

# Revisiting Richard Rorty

Edited by

**Pedro Góis Moreira**

Catholic University of Portugal



Bridging Languages and Scholarship

**Series in Philosophy**



**VERNON PRESS**

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[www.vernonpress.com](http://www.vernonpress.com)

*In the Americas:*  
Vernon Press  
1000 N West Street,  
Suite 1200, Wilmington,  
Delaware 19801  
United States

*In the rest of the world:*  
Vernon Press  
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,  
Malaga, 29006  
Spain

Series in Philosophy

Bridging Languages and Scholarship

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019949471

ISBN: 978-1-62273-761-1

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# Introduction

This collection of papers was born out of a conference organized on 25-26 September, 2017, at the University of Minho, Portugal, where we sought to honor the American philosopher Richard Rorty ten years after his death. Rorty is considered one of the most original philosophers of the last decades and has generated warm enthusiasm in many intellectuals and students, both within and outside of the field of philosophy. As the reader can see in this text, Rorty scholarship has expanded beyond the Anglo-Saxon world. Our conference and this text include valuable work in three languages — English, Portuguese, and Spanish — and is a small example of the reach of Rorty's thought only ten years after his death. Furthermore, since Rorty's impact was also due to his controversial thinking – a thought emancipated from contemporary academic rules – he also sparked heated controversy, thus justifying Christopher Voparil's claim that “Rorty criticism has gone beyond a cottage industry.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Revisiting Richard Rorty* conference replicated this double movement: on the one hand, some of the essays presented there offered developments on trails opened by the American philosopher, and others, in contrast, emphasized a critical position in relation to Rorty's work and to the premises he established in the field of pragmatism. The result of this was the continuation of a goal Rorty always pursued: the *Rortian conversation*, which grew and crossed the Atlantic, transcending the boundaries between the so-called analytical and continental traditions.

Rorty said that he was continually inspired by the Hegelian motto “*die Philosophie ist ihre Zeit in Gedanken gefaßt*” (“Philosophy is its own time apprehended in thoughts”). In line with this, his philosophy always tried to remain close to the spirit of the time and to the recognition of the contingency that necessarily constrains us. As János Salamon humorously commented.

Most of us wouldn't recognize the spirit of the age if it passed us on the street, but that's only because most of us aren't great thinkers. Sometimes, it's the spirit of the age that fails to recognize the great thinker and then has to make a belated fuss catching up with him. (...) The American philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Voparil, “On the Idea of Philosophy as Bildungsroman: Rorty and his Critics,” in *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 2, n° 1, 2005, 115-133: 115.

Richard Rorty had a much less dramatic encounter with the spirit of the age: he and it grew up together, so to speak.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than leaving us a philosophy frozen in time and hermetically closed, Rorty's legacy consists, above all, in having left us with the tools to think the world and its ideas even beyond our times – as if, by recognizing our contingency, we would then have a way to think beyond this very contingency. This has allowed many of our authors to take Rorty as a starting point in order to think about the challenges of today's society – a society marked by the emergence of strong figures, accusations of fake news, and the recognition of a post-truth era in which language plays a central role.

Like Roland Barthes, Richard Rorty, too, seemed to suffer from a certain kind of disease: "I have a disease: I see language."<sup>3</sup> However, this linguistic omnipresence, in the hands of Rorty, showed the revolutionary power of language and the importance of strong poets, thus acquiring the dimension of a conversation. If it is true that we are captives of language – and of *a* language – this does not mean that we are condemned to a contingency, to a truth, to a worldview. After all, to be human is, above all, to have this incredible capacity for conversation, which inevitably entails the possibility of change. It is in this sense that we could say that Rorty was always in a balance between instincts that were simultaneously conservative and revolutionary – as if he was constantly surprised by the presence of these two facets in himself and within the world.

It was the respect for this legacy that motivated the heartfelt homage we wanted to offer him. Even though it is difficult to speak of "a" Rortian philosophy, once we become familiar with the intellectual tools that Rorty made available to us – the feeling of openness, of distance, and of intellectual elevation that result from the recognition of our contingency, from the reflection on our historicity, and from thinking thought as a conversation – then we end up giving continuity to a way of thinking and to a tradition that did not want to become one in the first place. In this way, we end up valuing, above all, Rorty's incredible ability to remind us that it is always possible to have "something new under the sun."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> János Salamon, "The Afternoon of a Pragmatist Faun. Richard Rorty (1931-2007)," in *Eurozine*, August 7, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 161.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 389.

