

## **Antipodean Encounters: Socratic Conversation and Ironic Redescription as Complementary Rhetorical Strategies in Richard Rorty's Metaphilosophy**

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“Conversation” and “irony” are central notions of Richard Rorty’s philosophy. Through the metaphors of “conversation,” Rorty stresses the desirability of unbounded communication both among academic disciplines and in political practice. Moreover, Rorty conceives of philosophy itself as an ongoing conversation, in which the philosopher’s role is that of a “Socratic intermediary” (*Mirror* 317), a public intellectual conversant with several kinds of language games, practicing a kind of interdisciplinary cultural criticism. Thus, the conversational model comes to serve as the paradigm of antifoundationalist discourse, as conversations proceed without theoretical grounding or the control of a formalized discipline, while they require that ideas and arguments be formulated in terms intelligible to all participating interlocutors.

“Irony,” on the other hand, argues for the value of idiosyncratic redescription, relating to such key conceptions of Rorty’s philosophy as “abnormal discourse” or “strong poetry,” which function both as vehicles of cultural progress and as quasi-poetic means of private self-fashioning. Irony—in its specifically Rortyan sense—requires a capacity to invent novel metaphors, formulate hitherto unimaginable patterns of thought, reveal or establish unforeseen relations. These “idiosyncrasies” can either be enlisted for the purpose of the social, cultural, political or scientific advancement of a community, or be so thoroughly “privatized” that they remain valueless or unintelligible to anyone but their inventor. In short, while conversation calls for the ability and willingness to come to an agreement on the rules of the language game being played, redescription in idiosyncratic terms aims to be incommensurate with all extant language games.

What my argument below aims to demonstrate is that “conversation” and “irony” are by no means mutually exclusive terms in Rorty’s metaphilosophical discourse. Indeed, they can be looked upon as complementary notions in the service of a radically antiessentialist agenda, whereby they denote rhetorical strategies, rather than individual tropes, deployed for the purpose of maintaining the discursive authority of Rorty’s neopragmatist idiom.

### **The Antipodeans: conversation and redescription**

In his seminal *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty devises a short science fiction tale to illustrate his argument against dualism in the philosophy of mind.<sup>1</sup> The Antipodeans, Rorty tells us, are “beings, much like ourselves—featherless bipeds, who built houses and bombs, and wrote poems and computer programs” (*Mirror* 70). They have a definite notion of what it means to be a person, as opposed to a robot or a pet, but they do not “explain the difference between persons and non-persons by such notions as ‘mind,’ ‘consciousness,’ or anything of the sort” (70). They also believe in immortality which, however, does not “involve the notion of a ‘soul’ which separated from the body,” but is, rather, a “straightforward matter of bodily resurrection” (70). Underlying these seemingly minor differences between their culture and ours is the fact that for the Antipodeans neurology and biochemistry were the “first disciplines in which technological breakthroughs had been achieved,” and so “a large part of the conversation of these people concerned the state of their nerves” (71).

In other words, it does not take any professional expertise for the Antipodeans to be able to express their sensations, perceptions, or any experience in the language of neurology, for “their knowledge of physiology was such that each well-formed sentence in the language which anybody bothered to form could easily be correlated with a readily identifiable neural state” (71). Thus, the Antipodeans can describe pain on account of burning by reporting that their C-fibers are being stimulated,

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<sup>1</sup> It is to be noted that I use the Antipodean-tale as a cogent demonstration of the specific problems I focus on below, without assessing the first-order philosophical issues it raises about the mind. For a detailed discussion of the tale, see Kenneth T. Gallagher’s “Rorty’s Antipodeans: An Impossible Illustration,” in which he discusses the self-referential tensions of Rorty’s example.

the perception of an aesthetically pleasing red rectangle by saying that it “makes neuron bundle G-14 quiver,” or feeling thirsty by claiming to be “in state S-296” (71). They cannot, however, make sense of the notion that the various neural states signify “peculiar and distinct sort[s]” of “*mental states*” (70). Apparently, these imaginary extraterrestrials are perfectly capable of functioning without positing an extra faculty (mind, “the mental,” etc.) beyond the boundaries of material explicability. They seem to have no need for any distinct conception (philosophical or otherwise) of what we, Earthlings, call “mind” to account for any nonmaterial aspect of their experience.

