

Rorty, Davidson, and the Future of Metaphysics in America

Bjørn Torggrim Ramberg, [CSMN](#), [University of Oslo](#)
b.t.ramberg@csmn.uio.no

To cite this paper, please refer to the published version:

Rorty, Davidson, and the Future of Metaphysics in America. In Cheryl Misak (ed.), [The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 430-448.

1. The fight against metaphysics has been a hallmark of much philosophy during the last century and a half. The fight has been futile, and it is by now well established that metaphysics, like capitalism, co-opts all opposition. Nietzsche railed against metaphysics, while Heidegger, in the end, simply wanted to leave it alone, but neither the railing nor the leaving has turned out to yield viable research programs. The logical positivists did try to do serious philosophy against metaphysics, but managed thereby to establish only that metaphysics is pretty much inevitable. Contemporary mainstream Anglophone philosophy is happy to acknowledge this; whether one is a realist or an anti-realist in ethics, a reductionist or an anti-reductionist regarding the mental, a naturalist or an anti-naturalist in epistemology, and no matter what one's view of truth, she proceeds content with the thought that metaphysics and philosophy are one. True, there remain pockets of right-wing Quineans who hold that any question of fact in the end is—or must be converted into—a properly scientific question. The common attitude, however, is sensible, relaxed, enlightened; what, in the end, was all that anti-metaphysical fuss about? What *were* those self-castigating Europeans so afraid of?

In the present chapter, I will consider one recent, last stab at metaphysics. Not, of course, with any notion of pulling off what Nietzsche, Heidegger, Neurath, Ayer and Hempel conspicuously failed to do. Indeed; the future of metaphysics in America is assuredly bright—given the pressure to produce distinctively philosophical publications in distinctively philosophical journals. What I shall try to do, rather, is to restate the point of the struggle

against metaphysics in terms of certain recent developments in American philosophy. My aim is to suggest why someone might still take the struggle against metaphysics *seriously*, and not simply dismiss that struggle as an odd historical phase—the temporary alienation of philosophy from itself—or as a pathological form of intellectual Puritanism, of *scientism*. This struggle, as I conceive of it here, is the effort to think of philosophy and metaphysics as *distinct activities*, and, moreover, to show that a commitment to the former may give reason for being wary of the latter.

These reflections take the form of commentary on Richard Rorty's efforts to rearticulate pragmatism. In the course of forty years of philosophical writing, Rorty, at different times, manifested both a recognizably Heideggerian and a recognizably Nietzschean attitude to metaphysics. These are not my focus here. Rather, I consider the points of Rorty's work where he comes closest to passing as a main-stream Anglophone philosopher. This aspect of Rorty's thought may be discerned most readily in his appropriation of the work of Donald Davidson. It is in grappling with arguments from Davidson—in his metabolizing them—that Rorty's *struggle with* (as opposed to a railing at and a leaving of) metaphysics is most palpable. In the context of this struggle, Rorty conceives of pragmatism as an attitude to philosophy that *opposes* metaphysics. Pragmatism, in this context, is the idea of philosophy without metaphysics.

Immediately below, in part 2, I distinguish two strands of polemic against metaphysics in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty (1979)). I then marshal specific points for the sake of which Rorty relies on Davidson, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and in later essays. Considering these points in terms of Rorty's meta-philosophical agenda, however, it would seem that a more ambivalent attitude to Davidson would be warranted than Rorty has ever displayed. It would anyway appear, as I then claim in part 3, that there are patent difficulties befalling one who attempts to draw in Davidson as an ally in a struggle against

metaphysics; it seems hard, as I explain, to deny him the status if not of *positive* metaphysician, then at least of *default* metaphysician. However, as I suggest in part 4, Rorty's thinking about metaphysics, and about pragmatism as a source of resistance to metaphysical thinking, develops in interesting ways after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. These may be brought out precisely in relation to the very difficulties that Davidson presents for the pragmatist reader. A radicalization occurs, which obviates the tension remaining in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with regard to metaphysics, as Rorty increasingly allows political, ethical and even esthetical terms to bear the full weight of the claims he advances. The result is a recasting of the stakes in Rorty's struggle against metaphysics, construed now in terms of the idea of the *autonomy* of philosophy, and also of the relation between Rorty and Davidson. The very contestability of Davidson's position vis-à-vis metaphysics, I conclude in part 5, serves to emphasize the consistency and depth with which Rorty's anti-essentialist attitude to philosophy may finally be carried through.

