

Nicholas Rescher
Studies in 20th Century Philosophy

NICHOLAS RESCHER COLLECTED PAPERS

Volume I

Nicholas Rescher

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PREFACE

This book collects together studies offering a new perspective on various aspects of 20th century philosophy. Written over the past dozen years or so, these essays involve developments in which I have been personally involved as a participant. The organizing principle employed here reflects the intensity of this involvement, increasingly moving as the book progresses, from what is more general to what is the more autobiographically specific in relation to myself. After all, the book is not a general account of 20th century philosophizing but merely a sketch of some episodes in which I was in some way involved.

One brief explanatory apology. In a few instances some redundancy in the discussion will be unavoidable where the same persons or issues recur in different and distinct contexts. Such repetition is the price of self-contained readability.

I am grateful to Estelle Burris for her able and efficient help in putting this material into publishable shape.

Nicholas Rescher
Pittsburgh, PA
June 2005

Chapter One

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY AT THE CENTURY'S END

1. BACKGROUND

Philosophizing in the United States has developed apace over the past century and has never been in as flourishing a condition as today, with philosophy firmly established as a subject of instruction in thousands of institutions of higher learning. However, the nature of the philosophical enterprise is changing, with the earlier heroic phase of a small group of important thinkers giving way to a phase of disaggregated production in a scattered industry of diversified contributors.

Already in Colonial times there were various writers who treated philosophical subjects: theologians like Jonathan Edwards and philosophically inclined statesmen like Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson. But such talented amateurs exerted no influence on other identifiable philosophers. More systematic developments had to await the growth of the university system in the 19th Century, when academic philosophy was imported from Europe, with idealists dominant at Harvard and Scottish thought dominant at Princeton, while Kantians were prominent in Chicago, Hegelians in St. Louis, and Thomists at the Catholic institutions. But even late into the 19th century America's most significant philosophers operated outside the academic system, where eccentric thinkers like R.W. Emerson, John Fiske, C.S. Peirce, and Orestes Brownson never managed to obtain a secure foothold. However, with the rising importance of the natural sciences, philosophy became the linch-pin that linked them to the liberal arts. The Harvard of James and Palmer and such distinguished imports as Santayana and Münsterberg, was a first harbinger of this, with philosophy here closely joined to psychology. The influx of the scientifically trained philosopher refugees who crossed the Atlantic after the rise of Nazism greatly intensified this linkage of philosophy to the sciences.

The era between the two world wars saw a flourishing in American academic philosophy, with people like John Dewey, C.I. Lewis, R.B. Perry, W.P. Montague, A.O. Lovejoy, Ernest Nagel and many others making substantial contributions throughout the domain. And after the second World War there was an enormous burgeoning of the field. Numerous important contributors to philosophy were now at work in America, and the reader will find individual articles on dozens of them in this Companion.

However, no characteristically American school or style of philosophizing has developed, excepting one, namely pragmatism as originated by C. S. Peirce and popularized by William James. The pragmatists saw the validity of standards of meaning, truth, and value as ultimately rooted in consideration of practical efficacy—of “what works out in practice.” Though highly influential at home, this approach met with a very mixed reception abroad. Bertrand Russell, for example, objected that beliefs can be useful but yet plainly false. And various Continental philosophers have disapprovingly seen in pragmatism’s concern for practical efficacy—“for success” and “paying off”—the expression of characteristically American social attitudes: crude materialism and naive democratic populism. Pragmatism was thus looked down upon as reflecting a quintessentially crass American tenor of thought—a philosophical expression of the American go-getter spirit with its success oriented ideology and a manifestation of a populist reaction against the chronic ideological controversies of European philosophizing—epistemological rationalism vs. empiricism, ontological materialism vs. idealism, etc. (Americans, de Toqueville wrote, seek to *échapper à l’esprit de système*.)

2. MATTERS OF SCALE

Perhaps the most striking feature of professional philosophy in North America at the close of the 20th century is in scope and scale. The historian Bruce Kuklik entitled his informative study of academic philosophy in the U.S., *The Rise of American Philosophy: 1860-1930*, even though his book dealt only with the Department of Philosophy of Harvard University.¹ This institution’s prominence on the American philosophical scene in the early years of the century was such that this parochial-seeming narrowing of focus to one single department—with its half-dozen or so philosophers—was not totally absurd for the period at issue. But today it would certainly be so.