A dramatic turn of events sets in with a team of various experts from Earth landing on the Antipodeans’ planet sometime in the twenty-first century. The team comprises philosophers of both Continental and analytic persuasion, who give very different interpretations of the Antipodean predicament. The former sort holds the quasi-Heideggerian view that “there was no real problem about whether the Antipodeans had minds [...], for what was important in understanding other beings was a grasp of their mode of being-in-the-world” (73). Philosophers of the latter sort are designated by Rorty as “tough-minded,” who found “much more straightforward and clean-cut question[s] to discuss” (73). While the neurologists and biochemists from Earth are elated to find the extraterrestrials amazingly knowledgeable in their fields, the *analytic* philosophers on the expedition are all the more baffled by the apparent absence of the conception of mind from the Antipodeans’ philosophical vocabulary. “Though-minded” as they are, however, these philosophers “did not care what the Antipodeans thought about themselves, but rather focused on the question: Do they in fact have minds?” (73–74). Nevertheless, the questions by means of which they could determine whether the Antipodeans *really* have minds can only be formulated in the vocabulary of analytic philosophy, which cannot be separated from the assumptions that incite them to pose those questions in the first place. The Antipodeans, however, are unable to make sense of such individual vocabulary items as “raw feel,” cannot conceive of pain as different from stimulated C-fibers, nor can they tell the difference between “conceptual truth” and “empirical generalization” when reporting a sensation. Not sharing the terms and concepts whose mastery would be essential in order for the interlocutors to come to an even temporary agreement on what they are supposed to be conferring about, the attempt to answer the “straightforward question” of whether or not the outer space creatures

have minds inevitably results in a communicational impasse and the utter frustration of the analytic philosophers.

Although Rorty's primary purpose with this tale is to question some basic assumptions in analytic philosophy, it can also be read as thematizing three interrelated insights, which determine Rorty's metaphilosophical position throughout his oeuvre: (1) philosophical problems and vocabularies are linguistic constructions, shaped by contingent historical, cultural, socio-political, and institutional factors, so it is misleading to believe that these problems are perennial "topics of concern to any reflective mind at any era and in any society" (Rorty, "Analytic" 125); (2) philosophical problems are not "natural explananda" which "arise as soon as one reflects" (Rorty, *Mirror* 3), but, rather, optional ways of interrogating issues which fall outside the realm of "expert cultures" (such as the natural sciences or specialized politics); (3) it is always possible to break free from a certain philosophical vocabulary and create a new one through the dialectical practice of offering alternative descriptions of the problems at hand so that they cease to seem relevant or problematic.

In Rorty's tale, it is not a disagreement between the two parties involved that leads to their failure to engage one another in meaningful communication. Instead, they come to a standstill because neither can have recourse to apodictic means of demonstration whereby to provide unailing proof of the validity of their position. One can conceive of no demonstration or rational argument that could ultimately convince the Antipodeans that they *have* minds, or the analytic philosophers that they have encountered humanoids living *without* minds.

In one of his recent writings, Rorty envisions an analogous problematic,<sup>2</sup> relying on Wittgenstein's "beetle in a box"<sup>3</sup> for demonstration, and infers that "a descriptive term [cannot] have a sense if its application is regulated by no public criteria" ("Cultural" 11). Drawing on

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<sup>2</sup> This time, Rorty's example involves human beings with "consciousness" and "zombies" who "behave just like normal people, but have no inner life" ("Cultural" 11).

<sup>3</sup> "Suppose everyone had a box with a beetle in it: we call it 'beetle.' No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. – Here it would be possible for everyone to have something different in his box. [...] But suppose the word 'beetle' had a use in these people's language? – If so, it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as *something*: for the box might even be empty" (*Investigations* I.273).

the analogy, we can explain the communicational impasse in which Antipodeans and Earthlings find themselves by saying that they see different beetles (mind and neurons) in the same box (the human[oid] body). Nevertheless, this is not how the two interlocutors are likely to describe each other: from the vantage point of the extraterrestrials, the box seems to have no beetle in it, while the Earthlings blame it on the philosophical myopia of the Antipodeans that they cannot see even their own beetle.

The tale itself is a metareflection, demonstrating that no vocabulary is ever safe from being displaced by another, no description can ever be the right and only description. This is why the vocabularies of neurology and biochemistry are capable of being substituted for that of the philosophy of mind, inasmuch as they provide more feasible descriptions of human experience without positing an invidious mind/body dichotomy. Nonetheless, abandoning a certain philosophical vocabulary or shifting from one description to another is not as innocent and unproblematic a process as Rorty appears to suggest. What he does not seem to take into consideration is that by giving up the intuition that the Antipodeans possess minds and have mental states, the analytic philosophers would eliminate a distinctive and constitutive element of their own philosophical vocabulary, thus jeopardizing the validity of *any* philosophical claim they might make both prospectively and retrospectively. For the same reason, the philosophers cannot afford to declare the operative terms of their vocabulary mere rhetorical configurations, without running the risk of putting in question the theoretical foundations of their philosophy, thus undermining its disciplinary status. Rorty champions conversational philosophy on account of his conviction that such cases of first-order stalemating can be resolved through moving the problems one level up, as it were, to a meta-level, at which one compares whole vocabularies rather than individual claims and arguments formulated in vocabulary-specific ways. This is precisely the kind of move that appears to clash most forcefully with his endorsement of the idiosyncratic discourses of the ironist. Nevertheless, as I will argue below, irony can be interpreted as a rhetorical strategy essential for the mode of operation of metadiscourses.

