
RICHARD RORTY AND POSTMODERNITY: LANGUAGE AS THE MIRROR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system; hence this concept [of the real] cannot be meaningfully applied to the system itself.

Rudolf Carnap¹

All societies must incorporate in their operational procedures of daily life, devices, 'mechanisms,' social practices to do with 'manufacturing from their newborns the basic elements capable of maintaining their social order, i.e., persons. To the extent that a society remains in existence, these procedures must exist somewhere (nonlocatable) in its ecology, spread out in its constituent interrelations. Thus to us, irrespective of what goes on in people's heads, it seems both an important and feasible endeavour to discover what those procedures are. Thus: ask not what goes on inside people, but what people go on inside of — though if everything is everywhere in an implicate order, it hardly matters, for everything inside is paralleled by what is outside anyway.

John Shotter and John Newson²

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One way of simplifying in order to get a quick focus on the postmodernity debate is to ask people what they think the insides of people are like. Do people have 'dynamic' interiors, no insides at all, or do they carry about Lenin-esque, "socialist realist" reflections or "social reproductions" of the outside? The perception that there is something called a "postmodern condition" is generally framed by this anxiety about what goes on inside people and whether it has any relation to what Carnap, in the quotation above, calls the system. After all, if the scientific status of the "elements" depends on the "hyperreal" or unconditioned status of the "system," then what is the status of persons, and of their insides?

The system is an ungroundable entity, the product of what I have elsewhere described as the "sociological ego."³ The characteristic response of the sociological ego to the whole problem of the inside and the outside is to seek and to find something called a "paradigm" or a supraordinate model which will not only guide the study of 'nature,' but incorporate and solve all the relevant questions about 'human behaviour.' The hunt for the paradigm is essentially a form of Rationalism, because the paradigm is always conceived as a model embodying the unconditioned: the system is itself the condition for the reality of everything inside it.

The prime material for the construction of rationalist models in this century is unquestionably "language." Our habits of thinking about language contain lots of fertile ingredients for the construction of a Model System: language appears to be out there where you can observe it (it is textual), it seems to have regularized forms, and to impose these forms on all the parts of a whole, it apparently comes from nowhere (language is still plausibly contrasted with Nature), and nobody has arbitrary control over it. Language is the perfect General Idea for the Age of Sociology.

There is no need to document the grip which the idea of 'system' has on the contemporary imagination, but it is worth noting a certain rough pattern in its development which seems to parallel the transition from modernism to postmodernism. If we think of the contrast between the early Wittgenstein or Carnap and the later, or the shift from Russell to Quine and from Lévi-Strauss to Foucault, it does look as if there is a general tendency in paradigmatic thought to start out as a formalism and to wind up as a pragmatism. To state this in terms of my metaphor of the schizoid sociological ego, there is an emotional, basically projective cycle of idealization and devaluation of the object. The system goes from being something admired for its perfection to something hated for its persecution. But it is always pursued.

What is remarkable about this process is that the idea of language has been virtually immune to these fluctuations in the epistemic mood. Language, after all, has "rules," but nobody made them up; it is natural, but also quintessentially cultural; it is typically human, but not metaphysical; it

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is subjective and objective at the same time; personal, social, expressive, and unpredictable, yet simultaneously impersonal, factual, structural, and probabilistic; it allows us to have ideas without having to explain how we got them; it is both necessary and chancy (i.e., "contingent" in the peculiar modern sense of being noncausally causal); mine and yours at the same time — and so on. All the classic antinomies of thought — spirit/matter, idea/thing, freedom/necessity, creativity/constraint, universal/particular — have been experimentally resolved, from Saussure to Derrida and from Pierce to Rorty, in the Great Laboratory of Human Language.

