

# THE POST-EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY AND THE ULTIMATE FATE OF PHILOSOPHY. A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines the different fates of philosophy in Bloor's and Rorty's *post-epistemological* inquiries, tracing their sharp disagreement to their distinct conceptions of 'naturalism' and 'language.' To this end, the first section outlines their main reasons for overcoming the epistemologically-centered philosophy, as well as their reassessments of key concepts such as objectivity. The second section draws a comparison between their proposed post-epistemological inquiries, i.e., Bloor's empirically-informed 'sociologism' and Rorty's pragmatist 'conversationalism,' emphasizing that while the former implies the 'end' of philosophy in a scientific culture, the latter proposes a 'new role' for philosophy in a conversational culture. The third section shows how, in contrast to Bloor's dismissive attitude toward philosophy and the potential of intervocabulary discourse, which can chiefly be attributed to his *scientific* naturalism and his Wittgensteinian *rule-governed* view of language, Rorty's conception of philosophy as a cross-cultural, conversational practice is enabled and sustained by his *non-scientific* naturalism coupled with his Davidsonian *communicative* view of language. Finally, as opposed to Rorty's attempt to completely dismantle the 'epistemology industry,' the fourth section briefly explores the extent to which Bloor's 'theory'-oriented viewpoint is still affected by it.

**KEYWORDS:** epistemology, sociologism, conversationalism, philosophy, language, naturalism, epistemology industry

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary philosophy has been characterized by heated debates concerning a wide range of problems, goals, and methods derived from modern philosophy. Epistemology, in particular, has been heavily criticized from a variety of perspectives. Many philosophers have striven to develop a naturalistic account of knowledge, with the aim of eliminating 'epistemology' as a philosophical discipline that aims to define and justify knowledge claims. Amidst these disputes, however, a crucial question arises: What is the ultimate fate of philosophy? Will it be reduced to the natural sciences and subsumed as a 'chapter' of a specific scientific field?

Alternatively, is it possible to establish a novel role for philosophy in the post-epistemological era?

In this vein, this paper presents a critical examination of the works of two renowned figures involved in this critical debate. In their seminal works, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (1976), Bloor and Rorty proffer a larger framework for analyzing knowledge (i.e. the social or society), which propose different approaches to moving beyond traditional epistemology and standard epistemologically-centered philosophy, and present alternative visions for post-epistemological inquiry. Moreover, as this paper will show, predicated on different conceptions of naturalism and language, they hold different views about the ultimate fate of philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

This piece is divided into the following sections: The first section outlines their arguments for overcoming epistemology-based philosophy and describes how they reassess fundamental concepts, such as objectivity and rationality. The second section compares their proposed post-epistemological inquiries, namely Bloor's empirically-informed sociologism with Rorty's pragmatist conversationalism, and discusses the different fates that they envision for philosophy, ranging from the 'end' of philosophy to a 'new role' for it. The third section delves into the stark contrasts between the two, arguing that their disagreement stems from their opposing views on 'naturalism' (reductionist, scientific versus holistic, non-scientific) and 'language' (the Wittgensteinian rule-governed notion versus the Davidsonian communicationism). Finally, the paper briefly considers the extent to which Bloor's theory-oriented view still keeps the overall structure of the so-called 'epistemology industry,' as opposed to Rorty's attempt to dismantle it completely.

## 2. The Post-epistemological Inquiry: the Cases and Consequences

Epistemology is a fundamental branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, limits, and sources of human knowledge, as well as the criteria for justifying beliefs. Historically, with the prevalence of Cartesian-Kantian philosophy in modern times, its status has shifted to the heart of philosophical inquiry. While debates about the nature of knowledge and its underlying principles date back to ancient times, the 'epistemologization' of philosophy marked a new phase that captured significant attention from philosophers. Despite its long-standing significance, the discipline of epistemology, especially the Kantian epistemological tradition, has faced

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that despite their broad and shared backgrounds—such as an overall Wittgensteinian approach to language that prioritizes use over meaning, and a general Kuhnian approach that accentuates historical contingencies in the process of knowledge-making—there is scarcely any significant reference to each other's work.

considerable criticism in contemporary philosophy, with critics challenging its methods, goals and problems from a variety of angles.

Aligned with this movement, Rorty and Bloor are prominent figures in contemporary thought who expressly dispute the image of epistemologically-centered philosophy. By criticizing the basic characteristics that make up such an image, they aim to supplant it with more viable alternatives. As evidenced by the appellations of their major works, Rorty (1979) concentrates on the modern invention of the mind as a 'mirror of nature,' whereas Bloor (1976) is more concerned with the individualistic, mentalistic and normative orientation of traditional epistemology, showing how notions of knowledge are contingent on 'social imagery.' In what follows, we will outline their main rationales for dismissing epistemology-based philosophy, their reassessment of pivotal concepts like objectivity, and the post-epistemological inquiries they propose.

### 2.1. The Demise of 'Epistemology'

In liberating philosophy from the dominance of epistemology (i.e. the 'theory' of knowledge), Rorty launches a historical and conceptual assault on the modern view of philosophy-as-epistemology, wherein epistemology is regarded as the 'first philosophy' and the 'general theory of representation' (Rorty 1979, 3). In concurrence with Rorty's concept of 'contingency' and the transitory nature of philosophical problems (1998, 275-278), Rorty holds that by revealing the historical 'sources' of the metaphors (especially the mind as a mirror of nature) that drive philosophers to focus on their traditional concerns as mere 'historical contingencies,' we come to realize that their supposedly timeless problems are not inevitable. Once this episode is deconstructed, there is no need to bother ourselves with such matters as determining the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as knowledge or how the mind can accurately represent reality. For a particular case, he demonstrates that the 'intuitions' behind Cartesian dualism have a historical origin (Rorty 1979, 10), hence there is nothing inevitable about them.

After deconstructing the modern mind historically, he argues that the philosophical project of determining when mind/language accurately represents the world, or rather the quest to uncover the conditions under which accurate representation occurs, is fundamentally flawed (see Tartaglia 2020). In this vein, he sees Kant as the prototypical proponent of modern epistemology, as he sought to establish "the a priori structure of any possible inquiry, or language, or form of social life" (1982, 166), thereby providing "a history of our subject, fixed its problematic and professionalised it" (Rorty 1979, 149) through the development of a 'theory of knowledge' premised on his intuition-concept division.

