

How to be Sceptical about Philosophy

KAI NIELSEN

I

Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty agree (or at least seem to agree) on two very fundamental matters, namely, to put it in Rorty's words, (1) 'that philosophy as practised professionally today lacks *any* systematic unity' and (2) that this very fact poses for us now, standing where we stand, 'a central philosophical problem'.¹ (I say 'at least seem to agree' because MacIntyre actually puts the matter hypothetically, but I believe this is a stylistic matter only.²) It is also true that they both have a much more historicist view of philosophy than does traditional analytic philosophy; they regard (*pace* Quine and Reichenbach) the study of the history of philosophy as an integral element in the study of philosophy and think that philosophy is not something to be sharply separated, as a distinct discipline, from other areas of learning. And finally they both have worked themselves, through the tradition in analytical philosophy, into a position of deep dissent within or perhaps even from, that tradition. So we have some very fundamental areas of agreement between the two, both in what they are reacting against and positively in how they think we ought to proceed.

Yet MacIntyre also sees himself as in fundamental disagreement with Rorty, though, when I try to spot exactly what this comes to, it seems to me to be elusive. Indeed, I think many of MacIntyre's more perceptive remarks are actually complementary to Rorty's account rather than, as MacIntyre intends, as remarks tending to undermine it. I also think—and I shall try to argue the point in this essay—that MacIntyre's deconstruction of the tradition appears to be more radical than it actually is, that in reality it does not probe as deep as does Rorty's, and that often it is too easily content with a sociological analysis when something more is required as well. It seems to me that MacIntyre is not critical enough about what can or cannot be done with conceptual

¹ Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 106.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Philosophy and Its History', *Analyse & Kritik* I, No. 1 (October 1982), 101–115.

analysis. He does not at all have Rorty's radical scepticism here. But these, left just like this, are dark sayings that need elucidation, explanation and justification.

II

I shall do this indirectly by teasing out various elements in MacIntyre's critique of Rorty. MacIntyre rightly stresses, what in reality is a Deweyan point, that philosophy flourishes when it is in active relationships with the other disciplines. MacIntyre, in a remark that could well have been Rorty's, remarks that the 'destruction of any substantial version of the analytic–synthetic distinction also involves the destruction of the notion that there is some clear line of demarcation' between philosophy and something else—a line of demarcation that the philosopher must not cross if he wants to continue to do philosophy. A philosopher who works on issues raised by economics or politics or sociobiology or social anthropology need not be doing philosophy *and* something else. Except in certain very specific contexts, and for certain very specific purposes, there is no fruitful separating out of first-order and second-order considerations. By shifting to the formal mode rather than the material mode, one in reality asks the same question again though in a bombastic linguistic way. Nothing is gained by that linguistic turn or by semantic ascent. One only gets a pedantic re-description that makes the whole thing sound more scientific. We have scientism parading as scientific philosophy or exact philosophy. It is MacIntyre's point that we should seek to break down such philosophical isolationism.

Still, MacIntyre's claim that keeping philosophy and the 'other' disciplines in such an integral relation is a good thing and his further and related claim that, *à la* Kant and Reid, we should not take 'philosophy' as a name for a distinct discipline, are not claims that Rorty would do anything other than heartily assent to.³ What then is at issue between MacIntyre and Rorty?

III

While MacIntyre does not make his fundamental arguments in 'Philosophy and Its History' turn on what I shall now quote, he still remarks that

At perhaps its most fundamental level I can state the disagreement between Rorty and myself in the following way. His dismissal of

³ *Ibid.*, 111.

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'objective' or 'rational' standards emerges from the writing of genealogical history, as do all the most compelling of such dismissals—Nietzsche's for example. But at once the question arises of whether he has written a history that is in fact true; and to investigate that question, so I should want to argue, is to discover that the practice of writing true history requires implicit or explicit references to standards of objectivity and rationality of just the kind that the initial genealogical history was designed to discredit. Indeed when Rorty invites us to assent to the version of the history of philosophy which he has presented both in his book and in his paper he is surely not merely trying to elicit our agreement in the light of presently socially accepted standards of work, within philosophy and history. For he is—as philosophers characteristically are—himself engaged in advancing a philosophical theory about the nature of such standards. And this theory he presumably takes to be true, in the same sense as that in which realists understand that predicate.⁴

