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# The Impossibility of Philosophical Dialogue

David L. Roochnik

Philosophical dialogue, we are often told, is a good thing. It is an integral part of our intellectual ethic that the interchange of ideas, the testing of thoughts, and the friendly play of competing views are positive and welcome. Indeed, in a democracy such as ours, with its constitutional guarantee of the freedom of speech, philosophical dialogue seems paradigmatic of tolerance and free inquiry themselves. Part of the seductiveness of philosophy is that it seems to promise just such dialogue. After all, our founding father, Plato, wrote nothing other than dialogues and these have been taken to be a spectacular impetus for our intellectual tradition.

These days, the call to philosophical dialogue is being heard more regularly. After years of fratricidal antagonism the American Philosophical Association has made explicit efforts to promote dialogue between two of its major camps, the analytic and the continental. In 1981 its president, John Smith, lamented the fact that too often in the past much of the discussion in the philosophical community "has been insular and has militated against the admittedly difficult but also essential exchange between basically different outlooks and approaches." He stated, "the task before us now is to initiate a serious dialogue among the many different philosophical opinions represented in this Association."[1] A comparable statement was made by Alan Montefiore, a spokesman for the Cambridge University Press, which recently commissioned Vincent Descombes to write *Modern French Philosophy*. This work has the stated purpose of attempting to "increase mutual recognition and respect . . . on both sides of the same Channel."[2]

A third voice in this chorus has been that of Richard Rorty, who has made a concerted effort to put James, Dewey, Heidegger, and Derrida on the reading lists of American philosophers. His guiding notion, however, is not that of philosophical dialogue but of "conversation." His is an important contribution to the thinking represented in this essay and will be discussed below.

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I agree that Plato's dialogues are spectacular and that I am a member of the tradition he helped to found. However, I have serious questions about the nature and the very possibility of that which we too often simply take for granted. What exactly are philosophical dialogues and are they, in fact, always possible? In particular, is the proposed dialogue so much in vogue today, namely, that between contemporary French and Anglo-American philosophy, a realistic and viable expectation? I shall argue that it is not.[3]

## I

What is a philosophical dialogue (PD)? Philosophy is the love of wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge of the highest, most fundamental, most comprehensive or simply the most important things. Philosophy is the pursuit of this knowledge through *logos,* the Greek word meaning both thought and speech. I will be talking mainly about speech in this essay, so let us say that philosophy is the commitment to discussion of the most important and fundamental issues in the hope of attaining knowledge. What, then, is dialogue? Again the original word is Greek: *dialegesthai* means to converse. PD is therefore a kind of conversation about fundamental issues (FI's). But what kind? Returning to Smith's remarks we see its distinguishing feature: "an exchange between *basically different* outlooks." In other words, PD implies disagreement or controversy. If there is no disagreement a conversation can still occur, but it cannot be considered a dialogue. It will be one that is grounded upon some fundamental agreement and is "insular," for example, either instruction or a joint research venture.

I offer the following as a definition of a PD: it is a conversation in which two people equally committed to and fluent in philosophy disagree about an FI. It is an attempt to resolve the FI in question. I include the portion about equality to eliminate the possibility of, for example, a student arguing with a teacher. What I (and Smith and Montefiore) am interested in is the possibility of disagreement between two mature adults, each with a well thought-out philosophical position they believe is defensible. I include the portion about the attempt at resolving the issue because, given my definition of philosophy as embodying the hope and commitment to attaining knowledge of that which is

important, the disagreement the two parties enter into must include the motivation to settle it. The issue over which they are at odds is fundamental: knowledge of it is the goal. The dialogue, as Smith says, must be "serious." It is this specific mode of conversation that I believe is impossible.

My argument is relatively simple and, of course, not truly original. All conversation requires an agreed-upon "common ground" in order to take place. This is constituted by a common vocabulary and agreement upon the rules which govern the conversation and which determine what counts as "significant" or meaningful discourse. In the case where the participants disagree and are attempting to resolve the disagreement there must also be agreement upon the criteria which can, in principle, adjudicate the dispute. Without this there is no way to determine if progress in the conversation has taken place. All of this will be discussed below. For the moment let my assertion simply be this: PD is a kind of conversation. As such it requires a common ground for its possibility. A PD is about FI's. As we shall see, however, FI's are precisely what constitute the common ground needed for the controversial conversation to take place.[4] Therefore, if there is a disagreement about FI's there can be no common ground. The conclusion is that PD is impossible. If there is philosophical disagreement concerning FI's, and there certainly can be, the result is not *dialegesthai,* but *polemos,* polemical speech, or silence, either of the friendly, i.e., mutually tolerant and respectful sort, or not. This particular species of philosophical conversation, which as we shall see is exactly what Montefiore and Smith are advocating, is possible only in its "insular" variety.

