

# ANTIREPRESENTATIONALISM BEFORE AND AFTER RORTY

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*Barbara Herrnstein Smith*

I, for my part, cannot escape the consideration, forced upon me at every turn, that the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create.

—William James, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence” (1878)

If the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator.

—John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916)

Traditional cognitive science is captured by a particular picture of our fundamental epistemic situation. . . . Th[is] framework . . . is deeply embedded in the cognitive sciences. But it is time to abandon it. . . . Representing the environment is not what our brains evolved to do. Our brains evolved to control action.

—Michael Anderson, “Précis of After Phrenology: Neural Reuse and the Interactive Brain” (2016)

I take the title of this symposium, “Whatever Happened to Richard Rorty?,” as an invitation to consider how the philosopher’s views can be situated in relation to important contemporary intellectual developments. The question is illuminated, I think, when placed in a longer historical perspective than that offered by Nicholas Gaskill in his contribution here.<sup>1</sup> I also take the occasion to note historical and intellectual connections among fields of research that are central to those developments but not usually discussed together.

My focus is on projects related to Rorty’s rejection, especially as spelled out in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, of classic representational accounts of knowledge: notably, the conception of beliefs as mental images or propositional ideas that correspond, accurately or not, to the autonomously existing features of an external world. It is a conception of knowledge and human cognition—and, relatedly, of truth—that has prevailed in Western thought since the ancient Greeks, that has been the basis of formal epistemological speculation since the seventeenth century, and, significantly for Rorty writing in the 1970s and 1980s, that has continued to dominate views of knowledge, language, truth, and science in Anglo-American academic philosophy. Not incidentally, it is a conception of human cognition that has also dominated the cognitive sciences since their emergence in the 1950s and 1960s as more or less distinct fields of inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

In his rejection of mirroring metaphors for the presumed relation between “minds” and “nature” or “ideas” and “their objects,” and in his promotion of alternative nonrepresentational accounts of knowledge and truth, Rorty drew on a rich tradition of jointly pragmatist and constructivist views that spans the twentieth century. His major intellectual achievement could be seen as the strenuous affirmation of the value of such views and the vivid articulation of them for a generation of scholars and researchers. If his efforts are no longer of general interest, one reason is that those views, once the object of considerable scorn or outrage, have become more widely appreciated and embraced. Maintained by members of succeeding generations and extended in increasingly promising directions, the positions they reflect are no longer the immediate and dependable occasion of either excited attention or exciting scandal.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, related critiques of received views of knowledge and cognition were being elaborated in other quarters of the academy and internationally. Following important works by Thomas Kuhn,

1. Gaskill, “Rorty against Rorty,” this issue. I comment on Gaskill’s essay at the end.

2. The term *cognitive science* names a rather sprawling domain, including research and theory in disciplines ranging from artificial intelligence and developmental psychology to neurophysiology and primatology.

3. Rorty recognized the historical dynamics involved, though he may not have foreseen their application to his own work. Referring to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and other radically antiestablishment philosophers, he wrote that they “destroy for the sake of their own generation” and “know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over” (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 369).

Paul Feyerabend, and Michel Foucault, historians and sociologists of science—and a small scattering of philosophers—were developing increasingly radical challenges to prevailing accounts of scientific knowledge and progress.<sup>4</sup> Such challenges often focused explicitly on claims by rationalist philosophers of science to identify the supposedly distinctive thought processes that led to scientific discoveries. In a parallel development following important work in phenomenology, theoretical biology, and ecological psychology, theorists and researchers in the biological and behavioral sciences were developing more workable alternatives to the classic accounts of human cognition prevailing in their fields.<sup>5</sup> Like Rorty, many of the scholars involved in these projects drew on pragmatist and constructivist views set forth earlier in the century by William James, Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein; and writings by each of these philosophers, along with works by other earlier twentieth-century theorists in more empirical fields, continue to figure in contemporary antirepresentational accounts of knowledge, science, and cognition.<sup>6</sup>

There were dead ends and limiting theoretical or methodological commitments in the work of all those involved in these early developments. Insofar as their efforts operated together, however, they amounted to a powerful challenge to standard representational accounts and assumptions in epistemology, philosophy of science, and cognitive science. The alternative accounts they proposed continue to be pursued and elaborated, and the pragmatist-constructivist views they reflect offer compelling ways to think about knowledge, science, and the dynamics of cognition. The vitality of the views thus marked is evident in two especially active contemporary fields. One is science and technology studies (STS), including actor-network theory. The other is cognitive science, particularly the set of approaches and accounts currently labeled “4E” (embodied, embedded, extended, enactive) cognition.<sup>7</sup>

I consider Rorty’s relation to these historical developments below. First, however, some words on what distinguishes what I am calling here the tradition of pragmatist-constructivist epistemology.

