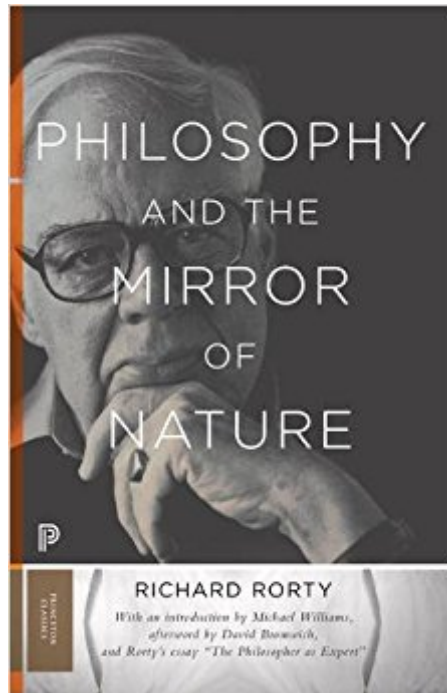


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Philosophy And The Mirror Of Nature (Princeton Classics)



Synopsis

When it first appeared in 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* hit the philosophical world like a bombshell. In it, Richard Rorty argued that, beginning in the seventeenth century, philosophers developed an unhealthy obsession with the notion of representation: comparing the mind to a mirror that reflects reality. Rorty's book is a powerful critique of this imagery and the tradition of thought that it spawned. Today, the book remains a must-read and stands as a classic of twentieth-century philosophy. Its influence on the academy, both within philosophy and across a wide array of disciplines, continues unabated. This edition includes new essays by philosopher Michael Williams and literary scholar David Bromwich, as well as Rorty's previously unpublished essay "The Philosopher as Expert."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This is an ambitious and important book. Ambitious because it attempts to place the main concerns and discussions of contemporary philosophy within a historical perspective; important because this is all too rarely attempted within our present philosophical culture, and almost never done this well."--Charles Taylor, *Times Literary Supplement*"It is going to be a long time before a better book of its kind appears."--Alasdair MacIntyre, *London Review of Books*"*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* brings to light the deep sense of crisis within the profession of academic philosophy. . . .

Rorty's provocative and profound meditations impel philosophers to examine the problematic status of their discipline--only to discover that modern European philosophy has come to an end."--Cornel West, Union Seminary Quarterly Review

Richard Rorty (1931-2007) was a prolific philosopher and public intellectual who, throughout his illustrious career, taught at Princeton, the University of Virginia, and, until his death, Stanford University.

A must read!

This book is as old as I am. Still, when I was first confronted with the problem of Richard Rorty in the late '90s, it was -- as one might guess from Rorty's position at that time as Philosopher Laureate, the most public face of a discipline which often shuns attention -- **au courant** enough to contribute an impetus and general casts of mind to the debate on many topics. By now the book is, like me, old enough to no longer be directly relevant to the livest currents of thought in analytic philosophy, and somewhat beside the point to Continentalists poring over Badiou and Agamben (neither of whom Rorty ever commented on directly, although one can guess he would not have been fond of the "fundamentalist" tone of some of their arguments). However, it is still relevant to understanding what philosophy has been and what it could be, perhaps even more so now that the dust has settled and we can historicize the inveterate historicist. Beginning as a student of ancient philosophy who had been taught by Richard McKeon and Leo Strauss, Rorty entered the consciousness of mainstream philosophy in the '60s with a bold new plan for understanding the operations of the mind: namely, that there was no such thing, no "mind" presenting an ahistorical problem for science and cultural inquiry, just a collection of tropes about personal awareness that did not militate for a "reifying" approach to psychology. This position -- called "eliminative materialism" and subsequently enthusiastically adopted by many bright young scholars working in the philosophy of psychology -- was a textbook example of "analytic" philosophy, that approach to philosophical research predominant in the English-speaking world, which places greater stress on clarity and rigor than historical learning and political import. But Rorty began to drift towards "Continental" thinkers, Europeans who doubted the possibility of a knock-down philosophical argument and who expected you to know your Plato (and much else) so well as to richly enjoy a series of punning plays on famous philosophical profundities. This book, written when Rorty was still relatively young, begins his journey in synthesizing the approaches of analytic and Continental philosophy, joining what Kant

