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# PHILOSOPHY, ITS HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

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<sup>14</sup> There is no place for “the notion of a presiding discipline called ‘epistemology’ or ‘transcendental philosophy’ – reducible [either] to *Naturwissenschaft* (psychophysiology) [or] to *Geisteswissenschaft* (the sociology of knowledge)” (p. 354). Rather than accusing Rorty of covertly reintroducing a fact-value distinction, it would perhaps be better to say that he adopts the distinctions (fact/value, *Natur/Geisteswissenschaft*, scientific description/description in terms of ‘meanings’) as he finds them implied in the Western Enlightenment tradition. But Apel is also a Western Enlightenment man, and he would disagree that they are implied by the tradition. The point illustrates the impossibility of appealing to a ‘social consensus’ in cases where disputes precisely disrupt the consensus.

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 66 ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278, 226.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty’s Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism* brings out a feature of his work which is implicit in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, namely the absence of a critique of the social power relations that make his type of pragmatism possible. To the dissolution of a legion of ‘philosophical problems’ in *Pragmatism* one wants to ask ‘What is the motivation for telling people not to engage in a certain kind of activity (the ‘search for foundations’)?’. It cannot be the conclusive character of the arguments against foundations, for such a notion would be self-defeating, and Rorty would himself agree that there are none, and that his enterprise is persuasive towards paradigm change rather than knock-down refutation. It cannot be just that the search has hitherto been unsuccessful and looks likely to remain so: a search for ‘moral perfection’ is similar, but that does not entail that we should cease to engage in it. It cannot be the Western consensus, because there is none – some people even persist in searching for theological foundations. Rorty’s motives are, certainly, philosophical – he is in the tradition of those who recommend a ‘new turn’, and who in the past have been happily assimilated into the tradition by their successors. But there is another, latent, function of this sort of pragmatism and naturalism. It serves to legitimate what Habermas calls the technocratic systems analysts – the technological and social programmers. And it can only appear as an ideology to live by where the power issues are not seriously joined, that is where philosophy can be “free and leisured conversation” in a “stable and prosperous part of the world”.

I am indebted to private correspondence with Richard Rorty for clarification of several points, and to the helpful comments of Nicholas Lash, Michael Power and John B. Thompson, specially in regard to my interpretation of Habermas and Apel. I am grateful to John Thompson in particular for his insight into the absence of the dimension of social power in Rorty’s book. Needless to say remaining misunderstandings are all my own.

## PHILOSOPHY AFTER RORTY

## 1.

In her paper ‘Epistemology without Foundations’ Mary Hesse tries to rescue philosophy from the elusive, even evanescent, future to which Richard Rorty has condemned it.<sup>1</sup> Rorty’s claim is that since Descartes and Locke philosophy has been the search for foundations of knowledge; that such an enterprise is misconceived, being based on an unnecessary and historically unfortunate picture of the mind as an inner arena of self-intimating certainties; and that all there remains for philosophy to become is the hermeneutic auditor and advocate of discourses which, lacking routines of conflict resolution, are apt to be ignored in our scientific culture. Hesse has little complaint about Rorty’s tirade against the epistemological aspirations and psychological assumptions of traditional philosophy. Her criticism is directed only at the characterisation of philosophy as having henceforth a novel and purely hermeneutic task.

She makes a number of protests: that even if philosophy is assigned a new hermeneutic aim, we shall probably be able to reinterpret the history of the subject in the light of this goal;<sup>2</sup> that Rorty’s anti-foundationalist arguments raise questions which actually outrun the hermeneutic brief that he envisages;<sup>3</sup> and that there is more in any case to the hermeneutic task than he ever allows. The last criticism is the fundamental one and will be the focus of our concern.

On Rorty’s conception, philosophy as hermeneutics tries to arbitrate, or at least practise shuffle diplomacy, in theoretical conflicts which suffer from evidential and methodological underdetermination: from underdetermination by data and by agreed criteria of theory selection. Preferring to speak of reflection – sometimes hermeneutic reflection – Hesse argues that in three ways, high-lighted in the Apel-Habermas view of philosophy, reflection transcends the bounds of Rorty’s image of it. Where he is taken to envisage a mundane, scientific and ultimately relativistic enterprise, she argues for something transcendental, non-scientific and non-relativistic: transcendental, because it displays conditions for the possibility of the discourse, or whatever, in question; non-scientific, because it offers

more than a second-rate status to the *Geisteswissenschaften*; and non-relativistic, because it seeks to uncover common procedures of rational communication and conviction in all the discourses we countenance.

