

## THE ELIMINATION OF SENSATIONS AND THE LOSS OF PHILOSOPHY

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In examining Rorty's version of eliminative materialism<sup>1</sup> one finds it difficult to stay with that limited matter for very long. This seems to be due to the fact that to comprehend Rorty's approach to the mind-body problem one has to wrestle with a much larger body of notions to which Rorty professes allegiance. The solution to the mind-body problem that Rorty formulates is an application of these ideas, a smaller reflection of the whole, and as a consequence one who decides to accept Rorty's version of eliminative materialism may find himself being mysteriously drawn further and further into the web of Rorty's large-scale ideas, perhaps all the time feeling a bit uneasy about the whole process. To complicate matters further, Rorty often utilizes the arguments of other philosophers (often toward ends they disapprove of) in conjunction with his own to achieve his final conclusions, so that although one can, without much difficulty, see exactly where he stands, it is frequently perplexing how he got there. The purpose of this paper will be to try to spell out Rorty's position both on the mind-body problem and in general, and then to discuss some of the consequences of that position.

Before discussing Rorty's version of eliminative materialism it must first be distinguished from the kind of eliminative materialism that Feyerabend proposes.<sup>2</sup> Feyerabend's version, which, adopting Lycan and Pappas'<sup>3</sup> terminology, might be referred to as strong eliminative materialism (SEM), dictates that the term "sensation" is not a referring term. Because of this, people who believe they have sensations and who use sensation language simply have empirically false beliefs, since there are no sensations. In addition, according to this view the abandonment of the mental language terms common to ordinary language will not reduce our ability to explain, describe, or predict. Therefore, "sensations" and all other terms that purport to refer to mental entities can and should be eliminated.

Rorty, on the other hand, advocates a different

type of eliminative materialism, dubbed weak eliminative materialism (WEM). Like Feyerabend, Rorty insists that sensations and mental terms in general are in principle eliminable. In this vein, Rorty employs an analogy between sensation talk and demon talk in which it is argued that just as at one time it was common practice to blame the existence of diseases on demons, and just as this type of explanation was eventually dropped in favor of terms derived from a greater understanding of diseases, so current sensation language is subject to the same type of abandonment should events advance to the point at which a change would be appropriate. Rorty also agrees that the elimination of mental talk will not result in a language that is inadequate for purposes of explanation and prediction. However, it seems that it is with these two points that the similarity between SEM and WEM ends.

The major factor in this divergence, and the source of extensive debate within the philosophical community is Rorty's contention that people who do, in fact, report the existence of sensations do not have empirically false beliefs. This view seems to be based on a combination of considerations, one of which is Rorty's acceptance of a pragmatic definition of truth. This is the view that truth consists, not in some objective word-world relationship which man may some day attain knowledge of after much agonizing effort directed toward that aim, but of "funded experience" - those beliefs which are not at the moment being challenged, because they present no problems and no one has bothered to think of alternatives to them.<sup>4</sup> Thus, to have true beliefs is simply to hold beliefs that are justified by the level of scientific inquiry at that particular time. In conjunction with this view, Rorty also professes a diametrical opposition to scientific realism's concept of the world as something, "so 'independent of our knowledge' that it might, for all we know, prove to contain none of the things we have always thought we were talking about,"<sup>5</sup> terming it, à la Sellars, "The Myth of the Given." This view is closely associated with the pragmatic notion of truth mentioned above, in that when one abandons an objective truth one must be willing to abandon an objective world along with it. Truth, whether defined by the pragmatist or the realist, must tell us something about the world, regardless of how one defines "world," and the two conceptions of truth and world must be consistent. The idea of pragmatic truth can tell us nothing about a realist's world, while the seeker of realist truth would be doomed to a life of frustration in an idealist's world. It is obvious that the concepts of "truth" and

"world" are inseparable, insofar as they must be consistent in order to yield anything but nonsense. Rorty thus holds not two positions but one; the concepts of "truth" and "world" are two sides of the same coin.

