Wisdom and Analytic Philosophy

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Commentary on Richard Rorty's *'Zur Lage der Gegenwartsphilosophie in den USA'*
(on the present state of philosophy in the USA)
Analyse & Kritik 3, (1981) pp. 3–22.

Abstract: Rorty's profound and challenging critique of contemporary philosophy is in several ways somewhat unfair. Analytic philosophy can contribute towards 'wisdom' in a reasonable sense of the term, though not in Rorty's narrow sense; and his contrast between 'sophist' and 'sage', with the latter understood in Plato's way, is also too constricting. Also, some contemporary 'analytic' work in the 'history of philosophy', so called, is not invalidated by Rorty's strictures—especially his implied accusation that we shan't be interested in the intellectual past if we can't look down on it.

Insofar as I won't defend any restrictive theory about what philosophy is or ought to be, I accept Rorty's advice that we take a 'relaxed attitude' to the question of where the borders of our discipline lie. But within those generously drawn borders there is, among other things, contemporary analytic philosophy, and I find Rorty's picture of it deficient in three respects.

(1) Rorty is right that we tend to define our subject in terms of intellectual style as much as of subject matter, and that style is taken to involve skill in criticising arguments (and in constructing them, though I wouldn't call this a 'corollary', as Rorty smoothly does). Rorty, however, writes as though that were the whole of it, or the heart of it, tending to equate 'philosophical ability' with 'cleverness'. He thus omits the commitment to thoroughness, consistency, and integrity—to following the argument where it leads—to looking for the ways in which one's views on one matter may make trouble for one's views on another. Presumably our colleagues in other disciplines would not say No to any of that, but nor would they emphasize it as philosophers do. If they did, I believe they would be mistaken about themselves: the commitment to intellectual thoroughness and consistency is, in my opinion, part not just of the self-image but of the reality of what is special to philosophy. That is not to say much about how well philosophers succeed in developing this virtue: my claim is just that they consciously take themselves to be committed to developing it to the highest degree possible. This is not adequately caught in Rorty's categories of 'cleverness' and skill in argument.

(2) When that element is added to the picture, it provides a ground for thinking of philosophy—even 'analytic' philosophy—as not just the hatred of stupidity but also the love of wisdom. There is a reasonable way of taking the word 'wise' in which a man will be helped to be 'wise' by his trying to make all the parts of his thought hang together, trying for unity and breadth, especially if breadth is sought through depth. **(**If the word 'depth' begs the question, then replace it: '. . . especially if breadth is sought in a disciplined and rigorous manner, and not merely as the self-indulgent search for pleasing word-patterns'.**)** There are two reasons for this. One is that intellectual wholeness is a part of, or a kind of, wisdom. To the extent that my thoughts about what would have been the case if. . . are connected in intelligible ways with my thoughts about natural law, and these with my thoughts about the concept of value, and those in turn with my thoughts about my own death—to that extent do I not participate in 'the virtues of the sage'? The other is that the kind of thoroughness and rigour to which analytic philosophy is dedicated is humbling, and intellectual humility is another part of wisdom. Today's analytic philosophers perhaps don't appear obviously humble; but the humility I am talking about is not very visible, because it is not a smile on the face of the discipline but rather its nerve and sinew. It shows not in modest talk but in certain assumptions about one's chances of being right, and about the inevitability, if one's work is worth anything, that it will be criticised.

Rorty's phrase 'double dollop of self-esteem' is inhibiting: here is an analytic philosopher congratulating himself on how humble his discipline makes him! But although I am shy about seeming to cut such a figure, I refuse to be finally deterred: there is a good question about what virtues of the mind are associated with philosophy as practised these days in the English-speaking world; we must be allowed to counter one answer with a different one; and I don't think that Rorty was trying to suppress disagreement through mockery.

In offering to correct Rorty's picture, I am not laying claim on analytic philosophy's behalf to any 'higher standpoint' or 'mysterious special knowledge about "concepts"' or the rest. I am, however, implicitly questioning his suggestion that analytic philosophers belong on the left-hand side of a sophist/sage antithesis. Perhaps they do, if the line is being drawn and the ground cleared by Plato, but why should we let something as constricting and falsifying as that get in the way of our attempt to understand ourselves? When I watch philosophy actually being done at conferences and workshops and departmental paper-readings and graduate seminars and in private correspondence, I don't see people who 'know something eternal and permanent' trying to communicate their knowledge to one another; but nor do I see mere nimbleness in argument, performances like those of unusually 'clever' lawyers. The contrast between Plato's sage and Plato's sophist is too crude to capture the reality of analytic philosophy as currently practised.

(3) Rorty quotes Quine's remark contrasting interest in philosophy with interest in the history of philosophy. That remark, taken in the context Rorty gives it—namely the context of Reichenbach's naiveté about philosophy's past and future—has the effect of putting on the 'history' side of the line something which many of us think to be a living part of the philosophical enterprise—namely doing philosophy in the company of, and with the help of, some of the great philosophers of the past. In Rorty's picture, pre-positivist philosophy comes in only through positivism's condescending picture of it; with that rejected, we are left with a purely contemporary subject, redefining itself day by day through the headlines about what the top departments are up to. Rorty writes: 'We no longer have a story to tell about the

relation between our problems and those of the past, one which shows how much more clearly we understand them than, say, Leibniz or Hume did. Instead we have a thriving enterprise which doesn't look back more than a decade. . . ' (p. 9)—as though we had to stop looking back at the past as soon as we were compelled to stop looking down on it!

Well, perhaps for some philosophers life is like that, but for many it isn't. And that is important. For one thing, by staying in touch with the work of our forebears, we do maintain a certain continuity of theme. I am neither presupposing nor arguing for any definition of philosophy in terms of its problems or its kind of problems; I am merely remarking that one doesn't have to be an antiquarian to think that there is continuity in the problems, and that that fact should appear in a description of present-day philosophical reality. Not that it's just a matter of descriptive accuracy: I do hold that the living contact with great philosophical texts of past centuries is a good feature of the contemporary scene—not merely a good way of doing philosophy but more generally and importantly a way of staying in touch with the past of our culture and making it relevant to the present. It is one of the glories of analytic philosophy that it throws in this great extra bonus. Given that Rorty has, in other writings, proved himself to be exceptionally able at that sort of philosophical work, its absence from this latest picture of his is puzzling. He does acknowledge 'a list of seventeenth and eighteenth century problems which are distinctively philosophical. . . ' etc., but that does not provide the emphasis whose absence I am deploring, for those problems are the metascientific ones which figure in Reichenbach's history of philosophy—they 'have now been pretty well solved, thanks largely to the greater self-understanding of the scientists themselves'. They are not what I am talking about.

I am not sure how all of this relates to the comparison between analytic philosophy and 'the continental stuff' which doesn't contain 'an argument in a carload' and which is said to be the work of 'people who like to tell stories, weave webs of words, express visions' (p. 17). I am not sure who these people are, but I know that in any case I haven't read them. I hope that Rorty has done less than justice to them, too: I would like to be more attracted to them, and more respectful towards them, than Rorty's picture of them will let me be.