There are two topics to which I address myself in this paper. First, in the section following, I examine Rorty's image of philosophy; then, in the final section, I ask whether the criticism of that image which is implicit in Hesse's last protest is fair. My comments are made on the assumption, shared with Hesse, that Rorty is certainly right to despair of an epistemologically foundational role for philosophical reflection. The question is, what other role can philosophy have.

2.

Rorty ascribes two distinguishable and complementary functions to philosophy in the final part of his book. First it is held to do for abnormal or incommensurable discourses something that corresponds to what epistemology – in a downgraded, nonfoundational sense – does for discourses which are normal and commensurable. Where such epistemology tracks down criteria and methods of conflict resolution within normal realms, philosophy strives to ensure that the absence of such procedures in abnormal areas does not mean that those discourses are silenced or shut off. Philosophy is the hermeneutic auditor of abnormal kinds of talk and serves to keep the conversation going between the speakers in question and more pedestrian interlocutors.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly philosophy is said to play the role not so much of hermeneutic auditor as of hermeneutic advocate. It sets out to construct a novel abnormal discourse and then to press this discourse into use, reinterpreting our ordinary experience in its terms. In this service philosophy ceases to be an underlabourer to other intellectual enterprises; it becomes an entrepreneur in its own right, advancing a distinctive 'poetic' product.

For Rorty the twin roles of philosophy involve it in a process of *Bildung* or edification, rather than in a systematic programme of research. "The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the 'poetic' activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our

familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions."<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to comment on the entrepreneurial brief which Rorty gives philosophy. If there are new illuminating things to be said, even in alien and abnormal discourse, then certainly let them be said; and if it pleases, let those who manage to say them be called philosophers. In what follows I shall ignore the possibility of such poetic philosophy and concentrate on the more properly hermeneutic form of the discipline, which Rorty envisages in his first underlabourer brief. Is the job of interpretation which is mentioned in this role-assignment a coherent and challenging task to assign to philosophers; or indeed to anybody?

Challenging, it may not at first seem to be. After all, interpretation across cultures, epochs and disciplines, such as Rorty mentions in the quotation above, is a relatively smooth practice and has long been a non-philosophical province. Why should it rouse colonial pretensions among philosophers, even philosophers deprived of their epistemological homeland? For Rorty I think that there is no reason why it should, except so far as the interpretation called for is of forms of discourse which are, as he says, abnormal or incommensurable. The hermeneutic task to which he wishes to recruit otherwise un-employed philosophers is not the regular job of interpretation but a rather more problematic one. As he says, "hermeneutics is only needed in the case of incommensurable discourses";<sup>6</sup> "Hermeneutics is the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse – the attempt to make sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about how to describe it, and thereby to begin an epistemological account of it".<sup>7</sup>

A discourse is abnormal or incommensurable – for Rorty the terms are synonyms – if it occasions disputes for which there appear to be no standard procedures of resolution. "By 'commensurable' I mean able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict".<sup>8</sup> Is incommensurability an intrinsic failure in a discourse, a failure on the part of participants to develop standards of conflict resolution? Often Rorty takes it as such but sometimes he suggests that the fact of its being alien is enough to make a discourse incommensurable and here he must be thinking of a relational, not an intrinsic, feature. This is suggested when he speaks above of hermeneutics being required at a stage where we are uncertain about the discourse under description and, more generally, when he says that epistemology caters for the familiar but hermeneutics is required to deal with the unfamiliar.<sup>9</sup> In view of these

indications we may take 'incommensurable' to mean 'at least incommensurable-by-us and perhaps incommensurable-by-anyone'; 'abnormal' to signify 'at least with norms different from ours – i.e. alien – and perhaps without any norms of its own.'