It is not entirely clear whether we feel more uneasy (to use Freud's word) *inside* systems or without them. One of the more interesting explorations of this ambivalence has been Jean Baudrillard's quasi-historical theorization of the "simulacrum" which links the emergence of postmodernity to our ideas about interiority in an inverse relationship.⁴ According to Baudrillard, the social "system" has evolved into a reproductive coding machine which plays out *varia* of an omnipresent, but not necessarily explicate order, a kind of cybernetic surround. But his major point is that this triumph of social communication (which can be interpreted as the apotheosis of the sociological myth of the "laws of collective behaviour") entails precisely the *death* of the social, which Baudrillard cryptically describes as the "implosion of society." Oddly enough, by 'implosion,' Baudrillard does not appear to mean a turning inward, or a privatization, but rather a concentration of social pressures which involves an increasing externalization of the forms of behaviour. The question is, why should this spell the *end* of society (rather than say, the end of the individual, as is usually, and blandly argued)? The answer appears to be that, for Baudrillard at least, sociological "facts" only come into being (or drift into the social scientist's line of vision) to the degree that the social itself loses coherence, and disperses into generalized oblivion. But how can this be? What is the social, if not society, the system, the "code?" Baudrillard's reply is that the idea of society (as ungroundable system, as noncontingent code) is precisely the reduction of the inside to the "anti-aesthetic" of the sociological ego. In the terms of Baudrillard's earlier work, it is the "eradication of the symbolic." On this interpretation, the code, or the interregulation of social codings, gradually assumes the function of the metaphysically real, the unconditioned, or in other words: the "hyper-real." But when this happens, there is a complete vindication of rationalism: the social becomes a mere memory, a dimly-recalled interpenetration of bodies beyond the prehensile shadow of an imagined interiority.

The unstated implication of Baudrillard's thinking on these matters is that the "social," if it ever existed, overlaps what we call the psychoanalytic domain. The irony of this is that, like every other theoretical reflection model of society (Marx's "Mirror of Production," for example), Freud's

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"mirror of desire" seems to have arisen at dusk, only to "paint its gray on gray." Baudrillard's nihilism has a utopian obverse, which is never articulated except in the now largely abandoned notion of symbolic exchange. Yet one can try to imagine how the social might have been. It might (for the sake of argument) have had something to do with the experiential layerings of human bodies encountering one another. But in order to appreciate these layerings, "persons" (social beings) would have had to be able to live out a paradox (a logico-linguistic "category-mistake" inimical to the sociological ego). Persons would, in order to be persons, have had, in a manner of speaking, to be the containers of their own containers: they would have been anomalous beings who somehow experienced themselves, on some level, as inside the "internal worlds" (to use Melanie Klein's phrase) of others, and experienced others inside theirs. And all of this social relating would have been going on, not merely as an endless redoubling of a set of interactive rules or conventions (the pseudo-scientific exteriority of the speech act, for example), but as an emergent property of the barely charted aesthetic dimension of the body, where connections to the "grounds of action" (moral, deterministic) are lost, not yet constructed, or barely relevant at all. In other words, this strange and imaginary breed of beings would have existed in a scene quite different from the ideally holistic sociological space, with its omnipresent structural substance. It is the difference between the symbolic ("social") world of the dreamwork, of existential transition, projective identification, splitting, possession, destruction, and reparation; as opposed to the systemic model of elements in a network of discrete paths and junctions, fused by some fluid and diffuse cathexis.

Baudrillard's adumbration of the waking nightmare of postmodern social reality is an avowed piece of "sociology-fiction" (S-F) which plays brilliantly with the suppressed referential dimensions of another kind of discourse which takes the system antinomy seriously, as the ultimate aim of all theoretical desire, the exciting object in its purest form. We cannot know which version of our collectivity is "true," but we can ask, with Baudrillard, what we would be like if such and such a model *were* true. From this perspective, postmodernism appears as the regulative ideal of a long tradition of logico-linguistic chauvinism. In recent years, this movement has been radicalized and delogicized by the prospect of discovering a perfectly self-cancelling practice in which the "human" would annihilate itself (at least theoretically) in an orgy of its own purest "ism," the evolutionary status-symbol of *language*. At various times, it has been called positivism, logical empiricism, hermeneutics, structuralism, genealogy, Habermas, deconstruction. Whatever one calls it, it crystallizes in conceptual form the phallic mechanization and anal elimination of the body which so dominates the Baudrillardian construction of the postmodern imagination. In the