Rorty's anti-realist position seems to be, in turn, largely attributable to arguments put forward by Quine,<sup>6</sup> Davidson,<sup>7</sup> and Stroud.<sup>8</sup> Quine's contribution, the indeterminacy of translation thesis, asserts that translation from one language to another can never hope to be "correct" translation since the language simply is the conceptual framework and is thus not a tool that can allow us to examine the conceptual framework. As Rosenberg puts it

The enterprise with reference to which Quine hopes to highlight the limitations imposed by his naturalistic standpoint is radical translation--translation of a hitherto uninvestigated language, unaided by the resemblance of cognate word forms, shared cultural norms, or the services of a bilingual interpreter. His conclusion is that the field linguist who undertakes such an enterprise is, in a sense, doomed to disappointment, not, however, by reason of failing to produce a well-grounded and reasonable translation of the language, but rather by being put in the position of being able to produce an indefinite number of equally well-grounded and reasonable translations, all of them mutually incompatible, among which there is nothing to dictate a choice.<sup>9</sup>

Rorty's reaction to Quine's thesis is based chiefly on his endorsement of Quine's rejection of the idea of "meaning," in which "meaning" denotes anything over and above the translator's interpretation of the foreigner's behavior<sup>10</sup> (which is, by necessity, confined as to context and circumstance). Rorty's reaction, then, constitutes an attack on Kant's distinction between necessary and contingent truth, since the difference between the two is therefore blurred. Along with this, Rorty defines the world as nothing more than the conceptual framework which is, in turn, represented by language. Therefore the possibility of a language that does not represent the world is ruled out, for it is only by virtue of language that we can know anything about the world (the conceptual framework). Indeed, there is no way for a language to fail to represent the world.

This line of argument is both supported and extended by Rorty's use of Davidson's and Stroud's argument. Their argument deals with the possibility

of the existence of alternative conceptual frameworks, i.e., conceptual frameworks that are completely different from our own. The thrust of the argument is that we would have no way of determining whether or not we had encountered a genuine alternative to our own conceptual framework, and that no empirical evidence would even be available in principle to indicate the existence of one. Rorty formulates an example using "language" instead of "conceptual framework" (as we have already seen, he holds the two to be synonymous in practice) which goes as follows:

It is, of course, possible to imagine humanoid organisms making sounds of great variety at one another in very various circumstances with what appear to be various effects upon the interlocutors' behavior. But suppose that repeated attempts systematically to correlate these sounds with the organisms' environment and behavior fail. What should we say? One suggestion might be that . . . the natives 'carve up the world' differently, or have different 'quality spaces' or something of the sort. But could there be a way of deciding between this suggestion and the possibility that the organisms' sounds are just sounds? Once we imagine different ways of carving up the world, nothing could stop us from attributing 'untranslatable languages' to anything that emits a variety of signals. . . . this degree of openness shows us that the purported notion of an untranslatable language is as fanciful as that of an invisible color.<sup>11</sup>

The upshot of the matter seems to be that it is perfectly possible that trees and butterflies have their own languages and thus their own conceptual frameworks, but there are no ways of determining whether this is the case, and therefore the entire question is of no significance, just as "alternative conceptual framework" must be considered a completely vacuous notion. This application of Davidson's and Stroud's argument is used by Rorty in addition to his own objection to the possibility of alternative conceptual frameworks which is based on a denial of Kant's distinction between spontaneity and receptivity.<sup>12</sup>

Another facet of Davidson's and Stroud's argument that Rorty borrows is the concept of "charity," which dictates that if we accept something is indeed a language, then it must be acknowledged that the majority of the beliefs in that language are true. This is the result of a verificationist argument

similar to the one used in Davidson's and Stroud's argument against alternative conceptual frameworks. That is, there is no way we could ever determine that a language was based on mostly false beliefs (what could count as conclusive evidence?). And if "language" and "conceptual framework" are indeed inextricably bound up together the majority of the beliefs contained within the conceptual framework, it follows, must also be true. As the reader has probably noted, we have rapidly transcended the matter of the mind-body problem, so before proceeding it might be wise to sum up briefly Rorty's argument in asserting that people who report sensations do not have empirically false beliefs.