What MacIntyre claims in that passage is mistaken, indeed deeply mistaken, in several ways. First, Rorty's dismissal of a certain *reading* of what 'objective' and 'rational' standards come to, though it emerges out of a genealogical history, is also an account, which in certain key parts is in fact established to be true by standards for assessing the truth of assertions generally accepted in the discipline. (Remember that people can have agreed on standards for assessing the truth of particular claims while not agreeing about the correct *analysis* of the meaning of 'truth'. They might agree about those standards for determining which statements are true without agreeing that truth is correspondence or having any agreed on theory or indeed any theory at all about what 'truth' or 'true' means.) In giving this genealogical history with a philosophical point, it is important (a) not only that there was one chap, Quine, and another chap, Sellars, both working out of an essentially positivist background, and that one said the analytic/synthetic distinction wasn't what it was said to be and the other said that belief in the given was a myth and (b) that in addition it is important that their views were influential, but it is also vital, for Rorty's genealogical history (and Rorty recognizes this), that Quine's and Sellars' arguments are actually sound, or by minor modifications can be made so, and that, for example, the Grice and Strawson counter to Quine does not carry the day. A genealogical history is essential to place all this and to see what its overall import is, but it is equally essential that it be warranted and not 'a just so story'. And that requires that its key claims be true or at least approximately true. Secondly, to raise questions about the truth of

⁴ Ibid., 109. The paper referred to is 'Philosophy in America', reprinted in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, 211–230.

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an historical account is one thing, to insist that talk of truth must be in terms of a correspondence theory of truth—the account of truth of the realist programme—is something else again. MacIntyre is just assuming that anyone who believes that there are true and false propositions and that there is a distinction between history and pure legend must accept a certain very unclear and challengeable account of what ‘truth’ means. We might rather minimally and playing it safe, or at least safer, stick with Tarski or Ramsey. In writing a history, standards of rationality and objectivity are employed that in part at least are internal to the discipline. Rorty, in making his claims about Quine and Sellars, for example, does not take his standards of rationality and objectivity from out of the blue. Using arguments that Reichenbach would surely have recognized as being to the point, he shows how Quine’s and Sellars’ critique of positivism show that Reichenbach’s powerful ‘analytical techniques’ are not such and then, without at all changing the rules of the game, he draws out the consequences for philosophy of the pragmaticization of positivism. In Wittgenstein’s terminology, working with a language-game, he shows that *some* of the conceptions of that language-game need correcting, that the standards of rationality and objectivity utilized in that context need correction. But that correction is not correction from out of the blue in terms of some alien language-game. Even Wittgensteinian Fideists have not denied that such critique from *within* was possible and sometimes desirable.

Rorty’s genealogical account of the history of philosophy does not require, for its acceptance, ‘standards of objectivity and rationality of just the kind that the initial genealogical history was designed to discredit’.⁵ When he argues for his case, as he does, there is no reason to believe—or at least MacIntyre has given us none—that he must, in using the word ‘truth’, be committed to giving, or at least assuming, a realist *analysis* of ‘truth’ in the technical philosophical sense of ‘realist’ intended. (Here his discussion of realism in his introduction to *The Consequences of Pragmatism* is important, as are his arguments, in various places, to the effect that pragmatists are not idealists in disguise.)

Starting with accepted standards of rationality and objectivity, those presently operative in our intellectual life (including, of course, philosophy and history), Rorty tries to show that, employing them carefully and concretely in the light of his narrative, one would end up with a considerable deconstruction of the conception of philosophy accepted in systematic analytical philosophy and earlier in the Kantian and Cartesian traditions. He has not hoisted himself by his own petard.

⁵ Ibid.

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IV

I want to turn now to some of MacIntyre's specific criticisms of Rorty.

MacIntyre, as we have seen, is as concerned as Rorty to link up our philosophizing with our sense of our own history of the subject. He will not accept Quine's bifurcation that there are those who are interested in philosophy and then there are those who are interested in something quite different, namely the history of philosophy. But MacIntyre, like Ian Hacking, thinks Rorty has got his history importantly wrong and that his mistakes about history distort his understanding of the present possibilities of philosophy.⁶ His history, MacIntyre claims, starts too soon, is too internally fixed on the development of philosophy as a separate discipline, and mistakenly tries to explain the *malaise* of contemporary systematic analytical philosophy in terms of the 'disintegration of the neopositivist programme of the Vienna Circle and its allies'.