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Wittgensteinian world of the language game, it rises like the dawn of new truths to come, the harbinger of the end of Ideology — a kind of Gestaltist figure/structuralist signifier of the cure, shimmering against a background of historical disease and metaphysical hallucination. Rosalind Krauss formulates this hope beautifully as a semiotic of the Cartesian ego, which is "the same entity both for myself and for the person to whom I am speaking":

We are not a set of private meanings that we can choose or not choose to make public to others. We are the sum of our visible gestures. We are as available to others as to ourselves. Our gestures are themselves formed by the public world, by its conventions, its language, the repertory of its emotions, from which we learn our own.⁵

In short, there are "no private languages" and as should be evident from the fact that this is a Wittgensteinian universe, the pan-linguistic reduction of experience is politically ambivalent. It has a liberal wing which clings to the objectivistic promise of the original "linguistic turn." While deconstructive philosophy faces the radical prospect that "language" is the last grand illusion of the "Western tradition" (and fixates mesmerically on its philosophically receding moment), the moderates of socio-linguistic thought continue to mine the traditional antinomies of knowledge and reason. But if the radical side of this tradition has its contemporary Hegel in a writer like Baudrillard, and the moderate side its Kant in Habermas, there is still a third, less absurd way through postmodernity, which has been sketched most deftly by the Anglo-American *philosophe*, Richard Rorty.

Richard Rorty and the 'Consequences of Pragmatism'

A wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism.

Ludwig Wittgenstein⁶

... the urge to think the unthinkable, to grasp the unconditioned, to sail strange seas of thought alone, was mingled with enthusiasm for the French Revolution. These two, equally laudable, motives should be distinguished. ... Those who want sublimity are aiming at a postmodernist form of intellectual life. Those who want beautiful social harmonies want a postmodernist form of social life, in which society as a whole asserts itself without bothering to ground itself.

Richard Rorty⁷

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The Rorty account of postmodernity is a straightforward pragmatist one. It compares with Jean-Francois Lyotard's argument that what characterizes the culture of the present age is the failure of the "grands récits," those overarching metanarratives which sought to determine the grounds for both the legitimacy and the direction of knowledge and history.⁸ But there is a crucial difference, for Rorty does not think there is anything new here at all. Postmodernism is just a kind of heightened awareness of a well-worn reality: society has always been a simulation model, and knowledge has always been a loose collection of stories we tell ourselves in different situations, for different purposes, which never have (and never will) fit together very neatly. What produces anxiety about this is that we take the Western tradition of epistemological, psychological, and utopian idealizations too seriously.

For Rorty, the transition to postmodernism is a Quinean "semantic ascent," the "shift from talk of objects to talk of words" (*LI*, 11). There is no compelling "material" reason for it other than the evolution of philosophical language itself, for there has never been an era when people "really" talked about objects; it was just useful for them at one time to think they were doing so. If, as both Sellars and Derrida have argued, "all awareness is a linguistic affair, then we are never going to be aware of a word on the one hand and a thing-denuded-of-words on the other" (*CP*, 100). The epistemological alternative is between language and things, and we have finally come to the realization that all our talk about things is merely a linguistic convention. So postmodernism is just the winning way of words, and not a profound existential predicament. But in order to gain the full benefits of this new and happy medium, we need to give up the idea of the truth. We have to accept that conversation is not about 'coming to a conclusion': like psychoanalysis, it is interminable — its point is just to keep going. Thus, Lyotard is right about the function of narratives, and Baudrillard, Foucault, and Derrida are right to abandon the whole idea of the Referent, or "transcendental signified" (which would put a reassuring end to the "indefinite referral of signifier to signifier," etc.); but they are wrong, according to Rorty, if they imagine that there is anything sublime or out of the ordinary or historically significant to be concluded from this by way of a moral.