### **The (Socratic) ironist as “meta-metaphilosopher”**

The ironist, as Rorty tells us in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, is a staunch antimetaphysician, who thinks “nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence,” and defies the metaphysician’s assumption that “the presence of a term in his [the metaphysician’s] own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence” (74). The ironist “has radical doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses,” and “she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than any others” (73). Furthermore, ironists are “nominalist and historicist” by conviction, so they “see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary, nor by an attempt to fight their way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old” (73–74). Ironists also realize that “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (73). They come to occupy a “metastable” position (Sartre’s term)<sup>4</sup>, in that they are “never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (73–74).

The ironist’s predicament is described in mostly negative terms as characterized by self-doubt and the inability to take herself or any vocabulary seriously. The ironist, however, does not seem to differ much from the Socratic intermediary, who is capable of mediating between various discourses and language games because s/he does not belong to any of them. To this extent, we may talk about a “Socratic ironist,” who might just be pretending to entertain self-doubt and a sense of rootlessness. In fact, just as Plato’s Socrates, s/he might engage in conversations, where s/he phrases his/her questions in such a way that each corresponding answer should strengthen his/her position, leaving him/her, at the end of the dialogue, in full possession of his/her discursive powers. One of the ways in which this feat can be accomplished is for the ironist to turn him/herself into a metaphilosopher, much like Rorty has.

Nevertheless, self-evident as it may seem to view Rorty as an ironist, it seems all the more problematic to regard him as a meta-

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre defines “metastable” as pertaining to a “hybrid state”: it is “unstable and transitory [...] neither entirely perceptive nor entirely imaginative, that would be worth describing for its own sake” (qtd. in Cumming 214).

philosopher. The slight transcendentalist tinge of “meta” arguably conjures up the image of the Platonic “philosopher king,” contemplating his domain from a regal distance. Habermas duly reads Rorty’s “Metaphilosophical Difficulties” (his famous introduction to the *Linguistic Turn* [1968]) as marking a “break in the history of analytic thought” (“Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn” 32), and sees Rorty’s metaphilosophical proclivity as part and parcel of his historicist outlook: “the metaphilosophical distance from which the editor [Rorty] comments on the texts [collected in the volume],” Habermas goes on to contend, “betrays the Hegelian message that every manifestation of Spirit that achieves maturity is condemned to decline” (“Pragmatic Turn” 32). Indeed, the ironist’s distance manifests itself not only in Rorty’s apparent unwillingness ever to adopt the rules of a language game other than his own, but also in his reluctance to take an atomistic view of the object of his analysis. In most of his work, he prefers to talk of historical epochs, rather than specific historical events, communities, rather than subjects, and vocabularies, rather than individual sentences (Contingency 5). This may contribute to the appearance that he acts as the philosopher king, whose reign he seeks to overthrow.

His apologia rests on a pragmatic basis: “[w]hen we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies and theories,” he contends, “[the] critical terminology [we deploy] naturally shifts from metaphors of isomorphism, symbolism, and mapping to talk of utility, convenience, and likelihood of getting what we want” (“Pragmatism, Relativism” 163). This, however, does not exempt him from the semblance that he is reclaiming the authority he urges philosophers to relinquish. He may talk about “utility” instead of “accurate representation,” “hermeneutics” instead of “epistemology,” but he still seems to assume the role of the *theorist* who oversees philosophical culture from far enough to be able to judge which vocabulary promises to be of more utility than others.

Even sympathetic commentators seem to be well aware of this tension, which they try to alleviate by palliating Rorty’s role as a *metaphilosopher*. Alan Malachowski suggests discarding the term “metaphilosophy” altogether in reference to Rorty’s work, contending that he does not “mak[e] claims *about* philosophical claims,” but rather, “*at them*” (Rorty 19). The “meta-philosophical level,” Malachowski adds, “is not an incommensurable platform,” which means that claims “made there can still be engaged by moves that belong within traditional [philosophical] debates” (Rorty 19). As opposed to this, the level at which Rorty’s discourse works, Malachowski concludes, “is a sort of *extra-*

*philosophical, performative* level, a place outside philosophy from which words are issued to change what is going on there” (19–20).