We were concerned with why interpretation should be thought to be a challenging job for philosophers. The fact that the matter for interpretation is always an abnormal discourse may be taken to introduce an appropriate challenge, for two reasons. The first is that given abnormality we cannot expect in Rorty's view to be able to translate discourse smoothly, or even Whiggishly, into the normal discourse from which we start. "The fact that hermeneutics inevitably takes some norm for granted makes it, so far forth, 'Whiggish'. But in so far as it proceeds non-reductively and in the hope of picking up a new angle on things, it can transcend its own Whiggishness."<sup>10</sup> A first challenge then is to find out whether we are confronted with a way of speaking and seeing which transcends our present perceptions, our current image of the world. "Our wonder, stripped of mirror-imagery, is simply about whether somebody or something may not be dealing with the world in terms for which our language contains no ready equivalents. More simply still, it is just wonder about whether we do not need to change our vocabulary, and not just our assertions."<sup>11</sup>

Rorty also suggests a second reason for thinking that the interpretation of abnormal discourse should be challenging. This is that in his view such interpretation may lead, not just to self-expansion, so to speak, but also to self-correction. The consideration is hinted at in the remark just quoted, where Rorty takes for granted that understanding an unfamiliar discourse may lead us to change our assertions. It is explicit in the following description of the hermeneutic philosopher at work. "In his salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation."<sup>12</sup> The important point is that between the normal, interpreting discourse and the abnormal, interpreted one there are always assumed to be disagreements. This means that the interpreter is faced with the challenge, not just of seeing whether his horizons can be expanded, but of discovering whether his present views are even adequate. The hermeneutic philosopher is no mere interpreter concerned only with comprehension. He is also a critic, both of his own discourse and that of his interpretees, for he has an equal interest in determining which of the disagreeing sides is in the right.<sup>13</sup>

Let us grant that the task assigned to the philosopher is a challenging

one. The next question is whether it is coherent. I wish to argue that it is not, on the following grounds. If a discourse is so different that its understanding involves self-expansion, then it cannot conflict with one's present beliefs in such a way as to encourage self-correction. Conflict of the kind which means that at most one of two rival beliefs or belief sets can be true requires that the beliefs can be expressed – or that they entail beliefs which can be expressed – as the assertion and denial, respectively, of the same proposition or propositions. Difference of the kind which means that in passing from one discourse to another one expands one's horizons requires that the propositions to which the discourses are addressed are not the same. Thus it is incoherent to envisage that an inquiry should at one and the same time force self-expansion and prompt self-correction.

The point can be put as follows. The normal discourse from which the hermeneutic inquirer starts represents his orthodoxy. There are two ways in which the discourse he investigates can fail to be orthodox: one, it may be heterodox, contradicting his original beliefs; or two, it may be 'xenodox', involving beliefs of a different and unfamiliar kind, beliefs addressed to novel propositions. No single discourse can be at once xenodox and heterodox and so no single inquiry can simultaneously yield the fruits of xenodox exploration – self-expansion – and heterodox contemplation – self-correction. This point can survive the Quinean claim that there is no fact of the matter as to whether a discourse under interpretation is one or the other; the point is that it cannot be represented simultaneously as both.

That Rorty thinks of hermeneutics as the investigation of the xenodox is abundantly clear. He consistently contrasts hermeneutics with epistemology – that is, nonfoundational epistemology – on the grounds that the latter holds that "all possible descriptions can be rendered commensurable with the aid of a single descriptive vocabulary".<sup>14</sup> Again he often makes explicit that in doing hermeneutics one gets into contact with propositional contents – he would not call them that – which are radically alien. The following two passages are examples.

There is no special reason to think that any given one-word expression in one culture can be matched with a one-word expression in a very different culture. Indeed, we may feel that even lengthy paraphrases will be of little help, and that we must just get into the swing of the exotic language-game.<sup>15</sup>

Producing commensurability by finding material equivalences between sentences drawn from different language-games is only one technique among others for coping with our fellow humans. When it does not work, we fall back on whatever does work – for example, getting the hang of a new language-game, and possibly forgetting our old one.<sup>16</sup>

But if Rorty sees hermeneutic inquiry as investigation of the xenodox, he is equally happy to cast it as an attempt to come to terms with the heterodox. "Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, ... where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts."<sup>17</sup> Here what is envisaged as important is not getting in tune with something novel and expansive, but finding the adjustments required to ensure a harmony of opinions across rival and conflicting accounts. The image of the explorer has given way to the image of the diplomat.

