

*Rorty and his Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Blackwell) £19.99/\$29.95

In the beginning of philosophy, there was a dialogue; a dialogue between an Athenian weirdo and a host of his compatriots. It is interesting that philosophy, having accomplished the detour via which it has produced an immense number of monologic treatises, now returns as if back to its roots. More and more philosophy books contain not presentations of theories, but rather dialogues between philosophers. This trend has been initiated by the famous *Library of Living Philosophers* published by Open Court; but during the recent decade, series of this kind have been proliferating.

The present volume is the product of one such series, published by Blackwell: it contains the essays of twelve philosophers reflecting on the philosophical views of Richard Rorty together with Rorty's responses. Its contributors are mostly people quite sympathetic with Rorty's philosophy (so one should not take the 'critics' in its title too seriously), but they are first-class and original philosophical personalities (including Robert Brandom, the editor of the volume, Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett, Hilary Putnam, John McDowell, and also Jürgen Habermas), and as a result, their anatomisation of Rorty's views is truly penetrating.


Rorty has become famous especially after the publication of his 1980 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, in which he not only challenged almost every dogma of contemporary analytic

philosophy, but portrayed the whole Western philosophy as put on a wrong track by Plato. It is, Rorty claims, on the wrong track for it wants to achieve the impossible: to bring us some special kind of truths (maybe even ones which are firmer than are those of our fallible, empirical science). Contrary to this, we should, according to Rorty, "free ourselves from the notion that philosophy can explain what science leaves unexplained" and put up with the fact that philosophy can be at most "useful kibitzing". By this attitude to philosophy, reinforced by his subsequent books, Rorty divided the philosophical public into two contrary camps: some philosophers have hailed him as a prophet who has managed to bring out that philosophy had degenerated into a nonsensical self-contained game; whereas others have seen him as an irresponsible sophist helping rhetoric prevail over reason.

The present volume can well serve as the compendium of the most distinctive features of Rorty's views and the most typical objections raised to them by philosophers who are not utterly unsympathetic with him. What is now apparently felt as most emblematic of Rorty's philosophical attitude and what is challenged in many of the included papers (most explicitly in those of Habermas and Davidson) is his conviction that we do not need any concept which would "transcend" our communal practices, especially that we do not need the concept of truth stronger than the concept of justification. What we, according to Rorty, should be after is broadening the range of the audiences to which we are able to justify our convictions – but to

struggle for a *universal* justifiability (hence for truth) is to waste time chasing a chimera. "You can only work," as he puts it, "for what you can recognise". While Rorty follows Dewey, who "thought that the desire for universality, and necessity was undesirable, because it led one away from the practical problems of democratic politics into a never-never land of theory", his opponents, according to Rorty, "think that this is a desirable desire, one which one shares only when one reaches the highest level of moral development."

This rejection of the 'transcendental' concept of truth is, of course, only the tip of the iceberg of Rorty's controversial philosophical views, which are underlain by the conviction that there is no world-in-itself which would be independent of what we do and how we talk. "There is no way," he claims in his response to McDowell's effort to "rehabilitate objectivity", "to drive a wedge between convincing your peers and directing your meaning to the world"; hence there is no "answerability to the world", no objectivity, independent of getting in phase with one's fellow humans, with solidarity. This and many other strands of Rorty's attitude are also discussed in the book.

Reading Rorty's responses to the challenges can serve as a good antidote against taking him as a *superficial* thinker. The way he faces the objections of his opponents shows that there is definitely much more to his controversial stance than ignorance – you may take his view to be stubbornly extravagant (one more weirdo?), and you may take him to be wrong; but you cannot take him as somebody who need not be taken seriously. 

## No weirdo

Jaroslav Peregrin on a Rorty to be reckoned with