The immediate ambiguity in what I have said lies in what I mean by an FI when I use that phrase to define philosophy. In Part II I'll give an example, but before doing that I want to pose a series of questions. What happens if, as is likely, a particular reader of this essay disagrees with my definition of philosophy? He could, for example, agree with my general definition but disagree with the list of FI's that I later propose. What he considers to be an FI may not be on my list. On the one hand, prima facie he and I, as philosophers, have nothing to say to one another. We've agreed that philosophy is about FI's but we don't have one in common. On the other hand, he might say, "We don't have an FI in common. Let's talk about that. What do you think an FI is? Defend your list."

In other words, it seems that he and I might disagree about our list of FI's, but discuss our disagreement. This entails our entering into a "meta-philosophical dialogue" (MPD) where we each suspend our loyalty to certain philosophical issues and instead discuss what an issue itself is. What kind of dialogue would this be? Having suspended our presuppositions we would have entered a "neutral" realm of discourse. However, even here there is still need for a common ground making the discourse possible. First we would have to agree to the proposition, "it is good to suspend one's fundamental presuppositions." But this simply exemplifies the problem, for it is at least possible that this proposition expresses an FI. Clearly there can be no PD about it. If I disagree with it I cannot argue with my reader, for if I did then I would have suspended my fundamental presupposition, i.e., that one ought not to suspend one's presuppositions, and thereby would have agreed with him. The issue cannot be argued without being begged. To debate the issue requires a common ground which, upon being established, immediately renders the debate superfluous.

One might object and say this is a rather drastic view of things or that my choice of an FI in the preceding paragraph was not appropriate. However, even if we dispense with the preceding paragraph, there are other problems. If my reader and I enter into an MPD we must agree first, on the rules governing it and, second, on the criteria for adjudicating it. How does one legitimately argue for one's chosen FI? Can one use foul language, cite poetry, or scream hysterically? Are there a list of informal fallacies that cannot be broken? Must the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) be obeyed? We cannot enter into an MPD unless we agree on its rules. Furthermore, we must agree what determines when progress has been made in the course of the MPD, in other words, its criteria. We need, to quote Rorty, "a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict."[5]

However, I suggest that these issues, agreement on which is needed in order to constitute the common ground making the MPD possible, are fundamental. The best example is the PNC which will be discussed in Part II. The criteria for determining what an FI is must be as equally fundamental as that which they are meant to judge. If this is the case, then the hope of the MPD of operating in a neutral realm free from judgment upon what is

an FI has been squashed. Similarly, another hope that would be eliminated would be that invested in the notion of a "method" that could be employed to resolve this dilemma. One could state, "if two partners in a discussion disagree on first principles but share a common commitment to the same method for resolving the dispute, PD is possible."[6] This is fallacious since commitment to a method implies commitment to a conception of rationality and thus agreement on FI's.

To summarize: assume there is agreement that PD's are about FI's. Assume there is disagreement about what the FI's are. Two things are possible. Either we immediately stop talking or we attempt to adjudicate our disagreement through an MPD. But the latter option has been shown to be impossible, for it recapitulates the dilemma involving FI's. Therefore, in both cases PD is impossible.

Rather than disagree with my list of FI's one could instead disagree with my very characterization of a PD. This is the tack Richard Rorty would take (and has taken in a personal letter responding to this essay). He differentiates Philosophy, the traditional or Platonic guest for knowledge of Truth and Goodness, and philosophy, the attempt (he quotes Sellars) "to see how things, in the broadest sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest sense of the term."[7] Without the capital "P" philosophy means conversation about issues which cannot and should not be called "fundamental." Rorty would accuse my definition of being Platonic and therefore subject to the long series of objections he has expounded in his most recent writings. Can he and I get into a PD in my sense of the term? Can we get into a "conversation" in his sense of the term?

The answer to the first question is no. I think there are FI's and he does not. Two situations are possible. Perhaps he will discuss my choice of an FI in the name of tolerance and collegial assistance. Although I am a Platonist he will assist me, for example, when I get stumped on the paradoxes involved in the "third man argument." Is this a PD? No, for there is no real, no "serious" disagreement about the issue in question. Rorty cannot take a position on this issue, for it is a traditional FI and he is devoted explicitly to the elimination of these from the philosopher's repertoire. Again, he might talk with me, but our talk has no more status than talking about Rembrandt with the local art historian or about Norman Mailer with a literary critic. He will not make a

commitment to resolving the issue: he does not believe the issue is resolvable or truly worth pursuing.

