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COMMENTS ON RORTY

One of the most interesting experiences you can have is to be told by someone else just what you are doing or have done. There is the jolt of a different perspective, the mixed reaction you feel on learning that someone else has been paying attention, the conflicting rush of judgments: "He's right! That's it exactly!", "He's wrong! I never did!", "So *that's* what I was trying to do."

I find Professor Rorty's bird's-eye view of the history of philosophy of mind both fascinating and extremely useful, full of insight and provocation, and, of course, flattering. Rorty proceeds by deliberate and knowing oversimplification – often a useful tactic – and since it is a useful tactic on this occasion, it would be particularly counter-productive for me to succumb to the powerful temptation to plow *seriatim* through his account restoring all the complications he has so deftly ignored. My first reaction, though, is that the momentum he builds up in the course of his interpretations leads to a certain overshooting of the mark. Also, like many other revolutionaries before him, Rorty has trouble deciding whether to declare victory, declare that victory is inevitable, or implore you to join in a difficult and uncertain struggle against the powers of darkness. I ask myself: Am I a *nominalist*? Do I declare the death of theories of the mind? Am I – or should I be – a Village Verificationist after all? I always seem to want to answer: *not quite*.

Since I, as an irremediably narrow-minded and unhistorical analytic philosopher, am always looking for a good excuse not to have to read Hegel or Heidegger or Derrida or those other chaps who don't have the decency to think in English, I am tempted by Rorty's performance on this occasion to enunciate a useful hermeneutical principle, the *Rorty Factor*:

Take whatever Rorty says about anyone's views and multiply it by .742.

After all, if Rorty can find so much more in my own writing than I put there, he's probably done the same or better for Heidegger – which means I can save myself the trouble of reading Heidegger; I can just read Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton Uni-

versity Press, 1979) and come out about 40% ahead – while enjoying my reading at the same time.

On second thought, however, I recognize that this is a very bad line of reasoning – and would be a bit of backsliding on my part if I were to fall for it, for I agree (74.2%) with Rorty about the nature of the hermeneutical enterprise, and join with him in cheering the plummeting stock – if not yet declared bankruptcy – of the idea of *privileged representations*. I could thus hardly suppose I could endorse his claim that we now can see that there are no privileged representations, and in the next breath withhold for myself some authorial privilege about what my own view is or has been, or about what I have been trying to show. So if I find myself issuing correctives and trying to throw wet blankets on some of Rorty's more inflammatory interpretations, it is just as possible that I am a short-sighted and spaghetti-legged Rortian revolutionary in spite of myself as that he has succumbed to enthusiasm in his attempt to draw morals from recent work. Balancing the *prima facie* presumption in favor of authorial authority is the well-known fact that people battling it out in the trenches seldom have a clear perspective on what they've accomplished, or even what the deeper point of their skirmishes might be.

However all that may be, I am happy to find myself in broad and deep agreement with Rorty about some major and probably controversial claims in his talk, and I will take a moment now to endorse some specific points – not meaning by my silence on others that I disagree with them, of course.¹ I think Rorty is right on target about Ryle, both about the nature of Ryle's genuinely revolutionary contribution, and also about just where we must forsake Ryle. Rorty's analysis of the bad old days of Broad's style of scholasticism, and more recent scholasticisms, is also a theme I applaud wholeheartedly. His analysis of the "jerky movement" from logical behaviorism to central state materialism to functionalism is an accurate and revealing description of that trajectory, I think, though of course the fact that Rorty and I both experienced that jerky movement from the inside, as it were, gives us no privileged sense of what that motion was like. (See Rorty's comments on my own paper in this issue for a demolition of this "pre-Galilean" vision of motion and an ingenious analogy between that view of motion and Searle's and Nagel's view of the mind.)

Before I read Rorty's paper I was only dimly aware of the relation he notices between the Rylean revolt against dualism and the earlier, failed, epistemological revolt. Seeing Ryle in this context helps explain, and support, the pivotal role in Ryle's revolution of the realization that the *experientially* direct or immediate is an *epistemically* mixed bag, containing every grade of inferentially mediated – and hence vulnerable – cognition. To see this as a fundamental and historically novel point of convergence in Ryle, Wittgenstein, Sellars and Quine is, I think, to see all four in a good light, revealing both the value and the idiosyncrasy of their individual paths to this shared ground.

