

CHAPTER THREE

PHILOSOPHY OR THEORY?
RORTY ON THE ANALYTIC-CONTINENTAL
DIVIDE

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The academic discipline called ‘philosophy’ encompasses not only different answers to philosophical questions but total disagreement on what questions are philosophical. (Richard Rorty 1985)

Whenever a view is held to be absolute anathema by one’s contemporaries,
that is the time to look at it seriously.
(Colin McGinn)

Perhaps the most important commentator on metaphilosophical issues in recent years has been the controversial Richard Rorty. Rorty is, for reasons that I hope to make clear, less controversial among his fellow Pragmatists or among Continentalists than among Analysts. For the latter, many of his pronouncements are akin to the proverbial red rag to a bull because many of his claims go quite against the grain of accepted philosophical wisdom. Rorty’s importance, it seems to me, lies in the many trenchant critiques of the dominance of what he calls the “scientistic” paradigm in philosophy and in his vision of an alternative future for the field construed along more literary- and socio-historically oriented lines. I am particularly intrigued by his claim that philosophy is “best seen as a kind of writing” (Rorty 1978-1979, 92) which is accordingly “delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition” (92). I find Rorty’s perspective not only appealing and refreshingly honest but also one with important implications for the study of philosophy in the Caribbean.

Since at least the turn of the twentieth century, many would argue, contemporary philosophy has been split into two main camps, the “Analytic” and the “Continental.” The very notion of the existence of such

a division is one normally either attributed to J. L. Austin's attempts to differentiate Oxford-style philosophising from the, to his mind, more bewildering variety espoused by Sartre and other such thinkers across the Channel, or traced to Carnap's rebuke of Heidegger's alleged "mumbo-jumbo" in the wake of their famous meeting at Davos. It may even, according to Critchley, stem from the efforts of John Stuart Mill much earlier to distinguish his own work, situated in the tradition of the British Empiricism of Locke and Hume, from that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, indebted as the latter was to the tradition of German Idealism. Whatever its source, the conception of a split between the Analytic and Continental approaches to philosophy is one predicated, as many have noted, on a problematic distinction that seems to unfairly pit apples against oranges. To be precise, it sets up an untenable opposition between a methodological approach to philosophising (that of analysis), on the one hand, and a group of philosophers united by their cultural origin, on the other. Analysts often unfairly accuse their Continental counterparts of being fuzzy thinkers who merely need a good dose of logic to come to their senses (this has become an inane and ultimately self-serving mantra *à la* the famous "four legs good, two legs bad"), while it ought to be obvious that Continentalists are not limited to the Francophone or Germanophone world just as Analysts are not restricted to the Anglophone.

Rorty acknowledges the existence of a full-blown "split" (Rorty 1989, 3) in the discipline but argues that it is one that, cutting across conventional and ultimately unhelpful demarcations of the discipline into "Analytic," "Continental," and the like, has its origins in the well-known disputes which occurred between Plato and the Sophists in fifth-century BC Athens. Rorty is not the first, of course, to note that philosophy (etymologically, the "love" of "wisdom") has had an uneasy, if not downright hostile, relationship with rhetoric and its "handmaiden" literature since at least Plato's attempt to expel poetry from his ideal state. Plato, you might recall, was distrustful not only of literature's dubious *moral* impact (its capacity to reduce grown men to tears or to make them laugh hysterically was thought to do their equanimity no good), but also of its *epistemological* insufficiency, that is, its failure ultimately to reflect those Ideal Forms which he thought material objects mirrored. It is perhaps the latter inadequacy, the incapacity of poetry to represent *the* truth, which has more than any other demarcated the figurative "messiness" and socio-historical specificity of literature from the putative "purity" and ahistoricism of that rational quest for absolute truth with which philosophy has mesmerised itself since its inception and with which, in the eyes of many, it is synonymous. This fundamental

disagreement as to the aims and methods of philosophy is not one limited to the classical period but can be glimpsed in all subsequent periods of intellectual history: for example, the Descartes-Vico dispute of the so-called “early modern” period (one more important, I would argue, than the more familiar one which pitted Rationalists against Empiricists) or the Kant-Herder battle which marked the end of the Enlightenment and the emergence of Romanticism and German Idealism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There are many other possible examples but these most often fall outside the pale of conventional histories of philosophy.

