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Getting Rid of the Appearance-Reality Distinction

Richard Rorty*

COMMON SENSE DISTINGUISHES between the apparent color of a thing and its real color, between the apparent motions of heavenly bodies and their real motions, between nondairy creamer and real cream, and between imitation Rolexes and real ones. But only those with a taste for philosophy ask whether real Rolexes are *really* real. Only philosophers take seriously Plato's distinction between Reality with a capital R and Appearance with a capital A. That distinction has outlived whatever usefulness it may have had. We should do our best to get rid of it.

If we did so, we should no longer wonder whether the human mind, or human language, is capable of representing reality accurately. We would stop thinking that some parts of our culture are more in touch with reality than other parts. We would express our sense of finitude not by comparing our humanity with something nonhuman but by comparing our way of being human with other, better ways that may someday be adopted by our descendants. When we condescended to our ancestors, we would not say that they were less in touch with reality than we are, but that their imaginations were more limited than ours. We would boast of being able to talk about more things than they could.

Parmenides jumpstarted the Western philosophical tradition by dreaming up the notion of Reality with a capital R. He took the trees, the stars, the human beings, and the gods and rolled them all together into a well-rounded blob called "Being" or "the One." He then stood back from this blob and proclaimed it the only thing worth knowing about, but forever unknowable by mortals. Plato was enchanted by the notion of something even more august and unapproachable than Zeus, but he was more optimistic than Parmenides. Plato suggested that perhaps a few gifted mortals might, by replacing opinion with knowledge, gain

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access to what he called “the really real.” Ever since Plato, there have been people who worried about whether we can gain access to Reality, or whether the finitude of our cognitive faculties makes such access impossible.

Nobody, however, worries about whether we have cognitive access to trees, stars, cream, or wristwatches. We know how to tell a justified belief about such things from an unjustified one. If the word “reality” were used simply a name for the aggregate of all such things, no problem about access to it could have arisen. The word would never have been capitalized. But when that word is given the sense that Parmenides and Plato gave it, nobody can say what would count as a justification for a belief about the thing denoted by that term. We know how correct our beliefs are about the colors of physical objects, or about the motions of planets, or the provenance of wristwatches, but we have no idea how to correct our beliefs about the ultimate nature of things. Ontology is more like a playground than like a science.

The difference between ordinary things and Reality is that when learning how to use the word “tree” we automatically acquire lots of true beliefs about trees. As Donald Davidson has argued, most of our beliefs about such things as trees and stars and wristwatches have to be true. If somebody thinks that trees are typically blue in color, and that they never grow higher than two feet, we shall conclude that whatever she may be talking about, it is not trees. There have to be many commonly accepted truths before we can raise the possibility of error. Any of these truths can be put in doubt, but not all of them at once. One can only dissent from common sense on a particular point if one is willing to accept most of the rest of what common sense says.

When it comes to Reality, however, there is no such thing as common sense. Unlike the case of trees, there are no platitudes accepted by both the vulgar and the learned. In some circles, you can get general agreement that the ultimate nature of Reality is atoms and void. In others, you can get a consensus that it is God—an immaterial, non-spatiotemporal, being. The reason why quarrels among metaphysicians about the nature of Reality seem so ludicrous is that each of them feels free to pick a few of his favorite things and claim ontological privilege for them. Despite the best efforts of positivists, pragmatists, and deconstructionists, ontology is as popular among contemporary philosophers as it was in the days of Democritus and Anaxagoras. Most analytic philosophers still take the question of whether the human mind can get in touch with the really real with perfect seriousness.

My hypothesis about why ontology remains so popular is that we are still reluctant to admit that the poetic imagination sets the bounds for

human thought. At the heart of philosophy's quarrel with poetry is the fear that the imagination goes all the way down—that there is nothing we talk about that we might not have talked of differently. This fear causes philosophers to become obsessed by the need to achieve *direct* access to reality. Direct, in this sense, means “unmediated by language”—for our language, we are uneasily aware, might well have been different. Before we can rid ourselves of ontology, we are going to have to get rid of the idea of nonlinguistic access. This will entail getting rid of faculty psychology. We shall have to give up the picture of the human mind as divided into a good part that puts us in touch with the really real and a bad part that engages in self-stimulation and auto-suggestion.