2. It is useful to think of Rorty's attack on metaphysics in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* along two different lines—one highly generalized and abstract, the other directed at specific metaphysical constructions. The former turns on a key meta-philosophical opposition of the book, namely that between systematic and edifying philosophy (Rorty (1979: 365ff). Edifying philosophers—Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein are the heavily idealized mantle-bearers of therapeutic philosophy in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—do not build philosophical systems. They are fifth-columnists, renegades, who deploy a current vocabulary of philosophy in a manner that turns it against its own presuppositions, and undermines the coherence of the very problems around which the vocabulary has evolved. This is *therapy*, in so far as it allows us to see that specific problems that have us in their thrall are intrinsically connected to specific vocabularies, and that these vocabularies are, in Rorty's term, *optional*. There is an obvious and explicit link to Wittgenstein and the idea that philosophical problems

are what we get when we are somehow taken in by language, and also a faint echo of the logical positivists' notion that trouble arises when we think we grasp meanings that aren't really there to be grasped. There is an important difference between the idea that language may fool us into seeing problems that are not really there, as the logical positivists wanted to suggest, and the Rortyan idea, more in line with Wittgenstein, that our mistaking philosophical problems consists in our taking them as mandatory, inescapable challenges to our ingenuity. At least to Rorty, they are not illusions to be seen through, but dead-ends, to be backed out of. The backing out is achieved, if at all, precisely by a reworking and transformation of the vocabulary that got us into the fix in the first place. And while the positivists clung to the idea of a permanent cure, Rorty offers no such hope. New, or transformed, vocabularies will bring their own dead ends. Successful therapy creates conditions for further systematic construction.

At this level of abstraction, metaphysics appears as the will to do constructive philosophy. In Rortyan terms, this is the will to create a maximally encompassing perspective, expressible in one coherent vocabulary, with the capability of *resolving* questions about what sorts of beings there are and how—and to what extent—we can know them. The basic presupposition of this project, which Rorty characterizes as *epistemology*, is “that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable.” (Rorty (1979: 316)

Commensurability, in turn, is tied to rationality:

By “commensurable” I mean able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict. (Rorty (1979: 316)

Metaphysics, then, becomes the search for *commensuration*, Though Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* urges us in no uncertain terms to forego this ideal of

meta-level agreement, and so to drop the idea of a common ground of knowledge, his attitude to metaphysics nevertheless seems not fully resolved. On the one hand, there is a sense in which systematic, constructive philosophy and edifying, therapeutic philosophy are portrayed as partners in perpetual crime, with one creating and recreating opportunity for the other. On the other hand, Rorty explicitly proposes a mode of philosophical discourse—*hermeneutics*, as he calls it—which is intended to replace the commensurability-seeking discourse of Western metaphysics, a successor discipline to epistemology, where the point is, along Nietzschean lines, to invent and sustain varied perspectives, to be juxtaposed but not pressed into a unified whole. Rorty is never able to convey, however, how such hermeneutic conversation would actually proceed. Drawing on Thomas Kuhn's famous distinction between normal and revolutionary science, forging the derivative notion of abnormal—that is non-commensurating—discourse, Rorty simply makes it harder, not easier, to conceive of an alternative to a perpetual dialectic of systematic and edifying philosophy, in so far as Kuhn's opposition is a dialectical one, where revolutionary science emerges from the tensions in successfully normalized science. Nor will the explicit appeal to Hans-Georg Gadamer get us very far in the direction of a clear view of a successor discipline to epistemology-based, commensuration-seeking philosophy. For Gadamer's contribution, if it is to be summed up, is the elaboration of the insight that in reaching a common understanding with others, we must allow ourselves to be transformed. Hermeneutics certainly recognizes the situatedness of any contribution to a discourse and makes a point of the incommensurability that may ensue across both time and space. This perspective is maintained consistently also with regard to the position of the understanding subject, whose *prejudices* accordingly are just as much at stake as is the nature of the object of understanding. No priority is given, in Gadamerian terms, to subjective consciousness. However, though it is achieved, if at all, in a dynamically

evolving and subject-transforming language, Gadamerian dialogue surely seeks a commensuration of standpoints. This is inherent in the famous ideal of a *fusion of horizons*.

The upshot of this is that the generalized contrast between metaphysics and non-metaphysical conversation that Rorty seeks to provide in the third part of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* remains largely unsubstantiated. We are left with no clear sense of how a discursive genre could be philosophical yet not be geared, somehow, to the achievement of commensuration. Anticipating the main point of section 4, we might say that Rorty, at this stage of his thinking, tries unsuccessfully to capture a difference between metaphysics and philosophy in *philosophical* terms, and that this is exactly why the effort fails.

The other line of attack in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, however, addresses not metaphysics in vague generality, but specific edifices of Western philosophy, chief among them representationalism, the subject-object dichotomy, and the scheme-content distinction. These three are really just different labels for, or manifestations of, the same basic metaphoric, the mind as mirror of nature. With regard to this image, Rorty's strategy is twofold; he tells a story of its genesis, but also enters into close combat, deploying philosophical arguments from within analytic philosophy to make explicit and to undermine the assumptions that, by his diagnosis, the mirror imagery has saddled us with. It is at this point in the campaign that Davidson is brought to bear.