To dismantle this philosophical project, Rorty draws on Sellars' critique of the 'given,' Quine's attack on the 'contingent-necessary' distinction, and Davidson's holistic anti-representationalist theory of meaning and belief. According to Rorty, these critiques together exhibit the 'theoretical bankruptcy' of Kant's discipline, since without such distinctions, we will not recognize what would count as a 'rational reconstruction' of our knowledge, nor will we know what the objective or method of epistemology might be (Rorty 1979, 169), such that 'philosophy-as-theory-of-knowledge' is no longer a viable concern. Instead, he proposes a holistic thesis known as 'epistemological behaviourism,' according to which one must "explain rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former" (Rorty 1979, 174). In this view, the notion of philosophy as a discipline seeking 'privileged representations' becomes unintelligible, since a thoroughgoing holism "has no place for the notion of philosophy as 'conceptual' ... as explaining which representations are 'purely given' or 'purely conceptual'..." (Rorty 1979, 170-71).

Bloor (1984a, 1984b, 2004), on the other hand, takes a different approach to move beyond epistemology and its normative orientation. He rejects the rational-social dichotomy, known as the two-factor model, which treats epistemic and social factors as having two distinct natures or kinds. Instead, he subsumes the rational factors, such as experimental evidence, theoretical assumptions, logical evaluations, and evidential relations, which are the eminent domain of epistemology, under the purview of the social. This move clearly dissolves the realms of epistemology and philosophy into that of social or sociological theory.

Bloor employs a variety of strategies to substantiate his point of view. First and foremost, founded on a naturalistic approach, he argues that the problems of knowledge should be addressed within a scientific framework, without which any epistemology will amount to 'implicit propaganda' (Bloor 1976, 80). In emphasizing the importance of a naturalistic approach to the nature of knowledge, he rejects all 'philosophical' accounts that do not share the same dynamic as empirical studies (80-81). This approach, instead of dealing with end products like proofs and propositions, focuses on productions such as natural inclinations, habits, patterns, and institutions (154-155). Moreover, one of the most notable features of Bloor's naturalistic stance is his 'symmetry requirement,' which states that the explanation of both true/rational and false/irrational beliefs must be 'symmetrical' (Bloor 2004, 937), preventing any intrusion of a non-naturalistic notion of reason into the causal story.

Bloor's stance situates him in opposition to 'rationalist' philosophers and epistemologists, as well as 'philosophical critics' of the sociology of knowledge, including Newton-Smith, Brown, Laudan, and Haack. These thinkers seek to

preserve a privileged domain for epistemological concerns by relying on a (false) dichotomy between the rational and the social, distinguishing between the intellectual virtues of knowledge claims (e.g., truth, objectivity, and rationality) and the sociological properties surrounding their formation and development. For instance, in response to Haack (1996), who ostensibly adheres to the social/rational (=evidential) dualism by distinguishing between 'acceptance' as a social phenomenon and 'warranting' as a matter of being supported by good evidence, Bloor (2004, 949-950) points out that the social is always present "in the midst of the rational process of warranting," because warranting itself is a process whose structure and content cannot be adequately examined without identifying its conventional and social dimension.

A special case is the rationalist idea that purely epistemic relations, such as the logical relation of premises and conclusions, lie outside the scope of sociological analysis. This idea implies that different methods of inquiry are required for different areas of knowledge, giving rise to the notion of the 'autonomy of knowledge' and indicating the existence of transcultural principles of rationality. In contrast, Bloor asserts that 'epistemic factors' are actually 'social factors' (Bloor 1984b), in the sense that the actual connections between premises and conclusions, as well as the specific implications involved, are socially constituted, and the patterns of relevance assumed by the agents are contingent upon an array of social factors (e.g., patterns of training or conventions of use) that jointly compromise the background at hand. As a result, studying the social background of epistemic factors is tantamount to demonstrating the social character of the epistemic (303), indicating the total compatibility of assuming that inferences can be 'rational' (e.g., inductive) while also being 'social' (e.g., conventional) (Bloor 2004, 931-32).

Overall, both Rorty and Bloor repudiate the traditional framework for the epistemological analysis of knowledge. Rorty contends this framework is historically and conceptually flawed, whereas Bloor discards the entire corpus of traditional epistemology with its teleological model that assumes the rational as self-explanatory (Bloor 1976, 10-11). Consequently, while Rorty replaces the modern epistemic subject with the community of contemporary peers, Bloor emphasizes the social is an integral part of the rational and human knowledge.

## 2.2. The Reassessment of Key Concepts

From the aforementioned considerations, it follows that knowledge is a social institution (as per Bloor) or a social practice (as per Rorty), which implies that it cannot be reduced to the categories that epistemologists focus on, and to some extent, they are both committed to 'the ontological priority of the social,' which

indicates that “all matters of authority or privilege, in particular epistemic authority, are matters of social practice, and not objective matters of fact” (Rorty 2007, 7). Consequently, both seek “to reinterpret these notions naturalistically” (Rorty 2000e, 151) and ‘reassess’ much of the vocabulary associated with traditional philosophy’s most valued notions, such as objectivity, truth, and rationality.

First, both Rorty and Bloor embrace a distinctly pragmatic approach to knowledge. As a pragmatist who believes that “what you talk about depends not on what is real but on what it pays you to talk about” (Rorty 2000k, 374), Rorty asserts that distinctions such as ‘what is correct/incorrect’ should be resolved on the basis of pragmatic criteria determining which options more effectively serve particular purposes. Moreover, he views beliefs and vocabularies as tools to be evaluated in terms of the particular purposes they can serve or the usefulness they can have in action. Similarly, in keeping with the long-standing tradition in sociology that study the interaction between knowledge and ‘human interests,’ Bloor (see Barnes, Bloor, and Henry 1996, 110-139) emphasizes the role that interests and goals play in shaping and structuring beliefs. Thus, both underscore the connection between the theoretical and the practical, and insist that knowledge is a goal-driven and interest-oriented activity, thereby giving no cash value to the idea of the ‘disinterestedness’ of the traditional epistemic subject.

Second, rather than conceiving of ‘rationality’ as the expression of a ‘natural order of reason’ or as a matter of applying of ‘ahistorical criteria,’ Rorty and Bloor construe it as a social phenomenon, in that it is a function of and contingent upon ‘society.’ Simply put, it is the structure of a given society that determines and guide the overall model of rationality, not the other way around. Moreover, by abandoning large entities like ‘Rationality’ or ‘Justification’ that can be articulated in an epistemological theory, they provide a ‘historically determined,’ ‘context-dependent’ account of epistemic categories. For Rorty (2000a, 59; 2000b, 56-57; 1998,2), justification and betterness-to-believe are always “relative to an audience,” and all arguments are reasons for particular people bound by social conditions. Similarly, Bloor (1983, 3) emphasizes that rationality is something that we shape as we construct and develop a form of collective life, and that any normative phenomena such as rationality requires an institutional character, implying that “no group, no rationality” (Bloor 1996, 848).

