

Rorty and the Metaphorical Animal as a Picture of Who We Are

Two Strands of Rorty's Thinking: Political Utopia and Anti-Theory

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- Two strands in Rorty's thinking: political utopian and anti-theoretical
- Rorty's awareness of two computer-related "prophecies" in the mid-90s
- The connectionist revolution against Chomsky and Habermas
- Humans as metaphor-weaving neural networks
- Darwin as the conceptual acid

I want to talk about two strands of Rorty's thinking that I will call, just for the sake of conversation:

- The **political utopian** strand
- The **anti-theoretical** strand

These are bad names because I don't want to spoil my talk. In this audience, the inferential connections in Rorty's vocabulary would have easily made my talk redundant.

And, as we will see, part of what I want to talk about is about **human redundancy**.

Around the mid-90s, Rorty became aware of two kinds of “prophecies” having to do with computers and technological change.

Rorty once met a businessman offshoring industries to poor eastern countries during a flight, who was cheerful about it, noting that American workers had to “tighten their belts” because they had nothing poorer, less educated people couldn’t offer in the globalized economy.

“By this time the flight was almost over, and we could not pursue the issues further. But ever since, I have been reading articles about the globalization of the labor market with fear and trembling. The last such article was by Edward Luttwack, and was called ‘Why Fascism is the Wave of the Future’.”

— Rorty, “Can American egalitarianism survive a globalized economy?”

“Still another cause of disproportionately rapid structural change is the rather sudden arrival of the long-awaited, very long-delayed, big increases in administrative and clerical efficiency that machines for electronic computation, data storage, reproduction and internal communication were supposed to ensure long ago.”

— Luttwak, “Why Fascism is the Wave of the Future”

“Partly because with generational change even senior managers can now themselves work those machines [...] partly because computer networks allow managers at the next level up literally to oversee, right on their own screens, the work that their underlings are doing or not doing, thereby giving it the same transparency as assembly-line work, with the same immediate visibility of inefficient procedures, inefficient habits and inefficient employees.”

— Luttwak

It is hard not to see the resemblances with today.

- The world economy is on the brink of a light or big pop of the “AI bubble”
- Mass firings partly because of economic downturn, partly in hopes of never having to hire those people again
- “Learn to code” became a meme of the Obama era — now junior programmers are being fired by the thousands
- Robert Reich’s “symbol analysts” cannot learn to code fast enough to be more productive than cheap machines

In the very same years, Rorty became interested more and more in the grandfather of the AI revolution:

The second rise of AI connectionism — the kind of Philosophy of Linguistics and Mind that is the engine of current AI architectures behind Large Language Models.

Against AI-connectionism were most of Rorty's adversaries: Fodor, Chomsky, Pinker.

We are now in the **third coming of AI-connectionism**.

The Importance of “In Defense of Eliminative Materialism” (1970)

Something Robert Brandom and Daniel Dennett agreed about was the importance of Rorty's argument towards eliminativism of the mind.

- Dennett wondered why Rorty railed against Philosophy, being that he was successful
- Brandom considered that strand to have been Rorty's **master argument**, the 'vocabulary' vocabulary that let him talk about all the things he wanted to talk about

We are nothing but incarnated vocabularies, according to Rorty, and it was Sellars and Davidson who showed us how to understand ourselves as exactly that.

“If we combine this Darwinian point of view with the holistic attitude toward intentionality and language-use found in Wittgenstein and Davidson, we shall say that there is no language-use without justification, no ability to believe without an ability to argue about what beliefs to have. But this is not to say that the ability to use language, to have beliefs and desires, entails a desire to justify one’s belief to every language-using organism one encounters.”

— Rorty, “Universality and Truth” (1996/2021)

*“We pragmatists think that the reason people try to make their beliefs coherent is not that they love truth but that **they cannot help doing so**. Our minds can no more stand incoherence than our brains can stand whatever the neuro-chemical substrate of such coherence may be.”*

— Rorty, “Universality and Truth”

*“Just as our neural networks are, presumably, both constrained and in part constructed by something like the algorithms used in **parallel distributed processing** of information by computer programmers, so our minds are constrained by the need to tie our beliefs and desires together into a reasonably perspicuous whole.”*

— Rorty, “Universality and Truth”

“That is why we cannot ‘will to believe’ — believe what we like, regardless of what else we believe. It is why, for example, we have such a hard time keeping our religious beliefs in a separate compartment from our scientific ones, and in isolating our respect for democratic institutions from our contempt for many (even most) of our fellow voters.”

— Rorty, “Universality and Truth”

*"It is perhaps worth remarking that one of the presuppositions of communication which Habermas mentions — the ascription of identical meanings to expressions — is endangered by Davidson's argument in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' that linguistic competence can be had without such ascription [...] **Davidson's argument that there is no such thing as language mastery in the sense of the internalization of a set of conventions about what means what** chimes with recent 'connectionist' criticism of MIT 'cognitivism' and thus of Chomsky's universalism."*

— Rorty, footnote to "Universality and Truth"

*“But, unlike Habermas, I should be unperturbed if the offers currently made by the human sciences were withdrawn: if Chomsky’s universalistic ideas about communicative competence were repudiated by **a connectionist revolution in artificial intelligence**, if Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s empirical results proved to be unduplicatable, and so on. I do not see that it matters much whether there is a universal pattern here.”*

— Rorty, “Universality and Truth”

“The ‘MIT’ notion, associated with Chomsky and Fodor, of ‘communicative competence’ is gradually being displaced, within the field of artificial intelligence, by the ‘connectionist’ view favored by those who see the brain as containing no hard-wired flow-charts of the sort constructed by ‘cognitivist’ programmers. Connectionists urge that the only biologically universal structures to be found in the brain are ones which cannot be described in terms of flow-charts labeled with the names of ‘natural kinds’ of things and words.”