János Boros also cautions against the use of “metaphilosophy”: he points out that precisely because Rorty claims that criteria of vocabulary-choice cannot be formulated by reference to a neutral and universal metavocabulary, viewing him as practicing metaphilosophy might create the misleading semblance that he is tacitly engaged in the kind of transcendentalist project he explicitly denounces (Boros 144). Since there is no conceivable place *beyond* or *outside* vocabularies (philosophical or otherwise), Boros contends, it would be less misleading to use “intervocularity” in place of “metaphilosophy,” which argues for the ability to switch from one vocabulary to the other (144). This ability presupposes willingness to pick up the interlocutor’s vocabulary, rather than translating it into one’s own terms,<sup>5</sup> or into those of a putative metavocabulary in the name of a universal understanding (Boros 144).

Rorty himself, however, seems to be quite content to be called a metaphilosopher, or more precisely, a “meta-metaphilosopher.” Very early in his career, in 1961, he published an essay, which is lesser-known today, bearing the laconic title “Recent Metaphilosophy.” Although still in his “analytic phase,” Rorty clearly prefigures his subsequent pragmatist turn. It is in this early essay that Rorty most explicitly argues for the inseparability of interdiscursive communication (conversation) and metaphilosophy. Moreover, he identifies pragmatist metaphilosophers (which he was shortly to turn into) as “meta-metaphilosophers,” and contends in the tone of *Mirror* and his subsequent work: “[m]eta-metaphilosophy makes possible communication among metaphilosophers,” adding that “since communication is the goal, rather than truth (or even agreement), the prospective infinite series is a progress rather than a regress: it becomes a moral duty to keep the series going, lest communication cease” (301–2).

It is notable that even though Rorty’s philosophical outlook may have undergone a number of Gestalt-switches, much of his later work might be interpreted as so many ways of shoring up this early thesis. This assumption seems to be corroborated by the fact that even in one of his last essays, he echoes his younger self claiming that first-order argumentation

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<sup>5</sup> See also *Mirror* (318), where Rorty defines the hermeneutics of conversation in these exact terms.



and second-order metareflection are indissoluble constituents of philosophical discourses:

The question of whether philosophy should think of itself as a science, like that of whether it can be assimilated to intellectual history, might seem discussable without reference to substantive philosophical doctrines. But in fact metaphilosophical issues—issues about what, if anything philosophy is good for and about how it is best pursued—are inseparable from [first-order] issues about the nature of knowledge, truth, and meaning. (“Analytic” 122)

It seems that insofar as he wishes to maintain the consistency of his philosophical antiessentialism, metaphilosophy becomes the most adaptable mode of discursive operation for him.

Nonetheless, the double “meta”-prefix certainly cannot be overlooked. What it suggests is that Rorty sees the pragmatist philosopher’s task as consisting in the formulation of not even second-, but *third*-order reflections, as it were, adjudicating the extant metaphilosophical vocabularies. Rorty does not elaborate on what enables the *pragmatist* metaphilosopher to occupy this position and where s/he is located in relation to second-order metaphilosophy. It seems, however, that the further the given discourse gets in terms of metalevels, the less appropriate it may be to call it “philosophy.” It is unlikely that Rorty, even as early as 1961, could have posited a sovereign discursive level three removes from actual first-order philosophical practice. Since he associates meta-metaphilosophy with communication, however, there is good reason to believe that the designation prefigures what he was later to call conversational philosophy, and the pragmatist meta-metaphilosopher anticipates the Socratic intermediary.

Furthermore, the urge to occupy a meta-metaposition may seem like an attempt to escape the confines of first-order debates, and in this sense it can also be looked upon as a rhetorical defense mechanism, since it enables one to opt out of a given discursive predicament by appealing to second- or third-order considerations. Rorty might have developed this defense strategy in response to the immense amount of criticism he has received during his long and prolific writing career. Indeed, most of his commentators focus on Rorty’s *philosophical* output, apparently operating under the assumption that professional philosophy is the most appropriate interpretive framework for his arguments to be explicated. Many of the philosophical analyses of his work are formulated as first-order arguments, oftentimes aiming to criticize his pragmatic stance in

relation to a host of philosophical problems (such as truth, meaning, reference, representation, epistemic justification, etc.) claiming that his understanding of these problems is partly or totally flawed.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the time, Rorty fails to meet his critics on their own ground, and defends himself by arguing that the assumptions on which the diatribes are predicated lose their relevance when viewed from a pragmatist perspective. In other words, he resorts to his ironist strategies and opts out of the conversation. There is, however, another strategy, which is closer to the Socratic method. It consists in bringing round the interlocutor to his own position in a *performative* fashion, so that s/he cannot help but reaffirm *his* position. In what follows, I will focus on two such communicative situations.