Lyotard imagines that the celebrated indeterminacy of twentieth century science bespeaks a profound change in the 'nature' of science, as if the previous, empiricist account of "scientific method" had once been true in practice, and not just a bad account of science all around (*HLP*, 163). Rorty wants to say that science has always been the way Kuhn and Feyerabend and Hesse describe it, and that only our style of talking about it has changed. But

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this involves him in a difficult choice. Either the conversation about science has been getting better since the Seventeenth Century, which would imply, paradoxically, that, say, the less objectivistic indeterminacy principle of quantum physics is actually more objective, more adequate to the actual reality of nature; or alternatively, Rorty must assume at least implicitly that the conversations of science (talk of realism and indeterminacy) have very little bearing on the historical and social practice of science or anything else. Rorty's pragmatic anti-realism forces him to reject the first alternative, but he cannot completely embrace the second, which leaves him in a peculiar position. In denying Lyotard's intuition that the forms of narrative (or of semiological abstraction, in Baudrillard's analysis) are historically significant (i.e., the intuition that the "Postmodern condition" is something startling and new), Rorty must continue to sustain the realist mirror model, because he must hold in reserve the idea that conversations are relatively disembodied processes whose (tenuous) link "to what is actually going on" is ultimately measured by their pragmatic adequacy. This is the reason for Rorty's nonchalant view, not only of Lyotard's "romanticism," but of Habermas' moral anguish as well. In either case, according to Rorty, the presumed historical saliency of the postmodernity issue is an intellectual chimera, "something which an isolated order of priests devoted themselves to for a few hundred years, something which did not make much difference to the successes and failures of the European countries in realizing the hopes formulated by the Enlightenment" (*HLP*, 171). As Rorty admits, he would like to "have it both ways," simply by "split[ing] the difference between Habermas and Lyotard" (*HLP*, 173). We can dispense with Habermas' search for a metatheoretical justification of rationality, but still resist the romantic poststructuralist critique of reason, not because it is wrong, but because it is "wildly irrelevant to the attempt at communicative consensus which is the vital force [driving our] culture" (*HLP*, 17).

The focus, then, of Rorty's diagnosis of postmodernity is neither Baudrillard's expectation of catastrophic retribution for the symbolicide of social being, nor Habermas' fear that democracy will sink before the leaks are plugged in its critical vessel. Not that Rorty would attempt to dismiss or to disprove these eccentric concerns. He would simply say that such dramas are difficult to articulate plausibly within the structure of ordinary language, and it is only through the agreed upon ways of talking that any kind of sense can be made of the situation we are in. Anything at all is permissible in conversation, but if talk grinds to a halt because nobody can figure out what to do or say about what has just been spoken, then it is likely that something is seriously wrong, and that the conversants must switch topics or modify their vocabularies until the exchange of views is safely underway again. And so, although Rorty has a great deal of sympathy for the argument that the

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traditions of thought since Plato, Descartes, Locke, and Kant need to be deconstructed, he does not expect that the exercise will lead anywhere. His conclusion is, instead, that once we have understood the conversational basis of our knowledge (and that this method of constitution is always provisional), the obvious choice is to keep talking, and to "take truth and virtue as whatever emerges from the conversation of Europe" (*CP*, 173)

Some, having heard Rorty's sympathetic purrings over the "destruction of metaphysics," may be surprised by this conclusion, but it is not so different from Derrida's, and arises from a profound alignment with the mainstream of Twentieth Century thought. For example, Rorty's counsel is that we should try to "suppress" certain "intuitions," particularly the intuition that "language does not go all the way down" (*CP*, xxx). "There is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language," he explains and this is because "our knowledge is limited by the language we speak" (*CP*, xix, xxxvi). No "intuition" can tell us anything significant about ourselves that language hasn't already articulated, for "an intuition is nothing more or less than familiarity with a language-game" (*PMN*, 34). Though Rorty abjures the linguistic positivism of his forebears Carnap, the early Wittgenstein, and Russell, there is still in his writing the lingering belief that a "bad language [one which "leads to dialectical impasses"] can be replaced with one [a good language] which will not lead to such impasses" (*CP*, xxxvi). In short, "the pragmatist reminds us that a new and useful vocabulary is just *that* [a new and useful vocabulary], not a sudden unmediated vision of things or texts as they are" (*CP*, 153).