But Rorty does not hold two alternating pictures of the hermeneutic philosopher. He consciously merges the pictures, arguing that the philosopher-as-interpreter will seek the agreement we want with the heterodox, while respecting the gulf that separates us from the xenodox. He writes as follows of the hope for agreement.

This hope is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but *simply* hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement. Epistemology sees the hope of agreement as a token of the existence of common ground which, perhaps unbeknown to the speakers, unites them in a common rationality. For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology – from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put – and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own. For epistemology, to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all the contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible.<sup>18</sup>

How does Rorty come to maintain inconsistent things? My own belief is that he is ill served by the term 'incommensurable', for it misleads him in two ways. He stipulates that it means 'in currently non-resoluble conflict', whether non-resoluble by us or by anyone. Applying it then to another discourse he is misled into assuming, without argument, not just that the discourse is in internal conflict, but also that it is in conflict with his own. This unargued assumption has 'incommensurable' come to mean 'in currently non-resoluble conflict with orthodox views'; it takes on the sense, more or less, of 'heterodox'. But secondly, and more significantly Rorty is misled so far as he never shakes off the ordinary usage of 'incommensurable', though he explicitly disowns it.<sup>19</sup> On this usage the word means 'untranslatable, at least in a straightforward way'; it has the sense, roughly, of 'xenodox'. That he never rids himself of the common usage appears in his constant application of the epithet, not to bodies of

doctrine, but to the terminologies in which such doctrine is spelled out; it is unfortunate that 'discourses' may refer to either.<sup>20</sup>

Because hermeneutics is said to deal with incommensurable discourses, and because this may mean either of two things, it is cast at once as exploration of the xenodox and examination of the heterodox. Such at least is my diagnosis of what must be seen as a surprising slip on Rorty's part. The slip comes to the surface on one occasion. In a context where the term has its standard rather than its stipulated sense, he says: "incommensurability entails irreducibility but not incompatibility".<sup>21</sup> If he had added that it positively entails compatibility, then he would have said that xenodox cannot be heterodox; he would have admitted that no single inquiry could explore the xenodox and examine the heterodox.

A further comment in concluding this line of criticism. Mary Hesse has suggested that from the point of view of one discourse D1, another D2 may be at once xenodox and heterodox.<sup>22</sup> This happens, she thinks, when D1 is current medical theory and D2 faith-healing lore. She would therefore defend the coherence of Rorty's view of hermeneutic philosophy, even on a strict reading of his remarks.

But her suggestion cannot be pressed into service on Rorty's behalf. The reason is that two discourses like medical and faith-healing wisdom are not incommensurable in his sense. From the point of view of each, the other is simply false, since it maintains things on which the standards of resolution in the home discourse ambiguously require a negative judgment. If the discourses can be said to be incommensurable, it is only in the weaker and irrelevant sense that from an outside point of view, there may be no standards available for judging between their competing claims.

What are we to make then of Rorty's image of philosophy? We can interpret his remarks charitably along either of two lines. The one is my own invention, the other a suggestion made by Rorty in a private communication: it is unclear whether he regards this as a proposal that is inspired by charity however and not one that is perfectly straightforward.

At one point in his book Rorty speaks of "incompatible points of view, in the sense that we cannot be at both viewpoints simultaneously".<sup>23</sup> My own suggestion is that we could take the agreement of which he speaks in connection with hermeneutics to consist just in the recognition that though the point of view of another discourse may not be simultaneously tenable with that of one's own, it may be a view point to which one can at any time emigrate. On this picture discourses are pragmatically in conflict, so that one cannot participate in them at the same time, just as one cannot

simultaneously see the duck and the rabbit in Wittgenstein's switching gestalt. The expansion involved in understanding a discourse alien to that from which one starts is sufficient to enable one to see the way beyond such pragmatic conflict. It holds out the hope of agreement in the sense, not of mutual accommodation, but at least of peaceful co-existence.

