Rorty uses the abandonment of metaphysics as a means of disallowing difficult questions. Relativism is not a problem, because we do not seek objective moral grounding for liberalism. Rather, we begin where we are as members of western culture and develop methods of description which help answer moral questions, extend our sympathies, and foster "moral progress."

Yet, Rorty does offer arguments for his postideology. One is the feasibility of political allegiance without ideology through a common story, heritage. Another is the appeal to utilitarianism and empathy for others as criteria of an evolving society. His allegiance to Mill’s concept of the proper role of government is perhaps the most traditional liberal element in his view (63).

We are left without an answer as to why, if the private and public spheres are equally important, the public gains priority. Perhaps this is a by-product of Rorty’s belief in a general consensus about the nature of liberalism. It seems to me that answering this question requires that we decide whether we are primarily members of a community, or bearers of individual rights. While Rorty wants us to keep these two selves in a permanent tension, he seems to emphasize the communal. This, of course, is consistent with his view of the self as social “all the way down” (185). But it is not consistent with his view of a meaningful life as a search for autonomy through redescribing our lives in new vocabularies (42-43). I guess just asking these questions puts one outside the liberal tradition.

This is an interesting book in which Rorty works out his relationship to writers as diverse as Proust, Freud, Davidson, and Loyola. The discussion of Orwell is a particularly good illustration of fiction exhibiting the contingency of human history. And there is no excessive optimism about the future of liberalism.

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In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: 1979), Richard Rorty advises us to avoid reading so-called “edifying philosophers” as though they are offering us views “about how things are.” This he says would be “just poor taste,” but worse yet would be to compliment such alleged views as true. This would further offend: “it shows a lack of tact" (372).

These curious lessons in meta-philosophical etiquette come to mind in trying to assess the present volume which offers us a highly readable and sympathetic account of Rorty’s views. It is always regrettable when the effort to give support unintentionally
gives offense. Yet Kolenda has given us an account of Rorty's views presented as answers to questions first posed by the decidedly unedifying systematic philosopher Immanuel Kant; and his questions structure the text: "What an I know?" (Chapter 1); "What ought I to do?" (Chapter 2); and "What may I hope?" (Chapter 3) Although I think it the most outstanding feature of this work, Kolenda's narrative strategy, raises questions of the etiquette of philosophical interpretation to which I will return. But first let me offer a brief account of this presentation of Rorty.

What can I know? Kolenda seeks to reinterpret this question in terms of Rorty's notion of "coping." Rorty rejects the classical concept of knowledge as a truth discovered by the subject and justified by a demonstrable correspondence with a language-independent reality. He replaces it with an active process of creating new metaphors for coping with the world which is constituted by the unforced beliefs of the relevant linguistic community. This reformulation allows a unified and nonfoundationalist approach to Kant's questions because coping "inherently includes knowing, action, and hoping" (22). Coping points to a pragmatic activist orientation toward the world and includes a "strong interest in advancing knowledge, in helping it grow" (24). Why ought we seek to "introduce new vocabularies and to invent new paradigms" which may or may not "become useful in producing future knowledge?" (Kolenda 25). Perhaps it is because this concern with the growth of knowledge engages the existential project of self-creation "since one's being is coextensive with what one believes and desires" (25). This raises the second question, "what ought I to do?" since the "task of self-creation" (36) includes (but is not limited to) moral choice. The discussion moves to social and political philosophy and Rorty's promotion of "freedom and tolerance as values that make room for self-creation" (37). And here we see the outline of an answer to the question "what may I hope?" A commitment to the growth of knowledge and human growth involves us in the hope to see our efforts succeed and be carried forward by future generations. The desire to further the growth of knowledge democratically distributes the work of enriching and renewing our conversation, and we find liberal democracy endorsed as one object of hope inspired by the goal of "optimal human flourishing" (65). It is "the connection of knowledge with human growth" which prompts Kolenda to attach the label "humanistic pragmatism" to Rorty's views (25).

The final chapter opens with a discussion of some objections to Rorty which include responses to his rejection of realism, charges of lack of seriousness, relativism and conservation. Here is my only serious complaint with this work. Kolenda tells us that the "fears" of Rorty's critics "are either unfounded or rest on a misunderstanding" (91). I would prefer a more dialectical approach, but perhaps I am a less sympathetic reader.

I agree with Rorty's skeptical arguments against the possibility of justifying our beliefs in a way that will resolve the question of their truth value with finality. Yet Rorty, it
seems, dogmatizes his skepticism in his rejection of realism. Once the authoritarian claims of traditional justificatory epistemology are given up, there is no need to undermine the assumption of an objective truth or an external reality in order to preserve democratic access to the philosophical conversation. Skeptical modesty inspired by respect for the ideal of truth and the fact of human fallibility plus an eagerness for discussion will do.

The volume concludes with an interesting discussion of the practical implications of Rorty’s edifying project for the current and future practice of American philosophy.

Despite my complaint above, I think Kolenda has done a great service by bringing the discussion of Rorty’s philosophy closer to the tradition which he attempts to repudiate and revolutionize. I think it moderates and thereby democratizes conversation about the future direction of that conversation. To return to our earlier question: is it bad taste to put such foundation-seeking questions to anti-foundationalist Rorty? I think the question is always open; as Rorty himself asks “How then do we know when to adopt a tactful attitude and when to insist on someone’s moral obligation to hold a view?” (Rorty 372). Although he concedes that there is no way to answer this question—which I think is too restrictive in its posing of alternatives anyway—he does suggest a more polite approach which is to see “edifying philosophers as conversational partners” and to evaluate them in terms of “the practical wisdom necessary to participate in a conversation” (Rorty 372). I am not sure whether this is helpful. Indeed Kolenda does see in Rorty’s views a continuation of a conversation with Kant, that is as a response to his interrogatory. Does this make Rorty less edifying? Does it make Kant more edifying? Or does it miss the point of Rorty’s philosophy entirely? Perhaps this is tactless, in Rorty’s words, but I think Kolenda is correct to ignore the implicit effort to spell out the terms of interpretation in advance. I do not see how Rorty can object to this democratic counter-revolution of Kolenda’s ingenious narrative strategy.

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John Dewey’s Pragmatic Technology, by Larry A. Hickman.
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press,
1990. xv, 234 pp. $29.95

As Prof. Hickman notes, John Dewey’s philosophy has received little attention in recent discussions of the philosophy of technology. Yet it is Hickman’s contention that not only is Dewey an important philosopher of technology, but that technology is at the core of his entire approach to philosophy, and indeed that “late in [Dewey’s] life, ‘technology’ became a synonym for his very method of inquiry” (p. 1). Hickman argues that for Dewey, inquiry should be called technological because it is “the means of effective control of an environment that is not what we wish