### **Socratic conversations: Rorty vs. Hilary Putnam and Barry Allen**

The debates between Rorty and his fellow-philosophers constitute a testing ground for his conversational philosophy. Refusing to abandon the philosophical/theoretical premises constitutive of their discourse, Rorty's critics often point out either that, despite his endeavor to the contrary, he still operates under epistemological assumptions, or that the notion of conversation is too vague to have any explicative value in accounting for human knowledge. Malachowski delineates these two types of criticism by saying that there are detractors who interpret Rorty's work as just another version of "*arguing a case* against philosophy-as-epistemology" (much like analytic philosophers do), and those who assume "that Rorty is not even trying to 'make a case' of *any* kind, that he has completely forsaken philosophy's 'normal discourse' of 'rational argumentation' and is merely indulging in 'rhetoric.' Their verdict is usually equally complacent: Rorty's rhetoric can be ignored—so it is carry on as usual as far as philosophy-as-epistemology is concerned" (*Rorty* 64).

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<sup>6</sup> The examples are all too numerous to be itemized here, but the tendency is clearly observable in several critical essays collected in various volumes, where the predominance of philosophical subjects delimits the critics' understanding of Rorty (see Malachowski ed. *Reading Rorty*; Herman J. Saatkamp ed. *Rorty and Pragmatism*; Robert Brandom ed. *Rorty and His Critics*; Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley ed. *Richard Rorty*). Hilary Putnam (especially in *Realism with a Human Face*) and Roy Bhaskar (esp. in *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*) figure prominently among the philosophers who criticize Rorty, in the name of philosophical realism, for his "frivolous" attitude towards epistemic justification, and his nominalist understanding of truth.

The critical reflections on Rorty's work by two of his fellow philosophers, Hilary Putnam and Barry Allen, are cases in point. Rorty's conversational philosophy proves successful in that it does indeed—as befits a Socratic intermediary—“lure” these philosophers out of their “self-enclosed” discursive practices. The desired conversation, however, cannot come to full fruition in accordance with the democratizing principles he valorizes. The reason for this is that Rorty's critics, by (temporarily) forsaking their own discursive practices—performatively and not at the level of argumentation—do not find themselves in a neutral interdiscursive space, but in a metadiscursive one, where Rorty's “meta-metarules” prevail. Putnam and Allen cannot help but play along.

Putnam, in his critique of Rorty, points out a classical self-referential paradox to the effect that despite his pronounced antiepistemological endeavor, Rorty still persists in operating under epistemological assumptions.<sup>7</sup> He contends:

But notice that the very person who strongly denies that there is any such property as truth, and who waves his picture at us to call our attention to its various attractions, as, for instance, Richard Rorty does in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—notice that this very philosopher does not recognize that his picture is only a picture, but believes that in some deep pretheoretic sense his picture is the way the world is. (*Realism* 32)

Addressing the problem of self-referentiality in a more substantive manner, he observes: “It seems [...] likely to me that [...] Rorty really thinks that metaphysical realism [inclusive of the representational view of knowledge] is *wrong*. [...] [B]ut this, of course, is something he cannot admit he really thinks. I think, in short, that the attempt to say that *from a God's-Eye View there is no God's-Eye View* is still there, under all that wrapping” (*Realism* 25).

According to Putnam, Rorty errs twice: once by rejecting the contemplative moment of theoretical reflection, thus renouncing the privileged insight reserved for philosophers, and, second time, by being blind to his own tacit theoretical assumptions. Rorty, in Putnam's

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<sup>7</sup> See also Charles Taylor's criticism of Rorty along similar lines. Taylor, while agreeing with Rorty's critique of foundationalist epistemology, criticizes him in the name of an “uncompromising realism” which, he thinks, would lend substance to his antiepistemological arguments. Taylor holds that Rorty's “non-realism is itself one of the recurrently generated *aporiae* of the [epistemological] tradition,” and sees him “as still very much a prisoner of the epistemological world-view” (“Epistemological Tradition” 258).

interpretation, cannot admit he thinks *any* view to be wrong, otherwise he would betray his own conception of rightness and wrongness as functions of social practices. This assumption sits well with Putnam's criticism of Rorty for what he takes to be his "cultural relativist" outlook (*Realism* 18-26, 125).