Rorty's own proposal for what I take to be a charitable reading starts from the admission that what is heterodox cannot be xenodox, and *vice versa*. It represents hermeneutics as the investigation, not of a discourse which is assumed to be both, but of one which may turn out to be either. "No single discourse can be at once heterodox and xenodox, but it's not true that we know right off the bat which it is. It may take a long time to figure out which, and what happens in the interval is the sort of shuffle diplomacy I want to recommend under the name of 'hermeneutics'."<sup>24</sup> On the proposed reading of the text, as on the previous one, the contradiction which we isolated is removed but the spirit of the hermeneutic vision of philosophy is still preserved. We may be happy to find that such an interpretation is available without feeling obliged to decide which we ought to endorse.

## 3.

We return now to the matters raised in Mary Hesse's main protest. She complains that even if the pretensions of a foundational epistemology are rejected, we may still hope for a form of philosophical reflection which is transcendental, non-scientistic and non-relativistic. Is this just? Does Rorty's image of philosophy-as-hermeneutics entail that no transcendental form of argument is available? And does it mean that he commits himself to a scientistic and relativistic view? I would like to consider first scientism, second relativism, and finally the charge about transcendental argument.

Rorty is explicitly naturalistic in believing that the world can be completely – in the sense of exhaustively<sup>25</sup> – described and even predicted in the terms of basic, physical science. "Every speech, thought, theory, poem, composition, and philosophy will turn out to be completely predictable in purely naturalistic terms."<sup>26</sup> By 'naturalistic terms' he refers to the terms of an 'atoms-and-the-void account of micro-processes'. Hesse claims that he is not just naturalistic in this sense however, but scientistic: specifically, that he is committed to the view that the only really objective truth about the world is the truth revealed in basic science.

She admits that he himself claims that objective truth is accessible in non-basic forms of discourse, forms of discourse which may be incommensurable in terms of basic theory, and therefore not reducible to such theory. However she argues that this claim is inconsistent with the joint assertion of naturalism and anti-foundationalism. The assemblage of basic and non-basic discourses would exhaust objective truth. "We should have objective foundations for all possible knowledge."<sup>27</sup>

This argument does not seem to carry force however. The assemblage in question is an unattainable ideal for Rorty, and not even an ideal regulative of anything. At no point could we be in a position to say that we had reached the end of all discourses, and that henceforth any knowledge claims would have to be shown to be derivable from what we had in hand. At no point could we in that sense have established a foundation. "Given leisure and libraries, the conversation which Plato began will not end in self-objectivation – not because aspects of the world, or of human beings, escape being objects of scientific inquiry, but simply because free and leisured conversation generates abnormal discourse as the sparks fly upward."<sup>28</sup>

The view to which Hesse says that Rorty is committed is that whereas basic science reveals objective truth, non-basic discourse – at least if it is irreducible to basic – is warped by values whose acceptance is ultimately a matter of decision. This is unfair. Rorty thinks that basic science is just as value-laden as non-basic.<sup>29</sup> This need not worry him, since he believes that values themselves may be objective, in the only available sense of that term. "The application of such honorifics as 'objective' and 'cognitive' is never anything more than an expression of the presence of, or the hope for, agreement among inquirers."<sup>30</sup>

In connection with the charge of scientism it is worth considering Rorty's view of the relation between basic and non-basic forms of discourse. He denies that the latter are reducible to the former. Consistently with doing so, he might wish to maintain the supervenience of the non-basic: that is, that no non-basic change can take place without a basic one; that the basic level fixes the non-basic. Supervenience does not entail reducibility, since it allows that non-basic truths may not be expressible at the basic level: this, because basic terms do not allow us to formulate translational or even nomic equivalents for non-basic ones.<sup>31</sup> However it is unclear whether Rorty wishes to assert even such supervenience. He says, for example: "alternative biochemical (e.g.) as well as alternative psychological theories will be compatible with all and only the same move-

ments of the same particles".<sup>32</sup> This suggests that he envisages non-basic change without any basic counterpart.