¹ Bruce Kuklik, *The Rise of American Philosophy: 1860-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

The American Philosophical Association, to which most U.S. academic practitioners of the discipline belong, has over 8,000 members, and the comprehensive *Directory of American Philosophers* lists well over 10,000 philosophers affiliated to colleges and universities in the USA and Canada. Admittedly, this profession is small potatoes compared with other academic enterprises; the Scientific Research Society *Sigma Xi* currently has a membership of more than 100,000 scientists, the Modern Language Association has more than 32,000 members. All the same, a small town of not inconsiderable size could be populated exclusively with contemporary North American academic philosophers. To be sure, its demographics would be rather unusual. Only just under twenty percent would be women, and Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans would (each) constitute just over one percent of the population. And its political orientation is decidedly liberal and capital-D Democratic. (Yet the fact remains that the condition of the American philosophy professoriate is still very much a matter of live white males teaching about dead ones.²) The social classes above and below the middle are underrepresented in this community, and a disproportionate fraction of its members come from families of professional status. Moreover, for reasons that require a deeper sociological analysis than can be attempted here, the profession attracts a disproportionately larger fraction of Catholics (generally practicing ones), of Jews (generally nonpracticing ones), and of immigrants. In general, American philosophers of the present era in general do not come from home backgrounds where the high matters of literacy or artistic interests played a significant role, and their own intellectual formation is more often that of a humanistic academic technician than that of an intellectual of the traditional European type.³

In an academic discipline of American philosophy's present size, two different—and sometimes opposed—tendencies are at work to create a balance of countervailing forces. The one is an impetus to separateness and differentiation—the desire of individual philosophers to “do their own

² Of the three top “Ivy League” institutions (Yale, Harvard, and Princeton), none presently has more than one female full professor in its philosophy department. And this state of affairs is in general rather the rule than the exception.

³ See D. D. Karnos and R. G. Schoemaker (ed.), *Falling in Love With Wisdom: [62] American Philosophers Talk about Their Calling*. From this interesting anthology one must conclude that while American philosophers are driven, surprisingly many are not driven by that curiosity and wonder which, as Aristotle has it, lies at the core of philosophizing.

thing,” to have projects of their own and not be engaged in working on just the same issues as everyone else. The other is an impetus to togetherness—the desire of philosophers to find companions, to be able to interact with others who share their interest to the extent of providing them with conversation partners and with a readership of intellectual cogeners. The first, centrifugal tendency means that philosophers will fan out across the entire reach of the field—that most or all of the “ecological niches” within the problem-domain will be occupied. The second, centripetal tendency means that most or all of these problem-subdomains will be multiply populated—that groups or networks of kindred spirits will form so that the community as a whole will be made up of sub-communities united by common *interests* (more prominently than by common opinions), with each group divided from the rest by different priorities as to what “the really interesting and important issues” are. Accordingly, the most striking aspect of contemporary American philosophy is its fragmentation. The scale and complexity of the enterprise is such that if one seeks in contemporary American philosophy for a consensus on the problem agenda, let alone for agreement on the substantive issues, then one is predestined to look in vain. Here theory diversity and doctrinal dissonance are the order of the day, and the only interconnection is that of geographic proximity.⁴ Such unity as American philosophy affords is that of an academic industry, not that of a single doctrinal orientation or school. Every doctrine, every theory, every approach finds its devotees somewhere within the overall community.⁵ On most of the larger issues there are no significant majorities. To be sure, some uniformities are apparent at the localized level. (In the San Francisco Bay area one’s philosophical discussions might well draw on model theory, in Princeton possible worlds would be brought in, in Pittsburgh pragmatic themes would be prominent, and so on.) But in matters of

⁴ See the essay by Bruce Kuklick “Does American Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” in Marcus G. Singer (ed.), *American Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series, No. 19), pp. 177-189.

⁵ The scattershot nature of recent American philosophy is illustrated—among innumerable examples—by the 1970 volume entitled *The Future of Metaphysics* edited by Robert E. Wood (Chicago, Quadrangle Books). Not only are the seventeen contributors disagreed as to the future of metaphysics, they are in dissensus about its past as well: what the definitive tasks of the field are, which practitioners afford the best role-models, and which approaches have proved to be the most promising.

method and doctrine there are many different schools and tendencies, and few, if any, all-pervasively dominant trends. Balkanization reigns supreme.

