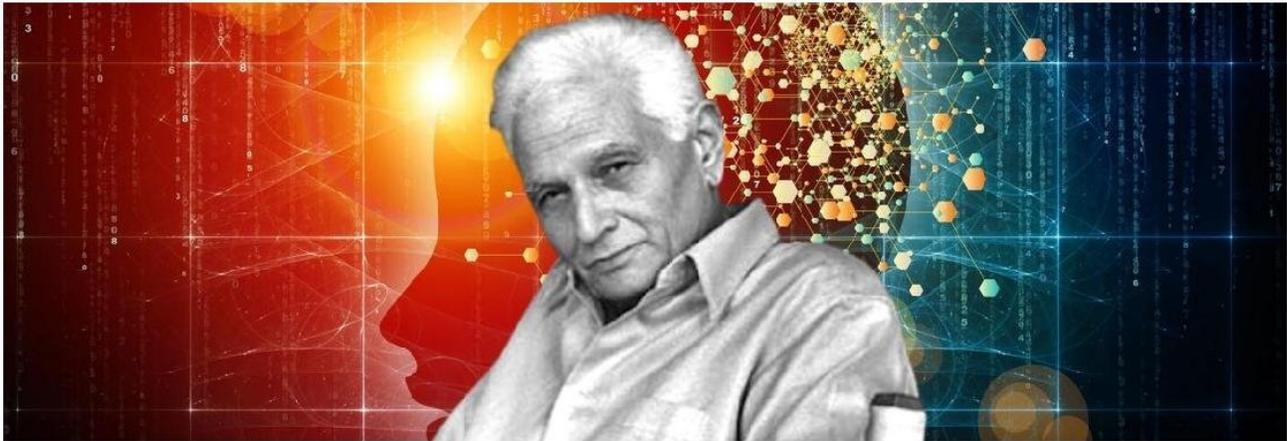


Derrida and the trouble with metaphysics



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According to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, western metaphysics has suffered from a long-standing hung-up. Philosophers from Plato onwards have idealised the present, positing it as an ideal, pure, timeless form of reality, to be contrasted with the messiness of life that exists in time, interconnected with the past and the future. But simply recognising that this pure “now” that philosophers have postulated isn’t anything like the human “now”, always within history and embedded in a web of meaning, doesn’t mean that Derrida was able to overcome metaphysics altogether. To the extent to which our language already carries with it the history of western philosophy, there is no leaving it behind; there is no going beyond metaphysics, writes Peter Salmon.

In January 1954, the philosopher Jacques Derrida, then 24 and just back from a summer in his Algerian home, visited the Husserl Archives in Louvain, Belgium. The archive had been founded in 1938, shortly after Husserl's death, in order to protect his corpus from the Nazi authorities. Smuggled out by the Franciscan Father Herman Leo Van Breda, the archive contains more than 45,000 shorthand pages, Husserl's complete research library and 10,000 pages of typescripts.



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But it was a small paper of no more than 30 pages, working title *The Origin of Geometry*, which was to spur a revolution in Derrida's thinking which would inform, with astonishing consistency, his work for the rest of his life, across a vast range of subjects – from traditional philosophical subjects such as meaning, language, ethics and religion, to issues such as gender, colonialism, film and hospitality. His

first book was a translation of Husserl's paper, its 30 pages 'supplemented' – to use a Derridean term – with an introduction of over 100 pages. In this introduction lay the seeds of all his later philosophy, and the terms forever associated with his name – deconstruction, differance, iteration and, crucially 'the metaphysics of presence' – Derrida's vital contribution to the calling into question of the whole basis of Western metaphysics.

Husserl, phenomenology and the metaphysics of presence

How do we know stuff about the world? Husserl wrote in a letter to the mathematician Gottlob Frege that he was 'tormented by those incredibly strange realms: the world of the purely logical and the world of actual consciousness... I had no idea how to unite them, and yet they had to interrelate and form an intrinsic unity.' His first attempts had been via mathematics. By analysing what a number is – something that 'exists' or something humans 'create', he thought he would be able to establish a relationship between consciousness and the world. It was Frege's criticism

of this attempt due to its 'psychologism', that is its dependence on the internal mental states of the subject rather than the logical relations at hand, which spurred Husserl to his subsequent investigations.