To get rid of this cluster of bad ideas, we need to think of reason not as a truth-tracking faculty but as a social practice—the practice of enforcing social norms on the use of marks and noises, thereby making it possible to use words rather than blows as a way of getting things done. We need to think of imagination not as the faculty that produces visual or auditory images, but as a combination of novelty and luck. To be imaginative, as opposed to being merely fantastical, is to do something new and to be lucky enough to have that novelty be adopted by one's fellow humans, incorporated into their social practices. The distinction between fantasy and imagination is between novelties that do not get taken up and put to use by one's fellows and those that do. People whose novelties we cannot appropriate and utilize we call foolish, or perhaps insane. Those whose ideas strike us as useful we hail as geniuses.

On the account of human abilities, I am suggesting, the use of persuasion rather than force is an innovation comparable to the beavers' dam. Like the beavers' collaboration in getting the dam built, it is a social practice. It was initiated by the novel suggestion that we might use noises rather than physical compulsion to get other humans to cooperate with us. That suggestion gave rise to language. Rationality, thought, and cognition all began when language did. Language gets off the ground not by people giving names to things they were already thinking about, but by proto-humans using noises in innovative ways, just as the proto-beavers got the practice of building dams off the ground by using sticks and mud in innovative ways. Language was, over the millennia, enlarged and rendered more flexible not by adding the names of abstract objects to those of concrete objects, but by using marks and noises in ways unconnected with environmental exigencies. The distinction between the concrete and the abstract can be replaced with that between words used in making perceptual reports and those unsuitable for such use.

On the view I am sketching, expressions like “gravity” and “inalienable human rights” should not be thought of as names of entities whose nature

remains mysterious, but as noises and marks, the use of which by various geniuses gave rise to bigger and better social practices. Intellectual and moral progress is not a matter of getting closer to an antecedent goal, but of surpassing the past. Beaver dams improved over the millennia as gifted beavers did novel things with sticks and mud, things that were then incorporated into standard dam-building practice. The arts and the sciences improved over the millennia because our more ingenious ancestors did novel things not only with seeds, clay, and metallic ores, but with noises and marks. What we call “increased knowledge” should not be thought of as increased access to the Real, but as increased ability to *do* things—to take part in social practices that make possible richer and fuller human lives. This increased richness is not the effect of a magnetic attraction exerted on the human mind by the really real, nor by that mind’s innate ability to penetrate the veil of appearance. It is a relation between the human present and the human past, not a relation between the human and the nonhuman.

* * *

The view that I have just finished summarizing has often been called “linguistic idealism.” But that term confuses idealism, which is a metaphysical thesis about the ultimate nature of reality, with Romanticism, which is a thesis about the nature of human progress. William James put the latter thesis forward in the following passage: “Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors active in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow. *The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world.*”¹

In that passage, James is echoing Emerson, whose essay “Circles” is perhaps the best expression of the Romantic view of the nature of progress. “The life of man,” Emerson writes there, is

a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. . . . Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series. . . . *There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us.* [Emphasis added.] The man finishes his story—how good! how final! how it puts a new face on all things! He fills the sky. Lo! On the other side rises also a man and draws a circle around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not man, but only a first speaker. His

only redress is forthwith to draw a circle outside of his antagonist. . . . In the thought of to-morrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures of the nations. . . . Men walk as prophecies of the next age.²

The most important claim Emerson makes in this essay is that there is no inclosing wall called “the Real.” There is nothing outside language to which language attempts to become adequate. Every human achievement is simply a launching pad for a greater achievement. We shall never find descriptions so perfect that imaginative redescription will become pointless. There is no destined terminus to inquiry. There are only larger human lives to be lived.

As James echoed Emerson, so Emerson was echoing the Romantic poets. They too urged that men should walk as prophecies of the next age, rather than in the fear of God or in the light of Reason. Shelley, in his “Defence of Poetry,” deliberately and explicitly enlarged the meaning of the term “Poetry.” That word, he said, “may be defined to be ‘the expression of the Imagination.’” In this wider sense, he said, poetry is “connate with the origin of man.”³ It was, he went on to say, the “the influence which is moved not, but moves.”⁴ It is “something divine . . . at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought.”⁵ Just as the Enlightenment had deified Reason, so Shelley and other Romantics deified what I have been calling “the Imagination.”