Essentially, the basis of the argument seems to be that, insofar as a language exists at all, it cannot fail to represent the "world." Or, put another way, given that a language represents a conceptual framework, and given that the conceptual framework is the world, the conclusion to be reached is that the language is incapable of being "wrong" about what the "world" is, since the language is our only way of knowing what the conceptual framework consists of. Thus, those who report sensations do not hold empirically false beliefs. Their conceptual framework simply contains entities known as sensations which are no more and no less "real" than demons were for their ancestors. This is a possibility, says Rorty, by virtue of the fact that

Since most of our beliefs (though not any particular one) simply must be true--for what could count as evidence that the vast majority of them were not?--the specter of alternative frameworks shrinks to the possibility that there might be a number of equally good ways to modify slightly our present set of beliefs in the interest of greater predictive power, charm, or what have you.<sup>13</sup>

It is crucial to recognize at this point that Rorty does not wish to argue that mental language will be replaced by some other language, neurophysiological or otherwise. Rather, he considers the question of whether mental language will in fact be replaced mundane and uninteresting in the extreme. As Rorty expresses it:

. . . I take no sides on the question of whether the materialist is right in his prediction that the ordinary ways of reporting on introspections will wither away. In my view the truth of the prediction is of much less philosophical interest

than the fact that the prediction is itself a coherent suggestion.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, it is the fact that sensation talk is, in principle, replacable that Rorty finds philosophically interesting and it is toward this goal, a proof of the coherence of this position, that Rorty has directed his energies.

It should come as no surprise at this time to observe that Rorty's chief objective is not the solution to the mind-body problem, but the defeat of realism. He further sees not only realism, but all of what we call "epistemology" and "metaphysics" as

. . . an outgrowth of the Cartesian and Lockean notion of a 'veil of ideas' which are the sole objects of direct acquaintance, and more specifically of the Kantian distinction between concepts (tied together by necessary truths) and intuitions (tied together by concepts to form contingent truths).<sup>15</sup>

And he continues

I claim that if we abandon the distinction between what is given to consciousness and what is supplied by consciousness from its own resources, and the distinction between necessary and contingent truth, we shall no longer be able to make sense of epistemology as a discipline.<sup>16</sup>

Because of this disenchantment with the notion of Cartesian dualisms Rorty suggests that

. . . the cries for the 'end of philosophy' which we have heard in our century are to be taken seriously. They should be viewed as calls for the abandonment of a paradigm of philosophy--roughly, epistemology and metaphysics . . .<sup>17</sup>

It seems that if Rorty is correct we are in for some large-scale changes. And although it must be remembered that these changes could never constitute the kind of radical shift that would make for an alternative conceptual framework, they nevertheless are of great importance to fields such as philosophy and science, as these are the areas in which the kinds of beliefs and concepts which are modified "in the interest of greater predictive power, charm, or what have you" most often seem to occur.

However, here too we are faced with a dilemma, because, according to Rorty, there is no way to predict

what changes will occur within our conceptual framework in the future based on our present situation. As a result, we must assume a kind of "wait and see" attitude. Nevertheless, this attitude itself has enormous ramifications for fields such as science, philosophy of science, and philosophy.

To follow Rorty, for instance, any hope for establishing rational criteria for theory replacement must be abandoned. Thus, a philosophy of science such as Kari Popper's, which places considerable emphasis on mapping out how science progresses and establishing a methodology by which the best of several competing theories can be selected, is out of the question, to be replaced by criteria so vague as to be virtually useless (such as whichever theory is appropriate to the culture at the time). In this way Rorty makes the process of theory selection look very similar to Darwin's evolutionary process, in that, for both theories and organisms, the fittest survive because they are the best suited to the environment (whether scientific or biological) at the time. Furthermore, there are no criteria to aid in determining the eventual successor theory ahead of time, for the only way of determining fitness is survival. Thus the philosopher of science must content himself with commenting on the replacement once it has taken place. In fact, even a conception of competing theories as being incommensurable is unacceptable. This is the result of the fact that Rorty holds a view of scientific theories that is completely analogous to his view of conceptual frameworks. Consequently, there can no more be incommensurable scientific theories than there can be alternative conceptual frameworks. This apparently results in a definition of competing theories as embodiments of slightly different points of view but essentially the same, or perhaps something else vaguely reminiscent of Spinoza. This kind of stance is as repugnant from a Kuhnian point of view as it is from a Popperian one. For although Kuhn would likely agree with the dispensing of notions of scientific progress and rational criteria for theory replacement, Kuhnian ideas about the incommensurability of competing theories and, more importantly, about different paradigms entailing different "worlds" would have to go, not to mention all the talk we hear from Kuhn about gestalt switches.

As for science itself, the kind of arguments we get from Quine, Davidson, Stroud, and Rorty have already begun to have an effect on the field of cultural anthropology. This pertains, for example, to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that the language of a culture defines and determines

that culture's world-view. Still further conflicts are generated when the issue is expanded to include the entire set of anthropological views on the relativism of language, culture, and world-views. Although it would be presumptuous to forecast the outcome of this clash, it is hoped that one of its products will be a few new insights into the theories on both sides of the debate, enabling us better to evaluate them both.