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The text that opens this collection was also the very last essay presented at the *Revisiting Richard Rorty Conference*. In “Rorty on vocabularies,” Robert Brandom writes a chapter with several connections to his essay in *Rorty and his Critics*, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism.” He explores Rorty’s vocabulary of instrumental pragmatism, its resulting “vocabulary vocabulary,” and Rorty’s public/private distinction. Brandom also appears at the very end of this collection, with an interview given at the conference in Braga: “Remembering Richard Rorty: an interview with Robert Brandom.”

The second text opens a section dedicated to politics. Ronald A. Kuipers, in “Successful prophecies, failed hopes? Richard Rorty and the demise of social justice,” proposes an alternative to Rorty’s “predictions” in *Achieving our Country*. Instead of seeing these “predictions” as a kind of foreknowledge, Kuipers suggests that we should understand them as a warning in the style of the biblical prophets and that they enable us to adjust our actions to our political hopes.

William Max Knorpp also retrieves these passages from *Achieving our Country* and, in “Richard Rorty’s “strongman” prediction and the cultural left,” he addresses Rorty’s argument in order to understand in what way the Cultural Left should be held accountable for the emergence of the “strongman.”

Agnė Alijauskaitė touches on a similar subject in “Achieving our cultural left? Rorty’s argument,” where she addresses, on the one hand, whether the 2016 US election marks the reemergence of class politics and, on the other hand, the extent to which class politics is compatible with Rorty’s anti-foundationalism.

Following is an essay from Aldir Carvalho Filho. In “A fraternidade, depois dos anos sombrios. A redescoberta rortyana de uma consigna esquecida,” Aldir explores Rorty’s “Looking Backwards from the Year 2096” (or, as it was originally titled, “Fraternity Reigns”). Through this analysis, he seeks to recover the value of fraternity that, as he notes, is the forgotten “third” value of the French Revolution’s “liberty, equality, fraternity.”

Two texts conclude this political section and address the relations between Rorty and Jürgen Habermas. On the one hand, Hernán Medina-Botero presents, in “Democratic politics without truth,” a rebuttal of two criticisms from Habermas against Rorty’s argument that truth is not relevant for an inclusivist political project. On the other hand, Juan Ignacio Cardona Giraldo also explores this question in “Educación para la democracia: una arista del debate Rorty – Habermas.” He describes the exchange of arguments between both philosophers regarding the connection between truth and democracy

and, then, examines their distinctly different approaches to what constitutes an adequate education for democracy.

Thanks to Pietro Salis' "Varieties of anti-representationalism," we shift to a set of texts concerned with epistemological issues. Salis draws two notions of anti-representationalism (one with "weaker" claims, and another more thorough and radical in its anti-representationalism), shows how Rorty adopts this second form of anti-representationalism and argues that this second version entails difficulties that are avoided by the first.

In "Será que é dispensável falar da verdade de algo?" Bernhard Josef Sylla examines whether it is really necessary to stop talking about truth in order to achieve Rorty's goal, i.e., less cruelty and less dogmatism. In alignment with criticisms from Strawson, Davidson and Habermas, Sylla argues that Rorty's philosophy can incentive us to be open and anti-dogmatic without having to drop truth-talk altogether.

In "Realism and relativism: The Rorty, Putnam debate," David Haack explores the arguments of Rorty and one of his "most sophisticated critics," (p. 155) Hillary Putnam. Beginning with Putnam's arguments that Rorty's conception of "warrant" is a sociological notion and that Rorty's argument ultimately falls in a self-contradictory relativism, Haack explores Rorty's defense against this attack and considers the ethical implications of adopting a Rortian philosophy.

In "Self, mind and the recovery of Metaphysics," J. A. Colen and Anthony Vecchio evaluates Rorty's attempt to dissolving perennial philosophical concepts (such as "soul" or "metaphysics") and questions (such as the mind-body problem). They argue that one cannot do away so easily with what Isaiah Berlin called "incurable deep metaphysical needs" and that these perennial interrogations have the embarrassing tendency to come back.

Rebeca Pérez León then engages in a reflection on Rortian historicism in "Historicism without transcendence." Starting from the criticisms presented by Peter Dews in "The Infinite is Losing its Charm," she defends Rorty point by point by restating his linguistic theses and shows the strengths of his view of finitude.