Since 1900 or thereabouts, Rorty contends, one finds grouped on one side of the philosophical divide an assortment of mostly Analytic philosophers (such as Russell or Carnap), a handful of Continentalists (such as the Phenomenologist Husserl or Structuralists like Saussure) and Pragmatists like Peirce. These are all positivists, he argues, united by a fierce commitment to a scientific and apolitical conception of the discipline and for whom physics most often serves as *the* paradigm of the discipline. On the other side of the divide stand various Continentalists and so-called “Neo-Pragmatists” (a label often used to designate those who, in subscribing to Rorty’s and, before him, Dewey’s version of Pragmatism, ought to be distinguished from the “true” Pragmatists who follow Peirce’s lead principally). Philosophers in this camp tend to advocate a “poetic” (Rorty 1988, 9) and/or a political conception of the field, Heidegger and Derrida being obvious examples of the former and Gramsci of the latter.

The fundamental distinction between these two camps of thinkers has less to do with either methodology or cultural origin than with differing responses to a single crucial question: to be precise, “whether philosophy has a pre-linguistic subject-matter, and thus ... whether there is an ahistorical reality to which a given philosophical vocabulary may or may not be adequate” (Rorty 1988; 23). The important question which arises in this context is the following: can the philosopher ever, by simply stepping outside the constraints of her place and time and discarding those linguistic and rhetorical trappings that are seemingly an indelible feature of human consciousness, apprehend the things-in-themselves? It is from such a putatively transcendental, omniscient vantage-point, importantly, that one would accordingly be able to discern the absolute truth of all things and, thus, adjudicate between competing truth-claims.

Distinguishing between philosophy and Philosophy, that is, between what Rorty, *pace* Wilfrid Sellars, often defines broadly as the general attempt to “see how things hang together,” on the one hand, and the

dominant ahistorical, apolitical, scientific conception of this activity, on the other, Rorty advocates by contrast a historicist, politicised and poetical approach to philosophising. He urges the development of a “post-Philosophical culture” (Rorty 1982, xl) in which philosophy, precisely because it cannot adjudicate the “relation of the thought of our time ... to something which is not just some alternative vocabulary” (xl), comes more to resemble a kind of “culture criticism” (1982, xl). From this perspective, philosophy would specialise in “seeing similarities and differences ... between attempts to see how things hang together” (xl) and, to this end, would strive to “compare and contrast cultural traditions” (xxxvii), conceptual frameworks and vocabularies. Rorty accepts that the label “philosopher” might no longer be appropriate for thinkers who engage in this sort of activity and who might accordingly be better served by a designation such as “theorists” (Rorty 1989, 96) or even “ironists” (73). This is because such “philosophers” “do not think that there is something called ‘wisdom’ in any sense of the term which Plato would have recognised” (96). “Theoria,” Rorty suggests, with its connotations of standing back and appraising things from a distance, may be a much more suitable epithet for the pursuit of those, like Rorty, who doubt that they have some privileged access to the absolute truth, some meta-perspective on perspective, and who consequently must content themselves with comparing the various discursive strategies by which humans seek to make sense of things.

Rorty’s views have, needless to say, been controversial amongst mainstream (i.e. mostly Analytic) philosophers who continue to see him as a turncoat of the most dangerous kind: a traitor who, lurking within the very heart of the field itself, merely pretended to subscribe to its most cherished tenets. The furious reception which met his now classic *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* led ultimately to his move from Princeton’s prestigious philosophy department, one of the pre-eminent bastions of Analytic philosophy where he had to this point led a distinguished career publishing on topics dear to the hearts of Analytic philosophers in key Analytic fora, to a specially created Chair in the Humanities at the less renowned University of Virginia and, in the years immediately prior to his death, to a distinguished Professorship in the department of Comparative Literature at Stanford University. By his own account, he felt compelled to make this difficult transition, to leave behind what was by any measure a hugely successful career, because he had undergone something analogous to a loss of faith in the central precepts of the Analytic church as a result of which he now felt he could no longer be

true to himself by holding on to beliefs for which he now felt there was no basis.