4. Works especially notable at the time include Bloor, *Knowledge and Human Interests*; Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Knorr Cetina, *Manufacture of Knowledge*; Pickering, *Constructing Quarks*; Collins, *Changing Order*; and Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*. Those by philosophers include Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*; Dupré, *Disorder of Things*; and Cartwright, *Dappled World*.

5. Especially influential early works include Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*; Gibson, *Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems and Ecological Approach*; and Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*. Important later works include Varela, Thompson, and Rosch,

*Embodied Mind*; Brooks, “Intelligence without Representation”; and Thelen and Smith, *Dynamic Systems Approach*.

6. Other important earlier works include Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*; and Canguilhem, *Normal and the Pathological*.

7. Recent explicitly anti- or nonrepresentationalist works, many of them citing the pragmatist-constructivist theorists mentioned here, include Noë, *Action in Perception*; Chemero, *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*; Barrett, *Beyond the Brain*; Hutto and Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism*; Anderson, *After Phenomenology*; and Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions*. For histories, summaries, and assessments of 4E approaches, see Newen, De Bruin, and Gallagher, *Oxford Handbook of 4e Cognition*.

“The spectator theory of knowledge” was John Dewey’s derisive label for classic representational accounts of cognitive processes. The phrase sums up what he and other theorists of cognition have found especially problematic in those accounts: not merely the tacit priority often given to visual perception, but the idea of cognition as passive, detached, interior, unidirectional, motionless, and motiveless.

The classic epistemological dream was that, through some combination of rigorously controlled observation and logical-rational thought, one could eliminate the distorting effects of sensory error and subjective bias and arrive at accurate knowledge of the world outside oneself. Both the ends thus sought and the assumptions on which they were based have been rejected and replaced by pragmatist and constructivist theorists. Rather than seeking how we can acquire an accurate picture of the world, they have sought to understand how we act effectively in the worlds we occupy. And rather than a world with features independent of our perceptions, they conceive of what we experience as “the world” as built up and articulated—or, as it is said, “constructed”—through our perceptual, motor, and other activities. In accord with those crucially revised aims and assumptions, the theorists in question have seen our fully embodied, ongoing, reciprocal interactions with our environments, rather than presumed interior mental operations, as the crucial locus of cognitive dynamics. And rather than correspondence with the presumed autonomously existing properties of an exterior reality, they see the effective coping with emergent conditions as the crucial measure of epistemic value.

This contradistinctive view of knowledge was summarized by Dewey in terms that are still bracing:

Were we to define science not in the usual technical way, but as a knowledge that accrues when methods are employed which deal competently with problems that present themselves, the physician, engineer, artist, craftsman, lay claim to scientific knowing. These statements go contrary to the philosophic tradition. They do so for just one reason. They rest upon the idea that known objects exist as the consequences of directed operations, not because of conformity of thought or observation with something antecedent. . . . The quest for certainty by means of exact possession in mind of immutable reality is exchanged for search for security by means of active control of the changing course of events.<sup>8</sup>

The continuities between the pragmatist-constructivist tradition just described and contemporary antirepresentational accounts of cognition, particularly those calling themselves “enactive,” are clear from descriptions of the latter by their proponents. For example, Daniel Hutto observes,

8. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 159–60.

According to [the theory of radical enactive cognition], the basic sorts of cognition that our brains help to make possible are fundamentally interactive, dynamic and relational. . . . The complex and cascading neural activity that enables such active engagement does not involve representing how things stand with the world, but only anticipating, influencing and coordinating responses in a strong, silent manner.<sup>9</sup>

Shaun Gallagher makes the continuity explicit: “Building on the insight found in his famous essay, ‘The reflex arc concept in psychology,’ that one’s active response defines the nature of what the organism takes as a stimulus, Dewey offers a characterization of the role of the brain in cognition that comes close to embodied-enactivist views today.”<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, these varied but congruent antirepresentational accounts of knowledge and cognition have significant implications for our understanding of specifically scientific knowledge, including familiar views of the supposedly distinctive nature of scientific observation and reasoning. Some of those implications were recognized early on by Ludwik Fleck, whose *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* has been a central resource for both theory and research in science and technology studies.<sup>11</sup>

A mordant critic of the crude ocular empiricism of the epistemological tradition, Fleck suggested that its conception of scientific observation reflects a popular myth about how perception operates:

The knowing subject acts as a kind of conqueror, like Julius Caesar winning his battles by the formula *veni-vidi-vici*, “I came, I saw, I conquered.” One wants to know something, makes the observation or does the experiment—and already one knows it. . . . But the situation is not so simple. . . . [One cannot observe or ask questions properly in a scientific field] . . . until tradition, education, and familiarity have produced *a readiness for stylized (that is, directed and restricted) perception and action*.<sup>12</sup>

Two points here have been important in the later twentieth-century development of social studies of science. One is that, like all our perceptions, the observations made by scientists are shaped and enabled by the thought styles prevailing in their epistemic communities and by the particular skills and practices they learn through ongoing social coordinations with other members of those communities. A second point is that such ongoing social shaping of our (and scientists’) percep-

9. Hutto, *Evolving Enactivism*, xxiv–xxv. The last phrase is a humorous allusion.

10. Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions*, 112. See also Heras-Escribano, “Pragmatism, Enactivism, and Ecological Psychology.”

11. The discussion here draws from Smith, “Netting Truth.”

12. Fleck, *Genesis and Development*, 84; italics in the original.

tions is not an obstacle to the discovery of what we (and they) come to call “facts” but a crucial element of the processes that yield them.

The problem that concerned Fleck most centrally was not the classic, What is knowledge? or How do we certify that we know something? but How does that which we call knowledge *come into being*? Exploring that problem meant seeking to understand the mechanisms of cognition at every level: those of the individual subject (scientist or layman) in the course of their lifetime; those of the social collective (scientific discipline or other field of knowledge) over several generations; and those that characterize science per se, as a specific sort of technical-cognitive enterprise, over historical time. Accordingly, Fleck urged the development of a new field, “comparative epistemology,” which he conceived as an exceptionally comprehensive enterprise. Multileveled and interdisciplinary, it would include experimental studies in psychology; research in anthropology and sociology; archival work in cultural, social, and intellectual history; and observations of science and scientists on site and in action.

In his descriptions of the project and illustrations of it in *Genesis and Development*, Fleck, writing in Europe in the early 1930s, drew no line between philosophy and the social sciences, or between psychology and sociology, or between any of these and social, political, or intellectual history. Each of these divisions, however, became institutionally significant in the decades that followed, and the various disciplines involved became increasingly mutually isolated and to some extent antagonistic. Thus, although a number of Fleck’s central observations, such as the rigidity of belief systems or the effect of prior expectations on perception, would be studied experimentally by psychologists, the two fields most immediately and extensively influenced by his work, the history and the sociology of science, developed along lines quite different from—and often in determined contradistinction to—those of empirical psychology. Moreover, while the history and sociology of science, especially as assembled under the label “science studies,” became increasingly explicitly constructivist, psychology, especially joined with neuroscience and artificial intelligence under the label “cognitive science,” maintained close connections to rationalist philosophy of mind and, in some places, operated as a stronghold of traditional epistemological assumptions and ambitions. Thus, Fleck’s “comparative epistemology” had little chance of uptake through most of the twentieth century. As cognitive science, social studies of science, and philosophy of mind have become increasingly interconnected in our own era, however, a de facto version of that project may yet emerge.

Although historical and theoretical connections between STS and 4E have been noticed, current intellectual traffic between the two disciplines is limited for familiar reasons. As is generally the case in efforts at crossdisciplinary interaction, significantly different conceptual idioms and intellectual traditions make conversation between their respective practitioners awkward and keep them at

a distance from each other's work and thought. On the STS side, historical disciplinary antagonisms and wariness of biological reductionism make it hard for practitioners, especially those trained in cultural anthropology or sociology, to recognize affinities with fields such as neuroscience. On the 4E side, a corresponding historical disdain of the humanities and social sciences among natural scientists keeps practitioners ignorant of those fields, and some brush-offs of "postmodernists" by otherwise intellectually sophisticated scientists and philosophers suggest the continuing crippling influence of science-war caricatures.

While integration of the two fields seems unlikely and would have no obvious benefits as such, more general recognition and exploration of their connections and congruences would, I think, be valuable to all concerned. As it stands, the disciplinary segregations have people on both sides reinventing wheels and reploughing entire farms. For example, Gallagher, promoting due attention to the institutional as well as social element in "extended" cognition (that is, involving processes in the external environment), proposes a research project for 4E cognitive science:

One could investigate the different ways that particular kinds of institutions extend cognition. . . . Consider, for example, the cognitive work involved in scientific research: would such work be possible—or would it be what it is—without the kinds of things and institutions that make it happen? This may include labs, scientific practices and procedures, journals and publication practices, funding agencies—all of which carry scientific thinking along and make science what it is.<sup>13</sup>

A glance at Bruno Latour's *Science in Action* or at a half-century of work in the sociology of scientific knowledge might give such a project a good head start. Conversely but correspondingly, the evidently serendipitous discovery by Latour and his associates of J. J. Gibson's fertile concept of "affordances" suggests that more deliberate forays into work in the biological and behavioral sciences might prove of ongoing value to practitioners of STS.<sup>14</sup>

The relation between Rorty's quarrels with representationalist epistemology and the varied projects I have been describing is complex. While his efforts clearly draw on and participate in the pragmatist-constructivist lineage just indicated, there are important divergences of motive and interest that separate him both from his American pragmatist predecessors and from contemporary practitioners of STS and philosophers pursuing 4E cognitive theory.