All paths to this insight are concealed by a very powerful illusion. That there is a *special* directness, an *asymmetry* between our relation to our own thoughts and our relation to the thoughts of others, is an obvious – a very obvious – fact, the sort of fact that tempts people like Searle to lay down the law. Seeing in the end what this asymmetry amounts to, seeing that it does not, in the end, give us each some parochial domain of papal infallibility – seeing that no epistemological bedrock at all can be found in this quarter is, as Rorty shows, the enabling insight of the tradition he and I place ourselves in.²

To insist that there is no such epistemological bedrock to be found *here* is, of course, only to insist on a special case of the doctrine that Quine and Wittgenstein – and others – were advancing in general, but seeing how one could manage to be a good Wittgensteinian or Quinean in the special case of presumed knowledge of one's own mind has taken some doing. In particular, we have had to come up with a detailed and plausible diagnosis of the undismissable first-person asymmetry – a diagnosis which even acknowledges that it is an epistemological asymmetry, but one that yields no foundations. That diagnosis is still, alas, controversial, and a cloud on the horizon of Rorty's revolution that I think he underestimates.

I attribute this underestimation to Rorty's failure – or refusal – to distinguish two quite different senses of *intuition*. On the one hand there are *introspective* intuitions, supposedly marvelous, incorrigible, inward glances or items of pre-linguistic knowledge – restricted in subject matter to one's own mental states or activities. The Given consists of gift-wrapped intuitions, in this sense of the term. On the other hand there are the intuitions one often permits oneself to speak

of in the context of “pretheoretical intuitions” or “intuitions of grammaticality”, or the intuitions relative to which some claim or discovery is deemed “counterintuitive”. Many who scoff at the Given have been willing and eager to countenance this latter class of judgements, which may be about anything at all – well-formedness, justice, quantum mechanics – and are typically supposed to be defeasible but unignorable at the outset.³ Note that in the dogmatic passage from Searle that Rorty quotes, the intuitions Searle views as bedrock are not *themselves* introspective intuitions. “Thermostats don’t have beliefs” is not, apparently, in the same league as “I am being appeared to redly and roundly” or “I am in pain”.

It would be great fun if Searle and Nagel could be abruptly dismissed as Neanderthal throwbacks, benighted holders of pre-Galilean views of the Given, but it won’t wash. I would think that Rorty would be at least mildly perplexed to notice in this regard that one of his (and my) heroes, Wilfrid Sellars – no friend of the Given, as Rorty makes clear – has been absolutely driven by the *other* sort of intuitions to propose a fundamental revision of all science (not just psychology and biology, but all of physics) in order to handle *qualia*, the raw feels or qualitative states. It is not that Sellars thinks he has an infallible introspective source of knowledge of his own qualitative states, but that in spite of his denial that he does, he still finds an overwhelmingly compelling *intuitive* case for finding something frankly missing in the sort of view of the mind Rorty and I both espouse. So to the extent that Nagel and Searle have, let us say, Sellarsian intuitions in addition to their misguided allegiance to the Given (in the language game we’re playing, they are guilty of this until proven innocent), the demolition of the Given will not remove all sources for their view.

Now I am myself baffled and dismayed by Sellars’ infatuation with raw feels,⁴ and I agree with Rorty that Putnam’s simple – if cryptic – observation that “qualitative character just is the realization” is the right *first* step to take to answer the Sellarsian qualms about qualia, but it is not as if there weren’t work to do in making this claim palatable.⁵ The work is neither “just” scientific nor “just” philosophic; it is a rather wonderful mixture. And it should not be forgotten that scientists studying the physical realizations of experiences are just as baffled by qualia as any philosopher or layperson can be.