What if, Husserl argued, we put aside the question of 'the world' entirely, and look simply at consciousness? Whether something exists or not is both moot and distracting. Husserl introduced the concept of the 'epoché', – from the ancient Greek, meaning 'suspension of judgement'. We 'bracket' the world, what is important is not whether this tree exists, but how we encounter it, how it affects us. The job of philosophy is to describe these affects, and to build concepts from them which we can later extend outwards.

Crucial here is the idea of 'intentionality' – as Franz Brentano had pointed out, we don't pace Descartes, merely 'think' – we 'think about'. All consciousness has a content, and in analysing this content, Husserl wanted to unite the strange realms of thought and world. He called this method 'phenomenology' – the study of phenomena – and by the time Derrida arrived at Louvain it was one of the dominant strands of twentieth century philosophy, spurred on by students of Husserl such as Emmanuel Levinas and, crucially, Martin Heidegger.

The Origin of Geometry is a late unpublished work, but it grapples with the same problems as his early work. Geometrical objects are, for Husserl, the perfect example of 'ideal' objects – they are defined precisely by their non-spatiotemporal nature (there are no perfect circles in the world) and are thus purely 'transcendental'. How do we – humans – think them and use them? How do we – finite beings – create transcendental things. What is their *origin*? This is not a historical question – Husserl is not looking for the person to whom the first geometrical object occurred. It is a question of meaning.

While Derrida would always acknowledge his debt to Husserl – 'Even in moments where I had to question certain presuppositions of Husserl, I tried to do so while keeping to phenomenological discipline', his critique of *The Origin* is wide-ranging and multi-stranded. One strand catches Husserl out for asserting that ideal objects require writing down in order to establish their existence – contrary to Husserl's usual assertion, shared with most philosophers, that writing is a secondary activity compared to speech, indeed a parasitic derivation of it. This bias, which Derrida would later term phonocentrism, would expand into his great work *Of Grammatology*.

The pure now is impossible. This 'fixed point', on which phenomenology bases its claims, is always impossible, can never not be 'contaminated'. The concept of the pure now is a hope.

Derrida also critiques the idea of the ahistorical, a strange state which contravenes, Derrida argues, all human experience. Derrida, in a method which would become familiar in his later works of deconstruction, seeks out moments in the text where history, as it were, sneaks back into Husserl's analysis – slips of the pen which, like the example of writing, reveal aporias (irresolvable contradictions) in Husserl's thinking, as surely as Freudian slips indicate the same in our thinking.

But his main focus is on the idea of origin, which – incorporating the two previous critiques – he uses as a lever to prise apart fundamental aspects of Husserl's philosophy across his entire corpus, and from which he develops his critique of 'the metaphysics of presence'.

Phenomenology, argues Derrida, posits a position from which we are able to study the affects of the world upon us, and from which we can investigate phenomena, including concepts. This position – the 'now' – is, somehow, pure, uncontaminated by anything that is not the now. And yet here, as in works such as *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, Husserl had very deliberately assessed that whatever the 'now' is, it isn't pure.

We exist, as Husserl memorably puts it, in a 'flowing thisness', from which we posit 'now's. But these 'now's are not independent entities, which can be extracted and analysed. Rather, we are to think of them like notes in a piece of music. A particular note gets its meaning from its position in the overall piece – our memory of what has come before, our anticipation of what follows. Otherwise we would have the same experience of hearing a C note whether it was part of a Beethoven symphony or a piece of death metal (not Husserl's example). It is, in temporal terms, contextual.

Husserl calls what has come before 'retention' and what follows 'protention' and each 'contaminates' the now as surely as the notes before and after that C note. What Derrida highlights in his critique of

phenomenology here is that, despite retention and protention always being already part of the now, Husserl retains an unexamined faith that there is still – sort of – a now, which retention and protention contaminate. A pure 'now' is still, in some sense, posited, even as its impossibility is asserted. 'Contamination' supposes something to be contaminated.