Ángel Rivera-Novoa offers the last text of this epistemological section where he addresses the subject of religion in "Rorty's demands on religious belief: in search of a pragmatic rationality." He describes Rorty's two requirements for religious belief (privatizing it and emptying it of cognitive content), and, after arguing that they do not do justice to the average believer, he introduces a notion of "pragmatic rationality" where religious belief can be both rational and consistent with a democratic framework.

A final set of texts put Rorty in dialogue with three other philosophers. In "Inversión de la línea platónica: Heidegger desde Rorty," Pilar Salvá Soria

addresses the well-known question of the relationship between Heidegger and Rorty. Central in her essay is the analysis of the “inversions” in which Rorty argues that Heidegger (and Heidegger before him had argued that Nietzsche) is still a Platonist trapped in a metaphysics of presence.

Next, Rodolfo Gutiérrez Simón compares the philosopher Ortega y Gasset and Rorty in “Ortega y Gasset, ¿precursor de Richard Rorty?” He describes the view of the two on four main fronts: their liberalism, their historicism, their notions of secularization and historicity, and their view of ethnocentrism. He concludes his essay by noting the striking similarity of their anthropological views.

Lastly, in “Rorty leitor de Hume,” Susana de Castro shows that even though Hume seems to only rarely emerge in his texts, Rorty (and especially the “late” Rorty post *Contingency, irony and solidarity*) follows the structure of Hume’s philosophical bi-perspectivism and his alliance of philosophical moderate skepticism with common sense.

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We would like to thank all of those who have made the conference organization and this publication possible. First of all, we owe a special thanks to Professor Robert Brandom for kindly accepting our invitation and for making, with Barbara, the long trip to Braga. We are thankful for his friendly company, for the conversations about his work and, above all, for the discussions about Richard Rorty.

Special thanks also are owed to the research group at the University of Minho, the Center for Ethics, Politics and Society (CEPS), who provided a home for the organization of the conference. It is thanks to the experience of its members that the conference was a thorough success. Also fundamental was the support offered by the Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD). This conference would not have been possible without its help.

Finally, our heartfelt thanks go to all who participated in the conference and who contributed their essays to this collection. You made possible not just a conference, but a conference that truly lived up to its name: Revisiting (and Remembering) Richard Rorty. Lastly, Pedro and Patrícia would also like to thank each other, which is a paradoxical thing to do in a text that is written by both! They are grateful that each was able to bring to life this homage to an author that they admire deeply.

Patrícia Fernandes and Pedro Góis Moreira

Lisbon, November 2019



## Chapter 1

# Rorty on vocabularies

*Bob Brandom, University of Pittsburgh*

### I. The vocabulary vocabulary

Rorty thinks that philosophy came to be definable—even, though analytic philosophers would not typically have put it this way—as “the sort of thing that Kant did.” Rorty stands in a tradition that understands that one of Kant’s fundamental insights is that what distinguishes the judgments and intentional doings of discursive creatures from the responses of merely natural ones is that judgments and actions are things we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. They express *commitments* of ours, exercises of a special kind of *authority*. Reconstructing the Cartesian distinction between minds and bodies so as to render it in *deontological* rather than *ontological* terms, Kant runs the danger of replacing a dualism of minds and bodies with one of norms and facts. As I would use the term, dualism is a distinction drawn in such a way as to make unintelligible the relation between the two sorts of thing one has distinguished. Following Kant in his own way, Rorty distinguishes *vocabularies*, within which various distinctive sorts of discursive, and therefore normative assessment are in order, from things like photons and butterflies, which interact with each other only causally. Things of this latter kind do not *normatively* constrain each other’s activities; they are not in the business of obliging and entitling themselves or each other to do things one way rather than another. A distinction of this sort is recognizably central in the thought of figures otherwise as diverse as Kant, Hegel, Frege, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Sellars. Does Rorty’s use of ‘vocabulary’ commit that great foe of dualisms to a dualism of norm and cause? I do not think so. But pursuing the issue opens up some interesting avenues through his thought.

