

**Richard Rorty on Kant:  
Remarks upon Pages 148-155 of  
*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*  
(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979)**

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**Prologue**

When refusing to applaud a writer like Rorty, one may appear to be picking at straws rather than registering the nature, scope and promise of the house that he has built.

Question: how else is a straw house to be destroyed?

Readers entranced by the seeming clarity and erudition of the text may well overlook how little warrant it provides for the deconstruction of the entire history of philosophy that it recommends and therewith of the hard-earned achievement of the philosophers who contributed to it.

Were Rorty right, philosophers could disregard the nuanced work of Descartes, Locke or Kant as justly as physicists disregard the history of physics, though for a different reason, the history of philosophy being merely a record of misguided endeavors to be left behind rather than emulated. When training young minds to think more logically, philosophers may for heuristic reasons attend to bits of it, but no one need suppose that by missing Kant one might be missing the truth about anything important, any more than a physicist, by missing Tycho Brahe, might be misunderstanding contemporary astronomy.

Were Rorty right, philosophers need only contribute to a contemporary 'edifying conversation' within which the misguided philosophical enquiries of the past can have little but nostalgic resonance.

I have never assimilated the writings of Descartes or Locke with sufficient care to assess Rorty's competence to discuss, much less dismiss, them. I have, however, done so with respect to those of Kant and can affirm that Rorty knows not of what he writes. I suspect, therefore, that his dismissal of Descartes and Locke is equally misguided.

### Fifteen Remarks upon Rorty's text<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. From page 148, 1:

For a person to form a predicative judgment is for him to come to believe a sentence to be true [Rorty ascribing the belief to Kant].

Kant believed to the contrary that one could form a predicative judgment ('think it', in his terms) without either opining, believing or knowing it to be true. How else could we, with Kant, think of transcendent judgments or the judgment that two straight lines may enclose a figure? (B267-268)

Furthermore, to what kind of thing is Rorty referring when speaking of a 'sentence'? Does he indeed mean 'sentence' (as repeated on page 149, 1)? or does he mean 'proposition' (page 148, 1 and page 149, top)? One wishes that he would make up his mind, for perhaps one could then determine if he means anything clearly by either – which, given the contemporary squabble over the status of both, is unlikely.

#### 2. From page 148, 1:

For a Kantian transcendental ego to come to believe a sentence to be true is for it to relate representations (*Vorstellungen*) to one another: two radically distinct sorts of representations, concepts on the one hand and intuitions on the other.

Believing for Kant, was an activity of an ego known empirically, not transcendently. To speak of a transcendental ego doing *anything* would have made no sense to Kant, for we can know of no ego transcendently.

Rorty's phrases, as written, are ambiguous. Were he to mean that we relate intuitions to intuitions and concepts to concepts, he would be right and would have saved himself from the root error of his section on Kant. As we shall see, however, Rorty means rather that we relate concepts to intuitions, which, to Kant, is flatly false. (See remark 10 below.)

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<sup>1</sup> I shall address my comments to passages by Rorty within the text specified by the page and paragraph where they appear. Unless otherwise specified, my references to Kant are to the second [B] edition of his first *Critique*.

## 3. From page 148, 1:

[Kant] created the standard version of 'the history of modern philosophy' according to which pre-Kantian philosophy was a struggle between 'rationalism' which wanted to reduce sensations to concepts, and 'empiricism' which wanted the inverse reduction. Had Kant instead said that the rationalists wanted to find a way of replacing propositions about secondary qualities with propositions which somehow did the same job but were known with certainty, and that the empiricists opposed this project, the next two centuries of philosophical thought might have been different.

The key rationalists, however, and later the key idealists, wanted to substantiate *all* qualities, not just secondary ones. This is why Kant took as one of his major achievements the reducing of all 'qualities', in Locke's sense, to 'secondary' status while retaining their empirical reality. (See Kant's *Prolegomena*, Part I, Remark III.)

## 4. From page 149, top:

According to standard neo-Kantian historiography, from the time of the *Phaedo* and *Metaphysics Z* through Abelard and Anselm, Locke and Leibniz, and right down to Quine and Strawson reflections which was distinctively *philosophical* has concerned the relation between universals and particulars. Without this unifying theme, we might not have been able to see a continuous problematic, discovered by the Greeks and worried at continuously down to our own day . . . Greek thought and seventeenth-century thought might have seemed as distinct both from each and other and from our present concerns as, say, Hindu theology and Mayan numerology.