13. Gallagher, "Socially Extended Mind," 8.

14. See Hennion, "From ANT to Pragmatism," which describes their discovery of Gibson's work along with that of James, Dewey, and other American theorists of cognition.

Two passages from Rorty's introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, in which he rehearses the antirepresentationalist arguments presented in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, illustrate the sharpness of the difference between his views and those then prevailing among his philosophical colleagues. In the first passage, Rorty describes the ideas he rejects as the shared beliefs of two then-eminent American philosophers:

Papineau and [David] Lewis share the conviction that there are "objective," theory-independent and language-independent matter-of-factual relationships, detectable by natural science, holding or failing to hold between individual bits of language and individual bits of nonlanguage. When these relations (e.g., "being caused by") do hold they cause us to "accurately represent" some item which belongs within what Putnam calls "a certain domain of entities [the ones which are there regardless of what we do or say] such that all ways of using words referentially are just different ways of singling out one or more of those entities."<sup>15</sup>

In the second passage, Rorty presents his contrary arguments ventriloquized through two other philosophers, Hilary Putnam and Donald Davidson, whom he considered intellectual allies:

The antirepresentationalism common to [them] insists, by contrast, that the notion of "theory-independent and language-independent matter-of-factual relationships" begs all the questions at issue. With William James, both philosophers refuse to contrast the world with what the world is known as, since such a contrast suggests that we have somehow done what Nagel calls "climbing out of our own minds." They do not accept the Cartesian-Kantian picture presupposed by the idea of "our minds" or "our language" as an "inside" which can be contrasted to something (perhaps something very different) "outside."<sup>16</sup>

Rorty's position in these passages (however distributed among other philosophers) is clearly close to that of James and other early pragmatist-constructivist theorists of knowledge. It is also, in some obvious respects, close to the views of contemporary antirepresentationalist theorists of cognition. As I noted above, if *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* appears less exciting now than it did in the 1980s, one reason is that many of the once-radical positions Rorty promoted there have become familiar and, in some fields, are acquiring due intellectual respectability. If these latter favorable developments have not been attended by sustained or increased attention to Rorty's work, it is also because his interests

15. Rorty, "Introduction," 11–12, citational notes omitted. The bracketed phrase is Rorty's insertion. 16. Rorty, "Introduction," 12.



in promoting those positions were considerably narrower than those motivating their most significant past and current elaborations and, indeed, were at odds with some of those interests and some of those elaborations.<sup>17</sup>

Rorty could be quite caustic in his descriptions of academic philosophy, but the shape and status of the profession were continuing central concerns. An article he published in 1982 titled “Philosophy in America Today” offers a good picture of his assessment of the profession at the time and of his intellectual tastes more generally. Referring to Hans Reichenbach’s *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*, which offered to show that, in Reichenbach’s words, “philosophy has proceeded from speculation to science,” Rorty describes the book, with evident disdain for just that progression, as a revisionist history designed to serve the analytic revolution.<sup>18</sup> He goes on, however, to endorse many of Reichenbach’s historical judgments:

This account of the history of philosophy makes a lot of sense even if one has been convinced by Kuhn that science is not as methodical as we once thought and by Quine that the “philosophic discoveries” Reichenbach admired were mostly dogmas. One can drop the dogmas and still preserve most of Reichenbach’s history. . . . He was . . . right, I think, in dismissing lots of philosophical programs as attempts to claim the status of science without imitating its procedures or respecting its results. I myself would join Reichenbach in dismissing classical Husserlian phenomenology, Bergson, Whitehead, the Dewey of *Experience and Nature*, the James of *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, neo-Thomist epistemological realism, and a variety of other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century systems.<sup>19</sup>

Quoting Reichenbach’s descriptions of the putatively disposable intellectual figures and programs in this remarkable list, Rorty explains his concurrent judgments: “Bergson and Whitehead, and the bad (‘metaphysical’) parts of Dewey and James, seem to me merely weakened versions of idealism—attempts to answer ‘unscientifically’ formulated epistemological questions about the ‘relation of subject and object’ by ‘naive generalizations and analogies’ that emphasize ‘feeling’ rather than ‘cognition.’”<sup>20</sup> While tastes may not have changed much among analytic philosophers over the past forty years, they have certainly changed elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> Figures and movements that have proved especially significant and valu-

17. Rorty’s name does not appear in the index of the nine-hundred-page *Oxford Companion to 4c Cognition* of 2021 and did not appear in the index of the six-hundred-page *Science Studies Reader* of 1999, edited by Mario Biagioli.