The centrifugal tendencies are, however, in a way counterbalanced by the centripetal ones. North American philosophers appear to be exceedingly gregarious by standards prevailing anywhere else. Apart from the massive American Philosophical Association, there presently exist some 120 different philosophical societies in the USA and Canada,⁶ twenty-three of which claim over 500 members. In the main, these societies are of three types: subdisciplinary (for example, Metaphysical Society of America, Philosophy of Science Association), geographic (for example, Minnesota Philosophical Society, Virginia Philosophical Association), and person-oriented (for example, Leibniz Society of North America, C.S. Peirce Society). These societies provide the lifeblood of interpersonal interaction among American philosophers. Their aggregate effect is a vast network of meetings and conferences that keep colleagues of common interest in ongoing interaction with one another. Even the most energetic and affluent of persons would find it next to impossible to attend all the professional conferences and symposia that would be of interest to an even modestly versatile philosopher. Some of the bigger of these societies adhere to large international bodies such as FISP (the International Federation of Philosophical Societies) or IUHPS (the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science). However, the activities of these UNESCO sponsored umbrella organizations have little impact on American philosophers and none on American philosophy.

3. THE AGENDA

The extent to which significant, important, and influential work is currently produced by academics outside the high-visibility limelight has not been sufficiently recognized. For better or for worse, in the late twentieth century we have entered into a new philosophical era where what counts is not just a dominant elite but a vast host of lesser mortals. Great kingdoms are thus notable by their absence, and the scene is more like that of medieval Europe—a collection of small territories ruled by counts palatine and prince bishops. Scattered here and there in separated castles, a prominent individual philosophical knight gains a local following of loyal vassals or

⁶ See the *Directory of American Philosophers* published annually by the Philosophical Documentation Center of Bowling Green, Ohio, pp. 176-91.

dedicated enemies. But no one among the academic philosophers of today manages to impose their agenda on more than a minimal fraction of the larger, internally diversified community. Given that well over ten thousand academic philosophers are at work in North America alone, even the most influential of contemporary American philosophers is simply yet another—somewhat larger—fish in a very populous sea.

The fact is that those bigger fish do not typify what the sea as a whole has to offer. Matters of philosophical history aside, some of the salient themes and issues with which American philosophers are grappling at the present time are

- applied ethics: ethical issues in the professions (medicine, business, law, etc.);
- computer issues: artificial intelligence, “can machines think?”, the epistemology of information processing;
- rationality and its ramifications;
- social implications of medical technology (abortion, euphanasia, right to life, medical research issues, informed consent);
- feminist issues;
- social and economic justice, distributive policies, equality of opportunity, human rights;
- truth and meaning in mathematics and formalized languages;
- the merits and demerits of scepticism and relativism regarding knowledge and morality;
- the nature of personhood and the rights and obligations of persons.

None of these issues were put on the problem-agenda of present concern by any one particular philosopher. None arose out of a preoccupation with fundamental aspects of some already well-established issue. None arose out of one particular philosophical text or discussion. They blossomed forth like the leaves of a tree in springtime appearing in various places at

once under the formative impetus of the *Zeitgeist* of societal concern. The nature of American philosophy today is such that for the most part new ideas and tendencies have come to prominence not because of the influential impact of some specific contribution worker but because of the disaggregated effects of a host of writers working across a wide frontier of individual efforts. Philosophical innovation today is generally not the response to the preponderant effort of pace-setting individuals but a genuinely collective effort that is best characterized in statistical terms.

Agenda-enlargement is one of the most striking features of contemporary American philosophy. The pages of its journals and the programs of its meetings bristle with discussions of issues that would seem bizarre to their predecessors of earlier days and to present-day philosophers of other places. The fact that those many hundreds of philosophers are looking for something to do that is not simply a matter of re-exploring familiar ground has created a substantial population pressure for more philosophical *Lebensraum*.

The result of this agenda enlargement has been a revolutionizing of the structure of philosophy itself by way of taxonomic complexification. The current picture of taxonomic lay of the land in North America philosophy is thus vastly more complex and ramified than anything that has preceded it. The taxonomy of the subject has burst for good and all the bounds of the ancient tripartite scheme of logic, metaphysics and ethics. Specialization and division of labor runs rampant, and cottage industries are the order of the day. The situation has grown so complex and diversified that the most comprehensive recent English-language encyclopedia of philosophy⁷ cautiously abstains from providing any taxonomy of philosophy whatsoever. (This phenomenon also goes a long way towards explaining why no one has written a comprehensive history of philosophy that carries through to the present-day scene.⁸) Philosophy—which ought by mission and tradition

⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards (London and New York: Macmillan, 1967).