Some concur with Rorty's diagnosis of the state of contemporary philosophy. For example, alluding to C. P. Snow's famous notion of the "two cultures," artistic and scientific, at loggerheads in modern academia, Critchley describes the gulf between these two camps as the "expression of a deep cultural divide between differing and opposed habits of thought" (48): "Benthamite and Coleridgean, or empirical-scientific and hermeneutic-romantic" (48), respectively. Others, though, have vigorously condemned the object of Rorty's sympathies. It was, for example, J.G. Merquior who first coined the disparaging term "litero-philosophy" to denote "Gallic philosophy" (12), distinguishing what he sees as the philosophical "rigour" (12) of Anglo-American Analytic philosophy from the philosophical "glamour" (12) of thinkers like Bergson, Sartre, Derrida, and Foucault. In a similar vein, Christopher Norris, though certainly not hostile to Continental philosophers like Derrida, has attacked the relativism of so-called "Postmodernism" in general and Rorty in particular, who has become his particular *bête noire*. (The validity of Norris' controversial attempt to turn Derrida into a creature of Enlightenment positivism, to a critique of which the latter devoted so much of his career, is a topic of discussion for another time, however.) It is perhaps not insignificant, in this regard, that Norris' career has taken precisely the inverse direction to Rorty's. The former has moved away from literary theory and criticism towards an ever increasing engagement with some of the central voices and issues of Analytic philosophy (he is now Distinguished Research Professor in the department of philosophy at Cardiff University). The latter, as noted above, largely abandoned the Analytic philosophy which dominated his early career at Princeton in favour of a mixture of Pragmatist- and Continental-inflected "culture criticism."

Rorty has, it seems to me, put his finger on a rift not limited to philosophy *per se* but fundamental to academe as a whole, in which science continues to be placed on a pedestal and not just in Faculties of Natural Science: in Social Science Faculties, the interpretive, humanistic or even postmodern approach to the understanding of the social formation—the labels are many—remain in the minority. In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to offer an at best cursory and simplified overview of some of the main bones of contention separating the scientific and poetic/political paradigms, Philosophy from Theory.

Given their centrality to the philosophical endeavour as a whole, it is perhaps perfectly understandable that inter-related metaphysical,

epistemological, linguistic and logical issues (the broad terrain often termed, and confusingly so for my purposes here, “theoretical philosophy” in Scandinavian countries) are located at the very heart of the conflict between Philosophers and Theorists, respectively. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty offers an overview of the history of modern philosophy that traces how a preoccupation with epistemological matters, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, came to be supplemented, from the late nineteenth century onwards, by a concern with the fundamental role played by language in the acquisition of knowledge (the so-called “Linguistic turn”). This concern was as true of philosophy on the Continent (and manifested in the work of thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger) as it was of philosophical developments in the UK and, later, the USA. A number of basic assumptions undergirding the work of the scientific camp need to be unpacked in this regard, not least the view that the truth concerning any aspect of the physical universe can in principle be empirically ascertained (though not necessarily in any straightforward or simple manner); the view that objectivity is possible (so long as scrupulous care is taken with the method which one applies); the view that, since our thoughts are inextricably bound up with language, words are an adequate vehicle for representing the world as it really is (in this tradition, a referential model of signification—the view, basically, that the sign means by virtue of reflecting or mirroring the referent—has come to be supplemented by a neo-Kantian *structuralist* account of language that has aspired to complicate any notion of a simple correspondence of word to thing with reference to the systematic differences constitutive of language); and the view that logic is the key vehicle by means of which convincing arguments can be advanced on the basis of extrapolating valid conclusions from prior premises, whatever may be their source. Language, once pruned (along the paradigmatic axis) of rhetorical superfluity and predicated (along the syntagmatic axis) on syntactical correctness and logical precision, can mirror the world as it really is.