Note how far Rorty has moved here from his professed models of Dewey and Heidegger. Can one imagine the late Heidegger, for example, despite having no respect for the 'unifying theme' cited by Rorty, feeling obliged to separate his thought from that of the pre-Socratics?

## 5. Page 149, 1 (and similar remarks on page 152, top, "entities in inner space". See also page 155, top, and remark 15 below for "postulated theoretical entities in inner space"):

For better or worse, Kant did not take this pragmatic turn. He talked about inner representations rather than sentences.

To represent, Kant believed, was to intuit or to conceive – a *doing* [some how] rather than the registering of a *being* [of some kind], just as to 'construct' a triangle in 'pure intuition' was a *doing* [some how] rather than the registering of a *being* [of some kind]. If by 'entity' one means the proper subject of a judgment, then representations were never entities to Kant, for one never 'intuits' them, much less within an 'inner space'.

6. From page 149, 1 continued:

Kant built "into our conception of a 'theory of knowledge' (and thus our conception of what distinguished philosophers from scientists) what C. I. Lewis called "one of the oldest and most universal *philosophical* insights" [italics EWC], viz.: 'There are in our cognitive experience, two elements; the immediate data, such as those of sense, which are presented or given to the mind, and a form, construction, or interpretation, which represents the activity of thought.' The 'insight', however, is neither old nor universal . . . Strawson repeats Lewis's claim when he says 'the duality of general concepts . . . and particular instances of general concepts encountered in experience' is a 'fundamental duality, inescapable in any *philosophical* thinking about experience or empirical knowledge'. [italics EWC] This version is less misleading than Lewis's, simply because it includes the word *philosophical*. For the reason this duality is inescapable in *philosophical* thinking about experience is just that those who do not find it do not call themselves 'philosophers'.

Rorty's suggestion that Strawson's formulation is "less misleading" than that of Lewis, having, unlike Lewis, admitted the duality to be 'philosophical', is nonsense, for, as the quotations attest, Lewis affirmed it to be as 'philosophical' as Strawson did.

7. From page 150, top (and also page 151, top, and page 152, top):

The term *experience* has come to be the epistemologists' name for their subject matter . . . In this sense, 'experience' is a term of philosophical art (quite distinct from the everyday use, as in 'experience on the job' . . .

Whatever Descartes or Locke may have meant by the word 'experience', Kant meant by it exactly what we mean when we use it within the phrase 'experience on the job'. As Kant insisted over and over again, experience is 'empirical knowledge' – no more and no less. We never therefore *experience* intuitions, concepts or judgments, though we indeed intuit, conceive and judge and experience ourselves doing it. Rorty's note 29, therefore, and the text to which it refers are a joke. (See B1, 147, 161, 166, 218 and 234.)

8. From page 151, top and note 31 on bottom:

Thought is only *philosophical* if, like Kant's, it looks for causes of, rather than merely reasons for, claims to empirical knowledge, and if the resulting causal account is compatible with anything which psychological inquiry might up with. [Note 31] It may seem shocking to call Kant's account 'causal', but the notion of 'transcendental constitution' is entirely parasitical on the Descartes-Locke notion of the mechanics of inner space, and Kant's self-deceptive use of 'ground' rather than 'cause' should not be permitted to obscure this point. If we eliminate from Kant what Strawson calls 'the mythical subject of transcendental psychology' we can make no sense of the Copernican revolution.

Hardly 'shocking', save as coming from one who should know better, but false. A *ground*, to Kant, was related to its 'consequent' as verb to adverb, not as cause to effect. To run quickly is to run. Running, therefore, is the ground (or necessary condition) of running quickly, not the cause of running quickly. Similarly, to intuit something, for Kant, was to intuit in a certain way (that is, as it appears) the *same thing* that could have been intuited in another way, though not by us (that is, as it is in itself). Kant never spoke of a thing-in-itself or of a thing-as-it-appears (Paton to the contrary notwithstanding). Kant used no hyphens! He spoke rather of things as they appear and of the *same things* as they would appear to beings of contrary intuition – and any three-year-old capable of judging a clock to be a clock can comprehend the difference.