Could he and I get into a PD on this question: are there or are there not FI's? No, for this issue itself is fundamental. A positive or a negative answer to it would constitute a philosophical position and would represent a quest for an old-fashioned Truth.[8] Someone who denies the possibility of FI's surely cannot discuss this denial philosophically, for immediately upon doing so he has contradicted himself.

The answer to my second question, can Rorty and I get into a "conversation" in his sense?, is also no, and for many of the same reasons. A Rortian "conversation" implies belief that there are no real FI's. I believe there are. Therefore I, as a Philosopher, cannot participate seriously in a conversation which, in my view, is and always will be less than fundamental. What would be the point? I would, of course, attempt to persuade him that there are FI's, but if he is consistent then he will not seriously defend his denial. The word "seriously" is crucial here. Its opposite is "playfully." Both will be discussed below.

To summarize again: I offered a definition of a PD. We might agree that it is accurate. If so, we might then either agree or disagree about the list of FI's. If we agree on this, there is no PD. If we disagree, there is no PD. Finally, we might simply disagree about my initial definition of a PD. If so, there is no PD.

This may seem a bit extreme. One might say, "Of course we can talk about FI's, even if we disagree. You listen to me and I to you. There will be mutual respect and attentiveness." So we talk. After having listened, my interlocutor might say to me, "That was interesting. I totally disagree, but I've enjoyed and even benefited from listening to you. Thank you."

Was this a PD? No. Three points are relevant. First, there is a mutually agreed-upon respectfulness here. Also there must be enough of a common vocabulary and a shared conception of what is significant discourse so that both parties understand one another. This itself might constitute a very fundamental agreement. This is not what is most important in this case, for what we have here is actually tantamount to "philosophical silence" between the interlocutors. We each affirm the other's right to have and express views on various issues and so we are not faced with a literal silence. From a philosophical perspective, however, we have not entered into a conversation challenging the other on his

ground. We distance ourselves from one another. A PD, since it is philosophical, implies pursuit and commitment to that pursuit. If there is merely a friendly distance and not a shared attempt at resolution of the issue there is no PD. The fact that you say, and even say sincerely, "thank you" to me, i.e., the fact that you actually benefited from listening to my presentation, in no way implies that we had a PD. You might be using my position simply as a means for testing yours. These types of conversations often do occur and they are genuinely beneficial, but they are not, given my definition of a PD, philosophical dialogues.

There is another possibility here. After having listened to me one might say, "You know, you're right. I'm wrong. I'll come over to your side. Thank you." A less extreme version of this would be, "You know, you're right about that point. I'll modify my position to take your point into account. Thank you." Are either of these a PD? They certainly seem to be. In fact, this is exactly what appears to be the hope of Smith or Montefiore: an exchange culminating in a moment of learning. However, neither is a PD. The first represents didactic persuasion, or simply instruction. What occurs here involves an evolution and a transformation on the part of one of the interlocutors. The conversation begins in disagreement. But in the course of listening to my interlocutor's views I decide (or realize, or see) that they are superior to mine. Clearly for this to occur there must be some point of agreement. Once this point is reached the PD, if there had actually been one, ceases to occur. But was there a PD before that moment? No. I was listening as my interlocutor stated her views. I was silent and then I realized she was right and came to agree. Is this cumulative conversation, i.e., the conversation before the point of agreement, the point itself and the subsequent conversation, a PD? No. The question I am asking is whether it is possible for representatives of two "basically different outlooks and approaches" to converse. The case of didactic persuasion is very possible and highly desirable, but it does not conform to the PD as described. What is at issue here is whether two people who disagree with one another can continue to converse while maintaining their fundamentally divergent positions. In a didactic conversation the divergence at some moment vanishes. The fact that we have such conversations gives us all the more reason to talk to one another. In no way is this essay intended to undermine our belief in the goodness of a great deal of philosophical exchange.

What it does intend to do is to demonstrate that in a highly restricted, although critical, case, that involving fundamental disagreement, we cannot in fact continue to converse. As we shall see, the debate that Smith and others hope will occur is an example of just this case.

In the second case of my modifying my position to take into account the good points my interlocutor has made, we again don't have a genuine PD. This situation is very much like the one described above, namely, that of self-testing or, more drastically put, of honing one's weapons for future use.