This is how Rorty puts it: devoted to comprehending the nature, origin and limits of human knowledge, philosophy views itself as a “*foundational discipline*” (Rorty 1979, 132) with respect to the natural sciences especially, a “tribunal of pure reason” (139) responsible for adjudicating the “objectivity of the knowledge-claims made in the various empirical disciplines” (135). Committed to what Rorty (*pace* Sellars and Quine) calls the “Empiricist myth of the given,” it revolves around an ideal of “knowledge as the assemblage of accurate representations” (163) that refer to the existence of an unchanging reality impervious to human desire, a “permanent neutral framework whose ‘structure’ philosophy can display”

(315). Correspondence to this reality serves as the ineluctable foundation for all truth-claims: in this schema, the “object which the proposition is about *imposes* the proposition’s truth” (157). Scientific objectivity is achieved by “sorting out the ‘given’ from the ‘subjective additions’ made by the mind” (133-134), that is, by eliminating those Baconian “idols of the mind,” political and otherwise, which threaten to interpose themselves between knower and known.

Theorists, by contrast, most often question whether the truth can be known and cast doubt on the very possibility of a scientific objectivity. The main reason for this, many Theorists contend, is that all our truth-claims are relative to, because expressive of, the (asymmetrical) socio-historical context in which they are elaborated. Underlying this view is a particular paradigm of language, the so-called *expressivist*, according to which meaning emanates—not unlike one’s breath—from within the individual whose particular outlook and, by extension, that of the wider culture of which she is part it is thought to express. From this point of view, language is a far from impersonal, neutral medium through which the world is ideally reflected. The expressivist model of signification, which became the dominant mode of thinking about language (and, by extension, culture) in Germany from about the late eighteenth century and thereby replaced the dominant, centuries-old assumption that words function primarily in a mimetic fashion, has informed, explicitly or implicitly, the outlook of those schools of thought most commonly associated with Continental philosophy: namely, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Phenomenology/Existentialism/Hermeneutics. Our truth-claims are also undermined, other Theorists argue, by the very medium in which they are articulated. They founder in particular on the shoals of figurative language not solely because figures of speech are more often than not culturally-specific, but because the tropes we apply are arguably more than “merely wit to advantage dressed” (Pope): according to so-called “Post-Structuralists” like Derrida and De Man, metaphor marks the very limits of conscious thought beyond which consciousness cannot pass in order to come face to face ultimately with the things themselves. Derrida’s main goal in this regard has been to show that there is an unsettling, rhetorical dimension to language that, by unravelling the neat complex of systematic differences thought to form the basis of meaning along the paradigmatic axis and thereby problematising conventional notions of syntax, narration and logical development along the syntagmatic axis, undermines simplistic notions of reflection and disseminates facile conceptions of intention. In the final analysis, so the argument goes, all our claims to veracity accordingly deconstruct

themselves. By seeking to interrogate in gadfly-like fashion many of our most cherished philosophical assumptions, Derrida has, much like his admirer Rorty, earned the ire of many mainstream (again, read “Analytic”) philosophers. Derrida’s observation, at the time of the odious Cambridge affair (I refer here to the concerted, though ultimately unsuccessful, effort by philosophers like Quine to discourage Cambridge from granting him an honorary doctorate in 1992), that the Sophists continue to haunt our philosophical conversations in the present, is one not without merit.

This is how Rorty, once more, puts the foregoing: Theorists, viewing their discipline as necessarily imbricated in, rather than “underlying” (Rorty 1979, 132), a wide variety of disciplines, and not exclusively the sciences, are doubtful that reason can ever function in some pure and impartial way to distinguish the true from the untrue. Suspicious of the existence of “ahistorical formal ‘structures’” (Rorty 1988, 21) inherent in the physical universe that merely wait to be discovered, Theorists reject the “ideal of objective cognition” (Rorty 1979, 13), arguing that knowledge is not derived from but imposed on an inherently malleable “Real” capable of bearing as many interpretations as human ingenuity allows. In this schema, “truths” (rather than *the* Truth) are “made rather than found” (1989, 3), a function less of the “object known” (Rorty 1979, 159) than the “arguments given for them” (1979, 157) by the knower. Accepted knowledge on any issue amounts, he suggests, to little more than the “current consensus on that topic” (Rorty 1985, 66). Accordingly, scientific objectivity is rarely, if ever, possible in part because knowledge is a function of the social and political context in which it is elaborated and in part because of the very tropes we necessarily apply. Where philosophy regards “metaphor as a distraction from ... reality” (Rorty 1985, 23), Theory regards metaphor “as the way of escaping from the illusion that there is such a reality” (Rorty 1985, 23), or at least that some direct access to it is possible. From this perspective, one’s “choice of vocabulary matters at least as much as one’s answers to the questions posed within a given vocabulary” (Rorty 1985, 60). Doubtful as a result that philosophy can find “natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions” (Rorty 1982, xxxvii), Theorists view their role as akin to that of the cultural critic and historian. For this reason, “historico-metaphilosophical reflections on their own activity” (Rorty 1988, 21) is deemed far more important than methodological scrutiny.