This is not, as can be seen, a case where, with greater knowledge, with greater effort dedicated to the question, we could get to the pure now. The pure now *is* impossible. This 'fixed point', on which phenomenology bases its claims, is always impossible, can never not be 'contaminated'. The concept of the pure now is a hope.

The history of metaphysics, then, is a history of our hopes for presence – for a pure, central, present object of enquiry, from which we can derive our knowledge – the self included.

Derrida's crucial insight is that this 'hope' is not an idiosyncrasy of phenomenology, nor only of its analysis of time. Rather it is endemic to philosophy itself. We exist in a 'flowing thisness', and philosophy again and again posits ideal, timeless, pure forms which life somehow contaminates – as though there was a something 'before' or 'outside' of life. This is the structure of most religious philosophies – the ideal being God, the contamination being humanity. Platonic forms are 'ideal' examples of things like circles, to which no actual circle could aspire. The critique of temporal purity is as valid when applied to the spatial dimension.

The history of metaphysics, then, is a history of our hopes for presence – for a pure, central, present object of enquiry, from which we can derive our knowledge – the self included. Derrida's critique of speech and writing captures this – unlike writing, speech is seen as 'pure' language, and thus an expression of our 'true' being – the religious might call it the soul, the non-religious some other term which really means soul. In fact, Husserl at one point goes further, arguing that even speaking words is a form of contamination, as we may be misunderstood. It is only the speech in our own head which is the pure self – an argument Derrida fully critiques in his

Speech and Phenomena, perhaps his most thoroughgoing analysis of the metaphysics of presence.

There is no going “beyond” metaphysics

As Derrida recognised, Heidegger had, both directly and indirectly, made a similar critique of Husserl and of Western metaphysics. Husserl had attempted to arrive at pure phenomena and describe beings independent of any presuppositions – ‘to the things themselves’ as Husserl famously put it. But, as we have seen, pure phenomena do not exist. This for Heidegger was one of the ways in which the ‘question of the meaning of Being’ has been lost. In its search for a *fundamentum absolutum*, of an indubitable grounding for metaphysics, the openness of Being as the Greeks understood it, has been occluded. In addition, the distinction between essence and existence, and between the ideal and the real (whatness and thatness) are illusions; Being precedes both. The mistake lies as far back as Plato – the birth of Western philosophy, with its categories, its hierarchies and taxonomies, is the moment Being is forgotten.

For Derrida, Heidegger despite himself is unable to go beyond metaphysics as he explicitly attempts to do. But then, as Derrida himself is aware, neither does Derrida.

For Derrida – whose ‘deconstruction’ is deliberately based on Heidegger’s ‘destruktion’, a method of taking apart while leaving intact – Heidegger despite himself is unable to go beyond metaphysics as he explicitly attempts to do. But then, as Derrida himself is aware, neither does Derrida. Firstly, we have no language to do so which is not already informed by metaphysical propositions:

"There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax or lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest."

Secondly, there is not 'going beyond' metaphysics, as this is to repeat the gesture about which he warns – to posit an 'entity' outside of (before, beyond) the mess of life. To take the example of the 'now' again – any analysis of the 'now' can only deal with the 'now' we have to deal with – impure as it is.

What Derrida does do, in recognising this urge to posit the pure based on the impure, is to open up the possibility of a metaphysics which recognises absence as fundamental to its structure. Derrida has some big gestures for this – such as his idea of hauntology, a near homonym of ontology, which studies 'what there isn't' instead of 'what there is' (while recognising the distinction is ultimately as contested, and revealing, as all dichotomies). Thus histories which did not occur, beings that do not exist, futures and existents which never come to be – including pure democracy, the pure gift, pure hospitality. These limit cases, always beyond what can actually be, disclose knowledge about what there actually is, including concepts.

But his critique is also more intrinsic than that. Where there is 'essence' and 'identity', Derrida posits 'alterity' and 'difference'. More, he posits 'différance', a word he first uses in *Speech and Phenomena*. Pronounced exactly the same way as 'difference' (this is Derrida forcing the written word to be more decisive than the spoken) it is a complicated term, which incorporates the idea of differing and deferring. Western metaphysics has, in Derrida's reading, always been a history of trying, as it were, to secure the meaning of words – 'truth is...', 'beauty is...'.