The thumbnail version of the relevant claims developed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is that once you take in the full force of Sellars's attack on the myth of the given, and juxtapose it with Quine's extinguishing of a principled distinction between the analytic and the synthetic, matters of meaning and matters of fact, then what you end up with is the philosophy of Davidson. The pinnacle of the expression of this happy synthesis is Davidson's rejection of the scheme-content distinction (cf., Davidson (1974)). This paper, as Rorty reads it, deploys and deepens (in Sellarsian direction) the Quinean third-person perspective on

meaning and mind with devastating consequences for the representationalist ideas that have sustained epistemology since Kant. In Davidson's view, we simply cannot make sense of the idea that we produce representations of a given world by structuring through operations of subjectivity the input provided by an objective source. So questions concerning the adequacy of our conceptual schemes or the accuracy of our representational capacities must simply be abandoned as resting on an incoherent view of how thinking agents relate epistemically to the world they operate in.

Rorty hails the resulting "pure philosophy of language" (Rorty (1979: 259-262), where truth is construed in purely semantic terms and no notion of reference with epistemic or ontological implications can get any traction at all. This is philosophy of language shorn of the metaphysical significance afforded it by Michael Dummett and other enthusiasts of the linguistic turn. It will not enter into alliances with either ontology or epistemology. As Rorty puts it,

The actual results of the hard work on adverbial modification and the like which would result from concerted efforts to carry out Davidson's suggestions would do little to help or hinder any solution of any of the text-book problems of philosophy. Rorty (1979: 261).

Nevertheless, by telling us something about what it takes for a creature to be a user of language, however, Davidson's account of "how language works," contains the core of a philosophical anthropology of wide scope and great cohesion. As Davidson's account unfolds, developing from engagements with specific and delimited problems in philosophy of language, of mind and of action to the at times sweeping vistas of later papers, a systematic philosophy of great ambition emerges. Rorty, however, remains enthusiastic. During the nineteen eighties, he writes a series of papers in which he comes increasingly to rely on

Davidson to clarify and articulate his own philosophical views. As he puts it in “Non-Reductive Physicalism,”

I see Davidson as the culmination of the holist and pragmatist strains in contemporary analytic philosophy: These motifs, in turn, are the culmination of a long struggle (which extends far outside the boundaries of “analytic” philosophy) against Platonic and religious conceptions of the world. Rorty (1987: 117).

How can it be that Rorty’s oppositional meta-philosophical stance, his notion of therapeutic philosophy, can be served by—can enthusiastically embrace—one of the most systematic and comprehensive philosophical edifices raised during the second half of the 20th Century? One explanation might be that for all Rorty’s sweeping meta-philosophical rhetoric and brazen historicizing, he is at heart a pretty conventional philosopher, content to embrace any doctrine, metaphysical or not, that is supported by arguments he finds persuasive. So it is not systematic and constructive philosophy *per se* that bothers him in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, it is *erroneous* systematic and constructive philosophy. Davidson, by contrast, is alright, because, tuned in to both Quinian and Sellarsian thought, he is both sufficiently naturalistic and sufficiently anti-scientistic to appeal to Rorty’s philosophical sensibilities. Another possible explanation, however, is that Rorty has moved beyond the polarization of philosophy into constructive and therapeutic endeavors, and that the contrast between systematic and edifying philosophy critical to the anti-metaphysical line of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* no longer defines Rorty’s pragmatic stance. The struggle against metaphysics may no longer be the struggle against systematic philosophy as such. But if that is so, what is now the point of pragmatist resistance toward metaphysics? What is at stake, meta-philosophically speaking? Before addressing this question more directly, in part 4, it will be useful to consider some features of the Davidsonian philosophical edifice that

Rorty exploits, and to juxtapose Rorty's use of Davidson with the kind of reception that Davidson has received among notable analytic philosophers. We will see that while Davidson provides Rorty with critical elements in his articulation of a pragmatic view of truth and language, his relation to metaphysics is ambiguous, at best.

3. When Rorty turns to Davidson for anti-metaphysical argument beyond the case he makes in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he extends and develops the anti-representationalist line described in the previous section. A good place to start is with Rorty's articulation of a pragmatic form of naturalism, in "Non-reductive Physicalism." In this paper he succinctly treats three Davidsonian theses that remain of lasting significance to his views; reasons can be causes; things in the world do not make sentences (nor, a fortiori, beliefs) true; metaphors do not have meanings (Rorty (1987: 113ff). Let us consider these in turn.

Davidson's famous argument for monism (Davidson (1971)) turns on the claim that a mental state—a combination of beliefs and desires—providing a reason for an action, properly explains that action only if it is also the cause of it (Davidson (1963)). In Rorty's reading, this "amounts to the claim that a given event can be described equally well in physiological and psychological, non-intentional and intentional, terms." Rorty (1987: 114) The pragmatist lesson, for Rorty, is that there is no essence in the thing that makes it be either a mental thing or a physical thing. What makes one form of description (not, of course, a particular claim) apt rather than another is human purpose, interest and need. Nevertheless, this "is to grant the materialist everything he should want..." It is, Rorty claims,

to gratify all his legitimate needs, to permit him to pay all the compliments to the physical sciences which they deserve. But it will not permit him to gratify all his metaphysical,

reductionist needs. It will not permit him to claim that he has finally grasped the “essence” of the world of human beings. Rorty (1987: 116-117)

They pay-off from Davidson’s doctrine is clear; linking the mental-physical distinction to kinds of vocabularies and choice between vocabularies to human purpose, there is no longer any motivation to pursue distinctively metaphysical questions of the sort that later became known as “placement problems”.