The same is true of the notion of ‘objectivity.’ Rorty and Bloor both discard the traditional view of objectivity as being based on external facts and objects, and instead, ground objectivity in such intersubjective structures as agreement or convention. In this regard, Rorty (1991, 38-9) replaces the ‘desire for objectivity’ with the ‘desire for solidarity’ with a community, implying that the ultimate source

of objectivity is the social agreement that arises from communication and negotiation among subjects rather than something that exists independently of human practices. Similarly, following Durkheim and Wittgenstein, who argue that sense experience lacks objectivity, Bloor (1983, 58) locates the source of objectivity in society, and, in providing a sociological response to Popper's 'third world' (Bloor 1974), claims that 'objective' knowledge, far from being the 'content' of an individual, actually refers to social factors such as collective customs and institutions, and relies on a social group's 'currently accepted beliefs.'

Third, both Bloor (2007; 2020) and Rorty (1991, 21-34), in their own ways, support a relativistic perspective on knowledge that refutes any absolute, socially independent criteria for evaluating other cultures. In accordance with the agenda of the 'Strong Program,' Bloor ardently endorses relativism in the only acceptable sense, namely 'anti-absolutism,' which repudiates the existence of absolute knowledge and absolute justifications for any knowledge claim. As a result, all beliefs and justifications are a product of, and relative to, the limitations of human nature and our status as social beings. Likewise, Rorty, who renounces any absolute knowledge, could be classified as a relativist in this sense. Nevertheless, since he does not believe that the "critique of absolutism leads to relativism" (Rorty 2000a, 11-12), and in congruence with his general 'anti-dualism,' he endorses 'ethnocentrism' as a variant of coherentism so as to circumvent the vexing problems associated with certain forms of relativism. This view holds that there is nothing to be said about, say, rationality other than descriptions of the familiar justifying procedures for sound knowledge acquisition that are operative in a given community, such as ours, and employed in this or that area of inquiry (Rorty 1991, 23). This view is, of course, more consistent with his pragmatism, which rejects presenting a 'theory' (of truth) or an 'epistemology,' let alone a 'relativistic' one (1982, xiv).

Furthermore, Rorty and Bloor take a minimalist approach to truth, denying that there is much, or anything constructive, to say about the nature of truth. Thus, in the general Wittgensteinian vein, suggesting that "there is nothing to be understood about the concept of X except the various uses of the term 'X'" (Rorty 2000b, 56-57), they bring to our notice distinct 'uses' of the term 'true.' In this context, Rorty (1991, 127-128; 2000a, 11-12), who rejects the truth-as-correspondence account and any attempt to 'hypostatize' the adjective 'true,' distinguishes three important functions or uses that the predicate 'true' has in our linguistic-conceptual practices: The endorsing use, as a way of using the concept of truth to confirm or affirm certain assertions; the cautionary use, which we make when we contrast justification and truth, in that a belief can be justified but not true; and the disquisitional use, by saying metalinguistic things of the form " 's' is true iff-

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Finally, both Rorty and Bloor emphasize the radical notion of 'contingency,' denoting that every knowledge claim, no matter how inevitable and stable it appears, 'could have been otherwise,' and is bound up with socio-historical contingencies. Rorty (1989, 3-22) holds the idea that everything in our conceptual-linguistic systems is infected by 'time and chance' leads to the conclusion that, for example, languages are fashioned by an ensemble of unpredictable socio-historical forces, devoid of any essential relation to extra-linguistic elements. A similar idea can be found in Bloor's sociological finitism as applied to basic cognitive activities, like classification and concept application. According to Bloor (see Barnes, Bloor, and Henry, 46-80), the instance-to-instance development of any classification and the case-to-case movement of concept-application are determined by contingent social processes, with each act reliant on local contingencies and ultimately on the contingent judgments of historical agents and their goals and interests. Thus, both Rorty and Bloor regard contingency as a pivotal component of human knowledge production and meaning construction, culminating in a variable image of the growth and development of knowledge/meaning making.

### **3. The Post-epistemological Inquiries and the Fate of Philosophy**

Given the demise of 'epistemology,' which implies a fundamental shift in our understanding of knowledge and its accompanying categories, it is unsurprising that we expect radical alternatives for pursuing inquiry in the post-epistemological era.

After deconstructing the epistemological orientation of modern philosophy as a contingent phenomenon, Rorty concludes that viewing knowledge as 'a matter of conversation' rather than as an attempt to 'mirror nature,' abolishes the need for a 'metapractice' that critiques "all possible forms of social practice" (Rorty 1979, 171). In doing so, he points out a distinct role for the practice of philosophy: rather than pursuing objective truths or discovering what is really real in a 'philosophical' or 'scientific' theory (2007, 104), it clarifies "how things (e.g., all the different vocabularies of all the different cultures) hang together" (Rorty 1982, xiv-xxxviii). Considering this, Rorty proposes a variety of inquiries to fill the gap left by the



rejection of epistemology, including pragmatism, conversational philosophy, edifying philosophy, and hermeneutics (see Malachowski 2002, 59-62), each fulfilling a specific role in his post-epistemological inquiry.

Generally speaking, these proposals share a vision of a culture that is emancipated from a God's-eye view, where agents strive for new descriptions for social purposes (Rorty 1979, 360). Hermeneutics, in essence, expresses "the hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled - that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt" (Rorty 1979, 315) and involves the "attitude of openness to fresh and innovative descriptions" (see Grigoriev 2020, 414-415). Edification, as opposed to systematic and constructive philosophy, is the "project of finding new, better, more fruitful ways of speaking" (Rorty 1979, 360), which can be accomplished through the hermeneutical practice of comparing and connecting one's own culture and a foreign one, or by means of the poetic exercise of envisioning new ends, new vocabularies, or new disciplines. Finally, the philosophy-as-pragmatism contends that all knowledge claims are solely pragmatic, and that we should focus on what people do when they make truth claims.

Central to his new vision is the notion of conversation and conversational philosophy. For Rorty, conversation is an ongoing intersubjective-interpretive process in which appropriate members of a relevant community make claims and converse about, for instance, how things are. This process takes the place of confrontation as "the determinant of our belief" (Rorty 1979, 163) and constitutes "the ultimate context in which knowledge is to be understood" (1979, 389). Hence, according to the new view that highlights poetic self-creation, where free conversation is a key component, the legitimate goal of philosophy, as a "continuation of a conversation that began in the Platonic dialogues" (Rorty 2000e, 152), is to "keep the conversation going."