18. Rorty, “Philosophy in America Today,” 183.

19. Rorty, “Philosophy in America Today,” 184–85.

20. Rorty, “Philosophy in America Today,” 185.

21. For an instructive account, see Kuklick, “After *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.” Seeking to explain the stasis indicated by his extensive research, Kuklick writes: “In looking at the history of American thought over the half-century since Rorty came upon the scene, I see three factors that make for continuity rather than change: . . . the rootedness of professional thinking . . . ; the fixed abstract training of philosophers . . . ; and the enduring clout of

able for contemporary antirepresentationalists are dismissed here by Rorty for reasons that may well seem blind or perverse.

Rorty associated classic representational views of knowledge with a theological longing for unmediated final truth and saw the pursuit of such views in twentieth-century philosophy as a longing for scientific status that he thought improper and pretentious. In questioning those views and berating those longings, he sought to wrest professional philosophy out of its insular quarter of the academy and help transform the discipline into a site of socially and politically progressive intellectual exchange. While contemporary theorists questioning classical accounts of knowledge and cognition may agree with such aims, they have had no particular reason to pursue them. Both STS and 4E cognitive theory have quarrels with rationalist epistemology as an intellectual regime; but most STS practitioners are social scientists, not philosophers, and cognitive theorists, even those affiliated with philosophy by training or appointment, appear more interested in promoting their particular approaches than in fighting the philosophy establishment as such. There are certainly contemporary efforts, comparable to Rorty's (and perhaps no less quixotic), to reform the discipline from within; and, like Rorty's, they continue to focus on its provincialisms and complacencies. But representational epistemology as such, whatever its acknowledged conceptual problems, is not generally seen as a major source of its current stultifications.

Rorty was more comfortable with literary people (and their occupations and interests) than most philosophers are, and, although he respected the natural sciences, he seems to have regarded them as alien worlds. Scientistic trends in the humanities were a continuing concern for him, and even while rejecting his philosophical colleagues' realist assumptions and foundationalist claims, he evidently thought of science much the way most of them did. Thus, Rorty's observations on the subject are usually about scientific theories, descriptions, and arguments, not laboratories, research teams, or funding sources. And thus, while appreciating the critical elements in the work of early science-studies figures, he missed much that was important in the alternative accounts of scientific knowledge developed by midcentury historians and sociologists and, later, by actor-network theorists and practitioners of STS.

Rorty's relation to his American pragmatist predecessors was deeply ambivalent. Although he associated many of his efforts closely with those of James and Dewey, he was evidently embarrassed by what were counted as their philosophical blunders and troubled by what he saw as their metaphysical pretensions and

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analysis. . . . Undoubtedly the most potent factor is the unrelenting enlargement of a university occupation of philosophy. . . . [Rorty] detested it, as his own career demonstrated, and wished for a future in which 'the profes-

sion' would disintegrate as seers such as himself went off the reservation. His wish was not realized" (4-5).

scientific leanings.<sup>22</sup> Failing to recognize their reconceptualization of key terms, such as *experience* and *nature*, or their transformation of classical empiricism itself, he dismissed their subtle and original accounts of human cognition with allusions to “myths” and “dogmas.” Thus, commenting on pragmatism’s place in intellectual history in a 1995 essay, he wrote, “The philosophers of today who speak well of James and Dewey tend to speak ill of Bergson. . . . Following up on Sellars’s criticism of the Myth of the Given, they do not think anything is ‘given immediately in experience.’ . . . Contemporary philosophers who profess sympathy with pragmatism show little sympathy with empiricism—they would rather forget empiricism than radicalize it.”<sup>23</sup>