called the "school" and "cosmic" conceptions of philosophy, striving for both exactitude and relevance. As Rorty explains early on, the focus here is primarily on bold thinkers in the analytic camp, people like Willard van Orman Quine and Wilfrid Sellars who started dismantling key preconceptions of logically-minded philosophers not long after the paint had first dried on these "rational reconstructions" of concepts like knowledge and truth that we were *finally* getting to the bottom of -- after 2500 years of muddling through. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* takes the arguments of Sellars and Quine as exploding the idea that there is a timeless, ahistorical context for philosophical inquiry; drawing on the American Pragmatist tradition (which bulked very much larger in philosophical awareness after Rorty hit the scene), the author argues that what is called "philosophy" is really about what matters to us now, and that this might be very different than what was understandably important to a Kant or a Locke or an Aristotle. Along the way Rorty talks about almost everything that had happened in analytic philosophy up to 1979, and his glosses of more "foundationalist" thinkers like Putnam and Fodor are well worth the price of admission: you will get a very clear idea of just why something like the "computational theory of mind" perhaps ought to be allowed to go on its merry way, while the "causal theory of names" has to be waylaid -- one is a fruitful program in a young science, not particularly beholden to its supposed ontological commitments, while the other takes uncontroversial logical arguments and attempts to wring metaphysical conclusions from them. To historicize the historicizer (as mentioned above) Rorty is speaking from a particular viewpoint at the further reaches of "post-positivism" as it existed in the '60s and '70s, and much of what you will find in contemporary journals blithely ignores his complaints. But the arguments, though perhaps less relevant than they once were, are extremely crisply rendered and Rorty's prose highly rewarding. This "30th Anniversary Edition" avoids some of the mistakes made in preparing the anniversary edition of Quine's *Word and Object*: The themes of the attractive cover for the original and its readable typeface are maintained. Michael Williams, one of Rorty's most prominent students, draws attention in his Introduction to contemporary thinkers like Robert Brandom and Huw Price whose theses simply could not have existed without Rorty's example; David Bromwich provides a biographical Afterword which captures something of the subsequent importance of Rorty when he was nearly an American Sartre, combining philosophy and left-liberal politics in *The New Leader* and *The Nation* and drawing attention to discarded plans for "social hope" through his marvelous philosophico-cultural tract *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. If you already own the book, I don't think it's necessary to pick the new version up; but if you don't own the book, please acquire it.

While certain aspects of this book will be unintelligible to those lacking a technical education (like me) in American analytic philosophy--or to those who've never read Sartre, Hegel or Heidegger--the style of the book renders its main points interesting and comprehensible to an intelligent, thoughtful reader. Rorty's main points come through clearly and powerfully. The metaphor of philosophy as a mirror of nature--and the imperative need to move beyond this metaphor--is compelling and independent of the more analytically dense portions of the book. The full second half is fairly easy to follow for those who have more than a passing interest in philosophy. But, this isn't its main value. If you're daunted by the prospect of reading Derrida or Foucault--or even Sartre--parts of this book are the most honest and readable abridgments I've run across. As a lit grad student, I barely understood Derrida. Reading Rorty was like being given a magic key to unlock the inscrutable mysteries of continental postmodernism. Some find Rorty's style strained, but I think he's one of the most talented English-language stylists philosophy has known--perhaps second only to Jane Addams or William James. This isn't light beach-reading material, but it is a great read for those at all interested in contemporary philosophy.

It is hard to know how many stars to give this book. You could rate it based on its importance as a philosophical text, which would give it 5 stars. Or you could rate it based on how much you like Rorty's literary style, or how important and illuminating you find his ideas (i.e. how much you agree with him). Which may produce a different number of stars. If you are interested in recent analytic philosophy, this is a book that you should read. It has been very influential, and resuscitated interest in talking about pragmatism. You need to be able to discuss it intelligently, which means that you need to read it. For you, this book should have 5 stars. The conversation that Rorty's interested in having, is with Goodman, Quine, Putnam, Davidson, Kripke, and of course Descartes and Wittgenstein. If those are the waters in which you love to swim, for you, this book should have 5 stars. Rorty is verbose. He likes allusive, vague, referential, sweeping statements. If you're coming from a background in "continental" or "post-modern" philosophy, you will feel right at home, and find his style refreshingly clear and accessible. 5 stars. Or if you're coming from a background in "continental" philosophy you may find the discussion excessively "analytical" -- technical and nit-picking (see the note about Quine, Putnam, et.al., above). One star. If you're coming from a background in linguistic philosophy, you will find the hand-waving and verbosity make the book slow going indeed. Reading it makes one long for the wit and brevity of J.L. Austin, the clarity and precision of Searle, or even for Wittgenstein's pin-point examples. He takes many, many pages to tell us that Cartesian mind/brain dualism makes knowledge (conceived as accurate mental

representations of "external" states of affairs) an insoluble problem, and therefore that the idea of "a theory of knowledge" makes no sense. So epistemology (as the search for such a theory) should be abandoned. And we need to come up with a new idea of what philosophy is, since we've for a long time thought of philosophy as almost identical to epistemology. He doesn't say much about what that new idea of philosophy should be, except that it should be conceived of as part of the ongoing "conversation" that human beings have among themselves. Some folks will find this revolutionary, shocking, and even (dare I say it) post-modern. I found it a bit of a snoozer. Rorty's conclusions are right, but hardly shocking. Maybe some people found them shocking in 1980. I think I can still hear a faint echo of victorious crowing coming from the direction of the "Critical Theory" department. It was probably those guys. The thing that I found most useful was Rorty's discussion of the ambiguity of the idea of an "impression" as employed in classical empiricism. That was illuminating and deserves 3 stars. Averaging all of the perspectives we've mentioned, and rounding to take into account the fact that no perspective can claim to be Objectively True, but merely one voice in the ongoing cultural conversation, I calculate that the book should be rated at 3 stars. Your mileage may vary. But then, of course, it's YOUR mileage. :-)

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