Bloor (1983, 182-185), on the other hand, after systematically examining the sociological-naturalistic themes in Wittgenstein's works and reconstructing the idea of language-games in a comparative framework, proposes the 'sociology of knowledge' as the apt "heir to the subject that used to be called Philosophy." The gist of the proposal, which asks why different social groups produce different socially grounded images, is that the formation and development of language-games can be made law-like, allowing for a systematic, empirical study of language-games in various forms of sociological inquiry by capitalizing on interests as the social location of knowledge claims. In this way, his proposal offers a comparative framework for understanding the 'variation' of language-games and for tracing its causes and laws (137-138).

Moreover, Bloor sees the sociology of knowledge as an integral part of the scientific project, as an attempt to understand knowledge within the vocabulary of science, which particularly follows its non-evaluative pattern (see Barnes, Bloor, and Henry 1996, ix). In his reformed sociology of science, best exemplified in the four tenets of the 'Strong Program' (i.e., causality, impartiality, symmetry, and reflexivity), a body of knowledge is unavoidably shaped and sustained by social forces, and the goal is to use (social) science to demonstrate this point (Bloor 1976, 6-8). It is clear that Bloor's ideal inquiry has a positivist flavor because of the heavy emphasis on the scientific side of sociology, which emphasizes the 'value neutrality' of science (Collin 2011, 63). This strong positivist stance is evident in the sociologist's efforts to identify general regularities and construct theories to explain these regularities: "The search for laws and theories in the sociology of science is absolutely identical in its procedure with that of any other science" (Bloor 1976, 21).

Thus, diverging from Rorty's conception of a 'new role' for philosophy, Bloor's critique of epistemology appears to lead him to put an 'end' to this discourse: "Philosophy' is to be replaced by the positive science of sociology" (2020, 161). That is, Bloor, who views philosophy as equivalent to epistemology and sees philosophers as those who have assumed the role of "guardians of absolute values," has a tendency to exclude the entire practice of philosophy from the study of (scientific) knowledge because its efforts are rendered fruitless by the division of labor among the empirical sciences. According to this radical viewpoint, even 'conceptual clarification' is better left to the specialized fields of empirical inquiry, so that "the sociology of knowledge is the latest offspring. ... The long, historical task of philosophy may be close its end" (Bloor 2004, 952).

Of course, Bloor (1976, 5) has already departed from the philosophical project of defining knowledge as justified true belief by defining it as the appropriate subject of the sociology of knowledge, i.e. those beliefs that are collectively taken for granted or institutionalized. Nevertheless, the outcome is anti-philosophical as well, as once the empirically-oriented sociologist has exhausted all relevant data, there is nothing left for philosophy. In contrast, Rorty manages to preserve a novel role for philosophy in the post-epistemological era despite getting rid of the whole body of 'philosophy-as-epistemology' with its key assumptions. In alternative terms, contrary to what one might expect from Bloor's viewpoint, Rorty's answer to the question, "If epistemology fell apart... would that be the end of philosophy?" is emphatically negative (Rorty 2000g, 218), as he opines that one can be deemed a 'philosopher' by specifically rejecting the core problematic presupposition of 'Philosophy' (Rorty 1982, xviii). Moreover, he recognizes the pressing need for a dynamic discourse that concentrates not on the objective foundations of different

discourses, but rather on the ‘reconciliation and reconciliation’ of the human present with the human past. (Rorty 1999, 218)

In sum, Bloor views the post-epistemological era as a scientific culture in which scientific disciplines use their conceptual frameworks to explain other disciplines, leaving no room for the kind of work that traditional philosophers tend to do. Rorty, on the other hand, sees it as a multivoiced conversational culture in which anti-representationalist philosophers can make genuine contributions and actively participate in the ongoing human conversation by producing better redescriptions for reconciling the old and the new.

#### **4. A Critical Discussion: the Different Characters of Naturalism and Language**

While Bloor and Rorty are in agreement with regards to their critique of philosophy-as-epistemology, there are notable discrepancies between the two on the role and status of philosophy in the post-epistemological era. As far as this paper is concerned, the root of the matter can be traced to their opposing views on ‘naturalism’ and ‘language.’ As will be explored, it is Rorty’s holistic, non-scientific naturalism versus Bloor’s reductionist, scientific naturalism, coupled with his Davidsonian communicative view of language versus Bloor’s Wittgensteinian ‘rule-governed’ notion, that endorses his idea of philosophy as a non-scientific, cross-cultural, and conversational practice.

##### **4.1. Two Different Naturalisms**

Bloor’s viewpoint is heavily influenced by scientific naturalism and ‘scientism,’ which takes the form of a radical sociology that places ‘society’ or ‘sociological variables’ at the heart of the explanation of epistemic problems, giving ‘sociology’ a privileged status for understanding knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Congruent with this sociology, he seeks to scientifically understand the case under consideration by providing a satisfactory explanation of the social basis of the language-game at hand, which includes a comprehensive account of the social rules, goals, and interests at play, all of which together make up the social imagery behind well-established knowledge. This essentially scientific inquiry, located in the realm of ‘causation,’ appeals to social causes to explain the knowledge generated.

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<sup>2</sup> Bloor (2020, 161) uses the term ‘sociologism’ in a more limited, but closely related sense, to denote the position that knowledge, as a fundamentally social phenomenon, has been mischaracterized in traditional ‘philosophical’ accounts, thus requiring the ‘sociologist’ to correct the distortions caused by philosophical doctrines.

Scientism involves a plethora of theoretical commitments, the most important of which are fully embraced by Bloor. The first major one is a reductionist approach, wherein the structure of human knowledge is identified with the structure of, say, human society. The adoption of this position is manifest in Bloor's emphasis on the 'reductive' character of 'social interests,' which makes 'interest explanations' a standard part of the sociologist's toolkit. In this distinctly 'reductive' and 'causal' view (Bloor 2004, 942-943), the growth of knowledge production is seen to be boiled down to how the 'pattern of (social) interests' functions and is structured.

Relatedly, there is also a hierarchical view of the structure of scientific discourses, according to the weight and importance assigned to the basic units of scientific knowledge. In this view, 'natural science' is regarded as a privileged discourse at the apex of all human inquiry, which implies that, unlike the humanities and the arts, it is in touch with the 'intrinsic nature of reality,' giving its knowledge claims a special character. Moreover, every natural scientist favors one of the natural sciences to serve as the ultimate arbiter. For Quine, for example, (behavioristic) psychology is the proper scientific discourse for dealing with the problems of knowledge. Bloor, on the other hand, maintains that empirically-based causal sociology that does the work.