(Note as well that Kant never spoke of judgments as a priori or a posteriori either. He spoke rather (in the German) of judgments being *thought* a priori or a posteriori. The words 'a priori' and 'a posteriori' were adverbs distinguishing *how* we judge, not adjectives distinguishing entities of some kind.) (Bxxvii; and the *Prolegomena*, Part I, Remark II))

## 9. From page 152, top:

If Kant had gone straight from the insight that 'the singular proposition' is not to be identified with 'the singularity of a presentation to sense' (nor, for that matter, to intellect) to a view of knowledge as a relation between persons and propositions, he would not have needed the notion of 'synthesis' . . . The question 'How is knowledge possible?' would then have resembled the question 'How are telephones possible?' meaning something like 'How can one build something which does that? Physiological psychology, rather than 'epistemology', would then have seemed the only legitimate follow-up to *De Anima* and the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Had Kant done as Rorty suggests, he would indeed have needed no "notion of 'synthesis'", or any other, for that matter, for, under cover of the word 'proposition', he would thereby have begged every epistemological and 'transcendental' question concerning general logic and therewith every question pertinent to the verification of metaphysical judgments. To beg questions, however, is hardly to answer them.

## 10. From page 152, 1:

It is important, however, before leaving Kant behind, to ask *how* he contrived to make the concept-intuition distinction look both plausible and intriguingly problematic. To understand this, we must notice that the Kantian 'synthesis' required for a judgment differs from the Humean 'association of ideas' in being a relation which can hold only between ideas of two different sorts – general ideas and particular ideas.

To judge, Kant believed, was to synthesize intuitions with one another by means of concepts, or to synthesize concepts with one another by means of other concepts. We *never* synthesize an intuition with a concept. (The problems of epistemology, to Kant, were one and all problems of *connecting* two or more concepts. Subsuming an intuition under a concept was simply not an epistemological problem to Kant! To conceive of something was to imagine it as intuited in a certain way – under a rule – and if, indeed, we do intuit something that way, we have thereby 'exhibited' the concept. That is why, to Kant, existence was not a predicate.)

We never ever, for Kant, synthesize 'ideas', in Rorty's sense of the word – ideas as *private* mental occurrences. Kant indeed distinguished 'subjective' from 'objective' and therewith judgments that were 'subjectively valid' from those that are 'objectively valid', but 'subjective', to Kant, meant no more and no less than 'without reference to an *object*'. He had no interest in *private* mental entertainments. (B377 and 378; *Logic*, Part I, Section 3 and Intro, VI (A)).

#### 11. From page 152, 1 (continuation of above):

The notions of 'synthesis' and the concept-intuition distinction are thus tailor-made for one another, both being invented to make sense of the paradoxical but unquestioned assumption which runs through the first *Critique* – the assumption that manifoldness is 'given' and that unity is made. . . . inner space does contain . . . a collection of 'singular representations to sense', but these 'intuitions' cannot be 'brought to consciousness' unless 'synthesized' by a second set of representations (unnoticed by Hume) – the concepts – which enter into one-many relations with batches of intuitions. . . .

[Page 153, 2] But how, if we have not read Locke and Hume, do we know that the mind if presented with a diversity? Why should we think that sensibility 'in its original receptivity' presents with a manifold, a manifold which, however, 'cannot be represented as a manifold' until the understanding has used concepts to synthesize it? We cannot introspect and see that it does, because we are never conscious of unsynthesized intuitions, nor of concepts apart from their application to intuitions. . . . How, in other words, do we know that a manifold which cannot be represented as a manifold *is* a manifold? More generally, if we are going to argue that we can only be conscious of synthesized intuitions, how do we get our information about intuitions prior to synthesis? How, for instance, do we know that there is more than one of them?"

Nowhere did Kant say, because nowhere did he mean, that we can never intuit consciously without conceiving. He said exactly the opposite and gave examples. (B122 and 132; *Logic*, V) To perceive, to Kant, was to intuit consciously, and most of what we perceive passes, as he knew, unconceived. (We even intuit unconsciously, Kant affirmed, and perhaps conceive unconsciously as well. (B130))

Nowhere did Kant say, because nowhere did he mean, that we can never conceive consciously without intuiting. He said exactly the opposite and gave examples (the whole Transcendental Dialectic!). It passes understanding to me how, to Rorty, we could think of what Kant called 'transcendent ideas' if not through conceiving apart from intuiting.