Similar gains are extracted from the Davidsonian perspective on truth. With regard to the thought that there are no truth-makers, that there is nothing that makes a sentence true, Rorty remarks,

This doctrine may seem clearly paradoxical...It also seems paradoxical not to make a distinction between “the way the world really is” and “convenient, but metaphorical, ways of talking about the world.” Yet Davidson is willing to accept both paradoxes in order to escape from the traditional Western philosophical picture, the picture dominated by what he calls, “the dualism of scheme and content.” Rorty (1987: 116)

Indeed, Davidson’s work on the concept of truth is pivotal for Rorty’s articulation of pragmatism. Ten years later, he writes,

The greatest of my many intellectual debts to Donald Davidson is my realization that nobody should even try to specify the nature of truth...Davidson has helped us realize that *the very absoluteness of truth is a good reason for thinking “true” indefinable and for thinking that no theory of the nature of truth is possible.* Rorty (1997: 3)

However, while Rorty, inspired by Davidson, quickly abandons the pragmatist theory of truth, he still has things to say about the notion. In “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” he elaborates, somewhat in the spirit of early work by Robert Brandom (Brandom (1976)), the uses to which the notion of truth is put; (a) an endorsing use, (b) a cautionary use, (c) a disquotational use. (Rorty (1986b: 128))

On this picture, we can explain why we use “true” when we do, and to what ends. We can show the connection between understanding a language and understanding how sentences acquire their particular truth conditions as a result of their parts and the way they are combined. What we cannot do is appeal to the concept of truth to illuminate our epistemic practices. Davidson, in Rorty’s view, has given us an account of truth that meets our explanatory needs, in so far as we can articulate the purposes for which a competent speaker deploys the concept of truth, “while eschewing the idea that the expediency of a belief can be explained by its truth.” Rorty (1986b:128).

Like the first two, the final thesis Rorty extracts from Davidson is deployed to undermine the framework of assumptions that gives rise to representationalist epistemology. To Davidson’s account of metaphor as an essentially non-semantic phenomenon, Rorty adds the idea that metaphors are nevertheless basic to our linguistic practice; metaphor is what keeps language alive and adaptable, because while

...they have no place in the language-game which has been played prior to their production...they may, and indeed do, have a crucial role in the language-games which are played afterwards. For, by being literalized, becoming “dead” metaphors, they enlarge logical space. So metaphor is an essential instrument in the process of reweaving our beliefs and desires; without it, there would be no such thing as a scientific revolution of a cultural

breakthrough, but merely the process of altering the truth-values of statements formulated in a forever unchanging vocabulary. Rorty (1987: 124)

Whatever one thinks of this view of how language changes or how metaphor works, it is clear that this idea serves Rorty's purposes well. If literal truths in general depend on semantic material hardened into literal service through a process that is not itself tractable in semantic terms, but rather is hostage to contingencies, force of circumstance, and changing proclivities in a speech community, and so not subject to anything like explicit rational deliberation, then it is hard to see how literal truths could come to stand in a correspondence relation with the way things are in themselves. An established vocabulary might well allow sentences that are both true and literal, but given their non-rational genesis it is difficult to see how a set of dead metaphors could secure any form of ontological privilege for a particular vocabulary with respect to competing forms of description.

Even if one grants Rorty his three Davidsonian theses, however, it remains questionable in what sense these constitute an attack on metaphysics as such. What Davidson does away with, if one follows Rorty's reading, is a certain framework of epistemology, a certain broad, and broadly Cartesian, understanding of the problems we encounter in accounting for ourselves as putative knowing subjects. We lose our motivation to think of truth as a substantive goal or achievement (cf., Rorty (1995)), and also the opportunity to frame general sceptical worries (cf., Rorty (1998b)). These are certainly grand claims, and, if true, of great significance for the agenda of philosophy. But they do not impugn metaphysics as such. Indeed, as many of Davidson's interlocutors have assumed, it is natural to take Davidson precisely as offering metaphysical views. It may seem, then, that Rorty—or I—have dramatically overstated the anti-metaphysical ambition of the pragmatist line of thought that Rorty has pursued with Davidson's help.