Finally, there is a non-evaluative orientation, or 'value-neutrality,' built into strict scientific naturalism that is palpable in Bloor's position on evaluation. Put simply, Bloor seems to have a dismissive attitude toward the evaluation of epistemic systems and has nothing constructive to say about any inter-vocabulary discussion in which the established rules and interests themselves might be the subjects of debate. Instead, as the 'symmetry' principle sanctions, both rational and irrational aspects of knowledge should be treated equally, and their credibility attributed should be assigned to the same kinds of causes. In other words, the symmetrical position, which entails 'bracketing' evaluation for the purposes of causal explanation, is merely the other side of the 'scientific attitude itself' (Bloor 2004, 936-938). He sums up all the essential components addressed in the following passage:

I have taken for granted and endorsed ...the standpoint of most contemporary science. In the main science is causal, theoretical, value-neutral, often reductionist, to an extent empiricist, and ultimately materialistic like common sense. ...The overall strategy has been to link the social sciences as closely as possible with the methods of other empirical sciences. (Bloor 1976, 157)

Evidently, when scientific naturalism of this kind is taken to its limit, little room is left for any genuine philosophical work, and, along the way, one of the privileged scientific discourses takes its place in solving the problems of knowledge.

Interestingly enough, Rorty, who is sceptical of these components and points out the non-scientific, non-reductive character of naturalism, is able to propose a new transformative role for philosophy.

First, when it comes to dealing with other cultures, Rorty takes an essentially non-scientific approach. This stems from his denial of the possibility of an 'epistemologically pregnant answer' to questions like "What did Galileo do right that Aristotle did wrong?" as well as any epistemological hope of grounding knowledge. (Rorty 1982, 193) Consequently, the most reliable approach to encountering other cultures involves a hermeneutic understanding that stays away from reducing them to our own view. Such an engaged, 'interpretive' understanding, typified by ethnographic and anthropological inquiry, seeks to 'sympathize and associate' with people of a certain kind and to provide adequate 'narratives' (rather than laws) and appropriate 'redescriptions' (rather than predictions) in order to see them as familiar counterparts. Thus, in contrast to Bloor's scientific approach, which is heavily concerned with 'explanations,' Rorty's approach is non-scientific, signaling a shift of interest from what can be gotten right once and for all (as in a systematic theory) to what can only be repeatedly reinterpreted and recontextualized (Rorty 2007, 182).

In fact, the two have different orientations. Bloor basically aims at reducing meaning and knowledge to sociological and institutional processes (Bloor 1997, 134-135), whereas Rorty's approach, centered on the modest task of 'reweaving webs of belief,' is primarily holistic. In simpler terms, instead of searching for some foundational variables, this approach involves a 'hermeneutic circle,' in which understanding the parts of a culture or language is interconnected with how the whole functions, and vice versa (Rorty 1979, 318-319). This substantial notion of understanding implies that coming to understand is more analogous to getting to know a person than following an algorithmic method.

Such a radical difference of opinion is underscored by their divergent views on the nature of 'content' (or meaning) and the best way to study it. Remarkably, Bloor (2004, 928; 1996, 853) sees meaning as a 'social institution' and every concept-application as a 'conventional' move, so that studying it amounts to discovering the 'sociological machinery of interaction' and the 'sociological variables' (e.g. traditions, authorities, goals and interests) that are responsible for the formation and development of the cognitive macrostructure. Conversely, Rorty (2007, 182-183; 176-179), dissatisfied with the concept of 'concept,' imagines it as a 'person,' an ever-evolving entity that can be understood only by telling a satisfactory story about its 'life history,' i.e., how its present behavior connects to its past. To phrase it differently, in contrast to Bloor's static approach, the study of 'content' is a matter of holistically understanding the evolution of the cultural practices in which its users

engage, to the extent that it “cannot be separated from its genealogy” (see Malachowski 2020, 323; emphasis added).

Moreover, Rorty’s approach to human knowledge varies from Bloor’s second commitment, in that he embraces a unified or integrated image of human knowledge. In this regard, against ‘positivistic’ philosophy of science, he explicitly defends the anti-scientific, holistic, pragmatist thought in American philosophy (which is shared with Dewey, Kuhn, Quine, Davidson, and Putnam) (Rorty 1991, 65-66), which attempts to be ‘naturalistic’ without being ‘reductionist’ and ‘scientific’ (113-124). In other words, he promotes a naturalistic philosophy that seeks “to avoid having the natural scientist step into the cultural role which the philosopher-as-superscientist vacated” (75).

In particular, Rorty (1982, 193-195), following Dewey, asserts that the very distinctions that allegedly distinguish the natural from the cultural are questionable, concluding that different disciplines can be distinguished only by the different purposes they pursue, rather than by such confusing terms as ‘scientific,’ ‘objective,’ ‘value-free,’ and ‘a reliable method.’ On the other hand, Rorty (1991, 113-116), following Davidson, sees no point in drawing philosophical lines of demarcation through culture, dividing it into science-poetry by relying on distinctions between, say, sentences expressing ‘hard facts’ and those expressing ‘soft values.’ Instead, we can replace it with a distinction between sentences that fulfill a particular purpose and those that serve other purposes, thereby treating both science and poetry equally. Thus, Rorty (2000a, 217) sees all knowledge claims arising from different disciplines as equal, with none having a special relation to the world or being more in touch with ‘the intrinsic nature of reality’ than others. Significantly, instead of the ‘method’ orientation of the alternative view, the overall pattern of all inquiry is ‘deliberation’ on alternative consequences of speculation (Rorty 1982, 163-164) or the ‘problem solving’ that we all undertake in every human pursuit (1982, 193-195).

Thus, in contrast to Bloor’s scientific naturalism, Rorty (1991, 35-45) maintains that science is merely one of many ways of coping with our environment, and that the only sense in which science is exemplary is that it serves as a ‘model of human solidarity.’ In other words, Rorty, who views different epistemic systems, including science, as different solidarities developed on the basis of different goals, sees each of them as distinct threads of the unified ‘human conversation.’ Combined with his hermeneutical notion of knowledge, which claims that knowledge is essentially a matter of conversation, and the Dewey-Davidsonian point that there is neither a fundamental distinction between human discourses nor an ‘inviolable’ barrier between them (see Rorty 2007, 172), Rorty concludes that culture is a conversational matrix rather a structure built on (social or epistemic) foundations,

in which a vast space is opened up for inter-vocabulary proposals ranging from the seemingly irrational to the evaluative and transformative.