Another important disagreement, one linked to the first adumbrated above, revolves around a constellation of questions concerning the nature of human beings—and of the mind (or consciousness) in particular—as well as how we live, and *ought to* live, with one another (in other words,

the realm of “social” and “political” philosophy or what Scandinavians might term “practical philosophy”). There are a number of intersecting, though distinct, concepts which I am grouping under the general rubric “human being”: identity, human nature, the self, the personality, subjectivity, and so on. The view is widely shared by Philosophers that objective knowledge is made possible by the existence of a core of rationality, that is, a capacity for rational thought and reasoned discourse, common to all human beings. The precise source of this rationality has been variously conceived in the course of the history of philosophy—for example, by rationalists (whose assumption is that our thoughts transcend *a priori* the natural environment which we encounter) and by empiricists (who assume that our thoughts necessarily bear *a posteriori* the imprint of this environment)—but the dominant view today in Analytic-dominated philosophy departments is that the mechanisms of consciousness have their origin in and are thus best explained by reference to the complexities of the brain. Therefore, to understand the nature (and the limits) of knowledge as well as the role played therein by language, an understanding of the physiological basis of consciousness is absolutely indispensable. This is why, in recent times, philosophy of mind (in conjunction with related disciplines such as cognitive science and psychology) has emerged as the single most important branch of Philosophy in terms of both the sheer volume of research and teaching emphases. Any philosophy programme today that does not share such emphases seems more than a little dated or out of synch with international emphases, somehow. Moreover, the feeling seems to be prevalent that once a scientific inventory of the physiological structures responsible for consciousness has been completed (this is the philosophical or psychological equivalent, I suppose, of the human genome project in which biologists are currently engaged), there will be little need to engage in social and political discussion, or at least not of the sort which currently obtains, because questions as to how we ought to live with each other will be resolved by a more complete, scientific understanding of human nature. This is why though social and political philosophy has made something of a comeback in Analytic circles in recent times, due to the efforts of Rawls and company, it still remains, it seems to me, for the most part on the periphery of what is taken to “serious” philosophical discussion.

Rorty argues that, from this perspective, the role of the Philosopher is that of “cultural overseer who knows everyone’s common ground” (Rorty 1979, 317): to be precise, that “common rationality” (318) which is the foundation of all scientific inquiry. An epistemologically-centred Philosophy, Rorty argues, is predicated on the view not only that there are

“two ontological realms—the mental and the physical” (125) but that “knowledge of general truths is made possible by some special, metaphysically distinctive ingredient in human beings” (125). This special factor, whether denoting something transcendental, empirical or physiological in nature, has more often than not been connoted by a particular metaphor, he observes: that of the “Glassy Essence” (126) of consciousness in which the things of this world find themselves, ideally speaking, mirrored. The image which has held “traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods” (12). This metaphor of the mind is the inevitable corollary of a certain paradigm of knowledge-as-correspondence: “[w]ithout the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would never have suggested itself” (12). Moreover, mind and world exist in an arguably symbiotic relationship: it is thought that the former, ever intent upon further discoveries, has significantly expanded over the years to the degree that it has been able to ferret out those ever more deeply concealed truths of the latter, even as its essential nature remains basically unchanged.