Rorty sometimes gives the no doubt unintended impression that

science has its act together, that scientists are cheerful and unperplexed imperialists pushing back the boundaries of *terra incognita*, but of course scientists are people too, and whatever philosophers can offer the man in the street can be offered in much the same spirit, and to at least as great an effect, to scientists. This comes out particularly clearly, I think, in reflection on Rorty's bold claim (pp. 331–2) "To think of knowledge as a matter of being disposed to utter true sentences about something, rather than in terms of the metaphor of acquaintance . . . is to enable us to stop thinking of ourselves as divided into two parts, a mental part and a physical part." Setting aside cavils about the narrowness of this dispositional analysis (dispositions to *utter sentences* are surely the palest, Schankian shadows of the disposition we really want to talk of), suppose we all succeeded – layman and scientist alike – in convincing ourselves of the truth and beauty of this forward step in our understanding of knowledge. We all become *dispositionalists* (of some as yet unspecified sort) about the *nature of knowledge*. Having made the philosophers' contribution (throwing out the representational theory of knowledge, which was a *miscontribution* of earlier philosophers), we turn the rest of the job over to science.

We turn to the scientists and ask them to tell us how any thing (any living or non-living physical system) can have *those* dispositions to utter, act, etc. As Fodor never tires of pointing out, the only answer anybody in science or elsewhere has ever seriously proposed is: such a thing would have to be or contain a system of . . . *representations*.

But now are we back to all the earlier horrors of representational theories of the mind? Have we broken the mirror of nature only to find that behind it is . . . another mirror? No. This is *not* a case of the more things change the more they're the same thing. (In what follows I will appear to be disagreeing with what Rorty says in 'Contemporary Philosophy of Mind', but in the main I can be better interpreted as reminding Rorty, and the reader, of what he himself says in Chapter V of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.)

The advance from the old representational theory of mind through dispositionalism (of some sort) to a new brand of representationalism is – or could well prove to be – real progress, for the questions have been importantly changed; bad questions, as Rorty often puts it, being replaced by better questions. First, the new questions are about scientific – not "merely philosophic" – problems that seem to call for

– and promise – solutions, not merely dissolutions. Bogus mysteries have been set aside in favor of real, but explorable, mysteries. An essential *philosophic* advance permitting this transfiguration of the issues is exactly the abandonment of *privileged* representations in the new vision – though as we shall see this very strength can often be made to appear to be the main weakness of the new vision.

The representations posited by the new cognitivism are *not* deemed to be the ultimate and underived and incorrigible font of all meaning or intentionality. Indeed, oddly enough, although they are claimed to be explicitly and literally *in the heads* of believers, intenders, and talkers, they are granted just about the same status accorded such derivative vehicles of meaning as books and maps and the other representational *prostheses* of our culture. Just as the semantical or hermeneutical interpretation of a scrap of text found incised on a wall or scribbled on a page depends on attributions of intentionality – belief and desire and so forth – to the users and makers of the text, so the semantical interpretation of a bit of “mental” representation in the brain – a found inscription in the language of thought – depends on exactly the same family of intentional attributions. Just as we use books and uttered sentences to communicate with each other, we use our own brains to communicate with ourselves – past and future selves as well as proper parts of our current selves.⁶

The idea of internal representations with only derivative, pragmatic intentionality or semanticity can *seem* to be a weakness. Consider the all too familiar line of reasoning that concludes that no computer ever *really* means anything at all, every *really* believes or knows or intends or decides. Of course – runs this theme – it has internal states in lavish and intricate profusion, and we outsider observer-user-interpreters can endow some of these states with a derivative meaning of sorts, in virtue of the use to which we put these computers. But a computer is really just a sort of automated book or blackboard, a symbol storehouse whose symbols have only the meaning we interpreters assign them. Implied in this argument is that *we uninterpreted interpreters* are the *Ursprung* of all real meaning, the unmoved movers, to pursue Rorty’s comparison with Aristotelian ideas about motion still further.