To press this point home, we need only glance at two or three of the many debates and commentaries that Davidson has drawn over the years. Jaegwon Kim has engaged Davidson's account of the mental-physical relation and his view of events for many years (cf., Kim (1993), and Kim ((1997))). In a recent discussion of Davidson's philosophy of mind and of psychology, Kim presses questions of a distinctively metaphysical flavour. Concluding a section on the alleged supervenience-relation between mind and body, Kim says,

Thus, the question is open as to how anomalouos monism can, by itself or with suitable strengthening, cope with the problem of mental causation, and there is some doubt whether this can be done. This is not surprising, because Davidson's strict law requirement on causation, combined with his view that strict laws can be found only in basic physics, appears to give the physical domain a special role in shaping the causal structure of the world. In fact, it can be interpreted, or perhaps misinterpreted, as implying that physical causation is the only causation that exists. Kim (2003: 132)

Now, the problem of mental causation—that is, whether mental states actually or only apparently cause our actions—is one that Davidson does appear to take seriously. It confronts us with the conceptual problem of devising an understanding of the mental, the physical, causation, laws, supervenience, etc., that makes it possible for us to legitimately take mental states as causes, in the appropriate way, of our actions. Davidson, it would seem, has for a long time been engaged in just this project.

Kim also presses Davidson on the ontology of mental states;

If beliefs are essentially normative and are posited because of our normative requirement, are there beliefs in the same sense in which there are physical objects and events, like trees and explosions? Kim (2003: 134)

Kim's challenges are formulated in unabashedly metaphysical terms, yet they are not questions that Davidson dismisses. Indeed, to answer just these sorts of questions is what Davidson appears to be doing. In the same volume, Paul Pietroski concludes a detailed and sympathetic account of Davidson's views on events thus;

...ordinary claims have implications about events; and claims about events are in turn crucially related to how we think about causation, space-time, ourselves, and how we are related to the physical world that we often talk about and occasionally comprehend. Davidson thus shows how apparently narrow and technical questions about the semantics of natural language sentences can bear on the more traditional questions of philosophy. Pietroski (2003: 160)

Pietroski provides a generous and favourable account, yet one that would appear to align nicely with Kim's and to be fundamentally at odds with the direction in which Rorty wants to travel with Davidson. If there is any single point that Rorty has emphasized over 30 years of reading Davidson, it is that his account of language helps us leave behind the traditional problems of philosophy.

This, however, is clearly a minority view. As Kirk Ludwig puts it in the introduction to the volume of commentaries from which I have just quoted;

[Davidson's papers] form a mosaic that presents a systematic account of the nature of human thought, action, and speech, and their relation to the natural world, that is one of the most subtle and impressive systems to emerge in analytic philosophy in the last fifty years. Ludwig (2003: 1)

Together with Ernest Lepore, Ludwig lays out and examines that system over 400 pages, with the third and final part being devoted to "Metaphysics and Epistemology." (Lepore and Ludwig (2005: Part III)) Among the metaphysical doctrines they scrutinize are "The Impossibility of Alternative Conceptual Schemes", "The Impossibility of Massive Error", and "Inscrutability of Reference", concluding generally that the arguments supporting these famous claims are at best incomplete. Scott Soames, devoting a chapter of his two-volume chronological account of analytical philosophy to Davidson's argument against the possibility of, as also Soames puts it, alternative conceptual schemes, finds that he has "little alternative but to conclude that Davidson's case against alternative conceptual schemes is a failure." Soames (2003: 330)

It is possible that Rorty is right, and that these commentators, whether concluding critically or favourably, are reading Davidson in a direction that runs against the underlying current of his thought. This, however, is a very tough case to make out. Davidson, using language which is Kantian in flavour, develops accounts of the conditions of objectivity, of thought, and of communication, drawing strong, anti-Cartesian conclusions (cf., inter alia, Davidson (1983); Davidson (1986); Davidson (1991)).

The natural conclusion is that Davidson's contribution is, at best, to advance philosophy beyond the Cartesian presuppositions of traditional dualistic epistemology, or, more modestly, given the many critical assessments of his arguments, to deepen our understanding of those presuppositions and what they entail. That would appear to leave

metaphysics pretty much as it was; an inquiry into the non-empirical presuppositions of knowing and doing, and inquiry where we will presumably continue to make progress, by continuing to correct our mistakes and misconceptions.

Perhaps, though, this conclusion is a little hasty. For irrespective of the question of genre, it does seem right that Davidson, if his views have merit, forecloses certain options. His case against conceptual schemes is not against *alternative* conceptual schemes, but against the idea that there is any clear point to thinking of what we do when we master language as mastering a conceptual scheme *at all*. It is, as Rorty continually emphasizes, the scheme-content dichotomy that Davidson attacks. And if the related considerations against massive error are plausible, then at least we have a significantly different conception of our metaphysical tasks at hand. For by closing the space required to doubt the representational adequacy of our concepts, Davidson also undermines what has arguably been an important metaphysical impetus, that of securing epistemic *legitimation*—and usually a selective legitimation. And here we are close to one of Rorty's deepest concerns; what he calls *secularization* is precisely the development of a human self-understanding that eschews the need for legitimation of human thought and sentiment by appeal to structures—modes of being—that transcend transitory, finite, situated human existence.