It was not until Nietzsche—another disciple of Emerson’s—that this Romantic view of progress began to get disentangled from the claim that the intrinsic nature of reality is Spirit rather than Matter. Before Nietzsche, it was easy to conflate this central doctrine of idealist metaphysics with Emerson’s profoundly antimetaphysical insistence that there is no description of things that cannot be transcended and replaced by another, more imaginative, description. But in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche restaged the quarrel between poetry and philosophy. By treating Socrates as one more mythmaker rather than as someone who employed reason to break free of myth, he let us see Parmenides and Plato as all-too-strong poets. His way of looking at the philosophical tradition these men initiated made it possible to see both German idealism and British empiricism as outgrowths of the urge to find unmediated access to the real. Both movements were hoping to find something unredescribable, something that would trump poetry. Nietzsche helped us think of Kant and John Stuart Mill as two of a kind: both were anxious to find an enclosing wall, one that the imagination could not leap across.

In his later work, Nietzsche echoed Schiller and Shelley when he urged us to become “the poets of our own lives” [die Dichter unseres

Lebens]. But he wanted to go further. He said over and over again that not just human lives, but the world in which those lives are lived, is a creation of the human imagination. In *The Gay Science*, he summarized his criticism of Socrates and Plato in the following passage:

[The higher human being deludes himself]: he calls his nature contemplative and thereby overlooks the fact that he is also the actual poet and ongoing author of life [der eigentlich Dichter und Fortdichter des Lebens]. . . . It is we, the thinking-sensing ones [die Denkend-Empfindenden] who really and continually make something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. This poem that we have invented is constantly internalized, drilled, translated into flesh and reality, indeed, into the commonplace, by the so-called practical human beings (our actors). Only we have created the world that concerns human beings!⁶

A conservative interpretation of this passage would treat it as saying that although of course nature is not made by us, it has no significance for us until we have topped it up. We overlay nature with another world, the world that concerns us, the only world in which a properly human life can be led. The senses give both us and the animals access to the natural world, but we humans have superimposed a second world by internalizing a poem, thereby making the two worlds seem equally inescapable. Outside of the natural sciences, reason works within the second world, following paths that the imagination has cleared. But inside those sciences, nature itself shows the way.

That conservative interpretation might have satisfied the Romantic poets. It would have provided a plausible gloss on Shelley's claim that the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. It is consistent with the view of the relation between the cognitive, the moral, and the aesthetic that Schiller offered in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Nevertheless, that interpretation is insufficiently radical. It does not take account of Nietzsche's frequent polemics against the reality-appearance distinction—against the idea that there *is* a way that nature is in itself, apart from human needs and interests.

He says in the *Nachlass*, for example, that "the dogmatic idea of 'things that have a constitution in themselves' is one with which one must break absolutely."⁷ He spells out his point by saying: "That things possess a constitution in themselves quite apart from interpretation and subjectivity, is a quite idle hypothesis; it presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential, that a thing freed from all relationships would still be a thing"⁸

In passages such as this one, Nietzsche brushes aside the common-sense claim that there is a way Reality is independent of the way human beings describe it. He was equally contemptuous of the more sophisticated Kantian idea that an unknowable non-spatiotemporal thing-in-itself lurks behind the phenomenal world. Nietzsche's teaching does, however, bear some resemblance to Hegel's claim that Nature is but a moment in the developing self-consciousness of Spirit. Nietzsche would certainly second Hegel's insistence that we not conceive of knowledge as a medium for getting in touch with Reality, but instead think of it as a way in which Spirit enlarges itself. But Nietzsche differs from Hegel in rejecting the idea of a natural terminus to the progress of this self-consciousness—a final unity in which all tensions are resolved, in which appearance is put behind us and true reality revealed. Unlike Hegel, and like Emerson, Nietzsche is making a purely negative point. He is not saying that Spirit alone is really real, but that we should stop asking what is really real.