However, as anyone who has picked up a dictionary knows, every word is defined by another word, which is defined by another word – the meaning of word x is both deferred as we move along the chain, and is an effect of difference – we get its meaning in contrast to other words. There is no ur-word at the end of the dictionary, both sufficient to itself (it needs no other word to define it) and generative of everything else (thus producing meaning).

This is not accidental – '*différance*' is built into language, as it is built into all concepts. It precedes meaning – for Derrida fixing a meaning is a form of violence, and we should look not only at the act of doing so, but what it means that we attempt to. Deconstruction is a form of suspicion – Derrida sometimes described it as a parasitical method, anything is open to being deconstructed. But, as he pointed out, it is not imposed from without. Any text deconstructs itself, the moment it attempts to fix meaning.

Where Heidegger argued that we are reaching the end of metaphysics, Derrida argued that metaphysics – philosophy – always already works in the shadow of this death.

One could call Derrida's work a metaphysics of absence as opposed to a metaphysics of presence, but it is the ways in which they intertwine that is of interest. And the effort metaphysics has expended on suppressing the absent – the gaps between ideas, the ghosts and spectres which are called up within its thinking, the things that stand outside its purview in one era and why they are excluded. We are used to the Freudian concept that our words are not to be taken at face value – the unconscious, that exemplary sort of absence, is playing its part. Like a psychoanalyst of metaphysics, Derrida wants to know what is really being said.

If Western metaphysics is a search for fixed meanings, Derrida is not against this search – the search for the pure end term of religion – God – creates religion, the search for such things as Truth, consciousness and the self, generates philosophy. For Derrida these searches are 'tasks' in the sense that we always already find ourselves – to use a Heideggerian term – 'thrown' into. Part of our impulse is and always be to seek an origin, or a culmination, or at least solid ground. At the moment we do so – given we can actually experience none of those things – we are performing a gesture, attempting to renounce the equivocal, expressing a hope, be it finding an origin of geometry or overcoming metaphysics.

Where Heidegger argued that we are reaching the end of metaphysics, Derrida argued that metaphysics – philosophy – always already works in the shadow of this death. It is a structural component of metaphysics to imagine its own completion, present and correct. Or as Hegel put it in 1820:

Only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.

Western metaphysics will always search for the ideal, and believe itself to be edging forward towards it. Perhaps one day presence will triumph. But as Derrida noted 'The end approaches, but the apocalypse is long lived.'

Peter Salmon

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After Metaphysics: Rorty and American Pragmatism

Elin Danielsen Huckerby |

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Metaphysics wants to know what, ultimately, exists. What is true. What is good. For metaphysics, philosophy's ultimate aim is a complete account of reality, as it is in itself. Richard Rorty made a name for himself by claiming that this metaphysical impulse of mirroring the world is a philosophical delusion that's best left behind. Revisiting the Platonic dispute between poetry and philosophy, Rorty suggested philosophers take a leaf out of the poets' book, seeing their work as radically unconstrained, except by each other. This move would give philosophers more agency and at the same time more democratic accountability, writes Elin Danielsen Huckerby.

Richard Rorty, one of the most influential and debated philosophers of the twentieth century, wanted us to leave metaphysics behind. Metaphysics asks questions about the Nature of Things, of how things *ultimately* hang together. It proceeds from the presumption that there *are* first-order, philosophical problems, such as 'what is true?', or 'what is right?', 'what is good?'. And thus, it hinges on the belief that we can answer such underlying questions – it posits that reason, or rationality,

or the right understanding of language will let us develop descriptions that converge on reality itself, that will mirror it in language. Rorty does not think we can do this. Not because we cannot properly capture such fundamentals in language, but because there are, on his view, no essences to discover – there is nothing to converge on, at least not in the essentialist sense metaphysics supposes.