Let us call *positive metaphysics* the philosophical ambition that survives only as long as secularization fails; the project of legitimating, and thus hierarchizing, epistemic practices. Positive metaphysicians take seriously the idea that we could be fundamentally wrong about what kind of things there are in the world, what kinds of beings we ourselves are, and how one is related to the other. Positive metaphysicians believe that it may be possible to alleviate this by discovering, through conceptual efforts, what it really is to be a subject, an object, a knower, an agent. They think that in order to tell whether, for instance, we really can be said to *be* agents, we need to determine what causality *really is*, and what conditions must be

satisfied for any creature to be a minded creature. This is tough arm-chair work. Let us grant, now, that Rorty's use of Davidson at the very least poses a serious challenge to this conception of what philosophical reflection is aimed at. Still, Rorty's pragmatic stance toward metaphysics remains, for all I have said so far, not essentially different from that of earlier combatants. Call this stance *default metaphysics*. The defining feature of default metaphysics is to address the question of the viability of positive metaphysics as an essentially and internally philosophical question. Varieties of naturalism that conceive of this doctrine as a philosophical response to philosophical questions would provide examples. But what is the harm in default metaphysics? If we are naturalists, isn't that enough to shut down the pernicious kind of metaphysics, the positive kind? If we can agree to be naturalists, to account for ourselves in philosophical terms in such a way that positive metaphysics is no longer a live option, then even if our account of ourselves is metaphysical, it would be a naturalized metaphysics. Why should a pragmatist balk at that?

4. The guiding idea, as we pursue that question, is this; the conception most fundamentally shaping Rorty's struggle is that metaphysics is what you get when you accept the idea that philosophy has a distinct set of problems. The positive and the default metaphysician disagree about what those questions are, or at least how they may be posed, but neither doubts she is addressing problems of philosophy. A metaphysician, then, is apparently someone who believes in the reality of philosophical problems. A pragmatist, by contrast, is someone who doesn't. Two challenges, however, immediately threaten this way of putting the matter. Doesn't everyone believe in the reality of philosophical problems, *some* philosophical problems? One may disagree about their origin, their durability, and so on, but it is not as if philosophers have nothing to engage their minds except illusions of problems. Typically, when a philosopher declares a problem or a domain of philosophical inquiry to be illusory, that conclusion is arrived at by way of other problems or domains that are taken very

seriously, indeed. And, secondly and relatedly, what might Rortyan pragmatists take themselves to be addressing, if not philosophical problems?

The immediate lesson is that we ought to resist the temptation to capture the contrast we are after between metaphysics and pragmatism in terms of what is real and what is not. To deny that philosophy has its own distinctive set of problems—to deny that there is a set of questions which are essentially philosophical—is not to deny that philosophical questions are real questions. It is to deny that they must be philosophical, to suggest that we might treat them as questions of a different order. At a minimum, then, we must unpack the core issue—how to conceive of what we are doing when we engage in philosophy—without invoking a distinction between real problems and illusory problems. If a challenge about the nature of philosophical questions is to be issued, it cannot be, at least not when coming from those flying the standard of pragmatism, to the effect that a metaphysical mistake has been committed.

A statement of the anti-essentialist attitude toward philosophy that I would like to elucidate is offered in one Rorty's last essays, "Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn." Contrasting "therapists"—James Conant, Cora Diamond, and others—with pragmatic Wittgenstenians (such as Rorty), he says,

The therapists treat "philosophy" as the name of a disease that can be cured by recognizing that one has been uttering nonsense. The pragmatists, however, are not interested in getting rid of philosophical problems as such. They are dubious about the claim that philosophical problems constitute a natural kind. They are focused on certain particular problems—those that came into prominence in the seventeenth century. Rorty (2007c: 165).

The point here, I take it, is that there is, for Rorty, no such thing as *philosophy* that *requires* of us a certain kind of response. That there is such a thing, and such a requirement, is

what unites the therapists and the both varieties of metaphysicians, what, indeed, makes them all metaphysicians, even though they have very different notions of the kind of response that is required. To follow Rorty here, we need not deny that there are philosophical questions. We need only deny that they must be taken and answered in a certain way—that is as questions which are properly prior to, and independent of, concern with the contingencies of human affairs.

Metaphysicians are metaphysicians precisely because they do assert exactly this—or live by it. Rorty denies it. Certainly, many others have, too. Quine famously denies it, in asserting his naturalism; philosophy is continuous with and part of the same general project as science. Indeed, today the idea of continuity between philosophy and science, a continuity that tells us something important about philosophy and that philosophy does not share with other areas of culture, is widespread. For Rorty, however, the denial is not based on a scientific understanding of philosophy, an understanding of philosophy as part of *inquiry* in this narrower sense. Philosophical questions have their genesis in contingent history, in plastic practice, and can be taken as referring back to that practice. Rorty's case against metaphysics, then, is that it just is a commitment to this autonomy-thesis. Metaphysics may of course bear on human affairs, constraining or illuminating them, but this simply means that the normative practical commitments by which we form our lives and guide our conduct are depicted as derivative, dependent for their reasonableness on insight into something that transcends them. In short, metaphysics is a strategy for insulating the work of philosophy from the larger issues of cultural politics which are the locus of human action, choice and suffering. The real point of the critique of metaphysics is that we risk diminishing our own powers—both our power to see new opportunities for engaging with the world, and our power to act on suffering in ameliorating fashion. Fighting against metaphysics is to contribute to our ability and willingness to take responsibility for how we talk; this, to put it in Hegelian