Heideggerians, Nietzscheans, and neostructuralists are attractive to Rorty, not because he would betray the analytic tradition and go over to their side, but because they provide him with convenient insights into the paradigmatic autonomy of language-games. The structuralist theorization of power (Foucault) and desire (Lacan) as "effects" of discursive structure lends a credible aura to Rorty's idea of conversation as a supraordinate logic governing the production of understanding, knowledge, and culture. While bypassing the intractable traditional problems of how "sense impressions" get organized by the mind, or what "intuitions" refer to, textuality allows one to retain some residual notion of meaningful behaviour, "because persons like inscriptions have intentional properties" (*PMN*, 33). Moreover, for an analytically-trained philosopher, the notion of *intertextuality* provides a convenient way round the logical conundrums of "intersubjectivity", with all its embarrassing connotations of presence, interiority, and unverbalizable experience. The whole deictic, prehensile, emotive, cognitive problem of actually being a body dependent on other bodies in a physical world can be sidestepped or at least minimized and managed by talking about it as if it were the misleading effects of a linguistic model

designed according to patterns of anaphoric reference. The intellectual scandal of nonlanguage is thus safely relegated to the rubbish heap of the philosophical past, and the postmodern discussion can get on with the business at hand, which is to feed the conversation in ways which make sense, and do not interfere with the growth of knowledge, greater happiness, and respect for one's fellows.

The difference between Rorty's pragmatism and the "textualism" of the French School lies in their different ways of generalizing from constructivist hypotheses about perception. Rorty is quite able to tell the difference between saying, on the one hand, that (a) "What the body picks out in the world (perception) is influenced by interpretation (the assumptions built into language, culture, history, temperament, etc.);" and making, on the other hand, the very different claim that (b) "What the body picks out in the world is constituted by and dependent upon interpretation." The problem with (b) is just that it is the flip-side of empiricism. In fact, both rationalism and empiricism share the premise that perception is a combination of mind as it straightens out the confusion of bodily experience. (Here, "mind" is anything you like: the laws of association by contingency, behavioural conditioning, Kant's categories, Piaget's "sensori-motor development," or Chomsky's LAD). It was a short step from Cartesian dualism to the notion that, given the structurelessness of the given, perception must be entirely contingent on either Universal Mind or Historical Culture (it matters not which), and from there to the notion that this organizing function which saves the body from its own incoherence is just language, which culminates in the assertion that "perception does not exist."⁹

Rorty's capacity to thread himself through this epistemological thicket without appearing to get scratched is a measure of the real efficacy of the pragmatist synoptic. (See *PMN*, Part 2.)¹⁰ Rorty is not fooled by Idealist images of bodily chaos tempered by language, but his reasons are unfortunately bound up with an obscure *a priori* point about the philosophical irrelevance of information about the body. What Rorty wants to argue is that any specifications which a physiologist or an artist or a psychoanalyst or a physicist might be able to offer about matters concerning cognition, perception, feeling, personhood, and the like, will always be, in principle, vacuous, trivial, or at best, ambiguous, because they will never have any real bearing on language games, conversation, and "the whole of language," so far as these holistically determine the interesting and qualitative questions which philosophers ask. Rorty is not naive enough or brash enough to assert that "language as a whole" is the exclusive determinant of perception; he is rather saying that perception is so uninteresting as to be beyond conversation, or in other words, that there is no reason for a pragmatist not to be a realist in minor matters such as what we claim to see, hear, feel and touch.