⁸ John Passmore's *Recent Philosophers* (La Salle, 1985) is as close as anything we have, but—as the very title indicates—this excellent survey makes no pretensions to comprehensiveness. In this direction an earlier multi-person survey went somewhat further, exemplifying what is the best and most that one can hope to obtain: Roderick M. Chisholm et. al., *Philosophy: Princeton Studies of Humanistic Scholarship in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964). Yet not only does this book attest to the fragmentation of the field—but it conveys (from its Fore-

to be an integration of knowledge—has itself become increasingly disintegrated. The growth of the discipline has forced it beyond the limits of feasible surveillance by a single mind. After World War II it becomes literally impossible for American philosophers to keep up with what their colleagues were writing.

The rapid growth of “applied philosophy”—that is, philosophical reflection about detailed issues in science, law, business, social affairs, computer use, and the like—is a striking structural feature of contemporary North American philosophy. In particular, the past three decades have seen a great proliferation of narrowly focussed philosophical investigations of particular issues in areas such as economic justice, social welfare, ecology, abortion, population policy, military defense, and so on. This situation illustrates the most characteristic feature of contemporary English-language philosophizing: the emphasis on detailed investigation of special issues and themes. For better or for worse, Anglophone philosophers have in recent years tended to stay away from large-scale abstract matters of wide and comprehensive scope, characteristic of the earlier era of Whitehead or Dewey, and nowadays incline to focus their investigations on issues of small-scale detail that relate to and grow out of those larger issues of traditional concern. The turning of philosophy from globally general, large-scale issues to more narrowly focused investigations of matters of microscopically fine-grained detail is a characteristic feature of American philosophy after World War II. Its flourishing use of the case-study method in philosophy is a striking phenomenon for which no one philosopher can claim credit—to a contemporary observer it seems like the pervasively spontaneous expression of “the spirit of the times.”

4. MATTERS OF ORIENTATION

So much for the problem agenda. But what of methodology and style? Pragmatism and applied philosophy apart, all of the dominant styles of American philosophy in the 20th century—analytic philosophy, scientific and logicist philosophizing, neo-Kantianism, phenomenology and “Continental” philosophizing at large—have all originated in Europe. As far as philosophical approaches are concerned, Emerson’s idea of an America moving beyond the dominance of European tendencies and traditions of

word onwards) the defeatist suggestion that whatever larger lessons can be extracted from an historically minded scrutiny of the substantive diversity of the contemporary situation are destined to lie substantially in the eyes of the beholder.

thought has not been realized and—given currently pervasive intellectual globalization—may never be. The extent to which American philosophy rests on European antecedents is graphically reflected in the great divide in the American Philosophical Association between the “Analysts” *and* the “Pluralists.” To all intents and purposes this split mirrored the opposition in the Germany of the 1920’s between the followers of Reichenbach and Carnap on the one side and those of Heidegger and Gadamer on the other, the one looking for inspiration and example to science (especially mathematics and physics) and the other to humanistic studies (especially literature and philology)—a duality of perspective which itself had deep roots in the philosophizing of 19th Century Germany with its opposed allegiances, respectively to the *Naturwissenschaften* (Fries, Balzano, Haeckel) and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Dilthey).

Outside the instructional context, philosophy also plays some role in various research centers that are affiliated to major universities, such as the National Humanities Center in the Research Triangle of North Carolina, the Center for Values and Social Policy at the University of Colorado, and the Center for Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh. Apart from colleges and universities, American philosophy gets a (very modest) slice of the academic research support pie through such U.S. federal programs as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. Moreover such privately funded providers of research support as the Guggenheim Fellowship Program or the MacArthur Foundation’s “Creative Genius” Program also on occasion support the work of philosophers. In North America, philosophy is securely entrenched in the academic scheme of things. Nevertheless, the share of philosophy-and-religion is less than two percent of the college book market in the US, less than one quarter of that of psychology.⁹ (In America, Freud and Co. have clearly won a signal cultural victory.)

One feature that distinguishes present-day activity in American academic philosophy from the situation at any earlier stage is the rise of historical studies. For in North America, research in the history of philosophy is currently in a remarkably active and flourishing state. Several hundred specialized books are published in this area each year—many of them of a level of technical expertise rarely attained in American contributions of an

⁹ These (somewhat outdated) figures come from Fritz Machlup, et al, *Information Through the Printed Word*, Vol. I (New York: Praeger, 1978), p. 238. There is no evidence that philosophy’s situation has improved since.

earlier era. There exist some dozen specialist journals in the field (including *Ancient Philosophy*, *Medieval Studies*, *Hume Studies*, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* and the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, among others). And there are also some dozen specialist societies, most of them dedicated to the work and thought of a single great thinker of former times, including Leibniz, Hume, Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Whitehead, and Santayana. One third of American philosophy Ph.D theses produced these days relate to historical issues.