terms, is the pragmatist's way of spiritualizing the nature that we also are. It is this responsibility that gives us room to maneuver, to reflectively either embrace or alter some of the varied, complex ways that we language using creatures have developed for handling ourselves in the world. The more we treat ourselves as subservient responders, mere representors of structures or contents that are determinately there irrespective of our interested interaction with them, the more we abdicate our potential for personal, social and political creativity, for freedom.

What, then, of Rorty's appropriation of Davidson, who at least appears to proceed as a metaphysician in this regard? Let us turn once more to Rorty's interaction with Davidson's work. In "The Contingency of Language," the first chapter of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty draws heavily on Davidson, but is less concerned with the destruction of metaphysics that he is in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and more concerned with drawing an alternative picture to the representationalist view that he rejects. For this purpose, he finds inspiration in Davidson's "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson (1986)), in which Davidson, according to Rorty, "dispenses with the picture of language as a third thing intervening between self and reality, and of different languages as barriers between persons or cultures." Rorty (1989: 14) Rorty now aims to provide "an account of intellectual and moral progress which squares with Davidson's account of language." This account, elaborated in a number of essays from the late nineteen eighties and on, has provided us with some of the ideas for which Rorty is best known; the idea of objectivity as solidarity (cf., inter alia, Rorty (1991)), the rejection of truth as a goal of inquiry (cf., Rorty (1995)), the notion that irony is the appropriate attitude of a civilized person to her own deepest commitments (cf., Rorty (1989)), the claim that liberal tolerance is fostered by ethnocentrism (or anti-anti-ethnocentrism—cf., Rorty (1986a)). In Rorty's non-metaphysical accounts of human virtue—that is, the sort of behaviour that tends to improve the conditions of life for people in

general—appeal is made to standards of assessments that are immanent to experience and that have emerged historically through a non-teleological process. That, in turn, amounts, in Rorty own words, to providing an “intellectual history viewed as the history of metaphor.”

One way to look at this work is to see it as an application of Davidsonian doctrine to wider cultural and political concerns. However, it is possible to see Rorty as doing something different, something more radical. While exploiting to the fullest possible extent Davidson’s account of communication, of objective thought as requiring a plurality of speakers, of knowledge of one self, of others and of the world as being a single structure where all points of the triangle mutually support one another, Rorty engages in a parallel project, which reverses the direction of support. Rorty’s account of epistemic virtues in terms of solidarity (Rorty (1985); Rorty (1987)), of human interest, is not intended to provide a picture of objectivity or knowledge that is an alternative to Davidson’s philosophical account. Rather, we should take Rorty’s account of epistemic virtue as a matter of human solidarity as a demonstration of the possibility of taking philosophical questions as questions of cultural politics. What Rorty here aims to do, is to derive motivation and support for his use of naturalizing Davidsonian theses to undermine representationalist thinking from the commitments of an ethical and political nature—and in the case of his treatment of self-creation, also of an esthetic nature—that he expresses in those papers that explicitly address questions of cultural politics and human progress. In this way the philosophical ideas that Rorty imports from Davidson become, increasingly, embedded in the project of directly confronting ourselves and our practices in ethical and political terms. This, I take it, is just what Rorty means when he asserts the priority of democracy over philosophy and describes philosophy itself as a species of cultural politics. From the point of view of this radical pragmatism, the question of the autonomy of philosophy is not a matter to be settled by

theoretical reflection, determined by philosophical understanding. It is a question of ethical choice of direction. As he puts the point in the preface to his final collection of essays,

The more philosophy interacts with other human activities—not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics as well—the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and thus the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves. Rorty (2007a: x)

Metaphysics in philosophy is the wish to entrench the autonomy that Rorty fears will make philosophy increasingly useless in human terms. It is the construction of authority beyond human practice, unmalleable and immune to change. Metaphysics, from this point of view, appears as a variant of authoritarian alienation. Pragmatism, in Rorty's hands, finds its deepest expression as anti-authoritarianism (cf., for instance, Rorty (2000), 62). It opposes metaphysics as one opposes authoritarianism—through discreditation, by handling philosophical questions in terms that recover them from this alienation and treat them in—and as a part of—a context of ethical, political, and esthetic choice.