While Rorty encourages us to make and remake helpful, shared ways to talk to achieve aims, predict events, manage our environment, express what we desire, what we find joyful or sad, or to cause joy or sadness or any other affect, he wants us to

give up the quest for Truth. This mindset, he suggests, is not just misguided, but bears bad fruits. It seeks closure, an ending. It

upholds oppression: because metaphysics wants to converge on the *right* descriptions, it will inevitably have to reject all other descriptions as, if not wrong, then inferior. But despite his rejection of metaphysics, Rorty does not want us to stop practising philosophy. Instead, he wants philosophy to be practised in a different spirit, one where philosophers think of themselves as ‘poets’, engaged in a ‘literary’ kind of criticism. Not criticism intent on critiquing poems, plays or novels – although that could be part of the mix too – but intent on poetically making and continually *remaking* our vocabularies, and by this our understanding of our world.

Radical acceptance of contingency, radical rejection of constraints

Rorty’s influences were numerous, but he most strongly identified with the American pragmatist tradition. This school holds, as James expressively put it, that ‘the trail of the human serpent is... over everything’. It stresses that our ideas emerge from imperfect, embodied human beings as socially propagated tools for thinking and coping. Our notions are entirely incorporated within and shaped by our dealings, needs and desires. Importantly, pragmatism suggests that acknowledging the context-dependence, use-value, and fallibility of our ideas is a *helpful* thing to do, as it centres our potential for doing better. Tools for thinking might work for us, or not, and thus be picked up or put down, tinkered with, or replaced.

What Rorty does, is push pragmatism to its limits. He suggests that we not only think of ideas in this way but even of our very words as

contingent, material 'noises and marks' that can have specific effects. When Rorty began his career, analytic philosophy of language was thought to finally be making proper progress towards delimiting criteria for true knowledge. It was geared towards the natural sciences, logic, and mathematics, and while it acknowledged its indebtedness to (Kantian) metaphysics, it thought itself engaged in something more sensible and down-to-earth, more scientific: by finding out how *language* mapped onto the world, how it represented, it wanted to uncover how we arrived at true propositions, and thus how we might accumulate a body of knowledge that was a mirror image of the world in language. This differs radically from Rorty's suggestion that we think of our noises and marks as having effects, like, say, coordinating our behaviour and doings (think undertaking the Moon-landing), sparking joy, or affecting comfort.

The mirroring-ambition, and philosophy of language as the contemporary dwelling of metaphysics, was what Rorty powerfully assailed in his 1979 tome *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. I find, however, that a phrase in a lecture he gave the same year best helps us understand his stance. He says that to be a pragmatist is to accept that there are 'no constraints on inquiry' apart from 'conversational ones', no 'constraints derived from the nature of objects, or of mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers'. This focuses on the 'fundamental choice': to accept 'the contingent character' of all 'starting points', or not. In other words, what is at stake, is accepting or rejecting metaphysics. Siding with Rorty here is to say there are no essences, no things in themselves: there is the materiality of the world, and we and our various ways of expressing ourselves are always merely and richly elements of this corporality. And it is to hold that it is *in* material, human conversation that we work and rework shared conceptions, our narratives of how things can be said to hang together, and how to proceed in this world.

It is important to know that 'contingent', in Rorty, should never be understood as 'accidental', nor merely recall Darwin's lessons. It should be read as meaning emerged, evolved, dependent, carrying traces, coming with a history. It should bring to mind the 'red wheelbarrow' in William Carlos Williams's poem, or Harold Bloom's elucidations of those

inevitable yet sometimes hidden trails that go from poem to poem. What full acceptance of contingency achieves, is to free us from the compulsion that we must identify the *right* starting points to become capable of taking proper action, or that we have an obligation to dig down to an immutable bedrock of principles before we know how to proceed. It moves our attention forward and encourages us to be active agents by suggesting that all we can do, is to start where we are, do what we can, with what we have.

**In Plato's Republic, poetry, or art more broadly,
helps delimit philosophy by representing what
philosophy is not**

What Rorty urges us to do, is to make a less cruel future. To this end, he suggests two key strategies. To sustain and progress democratic culture, we ought to cultivate an ability to hold our concepts 'lightly' while taking their consequences seriously. We should learn to 'conversationally' amend our ways, as our needs and insights evolve. This is not to say that having conversations is enough – it is not. 'Conversationally' here means a practice founded on turning towards *each other* to collectively work out how to talk, and what to do. We, moreover, ought to build society around the overarching, shared aim of lessening 'cruelty'. The former ability Rorty sometimes calls 'ironism', the latter goal 'liberalism' (although scholars of his work are currently arguing that his identification with liberalism obscures strong commitments to more left-leaning, interventionist politics). To hold our concepts 'lightly', or be an 'ironist,' is another way of expressing pragmatist fallibilism: that we should remain open to the possibility that we could work out better (linguistic) practices. To bring about an intellectual culture where we would proceed with this kind of humbleness, while also recognising that we are fully responsible for our practices (we cannot outsource responsibility to God, say), Rorty suggests we need a 'poeticization' of culture. But why couch it in *these* terms, and why does such a poeticization entail leaving metaphysics

behind?