Two potentially damaging objections to what I have argued require comment. First, one might claim that I have offered (or even stipulated) a definition of a PD that is so narrow as to reduce it to triviality. Alternatively formulated, my thesis is merely analytically true or tautologous and I am running around in logical circles. There is, I concede, a kind of logical triviality to my argument. However, I insist that this is not equivalent to philosophical triviality. If or when PD is about FI's grave problems ensue, ones that ought to give rise to reflection on that mode of thought which does attempt to think fundamentally. In this essay I have explicitly narrowed the focus of my concern (and my definition of a PD) in order to permit a view of what occurs when this mode of thinking is brought into the arena of philosophical conversation or debate. It may seem objectionable to limit the term "philosophical dialogue" to the specific kind of conversation I am analyzing here. I do so precisely to draw attention to the use of this term in the context Smith and Montefiore suggest, and to provoke a critical response to the project they propose. This should become apparent in Part II.

The second objection is that it might be possible to agree on an FI and, nevertheless, continue to disagree on other FI's. (Obviously, this is a restatement of the first objection.) Can an agreement occur on one level and then become the common ground, making possible a fundamental disagreement? No. The reason for this is that issues are hierarchical with respect to their fundamentalness. Genuinely fundamental issues can be defined as those which and only those which establish common ground. Thus, if PD were to occur there would have to be agreement on FI's, which is a contradiction. If such agreement does occur, any subsequent disagreement will be over an issue less than fundamental, and therefore discussion of it will not be a PD. To make this point clearer I need Aristotle's assistance.

## II

The name Aristotle gives to that discipline which studies the most fundamental of issues is "first philosophy" (*Metaphysics* 1026a24),[9] sometimes simply called "wisdom" (*Meta.* 981b29-30). Its subject matter is "first principles and causes." As opposed to all other *epistemai* which "cut off" (*Meta.* 1003a25) some portion of being and study it this discipline is not partial: it and only it is truly fundamental, for only it gets to the bottom of all things and this bottom is the cause or principle of all other things. This is the study of being qua being.[10]

In Book IV of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle raises the question, does the study of being qua being also study "what are called in mathematics the axioms"? (1005a20). An axiom is one of several kinds of "starting points" (*archai*) that Aristotle discusses in the *Posterior Analytics,* which is the study of demonstrative science (71b20 ff.). "Starting points" in general are those propositions needed for a demonstration to take place. They cannot be demonstrated for they make demonstration itself possible. (See 71b27-28 and *Nichomachean Ethics* 1140b31 ff.) They must be accepted by some other mode of knowledge, be it intuition, induction, or dialectic, without proof. These starting points are either subject specific or general and relevant to many subjects. The most general are like what Euclid called "common notions," a frequently cited example of which is "if equals are subtracted from equals the remainders are equal."[11] These can be called the axioms and are what "the man who is to learn anything whatever must have" (72a17-18).

It is because axioms pertain to all studies that they are fundamental. They constitute the ground upon which any given science arises. "They belong to all things which are and not to any given particular genus in separation from the rest. Everyone uses them" (*Meta.* 1005a23-25). It is for this reason that it is the task of the first philosopher, he who studies being qua being and not just a part of being, also to study the axioms.

The most "certain" or "secure" (*bebaiotates* 1005b24) of all these principles is the Principle of Non-Contradiction. "For it is impossible at the same time the same thing both to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same way" (1005b19–20). This is the most fundamental of axioms for it is the rock bottom principle which constitutes the grounds of rational discourse itself. "All men who demonstrate refer back to this ulti-

mate *doxa*" (1005b34). The use of *doxa*, often translated as opinion, is rather extraordinary here so I shall leave it in the original Greek.

The PNC, with the question of being qua being (which is ultimately formulated as the question of *ousia*) is the most fundamental issue for Aristotle. Can it be debated? Can someone deny the truth of the PNC and then argue with one who affirms it? If so and only if so will a PD be possible.

