection, ‘Remarks on Nishida and Nishitani’ (1999). Rorty acknowledges his ‘extremely superficial’ knowledge of the Buddhist traditions and literatures that form the background for their thought, but he offers a constructive suggestion in which he describes pragmatism as “an emphatic reaction against Hegel, against absolute idealism, and against metaphysics” (p.241), inspired by Darwin’s theory of evolution. He contrasts this with Nishida’s and Nishitani’s ‘enthusiastic’ endorsement of a version of absolute idealism. He also cites Josiah Royce as the American philosopher whose view is closest to Nishida.

The Rorty who emerges from these essays is an ardent but not doctrinaire pragmatist and naturalist who warns about the political dangers inherent in the idealist and anti-naturalist positions while also seeing the risks of a headlong rush by philosophers into accepting Locke’s vision of the philosopher as a follower, not a leader – a mere “under-labourer, removing some of the Rubbish” in the wake of “the incomparable Mr Newton.” This volume sets a timely example of how a politically engaged philosopher can put hard won expertise to valuable use.

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- *On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished Papers, 1960-2000*, Richard Rorty, ed by W.P Malecki and Chris Voparil, CUP, 2020, £17.99 pb, 260 pages.