Thereby, in contrast to Bloor's dismissive view regarding evaluative considerations, Rorty influentially points out the imperative potentials and transformative possibilities within conversational culture (see Ramberg and Dieleman 2021), such as expanding "our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions" (Rorty 1989, 80), "enlarging our acquaintance" (1989, 80), altering 'truth-values candidates' at the inter-vocabulary level (1979, 320), offering 'new descriptions' to ensure social progress, expanding our 'horizons of inquiry' in order to "encompass new data, new hypotheses, new terminologies" (2000a, 17), constantly "reweaving the web of beliefs" to accommodate new stimuli (2007, 125), making an "indefinite number of novel claims, frame an indefinite number of novel purposes" (2000f, 189), and constructing ever "bigger and better contexts of discussion" (2000a, 13).

Significantly, as a key participant in the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural forum, conversational philosophy has the potential to reshape the landscape of conversational culture through two edifying strategies. First, instead of epistemology's focus on studying the familiar or the normal, hermeneutic philosophy is tasked with exploring the open, abnormal, inter-vocabulary, unfamiliar areas where no shared consensus has yet been established (Rorty 1979, 321; 1982, 141). In this open and flexible domain for abnormal discourse, which can be called the 'post-logical space of reason' or 'post-language-games discourse,' anything "from nonsense to intellectual revolution" (1979, 320) can be expected and produced.

The other is philosophy's transformative role in cultural politics, with the aim of renewing social progress and cognitive growth. The new kind of philosophizing, which does not seek to discover 'natural starting-points' apart from 'cultural traditions' (Rorty 1982, xxxvii-xl), endeavors to "compare and contrast cultural traditions" and "play vocabularies and cultures off against each other" in order to produce better ways of talking. Accordingly, philosophy, as a 'cultural criticism' that is free from the 'secure path of a science,' strives to attain the objectives appropriate to the conversational culture, such as enriching and maturing our conceptual repertoire (Rorty 2007, 124), making a genuine difference to social hopes (x), suggesting fresh novelties in human conversation (ix), proposing "new paradigms of argumentation" (Rorty 1982, 40), recommending changes in using words to make the conversation more fruitful (124), and synthesizing the achievements of the poems and 'sociologies' of the day into a larger unity (77). Consequently, in stark contrast to Bloor's stance, without reducing the substantive enterprise of philosophy

to that of the 'natural science,' Rorty favors philosophers who are 'historicist' enough to see themselves as participating in a conversation rather than practicing a 'quasi-scientific' discipline. (Rorty 2007, 126)

Rorty (1998, 5-11; 1982, Introduction) thus envisions a non-scientific, 'non-positivist' culture in which no particular part (literature or science) has 'priority' over others, where there are no 'transdisciplinary and transcultural criteria' beyond the accepted intra-disciplinary ones, and in which its participants are content with 'solidarity' and 'intersubjectivity' instead of objectivity. Significantly, although there is no place in this culture for the 'Philosopher' who could explain the superiority of certain areas of culture, there is plenty of room for a kind of philosophy that, without trying to be 'methodical' or scientific, can progress by finding a way to 'integrate the worldviews' handed down by our ancestors with novel theories.

Overall, Rorty's work presents a significant opportunity for substantive philosophical inquiry as a conversation-based practice, owing to his holistic, non-scientific conception of naturalism, which is lacking in Bloor's thought. Accordingly, not only is there no privileged discourse in human conversation that claims to be more 'accurate' or 'in touch with reality,' but pragmatic hermeneutic philosophy is a key participator in conversational culture.

#### 4.2. Two Different Views of Language

Rorty's approach to language is another dimension that affords him a discernible edge regarding the potential for inter-vocabulary and cross-cultural discussions, with no counterpart in Bloor's underlying assumptions.

Bloor's view, undoubtedly influenced by the works of the later Wittgenstein, is centered on a conventionalist, rule-following notion of language, according to this which language use is governed and structured by a set of rules as conventions, implying that linguistic understanding of language requires mastery of the techniques for applying these rules. In this context, Bloor's conception (1997, 1983) has several implications. First, building on Wittgenstein's slogan, "A game, a language, a rule is an institution," he emphasizes the collectivist aspect of rule-following and language, in the sense that they are shared conventions or social institutions. He thus opposes individualistic, psychological, and mentalistic views of meaning and rule-following. Second, taking up the famous slogan that the "meaning of a word is its use in language," he develops the sociological finitist theory of meaning, according to which meaning is created incrementally as we go along in response to the contingencies that accompany each act of concept use. Obviously, this view is opposed to any deterministic view of meaning and any attempt to reify meaning. Third, based on the well-known statement, "When I obey a rule, I do not



choose. I obey the rule blindly,” Bloor emphasizes the fact that there is a ‘blind’ dimension to rule-following, indicating the ultimate non-interpretive, non-logical step in the practice of rule-following. In this way, he emphasizes the practical basis of all language-games, showing a non-reflective level that has been socialized into institutional customs.

Most crucially, there is a radically relativistic approach, implied in Wittgenstein’s work but more explicit in Bloor’s, which views cultures as self-contained linguistically based activities, each with its own internal rule-governed logic that gives it its significance. In this view, not only is there no reason to seek common ground (e.g., universal standards of rationality) among diverse language-games and cultures, but the analyst’s primary task, besides description and interpretation, is to ‘explain’ the general pattern of using words and connect it to relevant social-practical aspects, as best exemplified by Bloor’s sociology of knowledge. Thus, the windows of language-games and cultures seem to be closed to each other. In this regard, while some contends that Wittgenstein cannot be classified as a relativist (Bell 1984, 298), Bloor’s sociological interpretation is closely aligned with Winch’s classical reading and other anthropologists, like Lyotard, who believe that Wittgenstein showed that there is no ‘unity of language,’ but rather ‘islets of language,’ each governed by a system of rules untranslatable into those of the others (see Rorty 1991, 215).

Turning to the opposite side, while respecting Wittgenstein’s critique of the Cartesian notion of ‘pre-linguistic awareness’ and even considering him a key figure in the development of the ‘linguistic turn,’ Rorty is more drawn to the Davidsonian approach offering a more radical standpoint on language and thought by placing intersubjective interpretation and communication at the forefront. Interestingly, while there are similarities between the two, including the social dimension of language, meaning holism, and an anti-reductionist account of meaning, Davidson’s philosophy encompasses additional ideas that set it apart Wittgenstein’s, all of which are highly relevant to Rorty’s thought that seeks a more expansive sphere for cross-cultural conversation.