It is, of course, possible and indeed necessary to distinguish between philosophers and philosophy professors—between those who are active contributors to the intellectual resources of the discipline and those who provide academic instruction in the field. But the fact is that in recent years the latter have largely become incorporated into the former group—that a growing professionalism based on more rigorous formal training and a “publish or perish” ethics in the academy has meant that the teaching staffs in American colleges are increasingly populated by people who are productive philosophers. For the fact is that American philosophers are quite productive. They publish well over 200 books per annum nowadays. And issue by issue they fill up the pages of over 175 journals. Given that almost 4,000 philosophical publications (books or articles) appear annually in North America, and a roughly similar number of symposium papers conference presentations and the like, the line between teaching and substantive contribution is anything but hard and fast. To be sure, the aggregate published output of philosophers—some 120,000 pages per annum—does not match that of other branches of the academic profession. (In 1987 alone, American scholars in English literature published 544 articles on William Shakespeare, 215 on John Milton, and 132 on Henry James.¹⁰) But even without such scholarly overkill, the productivity of American philosophy is an impressive phenomenon—though one could certainly debate the quality of this production. (This is not due to defective skill—the technical ability of philosophers seems better than ever—but rather to a penchant for concentrating on philosophically peripheral, nay often trivial issues whose main attraction is that they also preoccupy other philosophers.

¹⁰ Edward B. Fiske, “Lessons,” *The New York Times* (August 2, 1989), p. B8. At this rate, the annual output of Shakespearean scholarships is over six times as large as the collected works of the Bard himself.

Marshall McLuhan to the contrary notwithstanding, the book is still the key artifact of philosophizing. It continues to make a major impact, with works like W. V. Quine's *Word and Object*, Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* casting large ripples across the pond. Nevertheless, even monographic books are declining in import, with collections of a particular author's essays or lectures often exerting an influence no less substantial. (Donald Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* [Oxford, 1980] or Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Languages* [Oxford, 1982] are illustrations of this phenomenon.) And in the background looms the fact that the vast and diffuse journal literature is a formative force in present-day American philosophizing just as potent as the domain of books.

5. THE PROFESSION

What is distinctive in American philosophy today is less a matter of *product* than one of *process*. For it seems appropriate to characterize contemporary American philosophy as a substantial *industry*—with thousands of operatives, many hundreds of worksites (college departments), scores of training institutes (universities), and a prolific and diversified range of products, including not only classes but books, journals, congresses, conferences. Throughout, a high degree of scholarly competency and professionalism pervades the enterprise. Considering the quantity of philosophical writing that sees the light of print, its overall quality is respectably high—at any rate if one's standard gives weight to the technical dimension. (Depth of insight is another matter.) At any rate, the day of the philosopher as isolated thinker—the talented amateur with an idiosyncratic message—is effectively gone. (For better or for worse, an outsider along the lines of a Spinoza or a Nietzsche would find it near to impossible to get a hearing in the North American philosophical world of today.)

The recent statistics of Philosophy doctorates bring some interesting facts to light. The total number of doctorates awarded by institutions of higher learning in the USA has been relatively stable at around one-hundred thousand over the last years. But the production of philosophy doctorates has declined substantially (along with that of humanities Ph.D's in general). The proportionally increasing prominence of women among the new philosophy Ph.Ds has been a noteworthy phenomenon. But whatever victory this percentage gain represents for women seems a Pyrrhic

one, seeing that they are in process of securing a somewhat larger share of a profession that is declining probably in status and certainly in economic terms. (In the American context those factors are seldom far apart.)

Employment opportunities within the philosophy industry are reasonably good for those who meet its elaborate entrance qualifications. But as regards remuneration, the position of philosophers is typical of that of humanists in higher education. It is ironic that in a period when the real cost of higher education has risen dramatically, the average real pay of those who staff the activity has declined dramatically. (The reason lies in the fact that the size of the professoriate has expanded faster than the size of its undergraduate clientele, with a negative impact both on its pay and on its status.)