Leaving Metaphysics behind

Western philosophy has of course defined itself as something *else* than literature since the ancient Greeks. In Plato's *Republic*, poetry, or art more broadly, helps delimit philosophy by representing what philosophy is *not*. Poets are deceitful makers of untruths, as opposed to philosophers who seek what is true. Philosophers do not simply make things up, inspired by the muses, but dispassionately contemplate ideas. This view of philosophy as on a quest for truth, and its enabling belief – that human reason is capable of understanding the conditions and structure of existence – also saturated the theories of later philosophers, such as the rationalist metaphysics of Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza. These philosophers might not have wanted to ban the poets, but held beauty, art and poetry as subjective productions of the imagination that could not be rationally grasped, and thus to be kept out of the domain of philosophy proper. This, then, is the kind of philosophy Rorty wished we'd *stop* doing: philosophy as metaphysics.

That metaphysics persists is, to Rorty, deeply problematic, because it diminishes our sense of agency and the fullness of our responsibility alike

And metaphysics is, Rorty believed, coming to an end – or at least it potentially could if we worked at it. Its unravelling began with Immanuel Kant. This might seem counterintuitive, as Kant devised the most impressive metaphysical system philosophy has produced. While Kant rejected the view that human minds could comprehend the underlying structure of existence (how things are 'in themselves'), he replaced this metaphysical project with another: the aim of understanding human reasoning as such, and by this come to understand how we arrive at true knowledge. But the pivotal role Kant plays in Rorty's narrative has little to do with the details of Kantian philosophy, and everything to do with how Kant, by making what is a radically dismissive move, showed

rising generations *that it was possible* to thoroughly redescribe philosophical presumptions and problems. By this, Kant paved the way for the Romanticist inversion of reason and feeling, and for the Nietzschean story, where the entire metaphysical endeavour since Plato is set aside as an attempt at formulating a secularised, theology, a system for controlling human creativity and power by imposing rules on its expressions.

That metaphysics persists is, to Rorty, deeply problematic, because it diminishes our sense of agency and the fullness of our responsibility alike. It limits our ethical, critical, and political imagination. So: in what way does metaphysics persist, why is that a problem, and what is Rorty's alternative?

Metaphysics as a Problem *for* Philosophy

The belief that there are first-order, philosophical problems lies at the heart of metaphysics as an enterprise (what, ultimately, exists, what is true, what is right, what is good?). If there are such problems, solving them requires that there *are* constraints on thought. Answering such questions *depends* on the possibility of uncovering ways of thinking and talking that converge on reality. If there are no limits imposable on thought and talk (set by God, the moral law within, Nature, Science) we end up –as Plato well knew and as every metaphysician has feared since – in the unbounded realm of imagination and poetry. Thus, as Rorty notes, it is not sufficient for the metaphysician to be constrained by *social* norms, nor the constraints of 'the disciplines of our day': the metaphysician wants to be constrained by the 'ahistorical and nonhuman nature of reality itself'. When Rorty says there are only 'conversational' constraints, he is thus both rejecting metaphysics and saying he's comfortable with thinking of himself as a poet, of his philosophy as a kind of poetry.

Rorty considers there to be two versions of metaphysics still at work today. There is the Platonic form where objects are postulated for 'treasured propositions to correspond to', and the Kantian strategy of discovering those criteria that let us define 'the essence of knowledge, or representation, or morality, or rationality'. He associates the former with continental philosophy, and the latter with analytic philosophy, but

stresses that what they *share* is a 'common urge to escape the vocabulary and practises of one's own time and finding something ahistorical and necessary to cling to' – to answer questions by appeal to 'something *more* than the ordinary, retail, detailed, concrete reasons which have brought one to one's present view'. What metaphysics means and entails today is thus harder to grasp than the obviously universalising systems of a Leibniz or a Kant, and thus the problems which such modes of operation are also more elusive and harder to overcome.