5. The emphasis on the *humanizing* aspect of Davidson's account of thought and of objectivity becomes increasingly central in Rorty's reading and deployment of Davidson. His enthusiasm for the constructive and systematic work of Brandom serves to highlight this point. Resting normativity on human conduct, Brandom leaves no room for a source of authority or responsibility beyond efforts and travails of historically situated human beings. The pragmatist's point, then, is not that metaphysics is illusory or that metaphysical questions are meaningless. The claim, rather, is that metaphysics and philosophy are *possibly* distinct activities. No-one disputes the fact that one *may* take philosophical questions metaphysically—that is, as questions that are raised and answered as if they spring from prior constraints on the contingencies of our existence and our practices. The *positive*

metaphysician does this explicitly. The positive metaphysician seeks to map the non-empirical necessities by which all beings, all forms of life, are constrained. The *default metaphysician* takes questions metaphysically simply by neglecting to thematize or reflect the historicity and practice-rootedness of the concepts—the vocabulary—under investigation, rendering the knowledge produced as of something non-human, something *autonomous*. The *pragmatist* urges us, by contrast, explicitly to take philosophical questions as if they arise out of those very contingencies, resting on them and expressing them; that is, as questions to ourselves about ourselves. This is the content of the pragmatist’s efforts to persuade us to “stop talking about ontology” and “to turn everything over to sociology”, to borrow the admonitions of the later Rorty—or, as he also puts it, to let philosophy be cultural politics. Davidson’s systematic philosophy—a daring, constructive account of what it takes to be an acting, communicating, thinking being—provides such a pragmatist with two central elements of this campaign. The first consists of that network of philosophical arguments to the effect that our capacities to act and communicate in the world do not presuppose either subjective or objective essences, the stuff of which positive metaphysics is built. The second element is an opportunity, a challenge to *demonstrate* that metaphysics is not compulsory even for problem-oriented, constructive philosophy. This demonstration, the fundamental goal of Rorty’s developing engagement with Davidson, consists in integrating Davidson’s arguments into an account which precisely thematizes the historicity and practice-rootedness of the complex view that is developed, without creating tensions between that pragmatist story and the content of the view of human agency and thought that is being appropriated. Success in this endeavour would also illustrate the further—important—pragmatist point that whether or not Davidson’s work is positive metaphysics, default metaphysics, or pragmatist, will depend on its effective history. For the pragmatist—though not for the metaphysician—this is only to be expected. For rejecting the autonomy-thesis along pragmatist lines cuts both ways; if

metaphysics does not carve out any specific non-contingent preserve of inquiry—that is, if it has no essence— then no amount of philosophizing could ever get us securely past it. Metaphysics continues, as any genre will, as long as it can be adapted to the purposes of prevailing needs and interests. Yet as it does, pragmatists, for their part, will persist in construing those needs and interests as thoroughly human, thoroughly practical, and thoroughly non-metaphysical.

References:

- Brandom, Robert, 1976. Truth and Assertibility. *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIII.
- Brandom, Robert, 2000. *Rorty and his Critics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davidson, Donald, 1963. Actions, Reasons, and Causes. In Davidson (1980: 3-20).
- Davidson, Donald, 1970. Mental Events. In Davidson (1980: 207-224).
- Davidson, Donald, 1974. On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. In Davidson (1982: 183-198).
- Davidson, Donald, 1980. *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald, 1982. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald, 1983. A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge. In Davidson (2001: 137-153).
- Davidson, Donald, 1986. A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs. In Davidson (2005: 89-107).
- Davidson, Donald, 1991. Three Varieties of Knowledge. In Davidson (2001: 205-220).
- Davidson, Donald, 2001. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald, 2005. *Truth, Language and History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kim, Jaegwon, 1993. *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, Jaegwon, 1997. *Mind in a Physical World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kim, Jaegwon, 2003. Philosophy of Mind and Psychology. In Ludwig (2003: 113-136).
- Lepore, Ernest and Ludwig, Kirk, 2005. *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language and Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ludwig, Kirk (ed), 2003. *Donald Davidson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pietroski, Paul, 2003. Semantics and the Metaphysics of Events. In Ludwig (2003: 137-162).

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

Richard Rorty, 1986a. On Ethnocentrism: A reply to Clifford Geertz. In Rorty (1991: 203-210).

Rorty, Richard, 1986b. Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth. In Rorty (1991: 126-150).

Rorty, Richard, 1987. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In Rorty (1991: 113-125).

Rorty, Richard, 1989. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, Richard, 1991. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, Richard, 1995. Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright. In Rorty (1998a: 19-42).

Rorty, Richard, 1998a. *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers, volume 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, Richard, 1998b. “Antiskeptical Weapons: Michael Williams versus Donald Davidson.” In Rorty (1998a: 153-163).

Rorty, Richard, 2000. “Response to Jürgen Habermas”, in Brandom (2000: 56-64).

Rorty, Richard, 2007a. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics. Philosophical Papers, volume 4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, Richard, 2007b. Naturalism and Quietism. In Rorty (2007a: 147-159).

Rorty, Richard, 2007c. Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn. In Rorty (2007a: 160-175).

Soames, Scott, 2003. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century: Volume 2: The Age of Meaning*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.