The real burden of Putnam's criticism, however, is the claim that Rorty's denouncement of metaphysical realism can only issue from a "God's-Eye View," which, in turn, is identified as the *essence* of Rortyan thought concealed, as it were, "under all that [pragmatist/anti-foundationalist] wrapping." Thus, according to Putnam, he remains captive of the philosophical preconceptions<sup>8</sup> he seeks to swing free from, thus being incapable of a plausible defense of his "antiphilosophical" claims without running the risk of self-contradiction. Putnam's argument thus precludes the possibility of an open conversation between philosophical and nonphilosophical discourses by implicitly pronouncing professional philosophy a sealed vocabulary, incarcerating those who once get involved in any kind of philosophical discussion, and Rorty is no exemption.

The case being made by Putnam is comparable to what Alexander Nehamas calls the "Protreptic Dilemma" (396), by which he refers to the fragment from Aristotle's exhortation to "the love of philosophy," which features a rather playful defense of the need to philosophize. On Aristotle's account, philosophy is inescapable even if one self-consciously chooses *not* to philosophize, for in that case "we are obliged to inquire how it is possible for there to be no Philosophy; and in inquiring, we philosophize, for inquiry is the cause of Philosophy" (qtd. in Nehamas 396).<sup>9</sup> As

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<sup>8</sup> As a specific example, Putnam mentions that Rorty's "analytic past shows up" in his rejection of philosophical controversies which he thinks revolve around "pseudo-problems," such as those between realism and antirealism or emotive and cognitive content. According to Putnam, Rorty "*scorns* controversy" in a "Carnapian tone of voice" (*Realism* 20). In his response to Putnam, Rorty admits to the "tone of Carnapian scorn" in *Mirror*, saying, "I should not speak, as sometimes I have of 'pseudo-problems,' but rather of problematics and vocabularies which might have proven to be of value but in fact did not" ("Relativist Menace" 45). This rhetorical ruse is typical of Rorty's discursive strategies: he concedes the validity of the case his interlocutor makes against him, but rephrases his earlier statement in such a way that it should only minimally modify the position for which he is brought to task.

<sup>9</sup> The fragment, as quoted by Nehamas, reads in full: "If one must philosophize, then one must philosophize; and if one must not philosophize, then one must philosophize; in any case, therefore, one must philosophize. For if one must, then, given that Philosop

Nehamas comments, the “argument depends on taking philosophy to be flexible enough to include as its own proper parts even attempts to show that it is an impossible or worthless endeavor” (396).

From a Rortyan vantage point, the Protreptic Dilemma can be read in one of two ways. It can be interpreted as celebrating the discursive power of philosophy, in that the kind of “flexibility” the fragment argues for is, in fact, a way of empowering a discourse—indeed, an academic faculty—by proclaiming its quasi-oppressive ubiquity. In this sense, the Protreptic Dilemma reaffirms the very notion against which Rorty defines his antifoundationalism: that philosophical reflection (at least for someone even loosely affiliated with the discipline) is an inevitable exigency, being enforced by the nature of the “explananda” that arise.

It can also be read, however, as advancing the notion that once we have appropriated the insight that philosophy is an *optional* social/discursive practice (which entails that we *can* stop playing the philosophical language game if we choose to), we must assess both the defense and the criticism of philosophy as emerging *from within* the practice,<sup>10</sup> rather than emanating from a transcendental source beyond discourse. The defense of philosophy is no less in need of second-order deliberations than its critique, for specialized, first-order philosophical reasoning can neither plausibly defend nor voluntarily criticize the very discourse from which it derives its legitimacy. Thus, while the Protreptic Dilemma conceives of philosophy as an ever-extendible interior space, which cannot transcend itself even by self-reflectively accounting for its own practices, it makes a philosophically ingrained statement *about* philosophy, whereby, performatively, it turns itself into a meta-philosophical reflection. It is certainly not a metareflection in the sense that it goes *beyond* its own discursive limits to occupy a transcendental standpoint from which philosophy can be evaluated in critical or eulogistic terms. Rather, the reflection is more akin to the rhetorical gambit Douglas Hofstadter dubs “going meta,” which is a self-reflective move whereby discussion is taken to a different (“higher”) level (22). In

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hy exists, we are in every way obliged to philosophize. And if one must not, in this case too we are obliged to inquire how it is possible for there to be no Philosophy; and in inquiring we philosophize, for inquiry is the cause of Philosophy” (395-96).

<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Bernstein convincingly advances this notion when he asserts that we must shun the danger of “reifying the very idea of social practice and failing to appreciate that our very criticisms and arguments [formulated within the vocabulary of a discourse] [...] are constitutive of traditions and social practices” (“Philosophy” 773).

the case of the Aristotle-fragment, however, it is not so much an intended gambit as a performative corollary of the self-reference.