Rorty went on in this essay to claim Dewey for what he saw as a properly updated pragmatism. He did so here by paring Dewey’s work down to a fairly barebones historicist antirealism: “I shall construct a hypothetical Dewey who was a pragmatist without being a radical empiricist, and a naturalist without being a panpsychist. The point of constructing such a Dewey is to separate out what I think is living and what I think is dead in Dewey’s thought, and thereby to clarify the difference between the state of philosophical play around 1900 and at the present time.”<sup>24</sup> No less drastic, however, is the paring down and separating out that Rorty did in the course of paying homage to Dewey in the introduction to his own philosophical papers: “What seems to me most worth preserving in Dewey’s work is his sense of the gradual change in human beings’ self-image which has taken place in recorded history. . . . Dewey saw religious tolerance, Galileo, Darwin, and (above all) the rise of democratic governments and literate electorates, as central episodes in this story.”<sup>25</sup> The passage concludes with Rorty writing of Dewey and of himself: “His [Dewey’s] own effort to overthrow representationalist doctrines, an effort which embroiled him in endless controversies about objectivity, truth, and relativism, was undertaken because he thought that these doctrines had become impediments to human beings’ sense of self-reliance. I think that he was right about this, and that his effort is worth continuing.”<sup>26</sup>

Now, more than a quarter of century later, there are antirepresentationalist philosophers who, like Rorty, see their efforts as continuous with Dewey’s—not, however, because both are motivated by humanistic values but because Dewey’s writings anticipate their own radical theorizations of cognition and supply them with canny descriptions and useful accounts of the dynamics of experience. Comparably, what contemporary practitioners of science studies value in Dewey’s work, along with that of James and later pragmatists, are their efforts not merely

22. Given the more fluid nature of the relevant academic fields before their midcentury disciplinary calcifications, both James and Dewey could operate professionally and intellectually, without strain or “scientism,” as psychologists as well as—or, indeed, as part of their identity as—philosophers.

23. Rorty, “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” 291–92.

24. Rorty, “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” 292.

25. Rorty, “Introduction,” 16–17.

26. Rorty, “Introduction,” 17.

to overthrow the representationalist tradition but to produce accounts of scientific knowledge that are empirically and conceptually rich enough to replace that tradition. The joint efforts of both may yet, if not shatter the Mirror of Nature for good, then at least move it from its long-held central position among philosophy's furnishings. It seems that, in his attempt to "separate out what . . . is living versus what . . . is dead in Dewey's thought," Rorty got it pretty much the wrong way around.

At the end of the last century, reflecting on his own efforts to those ends, Rorty wrote, "I should like to think that English-speaking philosophy in the twenty-first century will have put the representationalist problematic behind it."<sup>27</sup> Whatever the fate of his other large hopes for our era, this one may come close to being fulfilled. But it will not be along the lines that he sought most intently or, probably, would have found most to his taste.

In his contribution to this symposium, Nicholas Gaskill maintains, among other things, that while Rorty was right to be antifoundationalist, his rhetoric is self-undermining and his work now duly upstaged by a set of more rhetorically prudent and conceptually advanced thinkers, notably Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Isabelle Stengers. In particular, Gaskill maintains that, whereas those thinkers "have given us better tools for confronting our contemporary situation, when a bad appropriation of the postmodern critique of knowledge threatens to undercut all claims to expertise,"<sup>28</sup> Rorty's blunt language and indiscriminate leveling of discourses alienate potentially sympathetic readers and open the philosopher to charges of relativism. These charges, Gaskill writes, "have renewed bite" "in a climate of 'post-truth' politics, where 'alternative facts' are invoked to justify deplorable acts."<sup>29</sup> There is much to question here. I confine my comments to a few points on topics that have concerned me in the past.

Whether or not "postmodern" by some determination, the work of each of the theorists Gaskill commends contains a strong critical element regarding Western science, by no means muffled by their shared concerns over climate change.<sup>30</sup> More significantly, part of what has distinguished their work, certainly Latour's, from more traditional views of science is an emphasis on the contingency of scientific facticity and, accordingly, the essentially limited

27. Rorty, "Introduction," 12.

28. Gaskill, "Rorty against Rorty," 385.

29. Gaskill, "Rorty against Rorty," 381.

30. For Stengers, see, e.g., *In Catastrophic Times* and *Another Science Is Possible*. For Haraway, see, e.g., *Modest%20witness*. Stengers indicts scientific experts for,

among other things, overruling popular skepticism about GMOs. Haraway indicts them for, among other things, the callous breeding and sacrificing of laboratory animals. The critical element regarding scientific authority and expertise is more oblique in Latour's work but explicit in his writings on religion. See, e.g., Latour, *Rejoicing*, where the scientific revolution is described as having effectively ushered in various devastations of modernity.

scope and fragile effectivity of Western scientific knowledge.<sup>31</sup> There is some question, then, of how their work, presented without equivocation and properly understood, could controvert public skepticism about scientific expertise or relieve academic anxieties over challenges to orthodox views of scientific truth and objectivity.<sup>32</sup> For example, contrasting Haraway's thought with Rorty's, Gaskill commends her for allowing us to reject the "authoritarianism" of the classical notion of scientific objectivity as what she calls a "god-trick" but without "level[ing] all discourses in a free-for-all."<sup>33</sup> Haraway does this, Gaskill explains, by emphasizing the embodiment and situatedness of all knowledge and by redefining scientific objectivity as socially responsible attention to such matters as the gender of bodies in scientific laboratories. However apt such emphases or interesting such a proposed redefinition, it is not clear what tools they would supply to address the contemporary situations Gaskill evokes or how they would escape other likely skepticisms, academic as well as public.