The growth of the profession, the massification of the system of higher education, and the eroding economic status of the professoriate all combine to make philosophy less of an elite endeavor than it used to be. This decline in elitism in American philosophy is illustrated in a graphic way when one considers the production of Ph.Ds in the departments of high prestige universities. Of the five principal “ivy league” institutions (Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania) only one (viz. Columbia) currently figures on the roster of North American philosophy departments most productive of Ph.Ds. From the standpoint of Ph.D. training, the most prominent contribution is made by the big U.S. state universities (Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Texas, and Wisconsin), and by the large Catholic institutions. However, the biggest single producer of philosophy Ph.Ds in North America is the University of Toronto. The main shortcoming of our flourishing *system* of higher education in philosophy lies in its very nature as such, which accentuates quantity over quality. Graduate programs are in general not inclined to judge competence by technical skill applied to minutiae rather than demanding actual contributions to the subject as such. As military academies produce managers rather than warriors, so philosophy programs produce problem solvers rather than philosophers.

The very size of the academic industry is intimidating and engenders humility. For the individual professional confronts the sobering thought: “Consider a thought experiment. Excise from American philosophy everything that is near and dear to you—every author and book and journal you actually read, every lecture you go to hear, every colleague you interact with. The result is still a large and thriving enterprise that has a healthy and active life of its own, irrespective of such an excision. The amputation

would make a difference, but nowise a fatal one. The process as a whole would proceed much as before.”

The size and scope of the academic establishment exerts a crucial formative influence on the nature of contemporary American philosophy. In the philosophical environment of the past, the role of the great figures was more prominent, and the writings of philosophers established a balance of indebtedness to “big names” as against “modest contributors” that was much more favorable to the former category than is the case today, when philosophical writers who make use of “the literature” are destined to take far more notice of the smaller fry simply because there are so many more of them.¹¹ In the past, the philosophical situation of academically developed countries could be described by indicating a few “giants” whose work towered over the philosophical landscape like a great mountain range, and whose issues and discussions defined the agenda of the philosophizing of their place and time. Once upon a time, the philosophical stage was dominated by a small handful of greats. Consider German philosophy in the 19th century, for example. Here the philosophical scene, like the country itself, was an aggregate of principalities—presided over by such ruling figures as Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and a score of other philosophical princelings. But in North America, this “heroic age” of philosophy is now a thing of the past.

6. TENDENCIES

Until around 1914, it was religion that exerted the dominant influence on philosophers writing in America. During the 1914-1960 era natural science served as the prime source of inspiration. But over the past generation the sources of inspiration have become greatly diversified. The stimulating essay by Richard Rorty on “Philosophy in America Today” (in *Consequences of Pragmatism* [Minneapolis, 1982], pp. 211-230) both describes and celebrates the post-war era’s shift from a scientific model of philosophizing to a political model where “literary culture” is what matters most, and people proceed in “the sense that nature and scientific truth are largely

¹¹ The process at issue relates to the principle known in the social sciences as Rousseau’s Law, maintaining that in a population of size n the number of high-visibility members stands as the square root of n . Compare the author’s, *Scientific Progress* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 96ff. On its telling, in a profession of 10,000 we would expect to find some widely recognized contributors.)

beside the point and that history is up for grabs” (pp. 228-9). But this tendentious account envisions an unrealistic uniformity. The fact is that at present philosophy is a garden where 100 flowers bloom. In recent years the source of influence has fragmented across the whole academic board. Some look for inspiration to psychology (especially to Freud), others to economics (from Marx to von Neumann), yet others to literature, or to law, or to . . . The list goes on and on. Contemporary American philosophy does not have the form of a histogram with a few major trends; it is a complex mosaic of many different and competing approaches.

Prominent examples of currently fashionable approaches are found in certain programmatic tendencies:

- to explicate the meaning of certain philosophical concepts by means of “truth” conditions—for example, free agency, or linguistic understanding,
- to explain human capacities (e.g., for knowledge or for understanding) in terms of models or analogies from computing machines and “artificial intelligence” considerations,
- to explain human rule-following practice in terms of social policies and norms,
- to explain human capacities (eg., for knowledge or for understanding) on the basis of evolutionary theories and Darwinian natural selection.

Each such program sets the stage for a diversified multi-participant effect—a little “cottage industry” as it were. Often as not, they result from the provocation of some individual’s or school’s exaggerated claim along some such lines as that “all evaluations simply express people’s attitudes” or “all communicatively significant features of human linguistic performances roots in social norms.”

For better or for worse, we have entered into a new philosophical era where what counts is not just a dominant elite but a vast host of lesser mortals. Principalities are thus notable in their absence, and the scene is more like that of medieval Europe—a collection of baronies. Scattered here and there in separated castles, a prominent individual gains a local following of loyal friends or enemies. But no one among the academic philosophers of