This kind of metareflection is observable in Putnam's argument as well, insofar as he seems to be provoked by Rorty's "deprofessionalized" rhetoric to enter the metaphilosophical arena in defense of philosophy. Some of the statements Putnam makes are metaphilosophical in the Rortyan sense of the word, in that they are potential answers to the question of "what, if anything philosophy is good for and about how it is best pursued" (Rorty, "Analytic" 122). In keeping with Rorty's view about metaphilosophical reflection being inseparable from first-order philosophical issues ("Analytic" 122), Putnam prefaces his more substantive claims about realism, relativism, "warrant," communal agreement, and social justification (*Realism* 18-29) by reflections on the nature and tasks of philosophy: "there is a sense," he contends, "in which the task of philosophy is to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which its task is to continue metaphysical discussion" (19). At another point, he reflects: "I hope philosophical reflection may be of some real cultural value; but I do not think it has been the pedestal on which the culture rested, and I do not think our reaction to the failure of a philosophical project [...] should be to abandon ways of talking and thinking which have practical and spiritual weight" (20). Moreover, he makes it explicit that his reflections have been inspired by "a very fruitful ongoing exchange with Richard Rorty" (19). Rorty, thus, "charms" a "hermetic thinker" out of his "self-enclosed practices" by setting what Janet Horne calls a "baited rhetorical hook" (255). Rorty does not simply provoke conversation, but generates a discursive predicament in which his interlocutor is compelled to retort in accordance with *his* (Rorty's) conversational strategies, that is, leaving first-order philosophical considerations behind and take the discussion to a metalevel.

Barry Allen's attack on Rorty's discursive view of knowledge illustrates the second type of criticism Malachowski adduces (one which accuses Rorty of being "merely" rhetorical rather than substantively philosophical). Allen impugns the conversational model of knowledge for its failure to answer the Socratic-Platonic question (familiar from Plato's *Theaetetus*) of why knowledge is preferable to mere belief or opinion (230). Allen agrees with Rorty that representationalist accounts of knowledge are to be abandoned, but disputes that devising such accounts is the only alternative to Rorty's suggestion of giving up altogether on epistemology:

But isn't that the real question—whether ruling out the epistemology of mirrors as good as proves the pragmatism of conversation? Have we an exclusive choice to make between metaphysics and sociology, mimesis and conversation, Platonism and Pragmatism? [...] The oppositions Rorty presents are not logically exclusive, so no objection against one side favors the other, and *no* argument can prove the negative proposition that there is no understanding of knowledge apart from the antithetical ones Rorty considers. [...] The question is not “how else?” [i.e., how else understanding knowledge is possible other than on a conversational basis]. It is why saying *no* to the epistemology of privileged representations is supposed to be as good as saying *yes* to Rorty's pragmatism? (225)

Allen suggests an alternative epistemology, one that is built around “artifacts [objects produced by our technological civilization], whose use is as social as conversation though there need be nothing linguistic or conversational about it” (226). His proposal that our adjudication of knowledge claims should be based on something “harder” than “mere” linguistic configurations is reminiscent of the Parmenidian skepticism about language and the Platonic contempt for rhetoric: Allen warns that knowledge is not to be confused with “prestigious talk,” that is, with the “communicative skills by which someone makes a case and persuades others” (228–29). The consequence of Rorty's championing language over artifacts is that he “banalizes technical or artifactual practice by redescribing it in his relentlessly linguistifying terms,” so the “superiority” of one knowledge claim over another “becomes essentially rhetorical,” whereas “the knowledge mostly responsible for present-day technological civilization does not have this rhetorical, linguistic character” (231). Allen seems intent on avoiding idealist fallacies, so he insists that it is artifacts, the world of objects, that generates language, and not vice versa: “[w]e learned a new way of talking as a result of living with Maillart's concrete bridges, but to confuse a new language-game with the artifactual innovation that gives it a point and material reference is to confuse a parasite with its host and make a mystery of both language and technics” (231).

Rorty's response to Allen is typical of his argumentative strategies in the face of criticism. He concedes Allen's antirepresentationalist and nonidealist stance, but reflects that there is no point in making a sharp differentiation between artifacts and language, for “sentences, skills, and disciplines [...] can all be treated as artifacts” (Brandom 238). With this move, he has achieved that the debate goes on to proceed by the rules of *his* language game. He has appropriated Allen's position and, thereby,

defused the critical force of his argument, which was predicated on positing the privileged status of artifacts as opposed to language and discourse. It is also characteristic of Rorty's argumentation that he does not insist on the unconditional primacy of the discursive—as opposed to the “artifactual”—nature of knowledge, thus avoiding the mistake of setting up impermeable positions by positing immovable binaries. Instead, he advances the pragmatic notion that “it is hard to have the leisure for language-building if you lack non-linguistic artifacts with which to defend yourself against the climate and the predators. One can see why the two kinds of artifacts are likely to have been produced around the same time, and to have developed in tandem” (Brandom 239). Evidently, Rorty is ready to pick up his interlocutor's vocabulary and refer to language (and discourse at large) as “artifact” without having to worry about giving up his position, since all this talk about language and artifacts remains implicated in discourse.