If we take a step back, we can say that there is the *vocabulary* of causes, and there is the *vocabulary* of vocabularies (that is, of implicitly normative discursive practices). What can we say about the relations between them? First of all, they are *different* vocabularies. It may be that all Rorty needs of the

Kantian distinction between the order of causation and the order of justification is this fact: these ‘orders’ are specified in different vocabularies.<sup>1</sup>

It would be a mistake to confuse, conflate, or run them together. But they are not just different. For one thing, the vocabulary of causes is a vocabulary. It is something we can discuss in the metavocabulary of vocabularies. We can ask such questions as how the vocabulary of Newtonian causes arose, and how it differs from the vocabulary of Aristotelian causes in the questions it prompts us to ask about ourselves and our activities. Rorty himself often pursues such questions, and thereby affirms his practical commitment to historicism. But developing and applying vocabularies is something that we, natural creatures, do. Our doing of it consists in the production of causally conditioned, causally efficacious performances. That is to say that using vocabularies is also one among many other things that is describable in the vocabulary of causes. Rorty never loses sight of this fact. In his insistence on reminding us of the causal relations between our applications of vocabulary and the world in which we apply it, he affirms his practical commitment to naturalism.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that we can use the *vocabulary* metavocabulary to discuss the causal vocabulary (its emergence, peculiarities, practical virtues and vices, and so on), and the *causal* metavocabulary to discuss vocabularies (the role of reliable differential responsive dispositions in empirical vocabularies, the practical capacities they enable, what they are nomologically locked to, and so on) shows that the distinction between the vocabulary of causes and the

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<sup>1</sup> If we were to try to be even a little more careful about pinning this general distinction on Kant, we would have to acknowledge that causation is itself a thoroughly normative (rule-governed) affair for Kant—indeed, explaining the significance of this fact is an absolutely central task of the first *Critique*. But the distinction between things that act only according to rules and things that act according to conceptions or representations of laws, the realm of nature, and the realm of freedom, will do pretty well. Rorty sometimes (e.g., in “The World Well Lost”) distinguishes these two by saying that what it is for us in practice to *treat* something as belonging to the first realm, is to see its antics as fit to be *explained* (which is the cash-value of adopting the causal vocabulary), while to treat something as belonging to the second realm is to see its antics as fit to be *translated* (which is the cash value of adopting the vocabulary vocabulary).

<sup>2</sup> Recall Rorty’s observation in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 166–167, that near the end of the nineteenth-century philosophy was left with two approaches, historicism and naturalism, neither of which gave philosophical understanding any special dispensation. Russell and Husserl, each in his own way, responded to this situation by coming up with something for philosophy to be apodeictic about in the Kantian manner. It has taken us the better part of a century to see through their fascinating fantasies and work our way back to historicism and naturalism.

vocabulary of vocabularies is not drawn in terms that make relations between them unintelligible. So it is not playing the functional expressive role of a dualism. From the point of view of *this* question, when we have remarked on the complementary perspectives these metavocabularies provide on each other, we have said everything there is to say—at any rate, everything we *need* to say—about the relations between the two.

Rorty's positive suggestion, following Dewey and suggested by remarks of Wittgenstein, is that we can make sense of normative evaluations of vocabularies on the model of assessing tools as more or less useful in pursuit of certain *goals* or *purposes*. One of the cardinal benefits he sees stemming from the adoption of the vocabulary of instrumental pragmatism is the *discursive pluralism* that idiom encourages. It makes sense to make normative comparisons of tools once a task is specified. Hammers are better than wrenches for driving nails. But it makes no sense to ask whether hammers or wrenches are better, simply *as tools*. Assessment of tools is always relative to a purpose; to describe something as a tool is only to say that it has a purpose, not to specify some particular purpose. Similarly, Rorty wants to teach us not to ask whether one vocabulary is better than another simply *as a vocabulary*. We can say that the causal vocabulary is the better one to apply if one's purpose is to predict which way one billiard ball will move when struck by another, or to get someone to say "Ouch." And we can say that the vocabulary vocabulary is probably better if we want instead to discuss the relations between Blake's poetry and Wordsworth's.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main indictments of the metavocabulary of representation is that it tempts us to think that we can make sense of the question "Which vocabulary is better as a *representation*?" without having to specify a further purpose.<sup>4</sup> "Mirroring the world" is intelligible as such a purpose only as an element of some larger practical context. The root commitment of the representational metavocabulary as a metavocabulary is the idea that "representing the world" specifies a purpose that all vocabularies share—or at least a purpose to which they could all be turned, a dimension along which they could all be compared. But insofar as this is true, the purpose in question is devoid of any content common to the motley of vocabularies with which we

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<sup>3</sup> Though that is not to say that causal vocabularies are useless in this case, since we can learn a lot about the vocabularies of these poets by studying the social and political influences to which they were subject, the effects of their early familial experiences, and so on.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the discussion that culminates at *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, p. 21.

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