The first point is that, obviously enough, the PNC cannot be directly proven. Any attempt to do so would beg the question immediately, for the PNC is the basis of all "proof procedures" and the attempt to prove it would require assuming it. Hence, there is no possibility of a PD which issues in a direct proof of the truth of the item debated.[12]

Aristotle states that the PNC can only be defended "elenchically" (1006a13). What this means is that the denier of the PNC will be refuted in the midst of attempting to defend his position; he will be forced to deny his initial thesis.[13] The only requirement that Aristotle makes upon his opponent is that he "say something significant" (*semainein*), both to himself and to the other member of the dialogue (1006a22). Once this occurs, however, the dialogue terminates. For simply by stating something significant the denier has actually affirmed the PNC. Why? The PNC, for Aristotle, is the foundation for all significant discourse. The denier has affirmed that some single attribute, in this case "false," applies to some subject, the PNC, and *not* its opposite. His defense of his position rests on this. But it is just this dependence that destroys his argument. He has obeyed the PNC in the name of rejecting it. He should have said, "the PNC is both true and false." However, if he had, it would have been a meaningless statement, for he would no longer have had a discernible position to defend.

The elenchic refutation, then, presents the denier of the PNC with two options: either say nothing significant in defense of his position (in which case he is indistinguishable from a vegetable; 1006a15) or immediately be refuted upon articulating a significant defense. In both cases there is no PD. What this means is that for Aristotle it is impossible to enter into a dialogue about the most fundamental of philosophical issues.[14]

The remainder of Book IV is a series of arguments intended to defend the PNC. Most take the form of a reductio ad absurdum.

They begin by assuming the denial of the PNC and draw the consequences of that denial, consequences Aristotle finds totally unacceptable.

In the first such argument Aristotle begins by asserting, "it is clear that this very thing, at any rate, is true, that the term 'to be' or 'not to be' means something definite" (1006a29). The term "man," for example, means one thing: let this be "two-footed animal." If this is the case then in the statement, "X is a man," being two-footed is what being a man means about X. If X is a man then X is two-footed and is not not two-footed. The predication refers to and therefore means something definite. If this were not the case, then when I said "X is a man" it could not be determined what I was talking about. That to which the predication referred would be indefinite and as a result there could be no discourse significant both to myself and the person to whom I was speaking.[15] To state Aristotle's general formula: *to gar me hen semainein outhen semainein estin.* "For not to speak significantly of some one thing is not to speak significantly at all" (1006b7). Denial of the PNC implies that it is possible to have significant discourse without there being any restriction to the number of true predications attributed to any given subject. Therefore denial of the PNC implies that it is possible *semainein* (to speak significantly) without *semainein hen* (speaking significantly of one thing), which for Aristotle is absurd.

Aristotle's reasoning sounds circular here and in a way it is. He begins with a particular conception of significant discourse and then shows that rejection of the PNC, which establishes the nature of that discourse, leads to absurdity, the absurdity being that there is no longer any significant discourse. The circularity here may not, however, be vitiating. The point is that if the issue is what counts as legitimately significant discourse the argument must beg the question: that mode of discourse must itself be used in order to establish itself as significant. As mentioned in Part I, the rules governing any given discourse constitute an FI. For example, must *onomata* (terms) signify one definite thing in order to be legitimate or can they be indefinite? Answering yes or no establishes the nature of the discourse that is to occur, a discourse which must (to quote Smith) be "insular" in that it cannot converse philosophically with a position disagreeing with it. There can be no PD concerning what Aristotle thinks it means to *semainein*.

Another argument is that if the PNC is denied then the doctrines of *ousia* and *to ti en einai* (substance and essence, to use the two standard but unilluminating translations) are also denied (1007a23). There would no longer be any possibility of an essential predication, since the contrary to that predication would be equally appropriate. All predication, therefore, would be accidental. If there is to be such a thing as "being essentially man" this must be different from "not being a man." If the two are not different, i.e., if the PNC is denied, then there can be no essential predication. In sum, the PNC is, for Aristotle, the ultimate regulator of predication, which, in order to be significant, must be definite and stable. Without it "anything goes," since certain predications, essential ones, lose their privileged status. To say anything goes means that without the PNC there would be no articulable substance which can be identified as the recipient of essentially true predications: there would be no *proton kath hou,* no "first of which," no primary subject of predication.[16] Hence there would be no such predications (1007a35).[17]

Yet another way to put this point is that if the PNC is denied there will be univocally truthful propositions. All things which seem true will be counted as true (1009a14). This situation could be termed relativism, since things which seem true seem true to someone. Therefore the one denying the PNC "makes all things relative" (1011a21).