The problematic upshot of the requirement for constraints metaphysics imposes, is, well, that it constrains, *and that it does so by reference to criteria beyond the political*, that is: beyond the ethico-social restraints that citizens of democratic societies negotiate and continually re-negotiate. That metaphysics is alive and well, and that its governing mindset impacts us all today, can be quickly demonstrated by asking, say, 'what is a woman?'. To ask this as an ontological question, where the answer is supposed to tell us about what kind of essential characteristics a 'proper' woman has, or where the answer would lay down criteria by which we can identify her *qua* woman, is to pose a metaphysical question. And answering that question in the metaphysical spirit instantly rules out infinite ways in which our uses of the word 'woman' might be amended to better fit our way of life here and now, fit *our* visions of what a just world looks like and what it takes to allow all human beings to flourish. Think of how troublesome it is for some to accept that trans women *are* women.

Metaphysics thus conceived is not so much a philosophical problem as it is a problem *for* philosophy. Its imposition of limits stands in the way of imaginative experimentation and pragmatic, meliorative problem-solving. Moreover, metaphysics poses a *democratic* problem by placing a whole host of important matters of debate beyond the reach of ordinary human conversation and cooperative deliberation.

Philosophy's quest for stable grids is, in practice if not always in intent, a move for mastery, and thus power, and in his later work, Rorty redescribed his pragmatist approach as 'anti-authoritarianism' for such reasons.

What do we do if metaphysics is a problem *for* philosophy? Can we

move beyond it? How difficult this is – and how easy it could be – is evident in Rorty's discussion of why even the ardently anti-metaphysical theorist Jacques Derrida failed to do so. Rorty greatly admired Derrida and his efforts to topple the foundations of Western metaphysics. He wholly approved of Derrida's attack on the 'metaphysics of presence', and incorporated Derridean insights about writing, materiality, attention to detail, effects, instability, process, poetry and play into his own work. Derrida himself declared his inability to move beyond metaphysics. Like Rorty, he knew he could never attain a clear, unbiased point of view outside the messiness and contiguity of human experience.

But whereas Derrida stressed that we, even as we argue against metaphysics, inevitably define our position in relation to it, and thus are trapped in a dance with its language and logic, Rorty *does* think there is a way out. We can decline to dance and walk away. Rorty suggests we stop theorising, in this sense, specific to philosophy and literary theory. Pragmatists are not against theory understood as writing that serves as a resource for deliberation or action. But Rorty wanted us to stop engaging in point-by-point refutation of arguments you'd rather see obsolete. Instead, he suggested we adopt a 'literary' approach, where we mindfully get on with attending to material matters, playing 'books against books', and inventing different ways to talk in the hope that others will find it useful.

Philosophers should become 'Literary' Critics

What Rorty proposes, is that we swap the quest for certainty with a practice of imaginatively making what we hope will be good, and adopt a relaxed attitude towards incommensurability, process, and change. Because such a practice, intent on making a difference in the world, does not rely on there being extra-conversational constraints, it can be conceptualised as a poetic practice, or as 'poetry'. Thus, when Rorty talks about 'poetry' he does not (always) mean it in a sense that indicates a distinctive use of stylistic markers, or use of words to evoke intensity of feeling or a sense of beauty. He often means originating from the human imagination and shaped, used, causing effects on, and being responded to, by us. But Rorty reserves talk of *poets* to those who are capable of 'making it new', a phrase he borrows from the

modernist poet Ezra Pound: poets are capable of inventing new noises and marks and putting them to novel uses. Kant was, then, a poet in this sense – anti-metaphysical philosophers such as Derrida and Rorty just have little use for Kant's poems. Rorty demands less of the word 'literature' and for the last four decades of his life, he closely associated his pragmatist stance with a 'literary' kind of attitude.