— Rorty, footnote to “Universality and Truth”

*“So the notion of ‘communicative competence,’ as something common to all human linguistic communities, drops out in favor of the notion of ‘**enough neural connections to permit the organism to be programmed into a language-user.**’”*

— Rorty

The Darwinian, parallel-processing, neural-networky understanding of ourselves is **maximally flexible, maximally useless for politics** — except in the way that knowing ourselves can help us avoid deluding ourselves into thinking that progress is a sure-thing.

“The right question to ask is: For what purposes might it be useful to hold that belief? This is like the question: For what purposes would it be useful to load this program into my computer? On the view I am suggesting, a person’s body is analogous to the computer’s hardware, and his or her beliefs and desires are analogous to the software. Nobody knows or cares whether a given piece of computer software represents reality accurately. All we care about is whether it is the software which, among programs currently available, will most efficiently accomplish a certain task.”

— Rorty, *Debating the State of Philosophy*

The pragmatist picture: Skills/practices are functionally specified habits.

- Dewey (1896): Stimulus and response are “teleological distinctions, distinctions of function”
- Miller et al. (1960): TOTE cycles (Test-Operate-Test-Exit) as composable units of behavior
- Brandom (1977/2008): Practices are habits that must be repeatable *across* inquirers

If beliefs are “programs of action,” they are not propositional attitudes but patterns of discrimination and response — **webs of habits**.

The content is in the connections, not the nodes. This is maximally flexible, maximally uncommitted to fixed essences — exactly what Rorty wanted from Darwin.

“We are the poetic species, the one which can change itself by changing its behavior — and especially its linguistic behavior, the words it uses. The ability is not to be explained by discovering more about the nature of something called ‘the mind’ any more than by discovering more about the nature of something called ‘God.’ [...] To say, with nominalism, that language is ubiquitous and to deny, with verificationism, that there are intuitions which our language must conform, is just to assert that we need nothing more than confidence in our own poetic power.”

— Rorty, “Contemporary Philosophy of Mind” (1982)

What are metaphors to us, in this picture?

- They are unfamiliar noises, hitherto unconnected to our webs of “beliefs”
- They have **pragmatic effects** — perlocutionary effects
- You use words in their literal ways, you make the other person’s web crash unto itself to redirect attention to something that was unsayable
- Metaphors are not mysterious meanings, but **linguistic nudges** into the direction you want the attention of your linguistic partners to turn

Metaphor is not the property of a few Enlightened individuals, but of all mankind.

- The more you know and the more people you know, the more effective you get at it — but it's a matter of degree
- Conceptual innovations do not depend on a Vanguard
- Every human is at the forefront of human ingenuity, dealing with problems imaginatively

“Concepts” arise like bacteria adapt to their environment. Random metaphorical innovations get picked up, they become part of the shared weave of “meanings,” they evoke other parts of the net in a regular fashion.

“No, words are not like genes; they are like viruses and bacteria. And ‘linguistic individuals — embodied lexicons’ are more perspicuously seen as having something like a microbiome, a huge population of unrelated symbionts, some very useful, even essential for life, and others quite deleterious in their effects on their hosts.”

— Dennett, review of Mark Richard's *Meaning as Species* (2024)

*“We should recognize that treating meanings as timeless is just another tenet of this schoolmarmish and unmotivatable ideology. Things shift. Communication continues. Laying down the law in dictionaries is an obsolete idea. Stipulated meanings in formal systems are OK, but we need to remember that these are special cases, deliberately frozen in time, so to speak. **A proper semantics of natural language will look more like biology than geometry.**”*

— Dennett (2024)

In between sessions of his Girona Lectures, Rorty was approached by John McDowell who said something like:

“You claim that we cannot represent reality accurately, but speak of Darwin as having done just that.”

Rorty recoiled in amusement saying that “this is one of the gravest accusations one can pose to a pragmatist” and rejoined by explaining that what Darwin gave you was a picture of how we got here that was **as flexible and uncommitted with any fixed essence as you can get**.

In Dennett’s terms: a powerful **conceptual acid**, eating away at all the philosophical overhead, leaving a nimble perspective on things.

Conclusion: Unity of the Two Strands

The political and speculative strands of Rorty's thinking, the playful combat of theory with anti-theory, are not two separate things but **two streams of the same river**.

- Rorty was deeply informed of the science of his day — that was part of his prescience
- His fears for the politics of the future stemmed, partly, from his recognition of the technical promises of today
- Those technical promises could be understood in a Darwinian, pragmatist way

Pragmatism should push back against representationalist pipe dreams. But it shouldn't push back against attempts to redirect our attention, to clear our eyes and achieve the kind of wisdom involved in "not being fooled anymore."

Thank you

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