Even if we accept MacIntyre's 'correction' of Rorty's conception of philosophical genealogy how would this touch Rorty's arguments about the present status of philosophy?⁷ Rorty is indeed asking: 'Given that this is how philosophy has been, what, if anything, can philosophy now be?'⁸ This does indeed link up philosophy with its history but how would accepting MacIntyre's history, rather than Rorty's, alter Rorty's claim, or tend to undermine his claim, that there is a disintegration of philosophy as a distinct discipline, with a distinct subject matter, methodology and an underlying critical role *vis-à-vis* culture? This, after all, is the heart of the matter. Perhaps we should say, if we accept MacIntyre's history, that it is not *philosophy* that has ended its own history but that the principal causal agent is the modern bureaucratization and professionalization of the world resulting from our present corporate capitalist and state socialist division of labour. It is these latter phenomena and not the internal development of the discipline

⁶ Ian Hacking, 'Is the End in Sight for Epistemology?', *Journal of Philosophy* **LXXVII**, No. 10 (October 1980).

⁷ Actually I think MacIntyre's claims here should be questioned, though I shall not pursue it here. What I am most in sympathy with is his claim that Rorty's account is too fixed on philosophy as a distinct discipline with an internal history. Rorty, as Isaac Levi and Bernard Williams have both differently argued, does not find an adequate place for science in his account. It is far too much seen as just one language-game among others. See Isaac Levi, 'Escape from Boredom: Edification According to Rorty', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* **XI**, No. 4 (December 1981), 589–601, and Bernard Williams, 'Auto-da-Fé', *New York Review of Books* **XXX**, No. 7 (28 April 1983), 33–37.

⁸ Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, 46.

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itself that is the primary cause of philosophy's disintegration and delegitimization. That is a fragment of a historical materialist explanation. But, even if this did give a partial causal explanation or even a more complete one, of the disintegration of philosophy as a distinct discipline, serving as a cultural overseer, still, even so, such a critique would not cut deep enough. Suppose we were in a future communist society, where the state with its bureaucratic structures had withered away and where a capitalist or capitalist-like division of labour with its rigid bureaucratically controlled professionalism was a thing of the past, still would not Rorty's questions about the future of philosophy remain perfectly intact? We would have, if such a thing really obtained, a truly human society, but how would this enable us to discover how to make philosophy 'whole again' or how, or even whether, to reconstitute or reconstruct philosophy? All of Rorty's questions would remain intact. This would suggest that looking to the *internal* history is also important in explaining the demise of philosophy as a distinct discipline. We should also ask what rationale, if any, it could have given the culture of modernity.

MacIntyre might try to resist this by saying that we could reconstitute philosophy, if (perhaps *per impossible*) culture were to become whole, or perhaps he would say, 'whole again'. It isn't, MacIntyre might very well argue, that intellectually speaking some of us do not know our way about in philosophy, have no sense of how to proceed in philosophy, but that the professionalization, bifurcation and bureaucratization of our lives makes the flourishing of philosophy impossible—cripples its institutional life. As Wittgenstein was well aware and as Rorty is too, we philosophers, knowing the subject very well indeed and sometimes even having the freedom and leisure to pursue the subject as we wish, still (sometimes at least) feel that we are at a dead end. Even when we are somehow captivated by philosophy, we can be deeply perplexed by, and indeed suspicious about, whether it has a rational point.⁹

However, MacIntyre's stress on the institutional impediments to philosophy does not get to the heart of the matter, and I will try to explain why, while elucidating and commenting on MacIntyre's own rationale for his claim.

MacIntyre, for all the radical sound of his rhetoric, sees philosophical questions in a traditional, analytical way as conceptual questions arising from the sciences and humanities and sometimes arising at the boundaries of these disciplines. For MacIntyre, it is very important to recognize that all the disciplines, including the hard sciences, have their philosophical, i.e. *conceptual*, sides and that we should not try to

⁹ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, 104.

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detach these philosophical enquiries from the actual scientific or humanistic work going on, and from the path of enquiry being carried on in the discipline. Where such a separation is actually made, these conceptual enquiries, MacIntyre claims, will be without content and will be, even when the discipline of philosophy tries to unify them, 'a set of fragments lacking any fundamental unity'.¹⁰ What MacIntyre believes has happened with the 'professional separation of philosophy from the other disciplines' is that people working in those other disciplines have failed to see 'the extent to which their own enquiries necessarily involved philosophy'.¹¹ Indeed MacIntyre stresses that 'their enquiries are . . . in part, but in key and essential part philosophical. . . .'¹² What needs to be done, MacIntyre maintains, is to bring to the philosophical side of those disciplines the strict and distinctive standards of argumentation and relevance developed by philosophy. (Here he plainly means developed by philosophy as a discipline.)