First and foremost, Davidson’s view of language is characterized by two intertwined strands of thought: interpretationism<sup>3</sup> and communicationism (which can be regarded as an early version of Rorty’s conversationalism). The former

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<sup>3</sup> This usage of the term is somewhat different from, albeit closely related to, the view commonly attributed to Davidson and also to Dennett, which is that we can learn everything constitutive of the mental by reflecting on our practices of attributing propositional attitudes. (see Glüer 2011, 135)

(Davidson 2001a, 125-170; 2004, 87-100; see also Malpas 2023), which places the interpreter's third point-of-view at the center, is concerned with attributing intentional content to a speaker's linguistic utterances 'from scratch.' This viewpoint yields certain un-Wittgensteinian consequences. First, meaning is essentially public and tied to its function in interpersonal communication, such that the scope of meaning is delimited by what a radical interpreter can glean. Second, in the interpretive process, attributions of beliefs and assignments of meanings are intertwined, so that detecting meaning is tied to certain (normative) assumptions about the mental, epitomized best in the hybrid character of the 'principle of charity' as the amalgamation of considerations of 'coherence' and 'correspondence.' In a similar vein, interpretability eventually becomes a necessary condition for the capability of thought and mentality, as only through interaction with the worldly objects and its interpreter can a subject have 'genuine thinking.' More importantly, Wittgenstein's restricted view of language 'use' is virtually deserted in favor of interpersonal interpretation and the communicative intentions involved, and the notion of 'language-games' as essential contexts of meaning, so dear to Bloor and Wittgenstein, is largely abandoned. (see Bridges 2017)

Furthermore, Davidson (2001a, 265-280; 2005, 89-182) deepens interpretationism by discarding the fact-language dichotomy, which blurs the boundary between the knowledge involved in linguistic understanding and general knowledge of our way around the world. As a result, he comes to the view that understanding a language is ultimately a matter of constantly constructing and modifying interpretive hypotheses for copying with 'speech transactions' with our fellow humans, in such a way that the meanings of utterances are reestablished fleetingly in each particular 'communicative exchange' (Glüer 2011, 5, 12). This dynamic dialectic of 'prior' and 'passing' theories (on the part of the speaker and the interpreter), which depends on mutual communicative interactions, requires the same practical skills and knowledge that we employ when dealing with other parts of the world. In this manner, instead of Wittgenstein's pre-existing, agreed-upon rules defining the legitimate moves inside language-games, the emphasis is on the moment-to-moment agreements formed over the course of the conversation, which ultimately form the basis of understanding.

Such a radical view leads to several important conclusions. First, 'meaning' and 'language' ultimately depend on 'successful linguistic communication' as the only purpose that matters. Second, akin to any other theory construction in other domains, the theory an interpreter develops for dealing with a speaker's utterances is always "a work in progress" (Joseph 2004, 89-90). Third, and most importantly, this communication-without-conventions view implies that the very idea of

'language' as a shared medium or set of agreed-upon conventions is ontologically deconstructed in favor of language users, their communicative intentions, and their use of linguistic signs for the purpose of 'mutual understanding.' Alternately stated, in such an anti-theoretical, anti-essentialist view of language, which deprives language of any essential structure, even Wittgenstein's 'rules' are deemed unnecessary for (linguistic) communication. In this way, Davidson's "no-language claim" (Glüer 2011, 97), which avoids "hypostatizing Language" (Rorty 1982, xviii), radicalizes Wittgenstein's anti-reificationist approach to meaning (also shared by Bloor) by extending it to 'language' itself.

Davidson also offers a series of interrelated ideas that directly oppose any form of relativism. First, by dropping the 'scheme-content' dichotomy (see Davidson 2001a, 183-198), i.e., the metaphor of a scheme that organizes or divides up experience or reality, he relinquishes the presuppositions of a number of related dualities that dominate in modern philosophy: the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity, the dichotomy of the linguistic and the empirical, and the grammar-experience distinction. In particular, he challenges the very distinction that the relativism thesis hinges upon, namely the relative-absolute dichotomy that forms the cornerstone of Bloor's exposition of relativism (2011).<sup>4</sup> Since by refuting the 'scheme' metaphor, any doubt regarding whether our knowledge is merely 'relative' to our schemes (our perspectives, our societies, or our cultures) or really in contact with 'objective realities' is gone.

In a related vein, Davidson (2001b, 135-192) espouses the idea of the 'veridicality of belief,' which is mutually reinforcing and supported by interpretationism, and suggests that beliefs are mostly true. This crucial thesis, which creates an inherently harmonious relationship between belief/mind and reality/world, is connected to the overarching idea that the rational is constitutive of the mental, and is built into the metaphysics of the mind (Glüer 2011, 253), implying that there are certain normative constraints (such as correspondence and coherence) that are a necessary condition for the very capacity of having thought and meaning something. This view, which "foundationally links ... the mental and the nonmental, the rational and the nonrational in general" (Glüer 2011, 9), is radically at odds with any viewpoint that separates the mind from both the world and the rational. In particular, it opposes Bloor's emphasis on "from mental images to social interactions" (Bloor 1983, 6-21) and the "social construction of mental states" derived from Wittgenstein's philosophy (1983, 50-82), where the question of the 'veridicality' or 'rationality' of the mental in itself is irrelevant, most likely

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<sup>4</sup> Bloor articulates the key messages of his sociologism (2020, 171) as follows: "Whenever relativism is denied—and absolutism implied—look for a social process that has been misdescribed."

because his anti-epistemological sociological view already asserts that it is ‘the social that defines the rational, not vice versa.’

Third, Davidson claims that the concept of an untranslatable language or a radically different belief system, associated with the idea of conceptual relativism, is incoherent. This is owing to his famous argument that failing to ‘translate’ into one’s own language serves as solid evidence for the absence of any kind of language (see Malpas 2023). The strong connection established by Davidson between meaning and truth, which is absent in Bloor’s Wittgensteinian view, suggesting that our understanding of truth is not separate from our ‘understanding of translation’ (Rorty 1998, 3), apart from anchoring meaning in an objective world “available to all” (Joseph 2004, 185), implies that we cannot understand the notion of a language-game that is largely true but untranslatable (Glüer 2011, 220). With this rejection, the ideas of ‘unbridgeable divisions’ between linguistic islands and ‘separate worlds’ brought about by cultural differences are also discarded (Rorty 2007, 53), and, thanks to the cross-cultural power of communicationism, the theoretical issues of ‘untranslatability’ dissolve into practical problems like lack of sympathy. As a result, when combined with the verticality of belief, this thesis implies that any two beings engaged in linguistic communication with each other (including Bloor’s ideal sociologist and the scientific culture involved) must share a vast number of (true) beliefs, so that cultural differences differ not so much in kind as they do in degree.