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With his insight that (contrary to the weight of Western thought, especially since Descartes and Locke) perception is not the likely source of ambiguity and complexity in human affairs, Rorty has got himself on the right track, but moving in the wrong direction. To begin with, it does not follow from the probability that sensory perception is a quite ordinary matter (which doesn't need "minds" or "mirrors" because biology basically takes care of it) that finding something out about it can have no interesting consequences for philosophy or social theory. In addition, Rorty can offer no good, essentially philosophical reasons for holding any theory of cognition — even his own pragmatic linguistic one. Certainly, conversation (even backed up by some unspecified sociology of semantics, (*CP*, 127)) is not a philosophically superior alternative to the old "glassy essence" of the mind: it is just one very important thing that human bodies do. The relation of the body to the world it is in is extremely complicated and yet it can get along quite well without a language game. Rorty knows this perfectly well, but he cannot allow such a consideration to be relevant because his thought remains continuous with philosophical tradition in the fundamental sense that he needs to be talking about knowledge as if it always must take *one general* form, which is, of course (in Rorty's case), language, since "there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using language," etc. But even if this were true (which it is demonstrably not), one could never conclude that language does this 'thinking' all by itself. There is no denying that language is crucial to the human way of doing things, as Rorty argues; but if you want a different kind of organism (one that does history, culture and politics), adding on the "unique feature" of language will not accomplish the feat, any more than "soft touch controls" and Dolby C will transform an ordinary tape deck into an audiophile's dream. The fact is that we don't even know if we know of all the ways of thinking and perceiving, and we certainly don't know much about the ones we have so far attempted to classify. Language is muddled up with everything else the body does, and there is no *general* reason — even a pragmatist one — to isolate it and declare, this is what we're all about, the rest is conceptually insignificant. (see *PMN*, especially pp. 213-256.)

Rorty's particular way of drawing out the implications of Anglo-American philosophy of language has many advantages, but it only hampers the gamble of breakthrough, which might circumvent the sterile debate between nativism and constructivism in social theory. The linguistic turn is too blunt an instrument for fine-grained insight, as the example of the prelinguistic infant, which crops up occasionally in Rorty's argument, shows. Rorty considers the infant to be a "borderline case" of personhood, like most environmentalists and constructivists, and on one occasion, he compares babies to record changers (*CP*, 11; *PMN*, 110; but see, *PMN*, 241). His point seems to be that the best you can expect from the body-without-

language (the empiricist's hypothetical "sense impressions," or what Rorty scornfully terms the "raw feel") is the typical infant's gut reaction to "coloured objects." Although Rorty is no fan of Piaget, his attitude seems to line up with the latter's attempt to reconcile empiricism and rationalism, and remains in step with the metaphysics which Rorty wants to dispense. Piagetian theorists (who were, until recently, the most open-minded researchers of prelinguistic intelligence, apart from the British school of child analysts like Klein and Winnicott) like to think of themselves as having made the world safe for an "active" (constructivist), as opposed to a "passive" (environmentalist or nativist) theory of mind.¹¹ What traditional Piagetians tend to do, however, is to reinforce the assumption that physical experience by itself is meaningless and incoherent (natural anarchy versus human (linguistic order) — at least, until the body has been fed for long enough on a rigidly-scheduled diet of "sensori-motor development." But there is nothing especially active or constructivist about this conception of babies. Piaget's child is too much of an isolate, imprisoned by "adualistic confusion" (the cognitivist's equivalent of Freud's "primary narcissism"), to do much more than repeat the behaviours prescribed by the succession of schemata pumped in by means of "circular reactions" (self-sustaining reflexes).

On the other hand, cognitive passivity of the Locke-Hume variety, or anti-constructivism of the realist sort (such as Rorty especially abhors), is not a feature of the more recent research which has been disconfirming the unnecessary metapsychological scaffolding of Piaget's observational work. The emerging evidence is that neonates are gifted with a basic, intermodally-coordinated perceptual ability to distinguish and recognize objects and people, to relate in a meaningful but physically awkward way to the actual features of the immediate environment, and even to translate what others do in terms of their own (unseen) body schemas. This is perception without mirrors, and it does not need to be primed by conditioning or by innate reflex mechanisms. Nor does it require a language-game to make semantic distinctions, or nominative diacritics to divide up the field of attention. Moreover, the prelinguistic infant displays a precocious capacity for (and expectation of) "communicative interaction" and intersubjectively shared experience, together with an ability to participate in complex emotional relationships over time.¹² Now, this still developing outlook on the human neonate has been accused of "innatism" (as if that were a meaningful criticism); in fact, contemporary neonatology is far from being anti-environmentalist or anti-constructivist. It simply grants some of the basic ingredients of feeling and intentionality, as a kind of farewell present from the womb (we do come from wombs); and this only seems like an insult to our intelligence (or to our class- and species-based pride in verbal skill) from

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the point of view of the extreme rationalist-empiricist reductionism which, until recently, has shaped the history of European psychology, and which Rorty chooses as his natural, antagonistic, metaphilosophical setting.