Nietzsche never developed this view in any detail, nor did he succeed in making it perspicuous. It is, as many commentators have pointed out, impossible to reconcile with many other things that he said. It is incompatible, in particular, with his repeated claim that he himself is the first philosopher to be free from illusion. The only criticism of his predecessors to which Nietzsche is entitled is that they were all too timid to break out of the Platonic account of the human situation, too hesitant to sketch a larger circle than the one Plato had drawn. Nor can Nietzsche's prophecy of a postmetaphysical age be squared with the passages in the later writings in which Nietzsche seems to be claiming that the Will to Power is the only thing that is really real. Those are the passages that Heidegger seized upon in order to caricature Nietzsche as "the last metaphysician," the proponent of an inverted Platonism.

Despite Nietzsche's own inconsistencies, the Romantic anti-Platonism he put forward in the passages I have quoted is a coherent philosophical position. It can be buttressed and clarified by bringing Nietzsche together with the work of various twentieth-century analytic philosophers. In what follows, I shall be rehearsing some arguments put forward by Wittgenstein, and some others developed by Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, and Robert Brandom. I think that these arguments help give a plausible sense both to the claim that nature itself is a poem that we humans have written, and to the claim that the imagination is the principle vehicle of human progress.

The analytic philosophers I have listed are united in their repudiation of empiricism. They debunk the idea that animals and human beings take in information about the world through their sense organs. They undermine the idea that the senses provide an unchanging and solid

core around which the imagination weaves wispy and ephemeral circles. On their account, the senses do not enjoy a special relation to reality that distinguishes their deliverances from those of the imagination.

The idea of such a privileged relation goes back to Plato's analogy between the mind and a wax tablet, and to Aristotle's suggestion that the sensory organs take on the qualities of the sensed object. Plato, Aristotle, and contemporary cognitive scientists all describe sense-perception as a way of getting something that is outside the organism inside the organism—either by way of identity, as in Aristotle, or by way of representation, as in Lockean empiricism and contemporary cognitive science. On this traditional account, there is a big difference between a mechanism like a thermostat that simply responds to changes in the environment and an organism with a nervous system capable of containing representations of the environment. The thermostat just reacts. The organism acquires information.

On the anti-empiricist view, a view Nietzsche would have welcomed had he encountered it, there is no difference between the thermostat, the dog, and the prelinguistic infant other than differing levels of complexity of reaction to environmental stimuli. The brutes and the infants are capable of discriminative responses, but not of acquiring information. For there is no such thing as the acquisition of information until there is language in which to formulate that information. Information came into the universe when the first hominids began to justify their actions to one another by making assertions and backing those assertions up with further assertions. Before the practice of giving and asking for reasons developed, the noises these hominids made to each other did not convey information in any more interesting sense than that in which the motion of ambient molecules conveys information to the thermostat, or the digestive enzymes convey information to the contents of the stomach.

To accept this alternative account of sense-perception means abandoning the traditional story about language-learning—one in which language got its start by people giving names to what they were already thinking about. For on this account all awareness that is more than the ability to respond differentially to varied stimuli is, as Sellars said, "a linguistic affair." The brutes, the sunflowers, the thermostats, and the human infants can produce differential responses, but awareness, information, and knowledge are possible only after the acquisition of language.

On the view common to Sellars and Wittgenstein, to possess a concept is to be familiar with the use of a linguistic expression. Whereas empiricists think of concepts as mental representations, Sellars and Wittgenstein have no use for what Willard Van Orman Quine called "the idea idea." Philosophers who still adhere to this idea are forced

to take on the well nigh impossible burden of explaining the relations between neural process and the various representations that make up this realm. Abandoning the idea means treating the possession of a mind as the possession of certain social skills—the skills required to give and ask for reasons. To have a mind is not to have a movie theater inside the skull, with successive representations of the surroundings flashing on the screen. It is the ability to use persuasion to get what one wants.

Before there were conversational exchanges, on this view, there were neither concepts, nor beliefs, nor knowledge. For to say that a dog knows its master, or a baby its mother, is like saying that a lock knows when the right key has been inserted, or that a computer knows when it has been given the right password. To say that the frog's eye tells something to the frog's brain is like saying that the screwdriver tells something to the screw. The line between mechanism and something categorically distinct from mechanism comes when organisms develop social practices—uses of words—that permit those organisms to consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of alternative descriptions of things. Mechanism stops, and freedom begins, at the point at which we can discuss which words best describe a given situation. Knowledge and freedom are coeval.