What the new view invites us to consider, on the contrary, is that there are no uninterpreted interpreters, no privileged representers. An implication of the view crudely expressed by the slogan that our

brains are organic computers is that *just like computers* their states can be interpreted via a sort of hermeneutical procedure by outside observers to have content – and that’s as strong a sort of content as their states can – or could – have. *We* are both the creators and the creatures of such interpretation, and are nothing beyond the reach of that activity.

This pronouncement sends a shudder of fear through many people, as they see their very *reality* as persons challenged by what appears to be militant instrumentalism and verificationism. Rorty feeds that fear by observing, provocatively: “Is it important for our self-image to think of ourselves as knowers – distinguished from the brute creation in being intelligent, in acting from knowledge rather from habit or instinct, in being able to contemplate things far away in space and time.” Indeed it is important for our self-image; it is also *true*.⁷ That is, it is *as true* as the vision we have only gradually achieved of the earth going around the sun. If one can take all such “discoveries” and then *in principle* relativize such visions to “interests” and “language games” – something I remain agnostic about in spite of the Rortian, Putnamian, Kuhnian and Gadamerian rhetoric – then at least let us never stop reminding ourselves that our vision of ourselves as knowers and carers is no worse off, epistemically, than our vision of water as H₂O.

I no longer find it polemically useful to insist that I am not any sort of verificationist; with Professor Rorty cheering me on (and Putnam offering similar encouragements in recent remarks), I am ready to come out of the closet as some sort of verificationist, but not, please, a Village Verificationist; let’s all be *Urbane* Verificationists.⁸

NOTES

¹ I cannot let pass one sharp disagreement. Rorty claims (p. 336) that *any* complex entity can be viewed as having functional states. I use to think something like that was worth saying, but now I think not. What Rorty’s analysis of functional states in terms of fine and course-grainedness leaves out is the *normative element* in any properly motivated functionalist characterization, the *designedness* which gives us leverage for distinguishing signal from noise, operation from malfunction. Darwin dethroned designedness as an ultimate metaphysical mark of the divinity of the living (the most profound revolt against dualism the world has ever seen); in dethroning designedness he did not eliminate it. It is precisely the exploitation of design assumptions that makes functionalist language games worth playing – that gives them the predictive punch we value in them.

² It is worth noting, I think, that both Rorty and I took a long time getting this point into focus for ourselves, in spite of helping and provoking – and misunderstanding – each other. See my *Content and Consciousness*, (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) chs. V and VI, and Rorty's 'Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental,' *J. Phil.* 67 (1970): 10, 'Dennett on Awareness,' *Phil. Studies* 23 (1972): 153–62, and 'Functionalism, Machines and Incorrigibility,' *J. Phil.* 69 (1972): 203–20.

³ Quine, for instance, defends his practice in a footnote in *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1960): "Twice I have been startled to find my use of 'intuitive' misconstrued as alluding to some special and mysterious avenue of knowledge. By an intuitive account I mean one in which terms are used in habitual ways, without reflecting on how they might be defined or what presuppositions they might conceal" (p. 36). Rorty himself makes unstudied use of the term "counterintuitive" in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 193, and does not chastise me in these pages when he quotes me as noting what "intuition proclaims" (p. 337).

⁴ See my 'Wondering Where the Yellow Went', a commentary on Sellars' Carus Lectures, in *The Monist* 64 (1981): 102–8.

⁵ In 'Quining Qualia', an unpublished paper currently undergoing revision, I attempt this task.

⁶ I discuss these claims more fully in 'Three Kinds of Intentional Psychology,' in R. Healey, ed., *Reduction, Time and Reality* (Cambridge C.U.P., 1981), pp. 37–61, and 'True Believers: the Intentional Strategy and Why It Works', in *Scientific Explanation*, ed., A.F. Heath (London: O.U.P., 1981) (the 1979 Herbert Spencer Lectures), and in 'Beyond Belief', in Andrew Woodfield, ed., *Thought and Object: Essays on Intentionality* (London: O.U.P., 1981).

⁷ How this can be an objective, but nevertheless instrumentalistic, fact about ourselves is the main topic of my 'True Believers.'

⁸ As on many other occasions, I am indebted to Bo Dahlbom for insightful suggestions and comments on an early draft of this paper.