If Philosophers have tended to emphasise the bodily basis of the structures of our consciousness and, by extension, the fixity and universality of human nature, Theorists have tended to be suspicious of some aspects of these claims. While not denying the importance of our physiology in the constitution of our minds and identity, Theorists argue that not only do Philosophers most often ignore the crucial role played by both the specificities of social and historical circumstance and language in the formation of our consciousness, but they also ignore the metaphoricality which inevitably informs their claims to veracity about the nature of the mind, the self, and so on. It is precisely for these reasons that Theorists tend to stress the unpredictable nature of human identity and to shed cold water on the idea of a timeless or universal human nature embraced as much by Enlightenment thinkers as their progeny in the contemporary world. This is why social and political theory remains at the top of the Theoretical agenda and continues to be perhaps *the* central area of research for most Theorists. The differences between Philosophers and Theorists on this score are perhaps best underlined by a celebrated exchange on Dutch TV in the early seventies between Chomsky (the representative in this instance, I would suggest, of the Philosophical tradition) and Foucault (the spokesperson for Theory). Where, for Chomsky, linguistic and scientific investigation has served to deepen our understanding of the way in which our brains, our minds and language work in a way applicable to humans

everywhere, for Foucault, there is no fixed human nature which scientific investigation of the mind and language merely *reveals*. All our conceptions of who we are, he argued, are the malleable products of various, not least psychological and psychiatric, discourses about the mind and the self (including, importantly, the philosophy of mind itself) through which have come to view ourselves in certain ways and to behave accordingly.

Philosophers and Theorists are also separated, finally, by very different perspectives on the nature of philosophy itself and its historical development. Rorty is of the view that Philosophers tend to focus on the analysis of “ahistorical formal ‘structures’” (Rorty 1988, 21) by attempting to solve eternally recurrent problems that transcend the particularities of time and place. Philosophy possesses what Rorty characterises as a “cream-skimming picture” (66) of itself and its past: it conceives of itself as a field of knowledge differentiated by the specificity of both its subject-matter (the “quest for knowledge about permanent and enduring topics” [66]) and its practitioners (“people who specialised in that sort of thing” [66]) from the wider “history of ‘thought’ or ‘culture’” (56) in which the “mere opinions” of non-philosophers (such as lowly historians and literary types) occupy centre stage. Because Philosophers believe that they perform a task akin to that of the scientist, they entertain few doubts about the predominantly scientific nature of the enterprise in which they are engaged, and thus see little need to engage in metaphilosophical reflection, apart from a scrupulous attention to questions of method.

According to Rorty, Philosophy thinks of itself as developing in ways analogous to the “history-of-science-as-the-story-of-progress” (Rorty 1985, 58), that is, in the direction of an ever greater rapprochement with the Real. This is why, as with the natural sciences, the study of contemporary solutions to certain recurrent problems is privileged over what, from the vantage-point of the present, must appear to be merely a prior history of muddled anticipations, half-truths, and downright errors. The formation of the philosophical canon accordingly holds little mystery—and few horrors—for philosophers: only the select few who have functioned as basically valid, albeit imperfect, signposts on the path towards the apprehension of *the* Truth, a goal towards which we are over time growing ever closer, deserve to be studied. The historiography of philosophy accordingly tends to take two main forms in this tradition. Firstly, what Rorty calls “doxography” (61), undertaken by philosophers who are convinced that Philosophy has “in all ages and places ... managed to dig down to the same, deep, fundamental questions” (63), is devoted to

merely “ticking off what various figures traditionally called ‘philosophers’ have to say about problems traditionally called ‘philosophical’” (62). This is the corollary, secondly, of “rational reconstruction” (49) in which “we anachronistically impose ... our problems and vocabulary on the dead to make them conversational partners” (49) in the “hope of getting them to admit that we have gotten those ideas clearer, or in the hope of getting them clearer still in the course of the conversation” (52). The ultimate goal of both “such enterprises in commensuration” (53) is to “assure ourselves that there has been rational progress” (51) and that, by avoiding past errors, we are drawing ever nearer to the final solution of urgent universal problems.