Again, there is a aura of circularity to all of Aristotle's arguments. He himself mentions this possibility early in the chapter (see 1006a17–22 and 1008b1–2). The pattern seems to be this: the PNC must be true because, if it is not, then significant discourse *as Aristotle understands it* (namely, as regulated predication interconnected with a metaphysics of *ousia* understood as the *proton kath hou*), is destroyed. Aristotle presupposes the nature of significant discourse that the PNC guarantees in order to guarantee the truth of the PNC. But what if his interlocutor simply rejects that version of significant discourse (and its attendant metaphysics) and admits he cannot argue with Aristotle without being refuted? What if he has no interest in arguing with Aristotle, but would rather do other things, such as sing Dionysian dithyrambs or record the social conditions of various historical epochs? Even worse, what if he totally ignores the challenge to argument? Aristotle gets abusive and calls him a "vegetable." Hardly the most "rational" of responses and one which, I believe, explains why he

refers to the PNC as the "ultimate *doxa*." The PNC needs to be believed: there can be no argument establishing it nor philosophical dialogue defending it.

What I hope is becoming clear is that the consequences Aristotle sees as following upon a rejection of the PNC themselves constitute a philosophical position on an FI. In fact, they represent exactly the position with which Smith and Montefiore and Rorty hope to converse. I am referring to post-Nietzschean continental philosophy as best represented by Derrida. The point I'm trying to make is that a PD between this position and others truly different from it is impossible for reasons I stated in Part I and which Aristotle states in *Metaphysics,* Book IV.

Derrida states very clearly in *Of Grammatology* that he is aware of the enormous gulf that separates him from the traditional version of *logos* or significant discourse, which he calls "logocentrism."[18] This is based upon a "metaphysics of presence," i.e., a metaphysics that makes central the Aristotelian *proton kath hou,* namely, *ousia.* In Derrida's account logocentrism implies the primacy of the voice, which in turn implies direct access to that which is present simply and essentially as itself. Following Aristotle's *On Interpretation,* spoken words are symbols of mental experiences, which in turn are immediate representations of things themselves. "Voice is close to the signified . . . whether it is determined strictly as sense or more loosely as thing" (11). In offering an alternative, that is, non-phonetic, account of signification, he says, "if the non-phonetic moment menaces the history and the life of spirit and self presence in the breath, it is because it menaces substantiality, that other metaphysical name of presence and ousia" (26).

Derrida is clearly affirming just the position Aristotle describes as following upon the rejection of the PNC. Both Derrida and Aristotle know what they're doing. Aristotle is aware that, if the PNC is denied, a set of consequences follows which he finds objectionable and self-evidently unacceptable. It is not clear whether he thinks that an actual and serious philosophical position can be maintained which includes a denial of the PNC. He implies, on the one hand, that Heraclitus, the most eloquent denier and massive critic of the PNC, did not believe what he was saying, and yet he spends a good deal of time explaining how it is that men come to adopt the position involved with the denial of the PNC (see 1005b25 and 1009a23). Regardless, Aristotle knows

what it means both to accept and to reject the PNC as the fundamental condition of significant discourse. So too does Derrida know that his rejection of traditional logos implies rejection of the traditional metaphysics of *ousia* and presence that regulated the classical version of predication. He knows he is heading towards a version of "unregulated" predication. The single word that best captures what Derrida means is "playful," which we might contrast with Smith's call for a "serious" (i.e., traditional) dialogue. The importance of play cannot be overemphasized in his thinking. It is a notion he inherits from Nietzsche, whom he rightly credits for making the first great move in the overthrow of traditional logos and metaphysics. "Nietzsche, far from remaining simply within metaphyiscs (with Hegel and as Heidegger wished) contributed a great deal to the liberation of the signifier from its dependence or derivation with respect to logos and the related concept of truth or the primary signified, in whatever sense that is understood" (19).

It should be noted here, in order to show how little the fundamental debate has changed, that Nietzsche himself was deeply in debt to Heraclitus, Aristotle's imagined interlocutor in Bk. IV. This is shown particularly well by fragment 52: "Time is a child playing a game of draughts; the kingship is in the hands of a child."[19] For Heraclitus, Nietzsche, and Derrida there is no stable and unchanging version of being; being is play or constant unregulated flux. The PNC loses its privileged status for these thinkers since there are no *ousiai* capable of admitting unequivocally and enduringly true predications.

It is with this position that Smith and Montefiore want English-speaking philosophers to converse. But, as Aristotle showed, this position represents a stand on the most fundamental of issues. It is impossible to argue with it.[20]

## III

I would like to close this paper with a brief look at the work of Richard Rorty. He no longer wants or affirms PD as I have defined it, but "conversation." Indeed, most of his recent work is devoted precisely to negating my definition of philosophy. Rorty too knows what he is doing. He knows that he is abandoning the traditional version of philosophical logos and its attendant metaphysics that were best expressed by Aristotle. He self-consciously

affirms many of the consequences that Aristotle saw as following upon a rejection of the PNC. Particularly he rejects the metaphysics of *ousia* and the notion of the mind as the apprehender of essences.