Philosophy and the Buzzards

The leather skin with which the body of the carriage had been covered many years before — the shiny skin which Noah remembered from the first time Jaweh had come as an unexpected visitor looking for sacred champions — had been torn by stones and streaked with mud from the rivers Yaweh and his entourage had crossed. It was also spattered with the remnants of excrement, eggs and rotten vegetables. ...

The Lord God Yaweh was about to step into the air ...

To Mottyl [the cat], it was meaningless. Her Lord Creator was a walking sack of bones and hair. She also suspected, from his smell, that He was human.

Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*.¹³

Richard Rorty cannot allow, in principle, that there is anything other than a general philosophical insight — the insight that our knowledge is determined by our vocabulary — which might settle the old issues, or at least, stop them from crowding out the new ones. He is thus compelled to discount or to ignore all those rich and complicated grades of information, and fragile strains of awareness (about humans as animals living in a physical world) which might otherwise have helped him really to lose the philosophical concerns which now absorb him in his desire to be without them. Like Wittgenstein, he believes that there are some orders of concept, modes of discourse, which actually run the machinery of the world, and others which sadly don't, because "nothing else moves" when they are turned. This implies that he knows what the mechanism must be like: a sort of hodge-podge of Twentieth Century claims about language, from Dewey and Quine to Heidegger and Davidson, which happen to fit the model of the world as a puzzle with the Truth-piece absent. Like Nietzsche with respect to God, Rorty believes that if you take the Truth-piece out of the puzzle, the other fragments will fall where they may. What actually happens is that the puzzle picture of the world remains in tact, while the blank beckons with an irresistible appeal — it is the absence which keeps the "conversation of Europe" going, because the empty space configures the world just as surely as God and the Truth did when they were in it.

But Rorty avoids the estrangement of metaphysical radicalism, and like Gulliver, eschews the natives who sling turds among the trees. He dreams

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about the day when we will not know what to do with God or the Truth, even if we find them — because we will not even guess they had a special place. Unfortunately, this is only a dream of polite conversation, of formal and disembodied language. "... If we became wholeheartedly pragmatic in science and morals, if we ever *simply* identified truth with warranted assertability, our fantasists would have no theme, our modernists no irony." (*SP*, 136) In short, nobody would feel anything. Yet there is still something valuable in the difference between Rorty and Deleuze (or Baudrillard): Rorty refuses to believe that we have become what the pious warned we would become if we abandoned God and Truth. If we think we have become simulacra, this is only because we continue to believe in the catechism. But Rorty has no taste for the Bible, Plato, and other prophecies of banishment. He only smiles, and declares that "from a full-fledged pragmatist point of view,"

there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, between protons and poems. To a pragmatist, these are *all* just permanent possibilities for use, and thus for redescription, reinterpretation, manipulation. ... Occasionally [however] a great physicist or a great critic comes along and gives us a new vocabulary which enables us to do a lot of new and marvelous things. (*CP*, 153)

Rorty's serenity may seem drably Fustian to some, but in a way it is the triumph of our age. Not that postmodern intellectuals are any better at diction than their premodern ancestors; but at least now we have the reassuring knowledge that the sound of whistling in the dark is really the grinding of the wheel that is "part of the mechanism." Science, discovery, creation, culture are whatever happens to spin off from our need to keep gabbing away. There is nothing irrational about this. Pragmatism is the culmination of the history of epistemology. In fact it assumes (without discussing) a lot of the "machinery" that gets left out of the official written transcript of the conversation. Rorty's work is a tribute, not only to Dewey, but to Mills' *Essay on Liberty*, which surely offers the most sensible, and in all probability the most humane option available for any world structured like a cognitive arena.