It may be that Rorty is guilty here of careless phrasing and that he does accept supervenience.<sup>33</sup> Yet it has to be said that he often writes as if non-basic discourses ride freely or non-superveniently on the basic atoms-and-the-void account. His attitude is one of *laissez-faire*. Equal rights for all discourses and a rejection of "invidious comparisons between these modes of description".<sup>34</sup> Such comparisons are said almost always to be ill conceived, as in the case of factual and evaluative discourse. "The usual excuse for invidious treatment is that we are shoved around by physical reality but not by values. Yet what does being shoved around have to do with objectivity, accurate representation, or correspondence?"<sup>35</sup> Rorty looks for tolerance, asking us to judge each discourse and vocabulary in its own right "on pragmatic or aesthetic grounds alone".<sup>36</sup>

The rejection of supervenience may be important to Rorty's argument for a purely hermeneutic philosophy. If we allow supervenience, then the following task will call to be performed for any non-basic form of discourse: that of showing how the discourse can get going compatibly with basic theory, without being reducible to such theory. Arguably, a good deal of contemporary work in philosophy – most conspicuously, in philosophy of mind – is of this kind. What we may need, if Rorty's image of philosophy is to be protected, is a defence of non-supervenience. And yet it is hard to see where that may come from. All our intuitions point to supervenience. More importantly, it is obscure how non-basic forms of discourse can provide the causal explanation if they are not supervenient on basic theory: supervenient in such a way that the causal chains invoked may run through links charted at the basic level.

We shall return later to this theme. In the meantime, we have to ask whether Mary Hesse's charge of relativism sticks any better than that of scientism. She suggests that in insulating discourses from one another, arguing that they need not be mutually commensurable, Rorty deprives us of any good reason why we should assert our own discourse-bound commitments as against those of alternative discourses. The idea is that since we cannot judge between the commitments, and since they still compete with one another, we can prefer our own only on the grounds of embracing the devil we know. There is no room for us to enter even the presumption that ours are correct, the others false. In the absence of procedures of adjudication, there is nothing that we could mean by this other than that only ours are true-for-us, or satisfy some other relativistic *ersatz*.<sup>37</sup> Hesse

sees the exit from relativism in the possibility of unearthing devices whereby the claims of different discourses can be settled. "Ground-level discourses ... may be mediated at a higher level by philosophical devices such as those used by Habermas and Apel. These include commitment to ideal speech, critique of ideology, science as corrective of illusions of self-understanding, and so on."<sup>38</sup>

Rorty invites the charge of relativism, so far as he represents alternative discourses as mutually incommensurable, not just in the sense of xenodox but also in that of heterodox. If I have to see discourses other than my operative one as making claims incompatible with mine, but claims so foreign that I cannot judge between them and mine, then certainly relativism, with all its self-defeating paradoxes, is in prospect. However, we have already seen that there are two different ways in which Rorty's remarks may be charitably interpreted. On neither does he posit the existence of discourses which are at once mutually xenodox and mutually heterodox. If either is endorsed, then we no longer need to see him as inviting the charge of relativism.

As a matter of fact Rorty supports Davidson's well-known argument about conceptual schemes and so positively disavows relativism. That argument is that the only available ground for thinking of another language, and therefore another discourse, as a language or discourse is to think of it, if not as translatable into mine, at least as interpretable – say, by paraphrase, neologism and even linguistic importation – in such a way that I can still hold onto most of my own; I can still retain my present sense of reality. We may not actually be able to translate or otherwise interpret but "we cannot make sense of the claim that there are more than temporary impediments to our know-how".<sup>39</sup> Thus I can think of other discourses as discourses only if I think of them as saying things which, however novel, are mostly true by my present lights. This is a far cry from relativism.<sup>40</sup>

And yet the claim that Rorty is not a relativist may be resisted. He rejects the idea that when confronted with challenging claims from an alien discourse one can rise above the confrontation with one's own tenets and appeal to a higher court for resolution. He would have no sympathy with Hesse's invocation of philosophical devices which can mediate from on high between ground-level discourses. Does it not follow that in facing alien claims all he can do is to be ethnocentric and affirm his parochial vision?

Rorty's views do entail a certain ethnocentricity but not one involving

relativism. Of the following ethnocentric principles, they support only the second.

1. *The principle of bullish relativism*

There are many incompatible views of the world, all equally good, but piety and practicality dictate that you stick with your own.

2. *The principle of sheepish absolutism*

In making sense of other incompatible views of the world you have to start from your own but there is no saying, given the effect of challenge and self-criticism, where you may end.