On the Romantic view I am commending, the imagination is the source of freedom because it is the source of language. It is, as Shelley put it, root as well as blossom. It is not that we first spoke a language that simply reported what was going on around us, and later enlarged this language by imaginative redescription. Rather, imaginativeness goes all the way back. The concepts of redness and roundness are as much imaginative creations as those of God, of the positron, and of constitutional democracy. Getting the word "red" into circulation was a feat on a par with Newton's persuading people to use the term "gravity." For nobody knew what redness was before some early hominids began talking about the differences in the colors of things, just as nobody knew what gravity was before Newton began describing an occult force responsible for both ballistic trajectories and planetary orbits. It took imaginative genius to suggest that everybody make the same noise at the sight of blood, of maple leaves in autumn, and of the western sky at sunset. It was only when such suggestions were taken seriously and put into practice that hominids began to have minds.

As for the concept "round," it was not obvious that the full moon and the trunks of trees had anything in common before some genius began to use a noise that we would translate as "round." Nothing at all was obvious, because obviousness is not a notion that can be applied to organisms that do not use language. The thermostats, the brutes, and

the prelinguistic human infants do not find anything obvious, even though they all respond to stimuli in predictable ways. The notion of prelinguistic obviousness is inseparable from the Cartesian story about the spectator sitting in a little theater inside the skull, watching representations come and go, giving them names as they pass. Sellars parodied that account when he described a child mind confronting the manifold of sense. "Ah," this mind says to itself, "there it is now! And another one! And another—a splendid specimen! By the methods of Mill, *this* must be what Mother calls 'red'!"

In the Cartesian picture, the child mind already knows the difference between colors and shapes, and between red and blue, before having learned any words. The contrasting view is suggested by Nietzsche in another passage from the *Nachlass*. There he writes, "In a world in which there is no being, a certain calculable world of identical cases must first be created."⁹ He would done better to have written "in a world in which there is no knowledge," rather than "in a world in which there is no being." If we rewrite in that way, we can read him as saying that you cannot have knowledge without identifiable things, and that there is no such thing as identification until people can use terms such as "same shape" and "different color." We only begin to have knowledge when we can formulate such thoughts as this thing has a different color than that, but the same shape. The empiricist tradition attributes the ability to have this thought to brutes and prelinguistic infants. The anti-empiricist view I am offering says that there is no more reason to attribute it to them than to attribute the thought "it is cooler than it used to be" to a thermostat.

Imagination, in the sense in which I am using the term, is not a distinctively human capacity. It is, as I said earlier, the ability to come up with socially useful novelties. This is an ability Newton shared with certain eager and ingenious beavers. But giving and asking for reasons *is* distinctively human, and is coextensive with rationality. The more an organism can get what it wants by persuasion rather than force, the more rational it is. Ulysses, for example, was more rational than Achilles. But you cannot use persuasion if you cannot talk. No imagination, no language. No linguistic change, no moral or intellectual progress. Rationality is a matter of making allowed moves within language games. Imagination creates the games that reason proceeds to play. Then, exemplified by people like Plato and Newton, it keeps modifying those games so that playing them is more interesting and profitable. Reason cannot get outside the latest circle that imagination has drawn. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that imagination holds the primacy.

* * *

The Nietzschean view I have been sketching is often described as the doctrine that everything is “constituted” by language, or that everything is “socially constructed,” or that everything is “mind-dependent.” But these descriptions are hopelessly misleading. Words like “constitution” and “construction” and “dependence,” in the language-games that are their original homes, refer to causal relations. They are invoked to explain how something came into existence or can continue to exist. We say, for example, that the US was constituted out of the thirteen original colonies, that wooden houses are constructed by carpenters, and that children depend on their parents for their support.