Like Aristotle, Rorty is aware that there can be no dialogue between truly divergent views on fundamental issues. The reason for this is that they are "incommensurable." As I stated on p. 150, two positions are commensurable if they can be brought under an agreed-upon set of rules determining what counts as significant discourse and what are the criteria which can settle the dispute. Rorty also uses the notion of a common ground.

> The dominating concern of epistemology is that to be rational, to be fully human . . . we need to be able to find agreement with other human beings. To construct an epistemology is to find the maximum amount of common ground with others. The assumption that an epistemology can be constructed is the assumption that such common ground exists (316).

He and I would seem to agree that common ground does not exist between truly divergent positions. As such I have claimed that PD is impossible. Since Rorty thinks that Philosophy is impossible, a fortiori he agrees with me on this. But at this point a strange, and I think misleading, kind of hope seems to infuse his discussion. Instead of an epistemologically inspired quest for rational foundations and common ground, Rorty urges the adoption of "hermeneutics."

> For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology . . . and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own . . . for hermeneutics inquiry is routine conversation (318).

It is this "conversation" (which I believe he misleadingly characterizes as Socratic)[21] that Rorty is determined to affirm. He wishes to get into conversations with strangers (319). He wishes to converse with all members of his university and not be restricted to the traditional philosophy department. The physicist, the art historian, and the poet all have equally legitimate claims to "philosophical" respectability and they must be invited to join the conversation.

There is much in Rorty's well-thought-out works that deserves

elaborate commentary. I only hope to make one point. There is at least one member of the university with whom Rorty cannot, in principle, converse: he who affirms traditional Philosophy. As I tried to show above, Rorty rejects the existence of FI's. He will not, of course, get into a traditional PD about his rejection. Nor, on the other hand, will the person who does affirm FI's get into a "conversation" with him. If I believe there are FI's, if I hold to the traditional conception of philosophy, then I must refuse the invitation into Rorty's conversation: it simply isn't "serious" enough for me. He might, as mentioned above, choose to pick up my "jargon" for a while, but clearly this is nothing other than a small, even playful, gesture of civility.

I think Rorty would agree with much of this. I think this is why he closes his book with the following statement:

> The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation (394).

I don't think Rorty takes this comment seriously enough. He insists that I do not insist that the conversation he plans be dominated by traditional issues. But my position is that those are the right issues. Rorty cannot converse with me. He must insist that I not speak. Presumably, I must do the same. His position and mine are incommensurable. We have no common ground of discourse. But he refuses, and must refuse, to approach my position hermeneutically, i.e., to adopt my jargon. What I think Rorty does not make clear enough is that, in fact, he is trying to persuade us that his version of edifying, hermeneutical, conversational philosophy is correct. In other words, he is doing something very traditional. He is too serious, too insistent, when he should approach this question with Derridean playfulness. Precisely like that most traditional of all philosophers, Aristotle, he must view the position which truly diverges from his own not as a stranger with whom he hopes to share a civil conversation, but as an enemy who must be silenced.

Rorty would object to the above on the grounds that, by making the choice be one between Derrida and Aristotle, I have falsely narrowed the range of philosophical possibilities. Ultimately he would side, not with Derrida, but with the pragmatists

who, while sharing many of the post-Nietzschean rejections of traditional Philosophy "rejected neither the Enlightenment's choice of the scientist as the moral example, nor the technological civilization which science had created. They wrote, as Nietzsche and Heidegger did not, in a spirit of social hope."[22] But does their (and Rorty's) hope have any status other than that of a particular *Stimmung?* If not, this becomes equivalent to saying that Heidegger and Nietzsche, and therefore Derrida, have a far more consistent position than does Rorty.[23]

The Rortian attempt to instill the spirit of conversation among us, just like Smith and Montefiore's call for a philosophical dialogue, is misguided. Rorty is not engaged in a new, edifying version of philosophy which avoids the pitfalls of the old. Like Aristotle, he is taking a stand on a fundamental issue: he is denying the existence of fundamental issues. He finds himself in exactly the same relationship with those who disagree with him as did Aristotle. No dialogue can bridge that gap; on this point he is surely right. But no "conversation" can make it whole and a sanguine prospect for the future. The situation is, and always has been, too serious.

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## Notes

1. Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association 56 (Sept. 1982): 6 and 18.

2. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. vii. There is a companion volume: *Modern German Philosophy,* Rudiger Bubner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

3. It is far from clear whether Plato actually thought there could be a philosophical dialogue, that is, a dialogue between philosophers. To argue that, in fact, no one, not Socrates, the Eleatic Stranger, nor Timeaus, ever gets into a dialogue with another philosopher is possible, but beyond the scope of this paper.

Here I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to my colleagues at Iowa State University. They were both supportive and critical of the work in this essay.

4. Professor William Robinson suggested to me that it is not FI's that constitute the common ground, but fundamental or first principles. An FI comes into play when a fundamental principle becomes a matter of controversy or simply of discussion. Since I am here most concerned with the nature and limitations of philosophical discourse I will retain my usage of the term FI, while keeping in mind that it is inextricably bound to the notion of a fundamental principle.

5. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 16. Hereafter, when citing from this work, I simply will list the page number.

6. This was stated by my colleague Tony Smith, who had Habermas very much in mind.

7. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xiv.

8. Of course, this is to call into question Rorty's entire project. Is it self-referential? Shouldn't he be getting into "conversations" with strangers and not writing philosophical arguments such as he has?

9. All citations are from the Loeb editions. Translations are my own. Again, I simply indicate page numbers.

10. I obviously oversimplify. I totally ignore the question of Aristotelian theology. Exactly what subject qualifies as fundamental for Aristotle needs to be explained more fully.

11. See H. Lee, "Geometrical Method and Aristotle's Account of First Principles," *Classical Quarterly* 29 (1935): 113–24.

12. R. M. Dancy in *Sense and Contradiction: A Study in Aristotle* (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1975) disagrees with this. See n. 16, below. In addition he makes it clear that the PNC is not a rule of inference. "If it is a rule at all, it tells you what to reject, or what not to accept. Then it can be compounded with rules of inference (modus tollens, say) to give other rules of inference (reductio ad absurdum). But then it is not something on which every inference depends" (11). Dancy's work contains numerous detailed observations concerning virtually every step in Aristotle's argument and I thank Professor Rorty for suggesting it to me.

13. See Dancy, 14–21 for a discussion concerning the nature of this argument.

14. Since it now seems that only *ousia,* or the PNC, represents a truly fundamental issue, one might ask, "is there only one FI for Aristotle?" I am tempted by this possibility but not yet prepared to argue for it here.

15. It is here that Dancy believes that there is a direct proof for the PNC. It would run something like this: (1) The opponent says "W." He concedes (2) "W" signifies something. (3) He concedes that "W" signifies S. (4) He agrees that if anything is a "W" it is an S. (5) It is not possible that something is a "W" and not be an S. Therefore, (6) it is not possible for anything to be a W and not be a W. Dancy's full argument is found on pp. 29–34.

16. I follow Ross' acceptance of Alexander's emendation here: *katholou* is surely wrong.

17. Another version of the "anything goes" thesis is simply to state that a contradiction entails everything and anything. Suppose P and not-P. Then P. Then either P or Q. But not-P. Therefore Q. Dancy discusses the limits of this strategy on pp. 13 and 15.

18. All citations from Derrida are from *Of Grammatology,* trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 13. Hereafter, I simply put page numbers in parentheses.

19. H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds., *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* 6th ed. (Berlin: Wendmann, 1951), Vol. 2, p. 162. See also *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks,* trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1962), pp. 50 ff.

20. A. J. Cascardi, in "Skepticism and Deconstruction," *Philosophy and Literature* 8 (1984): 1–15, has shown that deconstruction cannot be assimilated even into the position of skepticim, the limiting case to which the traditional philosopher can respond.

21. See "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism.* I believe this characterization is misleading because conversations into which Socrates enters precisely involve a commitment to a conception of FI's as here described.

22. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism,* p. 161.

23. My criticism of Rorty here is very much the same as Derrida directed towards Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (trans. Richard Howard. New York: Random House, 1965). In commenting on Foucault's effort to write "an archaeology of the silence" that is madness, his effort to discuss rationally what is essentially irrational, Derrida says, "the trap set by classical reason to catch madness and which can now trap Foucault" (Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference* [trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1978], p. 34). In other words, Foucault, much like Rorty, set out to move beyond classical reason, but was unable truly to escape it. As Derrida states, "The unsurpassable, unique, and imperial grandeur of the order of reason, that which makes it not just another actual order or structure . . . is that one cannot speak out against it except by being for it" (p. 35).