Even if we rescue Rorty from the charges of scientism and relativism, there remains the question of whether he leaves room for a transcendental mode of inquiry, such as Hesse envisages. This investigation would reveal, not the conditions for the possibility of supposedly inevitable features, as in the Kantian model, but only conditions for the possibility of particular, contingent discourses. Thus the Apel-Habermas analysis of the suppositions of argumentative discourse is held to be transcendental but non-Kantian: "Their programme is not that of reinstating the Kantian conditions for all possible experience. Perhaps men can live without argument, or even if they cannot, this seems to be a contingent fact of evolution, not a necessary fact".<sup>41</sup>

Although he explicitly despairs of anything other than philosophy-as-hermeneutics, I agree with Hesse that there is nothing in Rorty's anti-foundationalism to undermine the sort of analysis which she envisages. Earlier I adverted to the common philosophical pursuit of trying to display the compatibility of non-basic forms of discourse *vis-à-vis* basic theory. That may be redescribed as showing that the conditions for the possibility of those forms of discourse are realisable in a world described by the atoms-and-the-void account; it can be cast as involving a sort of transcendental analysis. I see nothing in Rorty's arguments against foundationalism to undermine such an enterprise. Like Hesse I think that Rorty discards a measure of wheat with the chaff of foundationalism.<sup>42</sup>

As a matter of fact Rorty does object to the very analysis of the conditions for the possibility of argumentative discourse which Hesse hails. It may be however that this objection is not so much that the analysis is transcendental in form as that it is designed like Kant's analysis to serve a critical purpose reminiscent of foundationalist epistemology; here his

view of it would differ from Hesse's: "The notion that we can get around overconfident philosophical realism and positivistic reductions only by adopting something like Kant's transcendental standpoint seems to me the basic mistake in programmes like that of Habermas".<sup>43</sup> The reason for suggesting that this may be the real source of Rorty's objection to Apel and Habermas is that he does himself sometimes seem to endorse arguments of a loosely transcendental character. For example, he endorses Davidson's argument that to interpret is necessarily to find a good deal of truth and agreement and that the ordinary notion of truth does not allow us to imagine that what we find ourselves commonly maintaining is actually, in the main, false: "Only in the context of general agreement does doubt about either truth or goodness have sense".<sup>44</sup>

In conclusion to this piece I would like to suggest that there is no anti-foundationalist reason why Rorty should not extend his sympathy for such forms of argument and that if he does so he will encompass much more of contemporary philosophical practice than is reflected in his strictly hermeneutic brief. Consider Wittgenstein's argument that rule-following only makes sense in the context of a set of social practices; or Wiggins's, that interpretation presupposes that certain utterances can be isolated as possessing a property hardly distinguishable from regular truth-value;<sup>45</sup> or the commonly mooted argument that to explain human actions in the ordinary intentional way is to assume that agents satisfy certain norms of rationality.<sup>46</sup> These are distinctive and substantive claims which have appeared in recent philosophy: they are distinctive because one can hardly imagine them coming up with other disciplines of inquiry; and substantive, because they have important ramifications for various practices. I see no reason why Rorty should not countenance such paradigms of philosophical research. Were he to do so, he would have to paint a more nuanced picture of philosophical activity than is depicted on his hermeneutic canvas. He might even satisfy Mary Hesse's desire to see philosophy represented in transcendental, or quasi-transcendental, colours.<sup>47</sup>

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mary Hesse's paper is in this volume; henceforth it is referred to as EF. Richard Rorty's condemnation is in the third part of his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford:



Blackwell, 1980); henceforth it is referred to as *PMN*.

<sup>2</sup> EF, pp. 51–52.

<sup>3</sup> EF, p. 55. This protest survives what I see as a misreading of Rorty's views on truth. Mary Hesse takes Rorty to commit himself, presumably not without an awareness of what he is doing, to "the rejection of an applicable propositional logic, and hence of any theory of truth, argument, natural kinds and natural laws now on offer" (p. 55). This does not fit with his endorsement of Davidson's theory of truth (*PMN*, p. 295 ff.).

<sup>4</sup> This is a summary of *PMN*, Chapter 7.

<sup>5</sup> *PMN*, p. 360. The second role for philosophy is discussed in Chapter 8.

<sup>6</sup> *PMN*, p. 347.

<sup>7</sup> *PMN*, pp. 320–321. The epistemological account mentioned would be such only in a non-foundational sense.

<sup>8</sup> *PMN*, p. 316.