But philosophers who say, misleadingly, that redness, like gravity, is constituted by language, or that roundness, like gender, is a social construction, do not mean to suggest that one sort of entity was brought into existence by another sort. They are not offering an hypothesis about causal relations—a hypothesis that is obviously absurd. Causal relations only hold within what Nietzsche called “a certain calculable world of identical cases”—a world of identifiable objects. We can investigate causal relations once we have identified such objects, but there is no point in asking where the world that contains such objects comes from. You can ask sensible paleontological questions about where trees and beavers came from, and sensible astrophysical questions about where stars came from, but you cannot give a sense to the question of where spatiotemporal objects in general came from.

Kant, unfortunately, did pose that bad question. He then told an imaginative story about how the thing-in-itself gets whipped into spatiotemporal shape by the transcendental ego. The blatant internal incoherence of that story soon gave idealism a bad name. But the Nietzschean view I have been outlining avoids any such story, and nevertheless preserves what was true in idealism—namely, the thesis that there is no such thing as preconceptual cognitive access to objects. Our only cognitive access to beavers, trees, and stars consists in our ability to use the words “beaver,” “tree,” and “star.”

Kant’s mistake was to formulate a thesis about the inseparability of identifiable things from our thoughts about them as a thesis about where those things came from. Hegel, by substituting absolute for transcendental idealism, avoided this mistake. But Hegel phrased his doctrines in terms of the Platonic-Cartesian distinction between material and immaterial being, and he was inspired by the hope of transcending the finite human condition. So Hegelianism succumbed to positivistic criticism. The historicism that Hegel took from Herder had to be reformulated

by post-Nietzschean philosophers such as Heidegger before it could be disentangled from Hegel's awkward attempts at eschatology.

Defenders of the Platonic tradition often criticize views of the sort I am putting forward by interpreting them as claiming that nothing was red or round before the first hominids began to converse, and that mountains came into existence only when they began to use a noise meaning "mountain." But this is a caricature. Wittgenstein's point is not about when things came into existence but about how language and thought did. It is rather that, as he put it, naming requires a lot of stage setting in the language: it is no use pointing to a red and round ball, uttering "red," and expecting the baby to grasp that you are directing its attention to a color rather than to a shape. Wittgenstein seems to have been the first to remark that the empiricist picture of language-learning requires us to think of babies as talking to themselves in *Mentalese*, the language that Sellars's child was speaking when it figured out that this was what mother calls "red."

The issue about prelinguistic awareness that pits Wittgenstein, Sellars, Davidson, and Brandom against Jerry Fodor and other fans of cognitive science may seem remote from the question of the priority of the imagination. But I have been trying to persuade you that that issue is decisive for the question of whether Nietzsche was right to think of the world as our poem rather than as something that somehow communicates information about itself to us. How we answer that question determines whether we think of the progress human beings have made in the last few millennia as a matter of expanding our imaginations or as an increased ability to represent reality accurately.

When Nietzsche urged us to "see science through the optic of art," he was suggesting that we should see new scientific theories not as representations of the real but as poetic achievements. Shelley's dictum that the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, interpreted along Nietzschean lines, is the claim that Newton was to the laws of motion as Solon was to the laws of Athens. Both men made imaginative proposals about what language should be used to achieve a given purpose. In Solon's case this purpose was to achieve greater social order in his city. In Newton's case it was to render physical phenomena more predictable. Both sets of proposals, for a time at least, served those purposes well. The question of whether either or both got reality right need not arise.

This view of science is anathema to philosophers whose favorite things are elementary physical particles. These philosophers conflate the question "have we, in recent centuries, learned more about how things work?" with the quite different question "have we learned more about what is really real?" The answer to the first question is obviously "yes."

The answer to the second will be “yes” only if we assume that finding out how things work is a matter of finding a description of them as they really are. It is just that assumption that both the German idealists and Nietzsche challenged. But whereas the idealists thought that philosophy could answer questions about the nature of Reality that empirical science could not, Nietzsche just wanted to stop people from posing such questions.

Nietzsche thought that Plato’s success in putting the term “really real” into circulation was a great imaginative achievement. But the answer to a great poem is a still better poem, and that is what Nietzsche thought of himself as writing. He asked us to see, as he put it in *The Twilight of the Idols*, that “the true world” is a fable, a myth concocted by Parmenides and Plato. The problem, he said, is not that it is a fable, but that it is a fable that has by now exhausted its utility. We should not say that the hope of knowing the intrinsic nature of Reality was an illusion, because, as Nietzsche rightly says, when we give up the notion of a true world we give up that of an illusory world as well. The difference between a good old poem and new better poem is not the difference between a bad representation of Reality and a better one.

