Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: an existential critique

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The disgust with dirt can be so great that it keeps us from cleaning ourselves – from “justifying” ourselves.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

In his much-acclaimed work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty sees traditional philosophy dominated by a type of imagery which depicts the mind as a mirror which reflects reality. One consequence of this conception of philosophy has been the construction of various philosophical systems which are supposed to serve as judges of other areas of culture. After close examination and critique, Rorty argues that philosophy centered in a theory of representation must be abandoned, advocating a deconstruction of these systematic philosophies, offering instead that philosophy have as its aim the continuance of “the Conversation of Mankind”. From the perspective I offer in this paper, one which I shall call an *existentialist perspective* (which will be differentiated in the course of this paper from what Rorty calls the *existentialist attitude*), I believe that Rorty’s project fails on two accounts: he offers a systematic philosophy (which he denies offering), and does not escape a conception of philosophy which involves a type of mirroring (which he does not see). I hope that in the course of this paper I can adequately develop these claims to the satisfaction of the reader.

My aim in this paper is neither to construct a new tradition, nor to react against established traditions. Instead, I invite the reader to begin philosophizing from his or her own personal life, thereby holding all traditions relative to that life. Such a position as the one here offered does not claim to escape the influence of social, cultural, and psychological factors, nor of certain philosophical traditions. It does, however, attempt to grasp from within the significance of a human life as it is lived, and to appreciate the
living of that life as *my* life, and not as merely a phenomenon in, or as merely a manifestation of, particular traditions.

I can offer no special credentials to justify this starting point, but merely report it as an inevitable starting point for me. I can only invite you to consider a like perspective, and only then to decide for yourself if the perspective offered in this essay is worthy of your serious consideration.

The remainder of this essay is divided into four sections. The first section gives a brief description of Rorty’s conception of the situation in traditional philosophy, and his interpretation of a type of philosophical undertaking that arose in reaction to this situation. The second section includes a criticism of Rorty’s misunderstanding of existentialism. The third section offers criticisms of Rorty’s reactive philosophy from what I believe is a more accurate representation of the *existentialist perspective*. The final section is a conclusion which pulls together and summarizes the main points of the paper.

**Rorty on philosophy**

According to Rorty, most philosophers have come to conceive of philosophy as a discussion of perennial, eternal problems. As such, its quest is to discover the foundations of knowledge, which will allow philosophy to adjudicate the claims of science, morality, art and religion. This quest is determined by certain philosophical notions which hold “traditional philosophy captive, ... [viz.,] that ... the mind [is] a great mirror, containing various representations — some accurate, some not — and capable of being studied by pure, non-empirical methods.”³ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as philosophy has become more rigorous and scientific, it has lost its place as moral teacher, and has come to have less and less to do with the rest of culture:

The attempts of both analytic philosophers and phenomenologists to “ground” this and “criticize” that were shrugged off by those whose activities were purportedly being grounded or criticized. Philosophy as a whole was shrugged off by those who wanted an ideology or a self-image.⁴

Against this background a group of seemingly disparate thinkers tried to break free from the traditional philosophical quest of seeking foundations based on a representative theory of mind. Instead, these thinkers — most importantly Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey — warned philosophers against the temptations of conceiving of philosophy in a traditional manner. The later work of each of these thinkers is “therapeutic rather than con-