Literature is also a kind of writing where we happily abandon representational constraints: we do not for instance require novels or poems to correspond to 'reality' in the way we traditionally expect the theories of science – or the grids of metaphysics – to do

'Literature' is here to be understood broadly, in a sense that goes well beyond novels and plays and poems. Rorty posits it as 'a kind of writing' that attends to the *material* details of human experience, to the small and the multitudinous. It is also writing that is *not* Theory (Philosophy) with universalising, metaphysical ambition. Rorty suggests literature is a richer resource for moral guidance than the religious or philosophical treatise, more helpful for enlarging our understanding of ourselves and the lives of others – not because it is intrinsically better in some way, but because literature, in its materiality and eschewal of the grand, unifying abstractions, is a more *useful* resource for those who, like him, no longer hold on to the end-of-inquiry narrative. Such inquirers will be in search of resources that allow comparative evaluations of how things are versus how they could be, works that can help amend their specific aims and practices. Explications that purport to show how things *ultimately* hang together are at best less useful, and at worst function as conversation-stoppers, halting our meliorative efforts. For Rorty, 'literature' – understood in a materialist, experience-attentive and expression-attentive sense where it includes 'ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel', as well as 'the movie, and the TV program' –

has proven itself vital for enriching our vocabularies and stock of narratives about who we are – and might become – and thus for working out how to progress from here. What practitioners working in this spirit want, is to become increasingly capable of amending and ‘re-describing’, of acting and talking in more useful ways. Literature serves this intention well.

Importantly, literature is also a kind of writing where we happily abandon representational constraints: we do not for instance require novels or poems to correspond to ‘reality’ in the way we traditionally expect the theories of science – or the grids of metaphysics – to do. Works of literature *can* be construed as ‘remarks’ in a conversation where we – despite not having universalising ambitions or being constrained by Nature, or God, or eternal moral principles – nevertheless are working out how to live. Thus, I would argue that to grasp the significance of literature in Rorty, and *particularly* what he means when he talks about a ‘literary’ culture or philosophy as ‘literary’ criticism, it is imperative to see that in Rorty, this word ‘literary’ stands for the *attitudinal* antithesis to scientistic, metaphysical philosophy. Literary writing, in that broad sense as well as the narrow, emerges when one approaches the task of narrating ways things can be said to hang together from this anti-universalising, anti-essentialising attitude.

The ‘literary’ attitude resists absolutes, totalising grids, final solutions, the search for Truth. What Rorty wants to *keep going*, is an intellectual and writerly practice mindfully uninterested in final solutions and absolute truths, and just as mindfully set on carrying on a conversation that is materially attentive and useful. This is what Rorty means by saying philosophers should become ‘literary’ critics.

Philosophy after Metaphysics

Rorty was a controversial figure, although less so now than before his death in 2007. Scholarly interest in his work is surging, and efforts are made to put *his* work to use. It is not surprising, really, that it caused consternation to ask philosophers to take the side of the poets in ‘the ancient quarrel’, and thus to give up their governing ambition and adopt a radically different self-conception. But I would propose that Rorty’s effort to reconceptualise philosophy as a ‘literary’ kind of criticism is one

of the most vital suggestions we can take from his work. We sorely need intellectuals that want to work in this spirit – who want to make a better future more than they want to get it right. And while provocative, Rorty's narrative is a hopeful one, more hopeful than Nietzsche's. For philosophy *is* assumed to be capable of reimagining itself as an open-ended, curious, imaginative, poetic kind of practice – one that sees our imagination as our greatest asset and centres the skill of poetically making and remaking vocabularies, and by this our understanding of our world.

Right now, unless we do remake our world, humanity, and every form of life on this planet is in peril. We live in terrifying times, and yet we spend so much time and energy arguing about who is right *in principle*, and not enough energy on making matters right. Metaphysics wants to understand the Nature of Things. We should prioritise understanding what other people are saying and why. We need to negotiate shared ways to talk, to agree on knowledge equilibria, and workable, mitigating practices, to enable us to collectively act. We need to pragmatically multisolve our problems rather than ask 'what is *the* answer?'. We would do well to think with Rorty of 'objectivity as solidarity' – and well to suffuse everything we do with a desire to poetically remake who we are.

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