* * *

In this lecture, I have been trying to persuade you that Nietzsche wrote the better poem. As I see it, the Romantic movement marked the beginning of the attempt to replace the tale told by the Greek philosophers with a better tale. The old story was about how human beings might manage to get back in touch with something from which they had somehow become estranged—something that is not itself a human creation, but stands over and against all such creations. The new story is about how human beings continually strive to overcome the human past in order to create a better human future.

To convince you that the new story is better for our purposes than the old, I have been asking you to think of what we often call the “beginnings of scientific rationality” in ancient Greece in the context of “the quarrel between poetry and philosophy.” To take the side of the poets in this quarrel is to say that there are many descriptions of the same things and events, and that there is no neutral standpoint from which to judge the superiority of one description over another. Philosophy stands in opposition to poetry just insofar as it insists that there is such a standpoint.

Plato said that we should try to substitute logic for rhetoric, the application of criteria for imaginative power. By tracing an argumentative

path back to first principles, Plato thought, we can attain the goal that he described as “reaching a place beyond hypotheses.” When we have reached that goal, we shall be immune to the seductive effects of re-description, for we shall have established the sort of “ostensive tie” between ourselves and the really real that, on the empiricist view, visual perception establishes with colors and shapes. Just as we cannot deny the evidence of our senses—cannot make ourselves believe that something is blue when our eyes tell us that it is red—so the Platonic philosopher cannot make himself doubt what he sees when he reaches the top of Plato’s divided line. But for the poets, logical argumentation—conformity to the rules of deductive validity—is just one rhetorical technique among others. Nietzsche and Wittgenstein both suggest substituting Emerson’s metaphor of endlessly expanding circles for Plato’s metaphor of ascent to the indubitable.

When he used the figure of the divided line to symbolize the ascent from opinion to knowledge, and when he used the allegory of the cave for the same purpose, Plato was implicitly recognizing that the only way to escape from re-description was to attain a kind of knowledge that was not discursive—a kind that did not rely on a choice of a particular linguistic formulation. To reach truth that one cannot be argued out of is to escape from the linguistically expressible to the ineffable. Only the ineffable—what is not describable at all—cannot be described differently.

When Nietzsche says that a thing conceived apart from its relationships would not be a thing, he should be read as saying that since all language is a matter of relating some things to other things, the unrelateable is necessarily ineffable and unknowable. Language establishes relationships by tying blood in with sunsets and full moons with tree trunks. Lack of describability means lack of relations, so our only access to the indescribable must be the sort of direct awareness that the empiricist has to redness and that the mystic has to God. Much of the history of Western philosophy, from Plotinus and Meister Eckhart down to Hume and Russell, is the history of the quest for such direct awareness.

I have been arguing in this lecture that the quarrel between the later Wittgenstein and traditional British empiricism epitomizes the quarrel that philosophy has had with poetry, and that the analytic philosophers who have lined up on Wittgenstein’s side have provided valuable support to Emerson’s Romantic account of progress in terms of ever-expanding circles. In my next lecture, I shall offer an account of non-Wittgensteinian analytic philosophy as an attempt to retain the Platonic story about progress and to maintain, against Emerson, that there really is an “enclosing wall,” a circumference to human existence—that philosophy can describe the unchanging framework within which dramas of history are enacted.

In the third and final lecture, I shall return to the topic of Romanticism. There I shall argue that admirers of Shelley and Emerson should beware of the temptation to turn the poetic imagination into a means of direct access to reality—the temptation to model the imagination as a truth-tracking faculty. The moral of the lectures taken together is that philosophy and poetry can coexist peaceably if both sides are willing to give up on the attempt to transcend human finitude.

RICHARD RORTY
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NOTES

- 1 William James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 109.
- 2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1940), 281.
- 3 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 480.
- 4 Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 508.
- 5 Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 503.
- 6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 301.
- 7 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*.
- 8 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*.
- 9 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*.