Gaskill's essay is much occupied with relativism, both the perceived problem of the position and the threat of the charge. His concerns, I think, are misplaced. Being charged with relativism is generally a sign of heterodox thought. As has been pointed out by a number of scholars, while the actual implications of the challenging views put forth by such figures as Protagoras, Nietzsche, Feysabend, and Foucault are generally intellectually coherent and morally benign, the absurd and perilous implications sometimes alleged to follow from their views are generally the product of distorting paraphrase, false inference, and/or global incomprehension.<sup>34</sup> Of course, antifoundationalists and other heterodox thinkers can avoid being charged with relativism by staunchly disavowing the position, denouncing the absurd and perilous relativism of other unnamed persons, and equivocating on the key concepts of the orthodoxy at issue—for example, *truth*, *fact*, or *objectivity*. Works that Gaskill cites as sharing Rorty's antifoundationalist views but escaping his rhetorical liabilities are good examples of how it can be done. As I indicate elsewhere, however, such hedging strategies, whatever their immediate rhetorical advantages, have considerable long-range intellectual costs. Among them is reinforcing both the orthodoxy otherwise being challenged and the power of the charge of relativism to hold such challenges at bay.<sup>35</sup>

31. See, e.g., in Latour's *Science in Action*, 78 et seq., the idea of "trials of strength" that must be undergone by scientific claims. Comparably, see, in his *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 18 et seq., the exacting "felicity conditions" required for the "instauration" and continuation of any entity's existence, that of quarks along with that of angels.

32. Gaskill appears to concede the point with respect to the anxieties of philosopher Simon Blackburn but defers the more general question (see Gaskill, "Rorty against Rorty," 388n30).

33. Gaskill, "Rorty against Rorty," 386.

34. See Smith, "Unloading the Self-Refutation Charge" and "Chimera of Relativism." See Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, for an array of such features. For related commentary on Boghossian, see Smith, "Reply to an Analytic Philosopher." For recent analyses of common charges, see Kusch, *Relativism and the Philosophy of Science*.

35. See Smith, "Cutting-Edge Equivocation," which discusses, among other examples, Haraway's "Situated Knowledges," a work that Gaskill cites several times in "Rorty against Rorty."

The tendency to “slide into cultural relativism”<sup>36</sup> that Gaskill spots in Rorty and against which he thinks we must guard is, I think, the least of contemporary worries. More troubling, for example, is the combination of our shared tendency (scientists and philosophers included) to resist dissonant ideas and ignore inconvenient facts and the considerable, often radical, differences among our operative realities. Accordingly, more useful, I think, than hopeful invocations of an unlikely “common world” are an appreciation of the significance of such endemic tendencies and an informed understanding of the psychological and social dynamics that shape and maintain our varied operative realities. Important appreciations and understandings of those kinds can often be found in the work of heterodox philosophers and theorists “charged with” a relativism that would be better registered as their salutary accomplishment.<sup>37</sup>

As an example of what he sees as Rorty’s indiscriminate discourse-egalitarianism, Gaskill quotes a sentence from a lecture by Rorty that reads, “There are many descriptions of the same things and events, and . . . there is no neutral standpoint from which to judge the superiority of one description over another.”<sup>38</sup> Gaskill writes, “Such statements, easy to find in Rorty’s work, begin with an important premise—that there is no master discourse for understanding reality—but suggest that the main upshot of this premise is that all descriptions exist on the same level.”<sup>39</sup> The alleged suggestion, however, is the product only of Gaskill’s gratuitous inference. As do other pragmatist theorists of language, Rorty routinely notes that different descriptions of the world—those offered by poets or physicists, for example—will be found better than others (more imaginatively evocative, for example, or more instrumentally reliable) in view of different interests or purposes. Here he is saying that it makes no sense to claim that one description is superior to another apart from any standpoint and thus without regard to any interest in relation to which its superiority in some respect could be maintained. One has to work hard to extract an everything-is-equally-good relativism out of Rorty’s rejection of the idea of a transcendently privileged discourse.