Allen thus falls victim to performative self-contradiction when, negating Rorty's claim, he asserts that

[t]he important thing is the quality of the performance that puts knowledge into practice [rather than the conversations in which knowledge is supposed to be discursively formulated]. Such performances are at most occasionally dialogical, and are usually evaluated not by conversational consensus but artifactual reliability—not by anybody's *agreeing* that a work is reliable or well done, but by its *being* so. [...] Conversation [therefore] is not the context in which it is ultimately decided what is knowledge. (232–33)

The contradiction, at the most basic level, stems from the fact that Allen's definitive statements about what knowledge is (and about what it is not) are actually formulated within the discursive confines of a *conversation*. Furthermore, “artifactual reliability” is not a free-floating value: at the very least, its recognition requires a set of in-place cultural practices which enable one to identify specific purposes that an artifact can reliably serve as opposed to other purposes for which it is utterly unsuitable. Allen's distinction between an artifact being *agreed* to be reliable and its *being* reliable would make sense only if there were a transparent relation of correspondence between the purposes to be served and the artifacts available or yet to be made. This would be possible if the purposes were “given” in an essentialistic sense: not only presenting themselves in a self-authenticating fashion, but also marking out the artifacts most suitable to serve them. Nevertheless, there are no



indisputable criteria available in reference to which one could decide whose position contains more “prestigious talk” as opposed to philosophical substance.

Furthermore, Allen’s criticism certainly misses the mark insofar as Rorty does not want to decide *what* knowledge is: “it will work better,” he replies to Allen, “just to drop knowledge as a topic rather than to say that I, and other critics, [...] have gotten knowledge wrong” (Brandom 237). Rorty’s “Socratic ironism” is very much in evidence in this statement: if the desperate attempts to define the notion of knowledge result in more confusion than what they clarify, we are at liberty to eliminate the whole topic, that is, to change the subject when the ideal goal of continuing the conversation is jeopardized.

### **Conversation and discursive authority (in lieu of a conclusion)**

Ironically enough, the Antipodean-tale, by depicting a paradigmatic case of a failed conversation, becomes an illustration of how communicational impasse occurs in an attempted conversation where one interlocutor tries to redescribe the other in the terms of his/her vocabulary, being convinced of its discursive supremacy. Besides being an imaginative jibe at some of the basic tenets of analytic philosophy, this illustration, on a more general reading, also points up questions about the interrelatedness of communication, ethics, and authority. It seems that despite Rorty’s professed anti-authoritarian persuasion and overtly emancipatory endeavors, we can read his texts as *performatively* evincing certain rhetorical strategies which appear to aim at maintaining the discursive authority of his own radically antiessentialist idiom.

In contrast to received critical opinion,<sup>11</sup> we can view these two rhetorical elements as functioning in a complementary fashion in his discourse, constituting a consistent metaphilosophical and political standpoint. According to this logic, Rorty’s concept of irony is an entailment of the latent authoritative purport of his conversational trope,

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<sup>11</sup> Rorty’s critics—for instance, Nancy Fraser, Jo Burrows, Thomas McCarthy, Frank Lehticchia, and Norman Geras—object that the notion of conversation is all too vague to have any substantial consequence to philosophical discourse or political practice, and that his championing of private idiosyncrasy potentially propagates a kind of dissent irrationality, which not only blots out the ideal of conversation, but is also incompatible with his professed commitment to liberal democratic values.

thus Rortyan “ironism” can be viewed as a rhetorical means of discursive control, which serves to keep the conversational space safe for the normalcy of conversations. There are two senses in which the notion of irony, on Rorty’s hands, can function as a means of control: it can denote (1) his radical nominalism (linguistic antiessentialism), which enables his discursive operation to be kept at a constant metalevel; and (2) an entirely privatized way of self-fashioning, which, by the same token, keeps the “private ironist” barred from entering “public” forums of cultural/political conversation. In the first sense, irony acquires traits reminiscent of the Socratic method. “Private irony,” in its turn, can be interpreted as marking out the limits of public acceptability for a discourse, and as such part and parcel of Rorty’s normalizing intent. In this sense, the operative term is “private,” rather than “irony,” which can be applied to any discourse or utterance that harbors potential dangers to the given conversation.

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