Redescription, Conversation, Metaphysics

In Rorty’s narrative of the maturation of Western thought towards a fully secularized, humanized culture, a key stage is 18th Century Romanticism. “What was glimpsed,” Rorty tells us (Rorty 1989, 7) “at the end of the eighteenth century was that anything could be made to look good or bad, useful or useless, by being redescribed.” This Romantic idea comes to full expression in Nietzsche’s image of truth as “a mobile army of metaphors,” and the concomitant claim that truth is a product of interpretation, not a constraint on it (“made” not “found”). One might take this to be an anti-metaphysical claim, to the effect that metaphysics is exactly the futile attempt to uncover extra-interpretational constraints on inquiry. Or one might take the Nietzschean line to be itself a species of metaphysics, in which case it will look like a variety of idealism, a claim about the human construction of the reality we in various ways engage and describe. The stand-off is familiar, and Rorty’s claim that the only constraints on inquiry are conversational ones (Rorty 1982) is often treated as simply another iteration of the idealist—and relativist—steps of this philosophical pas-de-deux.

To take Rorty this way, however, is to miss a constructive contribution to the development of pragmatist thinking. My suggestion is that what is interesting and original about Rorty lies precisely in his efforts to preserve the insight of romanticism without becoming entangled in the steps of metaphysics. Rorty’s approach places at issue the nature of metaphysics, what kind of a kind it might be, in a way that cannot be assimilated to either the anti-metaphysical stance or the idealist stance. For Rorty, a main purpose is to make us see that metaphysics is *optional*—something we can *talk ourselves out of*, by moving various strands of conversation in different and, Rorty holds, more constructive directions. Both the notion of conversation (Rorty 1979) and the notion of contingency (Rorty 1987) are important in this project. And each plays a role both in Rorty’s depiction of our concern with metaphysics and in his multifarious attempts to modify this concern in concrete ways and eventually to make us think differently about what it is that philosophers is doing.

As I fill out these claims, I will be considering in particular the notion of *redescription* that Rorty relies on in several places to draw what are for him critical contrasts between kinds of intellectual aspiration. We will see that in *commending* the notion of redescription and in *implementing* it as a strategic, rhetorical device, Rorty makes moves that have affinities both with logical empiricist (perhaps particularly Neurath’s) efforts to speak about meaning while dodging metaphysics, as well as with Sartre’s struggle to hold together a notion of responsibility that has ethical force with the utter contingency of human choice. Rorty, though, avails himself of a move that is, as far as I can see, original, in so far as he rests his case on the solidarity of his interlocutors.