I do not think this gets to the heart of the matter because I do not believe that it faces Rorty's radical challenge that there is no distinctive mode of argumentation which philosophers have which others (say economists or lawyers) do not.¹³ It does not face this and it does not face his related challenge that there is no distinct philosophical methodology or methodological understanding brought to, or at least bringable by, philosophy to these disciplines which will give us some valuable purchase on the central questions of those disciplines. And it does not face the related hard question whether philosophers really do have some special expertise with concepts or have any superconcepts which will enable them, in some expert way, to come to grips with the conceptual problems that arise in science. Moreover, he also does not, in spite of his acknowledgement of it, take to heart the point that, if Quine is close to the mark, there is no sharp demarcation between conceptual and empirical questions, second-order and first-order questions. There is nothing distinctive here—some conceptual something or other—that a philosopher, *qua* philosopher, even when deeply acquainted with whatever other discipline is in question, can rush in and get his hands on and then deftly perform conceptual analysis on it with his 'powerful analytical tools'. There are no such tools. Such talk is all metaphor.

MacIntyre differs from standard analytical philosophers in believing that philosophical inquiry must not be carried out in separation from

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 105.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rorty, *The Consequence of Pragmatism*, 211–230.

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the other disciplines and he is also distinct from them in stressing the necessity that philosophers have a thorough understanding of the history of their subject, have a reflective understanding of their relation to it and have developed the ability to read and interpret texts, particularly texts that are culturally at a distance from where they stand. But he is like the traditional analytic philosopher in simply assuming that philosophical questions are conceptual questions and that philosophers have some special expertise with concepts such that they can command a clear or clearer view of the conceptual terrain—a view that is rather special and not open to others unless they themselves become philosophers. MacIntyre does not face the complex challenge made by Rorty that this is a piece of philosophical mythology. This challenge from Rorty would remain, even if we were, as we surely are not, in a classless society free of bureaucratic control. Even if MacIntyre's sociology is exactly right, he has not disposed of these questions. And it is these questions which pose a deep challenge for philosophy.

V

To escape deformation, 'philosophy' would, MacIntyre maintains, 'have to become the name for the whole intellectual enterprise. . . .'¹⁴ MacIntyre rightly remarks, with a good sociological eye, that that is impossible:

The bureaucratic organization of academic work which the modern university requires and the type of division of labor which it entails are quite incompatible with any state of affairs in which 'philosophy' is not treated as the name of one discipline among others. Professionalization with all its drawing of boundary lines and its invocation of sanctions against those who cross them, its conceptions of what is central to 'the' discipline and what is marginal, is the inevitable accompaniment of bureaucratization. Hence there is at least a tension between the professionalization of philosophy and its flourishing, except of course as technique and idiom. For professionalization is always favourable to the flourishing of technique and to making narrowly technical proficiencies the badge of the fully licensed professional; and it is equally favorable to the development of idiosyncratic idiom, an idiom by which professionals recognize one another and for the lack of which they stigmatize outsiders.¹⁵

This is a sound and important sociological observation—one

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, 105.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105–106.

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typically simply ignored by the philosophical profession, e.g. members of the Canadian Philosophical Association or American Philosophical Association, as well as by other professions, unless, perchance, their profession is to study professions. But I do not see why Rorty should do anything other than welcome it as complementing his own diagnosis.

But even if by some magical wand we could escape the memories of such a bureaucratically organized professional world, we would still face the problems that Rorty, through Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey, places before us. What does it *mean* to say that 'philosophy' is the 'name for the whole intellectual enterprise'? Presumably, it means, if it means anything at all, that intellectuals working in those disciplines should try to see things in a holistic way. They should, in Sellars' phrase, try to see how things hang together. But that is to use 'philosophy' in the utterly untechnical and unproblematic sense in which 'a philosopher' is just another name for 'an intellectual' or, if that is too broad, for 'an intellectual who thinks rather holistically'. But here 'science' in its generic sense or 'humanities and science' in their generic senses could just as well be substituted for 'philosophy'.

However, MacIntyre still seems to want, and indeed to assume, perhaps even to hanker after, some intellectually unproblematic logical space for philosophy in some more technical or formal sense. It is just that, according to him, we don't have the sort of society which makes room for it. But in doing this he fails to face Rorty's challenge. MacIntyre's sociologizing of the problem is important, but it does not face the deep problem posed by Rorty about what, if anything, philosophy can be now, given what we know, even if we could radically change our institutional arrangements.