Probably the most devastating consequences, though, appear in philosophy itself. Here Rorty is explicit:

. . . without the two distinctions which give sense to the notion of 'epistemology' it is extremely difficult to formulate an account of what philosophy in the narrow sense might be. Philosophy as a Fach--as a continuing and permanent set of problems investigated in different ways in different generations--cannot, I think, survive the abandonment of these distinctions.<sup>18</sup>

For Rorty, philosophy has, since the seventeenth century, been occupied almost exclusively with epistemology and metaphysics. In "The World Well Lost" he discusses two facets of Kantian philosophy which he sees as the basis for both epistemology and metaphysics. If we now remove these twin foundations; (1) the Kantian distinction between spontaneity and receptivity, and (2) the Kantian distinction between necessary and contingent truth, then epistemology will become obsolete, not by virtue of being "solved," but because, in order for epistemology and metaphysics to be problems at all, both (1) and (2) must be presupposed. Once epistemology and metaphysics have been discarded, and now that ethics has become "autonomous,"<sup>19</sup> philosophy will simply be left barren--not of desire to continue to solve problems, but of the problems themselves. Because philosophy makes progress by inaugurating new sciences and simultaneously reducing its own range of applicability, its fate is to become a victim of its own success. Furthermore, says Rorty, that eventuality is not far off. All that will remain of philosophy will be a discipline in the broadest sense of the word. The philosopher will be nothing more than a

. . . critic of culture: the man who sees what is going on on all sides and tries to make sense of it by adjusting and rewriting the traditional wisdom, and occasionally just tossing it aside and creating a wholly new way of thinking about man and his activities.<sup>20</sup>



Furthermore,

In this sense of 'philosopher' there is no clear distinction between the inhabitants of philosophy departments and the historian or physicist or anthropologist whose work is praised as 'having philosophical implications.'<sup>21</sup>

This picture of philosophy and philosophers will undoubtedly repulse many philosophers, and will increase the fervor with which they argue against Rorty. However, if Rorty does prove accurate, then according to his view, that eventuality will not be determined by philosophical debate, but by inevitable historical process; and because we can only "wait and see" the entire matter is ultimately of only historical interest. Indeed, when Rorty's ideas are applied to themselves in this way, something which looks remarkably like a counter-argument seems to take shape. Specifically, there appears to be a paradox of self-reference lurking beneath the surface. For (according to his own position) in order to consider his views true they must be appropriate to the present configuration of the conceptual framework, in which case they would be expected to be accepted without the kind of opposition that, in fact, they likely will encounter. Thus it would appear that, according to the definition supplied by his own position, Rorty's views are false. Oddly enough, even if an argument such as this one should prove convincing, Rorty can still maintain a "wait and see" position. However, while we are waiting it might be interesting to consider just what it means for a position to be consistent with its refutation.<sup>22</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Richard Rorty, "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories," The Review of Metaphysics, XIX (September 1965), pp. 24-54.

-----, "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism," The Review of Metaphysics, XXIV, 1 (September 1970), pp. 112-21.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Feyerabend, "Materialism and the Mind-Body Problem," The Review of Metaphysics, XVII (1963), pp. 49-66.

<sup>3</sup>William Lycan and George Pappas, "What is Eliminative Materialism?" Australasian Journal of Philosophy, vol. 50, no. 2 (August 1972), pp. 149-59.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost," Journal of Philosophy, 69 (1972), pp. 649-65.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 663.

<sup>6</sup>W.V.O. Quine, Word and Object (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1960).

<sup>7</sup>Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Framework," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association 47 (1973-74), pp. 5-20.

<sup>8</sup>Barry Stroud, "Conventionalism and the Indeterminacy of Translation," Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W.V. Quine, ed. D. Davidson and J. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), esp. pp. 39-96.

<sup>9</sup>Jay Rosenberg, Linguistic Representation (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974), p. 50.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Rorty, "Indeterminacy of Translation and of Truth," Synthese, 23 (1972), pp. 443-62.

<sup>11</sup>Rorty, "World Well Lost," p. 653.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 650-51.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 660.

<sup>14</sup>Rorty, "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism," p. 121.

<sup>15</sup>Richard Rorty, Introduction to book now in

progress (January 1974), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

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