By contrast, Theorists doubt that philosophy can ever find “natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions” (Rorty 1982, xxxvii) as a result of which philosophy can never amount to anything more, as Hegel argues, than our “own time apprehended in thoughts” (quoted in Rorty 1982, xl). Rorty argues that “‘our time’” (Rorty 1982, xl), from this perspective, really means “‘our view of previous times,’ so that, in Hegelian fashion, each age of the world recapitulates all the earlier ones” (Rorty 1982, xl). Conceiving of philosophy as little more than a Bloomian “family romance” (Rorty 1978-1979, 96) and the role of the philosopher a similar to that of a literary critic or literary historian, Theorists engage in the dialectical “reinterpretation of our predecessors’ reinterpretation of their predecessors’ reinterpretation” (Rorty 1978-1979, 92), and so on *ad infinitum*, that is, in the “inconclusive comparison and contrast of vocabularies (with everybody trying to *aufheben* everybody else’s way of putting everything)” (Rorty 1982, xli). The gap between Philosophers, on the one hand, and Theorists, on the other, Rorty writes,

coincides pretty closely with the division between philosophers who are not interested in historico-metaphilosophical reflections on their own activity and philosophers who are... . This difference in interests parallels a difference in reading habits, a difference in philosophical canons. If the preeminent figures in one canon include Berkeley, Hume, Mill, and Frege, one will probably be not much interested in metaphilosophy. If they include Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, one probably will ... in the form of an historical narrative which places the works of the philosophers within the historical development of the culture. (Rorty 1988, 21)

Moreover, Theory views its history as analogous to that of the arts: “nonteleological” (1989, 16) in nature, it takes the form of “successive metaphors” (1989, 20) or vocabularies all at best asymptotic with respect to the Real. Because no vocabulary can be privileged on the grounds of

correspondence, Theorists emphasise that a historical consciousness that seeks to “‘place’ each vocabulary in a series of vocabularies” (1985, 61) in order to “trace changes” (1985, 61) in vocabularies is indispensable. Viewing cultural history as the inescapable “ground out of which histories of philosophy grow” (1985, 70), Theorists stress the historical and cultural specificity of all philosophising, the contingent rather than necessary nature of the solutions proposed, and the blurred boundary between philosophy and other forms of intellectual activity, not least literature and the arts. Canon-formation is, in this schema, a much more arbitrary and ephemeral affair as a result of which Theorists attempt to specify the precise processes by which particular vocabularies and their proponents emerge, attain and later, in most cases, lose their hegemonic status. Two historiographical genres tend, therefore, to predominate in this tradition: “contextualist historical reconstruction” (1985, 63) which, by “bracketing one’s own better knowledge” (1985, 50) in order to describe thinkers from the past “in ... their own terms” (1985, 50), reminds us of the historical and cultural specificity of all problems deemed “philosophical”; and “*Geistesgeschichte*” (1985, 56) which, working “at the level of problematics rather than of solutions to problems” (1985, 57), constructs narratives designed to show “how we have come to ask the questions which we now think inescapable and profound” (1985, 61).

The foregoing survey of the gulf which separates Philosophy from Theory is not, and cannot be, exhaustive. I think, though, that there are important implications to it for any incipient philosophy programme, not least one that seeks to host a series of conferences by the name “Conversations.” Philosophy here at Cave Hill, in my view, would do well to implement what Rorty, following Gadamer, terms a “hermeneutical” or “conversational” approach to philosophising. Hermeneutics (an earlier synonym for what he would later term “Theory”), he warns, should not be viewed as a “‘successor subject’” (Rorty 1979, 315) to an epistemology and philosophy of language that has outlived its usefulness, that is, as merely another way of thinking about the nature of knowledge and language. Hermeneutics should be conceived, rather, as something akin to a “Socratic intermediary” (Rorty 1979, 316) whose main function it is to oversee a never-ending dialogue between differing voices and points of views, to weave its way between competing vocabularies and conceptual frameworks, and to grasp the “relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation” (Rorty 1979, 318). Such a conversation presupposes neither a single “disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers” (Rorty 1979, 318) nor any access in the final analysis to the things-in-themselves, in the absence of which, of course, there is no

way ultimately to determine the veracity of particular truth-claims and, thus, of particular conceptions of philosophy.

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