VI

MacIntyre has assumed that philosophy has its own standards of argumentation and relevance. But he has not shown us how philosophy has, or can come to have, even in ideal conditions, its own standards of argumentation and relevance, standards of argumentation and relevance that will enable us to criticize culture: that will enable us to make a critique of the institutions of our society or to be an arbiter of legitimacy claims in a society. But it is just this question of whether philosophy can in any coherent way have this overseer role that is at issue.

Even with such a critical incapacity, there is another way that philosophy may be an issue in the other disciplines. MacIntyre criticizes the positivists—and he thinks that Rorty makes the same false assumptions—for 'supposing that there is indeed such a thing as science

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innocent of philosophical preconceptions. . . .¹⁶ MacIntyre simply asserts that to demarcate astronomy from astrology (and thus to distinguish good science from bad science) or to settle the issues between energeticists and atomicists in the late nineteenth-century physics requires that we take a position on the philosophical issue of realism.¹⁷ But he offers no evidence or argument for these claims. And in view of what Rorty has said about such issues the burden of proof rests with MacIntyre. Is it not by an appeal to a cluster of interdependent practices—observational, theoretical and conceptual—within those disciplines themselves that we are able, if we are able at all, to resolve these issues? Isn't that what we in fact do, and isn't it also the only thing we can do? Both pragmatists and realists think that 'There is a world out there'—what else could they think if they were not insane?—but they interpret rather differently how that should be conceptualized. Physicists need not and should not bother their heads about such arcane issues. They have more important things to do.

MacIntyre thinks that what makes analytic philosophers *philosophers* is their historical continuity with certain problems; what makes them *analytic* philosophers is 'their common preoccupation with meanings'.¹⁸ But how common is this 'common preoccupation'? Ayer, Austin, C. I. Lewis, Bouwsma, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Firth, Cavell and Quine are all analytic philosophers, and they are in a way all preoccupied with meanings, but in such different ways that it is, to understate it, rather misleading to call it a common preoccupation.

MacIntyre goes on to remark that what makes them all philosophers, as distinct from other folks concerned with meanings, is the way that this preoccupation with meanings is embedded in certain traditional philosophical concerns, namely with questions about 'cause, personal identity, the nature of belief, what goodness is'.¹⁹ In contemporary analytical philosophical culture these perennial concerns frequently get talked about in the context of talking about speech acts, logical form, extensionality and the like. But what gives those discussions philosophical life and what gives discussions about meaning life is their relation to these perennial questions.

MacIntyre puzzles me here. For much of his essay he seems as historicist as Rorty, seemingly denying that there is a list of historical questions which demarcate what philosophy is. But in the above remark—a remark which he repeats twice in his essay—he seems to be invoking a somewhat scaled down version of the tradition of perennial

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 111–112.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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philosophy. (Recall that he goes on to claim that contemporary French philosophy has those same underlying concerns.) But it is in this anti-historicist claim that he conflicts with Rorty.

I think Rorty's response would be the Wittgensteinian one that such talk has point only in determinate language-games and against certain preoccupations. Thus we can wonder what belief comes to in the salvation religions or among the Azande when they practise witchcraft or among people when they say they believe or do not believe in the programmes of the various political parties, but ripped from some determinate language-game we can hardly usefully talk about belief *sans phrase*. At best we will come up with a few dressed-up platitudes; at worst with some more or less disguised falsehoods. Similar things should be said for the other topics mentioned by MacIntyre. Perhaps, if we bring to it enough background, we can say what good coffee is, what a good teacher is, what a good film is, perhaps—just perhaps—what, in some determinate culture at some determinate time, good relationships between women and men are and, at the outer limits, what, under conditions of productive plenty, a good society would look like or at least something of what a decent political order would look like. But to say, shorn of any such determinate language-game, what goodness is is a pointless and perhaps a hopeless enterprise as well. At best we can come up with platitudes that do not enlighten anyone. (I have in mind something like Paul Ziff's saying, even if correctly, that to say 'x is good' is to say 'x answers to interests'.) At worst we come up with platitudinous falsehoods or varieties of nonsense. Moreover, in this context, MacIntyre seems completely oblivious to the pragmatist claim, championed by Rorty, that 'it will not help to say something true to think about truth, nor will it help to act well to think about goodness, nor will it help to be rational to think about rationality'.²⁰

University of Calgary

²⁰ Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, xv.