What Kant *did* say is that we can have no *knowledge of objects* without both intuiting and conceiving (that is, judging) about what we have intuited. (But note: knowing how to judge with objective validity was never, for Kant, a knowing *that* (a knowledge of *objects*), but a knowing *how*. We may therefore know much about how to use objects without knowing much about the objects themselves.)

Rorty's misunderstanding of how concepts relate to intuitions make his rhetorical questions trivial. I see on my desk before me a blue pen and a clock. That is, I now think of the first object as a pen and as blue and think of the second as a clock, but I am aware of having perceived both objects in their diversity (the first as pen and blue, the second as larger than the first, etc.) long before I thought of them as diverse in that way – long before I judged the first to be a pen and blue, judged the second to be a clock and judged them to be two objects rather than one. We may recognize diversity among our intuitions prior to conceiving of them as such, and – barring Rorty's misunderstanding of Kant – there is no puzzle whatsoever.

12. From 153, Note 35: Rorty pretends, after Robert Paul Wolff, to have discovered a contradiction between Kant's accounts in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* and the *Analytic*. Unfortunately for Wolff and Rorty, Kant inserted a note [B160n] in the second edition of the first *Critique* to point out exactly why, upon careful reading, the contradiction is only apparent: the aim of the 'transcendental aesthetic' is to isolate the sensibility from the contributions of the understanding *to the extent possible*.

Nowhere did Kant say or pretend within the *Transcendental Aesthetic* that the synthesizing of the diversity of intuition through space and time is other than a synthesizing through the understanding. When focusing upon space and time themselves, however, we needn't attend to the broader aspects of how the understanding does its job with respect to them. Within the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, therefore, Kant says nothing about them – in accordance with his note.

13. From page 154, 1:

What we want to know is whether concepts *are* synthesizers. . ." [See comment 10 above for Rorty's root problem.]

To Kant, whenever we encounter a particular thing, we intuit it. To think of two or more possible things as related to one another (as cause to effect, for example, or as subject to objects within the sphere of a predicate – as objects, that is, having a common

'characteristic'), or to think of two or more ways of judging as related to one another (as ground to consequent, for example, or as assertion to negation, etc.), is to connect them in a unified conscious act of judgment. To connect, to Kant, was to synthesize. To think, for Kant (to judge, that is, by connecting concepts) was therefore to synthesize. To conceive was therefore to synthesize, Q.E.D.

14. From page 155, 1:

But if we view the whole Kantian story about synthesis as *only* postulated to explain the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge, if we accept the claim that the quasi-psychological goings-on described in the 'Deduction' have no introspective ground, we shall no longer be tempted by the 'Copernican' strategy. For the claim that knowledge of necessary truths about made ('constituted') objects is more intelligible than about found objects *depends upon* the Cartesian assumption that we have privileged access to the activity of making. [italics EWC] But on the interpretation of Kant just given, there is no such access to our constituting activities. Any mystery which attaches to our knowledge of necessary truths will remain.

Kant's 'claim' did not depend upon the 'Cartesian assumption' that Rorty presupposes. It depended solely upon our being able to see, hear, touch, think, imagine, will, etc.. We need never have 'privileged access to the activity of making', whatever that phrase may mean to Rorty. We need only to be able to *make* and to think of ourselves as being able to *make*. Kant needed nothing more (and I should dearly like to see Rorty try to convince me that I cannot see, hear, touch, think, imagine or will).

15. From page 155, 1 (again):

For postulated theoretical entities in inner space are not, by being inner, any more useful than such entities in outer space for explaining how such knowledge can occur.

Recall remark 5 above! To comprehend Kant, we must, like Kant, be able to intuit, to conceive and to will, but to do so we need suppose no entities within an 'inner space', much less 'theoretical' ones and even less 'postulated' theoretical ones. When Kant insisted that to intuit purely or to conceive is to do something by 'inner sense', he meant no more and no less than that to do so is to do something to which temporal but not spatial adverbs must be applied. He did *not* mean that the actions occur in some place within a space *other than* physical space. As Kant insisted within the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, there is no other space within which they could occur.

### **Conclusion**

Rorty remarks (page 149, 1):

[Kant]. . . gave us a history of our subject, fixed its problematic, and professionalized it (if only by making it impossible to be taken seriously as a 'philosopher' without having mastered the first *Critique*).

Supposing Rorty's text to be exemplary, I can only hope that he's right.