<sup>9</sup> For example *PMN*, pp. 352–353. Elsewhere Rorty speaks of mutually incommensurable but intrinsically normal discourses (p. 388).

<sup>10</sup> *PMN*, p. 321.

<sup>11</sup> *PMN*, pp. 352–353.

<sup>12</sup> *PMN*, p. 317.

<sup>13</sup> It may be for this reason that sometimes Rorty casts the hermeneutic philosopher not as an interpreter but as someone working at a higher order: "hermeneutics is, roughly, a description of our study of the unfamiliar and epistemology is, roughly, a description of our study of the familiar" (p. 353).

<sup>14</sup> *PMN*, p. 378.

<sup>15</sup> *PMN*, p. 267.

<sup>16</sup> *PMN*, pp. 355–356. See also p. 319: "We play back and forth between guesses about how to characterise particular statements or other events, and guesses about the point of the whole situation, until gradually we feel at ease with what was hitherto strange".

<sup>17</sup> *PMN*, p. 318.

<sup>18</sup> *PMN*, p. 318.

<sup>19</sup> *PMN*, p. 302, n. 35; p. 316, n. 1.

<sup>20</sup> See for example *PMN*, pp. 350, 360, 362, 376–378, 386–387. Rorty's comment, p. 316, n. 1, does not serve to legitimate this usage.

<sup>21</sup> *PMN*, p. 388.

<sup>22</sup> In discussion at the Lancaster conference.

<sup>23</sup> *PMN*, p. 385.

<sup>24</sup> Private communication June 1983.

<sup>25</sup> See *PMN*, p. 205.

<sup>26</sup> *PMN*, p. 387.

<sup>27</sup> Hesse, EF, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> *PMN*, p. 389.

<sup>29</sup> See for example *PMN*, p. 329.

<sup>30</sup> *PMN*, p. 335. I think that Hesse mistakenly imputes a decisionist view of value to Rorty, on the basis of his remark that there is no objective truth as to whether the world as presented in a certain way has a sense or moral for an individual (*PMN*, p. 388). All that Rorty wants to stress in saying this however is that the individual may always generate a novel discourse in the light of which the given ones will lose their hold on him.

<sup>31</sup> For a good characterisation of supervenience see J. Kim 'Supervenience and Nomological

Incommensurables', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978): 149–164.

<sup>32</sup> *PMN*, p. 203. See also p. 247.

<sup>33</sup> In the private communication mentioned, Rorty says that he accepts supervenience in the sense given.

<sup>34</sup> *PMN*, pp. 204–205.

<sup>35</sup> *PMN*, p. 375.

<sup>36</sup> *PMN*, p. 208.

<sup>37</sup> This is a loose and perhaps imaginative summary of EF, Section 2.2.

<sup>38</sup> EF, p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> *PMN*, p. 355, n. 25. Notice one assumption in the claim: that the foreign speakers are sensorily and otherwise equipped more or less as humans are.

<sup>40</sup> Rorty might avow relativism in something like the sense distinguished by Bernard Williams in 'The Truth in Relativism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 74, (1974–75): 215–228.

<sup>41</sup> EF, p. 60. Contrast Rorty's softening of transcendental argument, mentioned below, note 47.

<sup>42</sup> For a more systematic account of one view of such wheat see my 'Philosophy and the Human Sciences', University of Bradford, Inaugural Lecture, 1979.

<sup>43</sup> *PMN*, p. 382.

<sup>44</sup> *PMN*, p. 309.

<sup>45</sup> 'What Would be a Substantial Theory of Truth?' in *Philosophical Subjects*, edited by Zak Van Straaten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980): 189–221.

<sup>46</sup> For one version of this see Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). Some ramifications of the argument are also traced in this book.

<sup>47</sup> In an article from 1971 – endorsed *PMN*, p. 305 – Rorty supports the sort of transcendental argument which tries to establish that specific proposals to revise certain conventional ideas are actually parasitic on those ideas and self-destruct: this, as distinct from attempting to show that no revisionary proposals whatsoever could hope to succeed ('Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments', *Nous* 5: 3–14). The paradigms of philosophy mentioned in this paragraph can surely be cast to fit this model of argument. What is not so clear however is that they can be squared with the view that philosophy is just hermeneutics.