The conversation which Rorty so cheerfully proposes is nothing other than what Baudrillard calls the "hyperrealism of simulation": the ecstasy of communication without interiority, and of societies without the social. But Rorty knows that the metatheoretical superiority of his own language-game has more to do with his emotional poise and experience than with anything anyone has discovered about the 'structure' of words. The language-game has the same mythical status in post-modernity as the bomb and DNA: it functions like the abstraction to end all abstractions, the moment when the

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myth of Nature is cancelled by the even greater myth of Culture. Like the irony that Rorty thinks would disappear with the triumph of pragmatism, the idea of language is a profound metaphor. But this does not mean that it is subject to determination by some still more general language-game. As Donald Davidson (one of Rorty's heroes) has shown, *metaphor has no deep linguistic structure*.¹⁴ There are no formal 'rules' of language which would explain "how metaphor works" — either as a universal feature of language, or as a puzzling anomaly. (Although Davidson does not say it), this suggests that semantics is *not essentially a linguistic affair*; and if this is so, then theories about language can offer us no easy and "simple-minded" pragmatist method of banishing the shadows. Streaks of black inhabit language as surely as they crowd the realms of things and the hollows of "raw feels" which Rorty shuns as impenetrably dark. Consequently, the 'rules' (or alternatively, the 'play') of "our language" can offer us little consolation, no special point of view, and no privileged explanation or understanding of our predicament (whatever it is). They are as illusory as the self-evidence of conscious self-identity; moreover, they are a substitute for the latter, and like Descartes' "I," the "Linguistic We" fails to eventuate.

Ever since the heyday of scientism in the late Nineteenth Century, analytic philosophers, structuralists, hermeneuts, and postmodernists have been trying to soften the positivist vision, to give language a human face — without letting go of the formalism. But in doing this, they have been making language work too hard. It may turn out that Rorty's soft-sell of Wittgensteinian philosophical engineering will wind up doing less credit to the hard facts of the positive spirit than Baudrillard, with his outlandish theory of the Simulacrum. For wasn't it the positivists who said that the power of language was its capacity for literal reference (or failure thereof)? — and that in splendid isolation, language is nothing but a dubious collection of T-statements?

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Notes

1. In Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 73. Subsequent references to this text will be noted as (LT).
2. In George Butterworth and Paul Light, eds., *Social Cognition: Studies in the Development of Understanding* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 50.
3. "Art and the Sociological Ego: A Psychoanalytic Reflection on Value," in John Fekete, ed., *Life After Deconstruction* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).
4. For a quick study of Baudrillard's recent work, see his "The Ecstasy of Communication," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 126-134.

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5. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1977), pp. 28, 270.
6. *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 95. Cited in Richard Rorty, "Introduction," (*LT*, p. 11).
7. "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in Richard J. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 175. Subsequent references to this essay will be cited in the text as (*HLP*). References to Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) will be referred to respectively as (*PMN*) and (*CP*).
8. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
9. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 45, n.
10. It is a pity that Rorty does not comment more on the work of J.J. Gibson, which is closer to his own than he admits. See Gibson, *The Senses Considered As Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966) and *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979). Gibson shows that perception cannot be understood in terms of the Hume-Kant notion of "sensation," or William James' "blooming, buzzing confusion." For example, seeing depth in space is not a question of the mind adding the concept of space to the two-dimensional retinal image.
11. See, for example, Michael Lewis and Jeanne Brooks, "Infant's Social Perception: A Constructivist View," in L.B. Cohen and P. Salapatek, eds., *Infant Perception: From Sensation to Cognition*, vol. 2 (New York: Academic Press, 1975), where it is argued that either perception is preceded by concepts in the mind, or else "man is ... passive, an organism being acted upon ..." It is this kind of false dichotomizing which tempts Rorty to drop the body out of the discussion entirely.
12. For summaries and discussion of recent neonatology, see T.G.R. Bower, *Development in Infancy*, 2nd Edition (San Francisco: Freeman, 1974, 1982); Margaret Bullowa, ed., *Before Speech: The Beginning of Interpersonal Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); George Butterworth, ed., *Infancy and Epistemology: An Evaluation of Piaget's Theory* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982); and Edward Tronick, ed., *Social Interchange in Infancy: Affect, Cognition, and Communication* (Baltimore: University Park, 1982).
13. Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (Markham, Ont.: Penguin, 1984), pp. 64, 66.
14. Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 245-264.