Gaskill emphasizes that he is “arguing that it is the rhetorical presentation of his positions, more than the positions themselves, that has distorted [Rorty’s] philosophical legacy” and writes of would-be sympathetic readers who “trip over” Rorty’s language and “rug-pulling rhetoric.”<sup>40</sup> To illustrate the point, Gaskill quotes two phrases from an essay by Rorty published in a literary journal and predicts their unhappy effect:

36. Gaskill, “Rorty against Rorty,” 392.

37. For elaboration of these points, see Smith, *Practicing Relativism*, 7–23, 106–24.

38. Rorty, “Getting Rid of the Appearance-Reality Distinction,” 79. The observation concerns the respective descriptions by scientists and philosophers making argu-

ments about a proof. Rorty had been saying that philosophers of science do not have better arguments about what constitutes a proof than do scientists themselves.

39. Gaskill, “Rorty against Rorty,” 383.

40. Gaskill, “Rorty against Rorty,” 383.

When [Rorty] addresses literary critics in “Texts and Lumps” (1985), published when “French Theory” still ruled in English departments, he asks critics to stop searching for a philosophical “method” and instead “to simply have favorite philosophers” whom they praise and others whom they damn “by making invidious comparisons.” Again, even a critic persuaded against searching for a grand method to ground his or her reading practices will bristle at the alternative being a kind of child’s game of liking or not liking philosophers. Although the case against “method” is convincing, the “ironic” alternative is destined to irritate and disappoint.<sup>41</sup>

As it happens, I was in the audience when Rorty gave a version of “Texts and Lumps” as a talk in the early 1980s. It was a time when Anglo-American literary academics were discovering an array of new textual approaches (hermeneutics, semiotics, structuralism, and so forth), many of them drawn from European philosophy and social sciences. In the essay as at the talk, Rorty applauds the importation of what he describes, with an allusion to familiar putdowns of continental philosophy, as the “sort of philosophy fashionable in France and Germany.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on, however, to express dismay at the scientism displayed in promotions of some of the imported approaches, notably, the idea that, like scientific explanations, literary interpretations could and should be “objective.” He also notes the evident effort by some literary academics to imitate the style of analytic philosophers or to appeal to philosophy to authorize their own judgments.

Rorty’s central point in the essay, shared at the time by many people in literary studies, is that such promotions and efforts are unfortunate insofar as they reflect the idea that the natural sciences are more intellectually respectable than the humanities or that being an analytic philosopher is a more intellectually elevated occupation than being a literary critic. Thus he writes, “One often finds critics using sentences beginning ‘Philosophy has shown . . .’ to formulate a justification for taking a certain favored approach to a literary text, or to literary history, or to literary canon-formation.” And, in language that Gaskill believes sounds like recommending a child’s game, Rorty continues:

I think critics would do better to realize that philosophy is no more likely to produce “definitive results” . . . than is literary criticism itself. This should not be viewed as undesirable “softness” on the part of either discipline, but simply as an illustration of the fact that there are lots of areas in which desiderata are not as well agreed upon as they are in medicine or in the munitions industry. It would be better for critics to simply have favorite philosophers (and philosophers to have favorite literary critics), favorites picked by consonance with their own desiderata.<sup>43</sup>

41. Gaskill, “Rorty against Rorty,” 383–84.

43. Rorty, “Texts and Lumps,” 78.

42. Rorty, “Texts and Lumps,” 78.

A bit later, recommending a pragmatist view of what were sometimes paraded as “methodological principles,” Rorty writes, with phrasing that Gaskill thinks is particularly offensive:

When applied to literary criticism, pragmatism offers reasons why critics need not worry about being “scientific,” and why they should not be frightened of the appearance of “subjectivity.”...It suggests that we neither be afraid of subjectivity nor anxious for methodology, but simply proceed to praise our heroes and damn our villains by making invidious comparisons. It urges that we not try to show that our choice of heroes is imposed upon us by, or underwritten by, antecedently plausible principles.<sup>44</sup>

There is, I think, nothing in Rorty’s language here for a literary critic to “bristle at,” nor anything in the essay “destined to irritate or disappoint.” On the contrary, there is (and was) much in it to cheer a critic and some turns of phrase that she might very well (and did) relish.

Rorty’s wry and partly self-mocking reference to invidious comparisons in the passage just cited and his bad guess about what was living and what was dead in Dewey’s work are cautionary for this symposium, which may make us wonder how our own ideas and assessments will be assessed forty years down the road, in climates, political and other, perhaps not now imaginable.

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44. Rorty, “Texts and Lumps,” 78–79.



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