Last, in line with his anti-conventionalism in semantics, Davidson (2001a, 243-264) dismisses the idea that conventions play a philosophically important role in metaphorical language (see Joseph 2004, 88-89). From his point of view, ‘metaphors’ do not have any distinct non-literal meaning and solely rely on using sentences with their standard meanings in fresh, novel, interesting ways. On the strong reading (see Camp 2013, 361-365), according to which metaphors do not express cognitive content in any way but simply induce or cause us to see things in a certain way, it follows that the creative power of metaphor-making, which involves ‘re-describing’ a part of reality in a novel way, enables us to “enlarge logical space” (Rorty 1991, 124). Remarkably, using the notion ‘language-game,’ which is pivotal to Bloor’s Wittgensteinian thought, it can be seen that metaphors express sentences that are initially incongruent with the current language-games; nonetheless, they present prospects for modifying those language-games and engendering novel ones.

On the whole, Davidson’s philosophy furnishes Rorty with plentiful resources that Bloor’s Wittgensteinian perspective lack, bolstering his notion of conversationalism and conversational philosophy. In contrast to Bloor’s stance, which renders it difficult to refer to ‘one’ language game or to identify ‘common’

ground between language games, Rorty claims that all human discourses make up a unified human conversation, implying that all human beings, as rational language users, share a broad common conceptual scheme and partake in an intersubjective conversation. Additionally, in response to the charge of 'linguistic idealism'- frequently leveled against Bloor- Rorty maintains that our constant 'contact/touch with the world' is ensured, so that human conversation inherently contains a generally true picture of the world, which, when combined with the rejection of the scheme-content dichotomy, indicates that "the world is present in thought" (Luntley 1999, 139-140).

Furthermore, in contrast to Bloor's ardent endorsement of relativism, Rorty's notion of conversation is 'post-relativistic' in character, and, contrary to Bloor's satisfaction with demonstrating the contextual framework of knowledge, Rorty (2000a, 13), while acknowledging "the ethnocentric contextuality of all argumentation," regards it as perfectly harmonious with the development of claims that 'transcend' the local context in which they are articulated. This view implies that there are no crucial 'barriers' to mutual understanding, no sharp distinctions between disciplinary vocabularies, and no 'mutually unintelligible language games,' so that all aspects of the conversational culture are in principle 'open' to one another: "in real cases representatives of different traditions and cultures can always find a way to talk over their differences" (2000a, 12). Specifically, in contrast to Bloor's rule-governed conception of language, which sees languages as separated from one another by incompatible sets of linguistic rules, Rorty repudiates the very distinction between questions of fact and questions of language, as well as the possibility of dividing true sentences into those that 'correspond to something' and those that are 'true' only by convention (Rorty 1982, xviii-xix). Crucially, based on the idea of the 'ubiquity of language,' Rorty offers a more coherent vocabulary and inquiry in which the identity and status of each concept are "up for conversational grabs" (2000h, 236; 2000c, 79) and the only constraints that matter are 'conversational constraints' derived from the considerations of our fellow-inquirers in the course of conversation (1982, 165).

Additionally, in contrast to Bloor's conservative thought, which primarily focus on established rules and conventions, as well as 'the past' or 'the present' uses, Rorty entertains a reformist, future-oriented view, asserting that human agents have the capacity to deliberate and criticize pre-existing agreements and uses, break current rules, transform the interests that guide their actions, and, if necessary, create new ones through dynamic interpersonal communication. This capacity specifically is enhanced by creativity through the use of metaphor, since Rorty (1991, 163) perceives metaphor as the 'causes' of our ability to, for instance,

'emancipate' ourselves from tradition or 'transvalue' our values, without which there would be "no scientific revolution or cultural breakthrough" (123-125). Consequently, according to Rorty's (14) alternative image to the 'inference-based scientism,' by enlarging our imagination primarily through the 'metaphorical use of old marks,' our minds expand and strengthen by incorporating new candidates for belief or by formulating 'a new use of words,' thereby opening the door to scientific and cultural development.

All in all, Rorty's distinct background, which includes a non-scientific naturalism and a communicative conception of language, enables him to create a broad space for cross-cultural discussion, to which conversational philosophy could make substantial contributions. Put differently, if 'Philosophy' as an overarching project of discovering the objective 'Truth' is no longer a viable option, contrary to Bloor's eliminative strategy that presents no other possibilities, Rorty sees 'philosophy' as the moderate project of 'constructing and comparing vocabularies' as a living alternative that effectively takes part in the conversational culture supported by post-relativism, communicationism, and interpretationism.

##### 5. The Ultimate Fate of 'Theory' and 'Epistemology'

Given Bloor's and Rorty's different perspectives on post-epistemological inquiry, this section briefly explores the extent to which Bloor's fixation on 'theory' (concerning meaning and knowledge), while rejecting the individualistic versions of traditional epistemology, is still affected by the so-called 'epistemological industry,' which Rorty, following Dewey, seeks to completely dismantle, seeing it as "consuming resources that, though appropriately used in a previous cultural epoch, should now be devoted to more worthwhile ends" (Rorty 1998, 277).

Before proceeding, a brief word about the 'epistemology industry' and two major pragmatism-based critiques of it is in order (see Talisse and Aikin 2008, 30-36). Simply put, this industry, as a modern professionalized framework for the analysis of knowledge, has two major problematic components, both of which are prevalent in Bloor's perspective. One is the heavy focus on 'knowledge' and 'knowing' as the proper subject of inquiry, and the other is the dogmatic selection of a set of 'theoretical' principles for theorizing about knowledge. From the standpoint of historicist pragmatism, the traditional epistemologist's guiding question, "How does the knowing mind orient itself to correspond to known objects?", which construes all experiencing as a 'mode of knowing' and knowledge as a unique relationship between knowers and known objects, should be replaced by the Deweyan question, "How are things experienced when they are experienced as known things?" This alternative view collapses the distinction between the

knowing, theorizing, and contemplative mind and the “responsible participant in social practices” by considering the knower as an ‘experimenter’ or, in Rorty’s interpretation, a ‘participatory interlocutor’ (Rorty 2000k, 371).

Of even greater importance is the fact that, despite the theoretical aspirations of epistemologies, there is no objective way to determine the truth of the narratives presented by epistemologies, and there is no non-circular argument to support the methods and principles adopted that shows their superiority over others. Instead, different epistemologies are designed to address different problems and serve different purposes. In truth, epistemologists’ narratives or accounts, like any other knowledge claims, are historically situated, purpose-dependent, and interest-laden.

On the one hand, Rorty’s ‘practical’ view of knowledge (2000i, 237-240), which he shares with Dewey, makes it more plausible to simply drop ‘knowledge’ as a serious topic and instead treat all beliefs as ‘artifacts’ skillfully constructed to serve particular purposes. Rorty’s ‘anti-essentialist’ view of knowledge, on the other hand, rejects the very assumption that there should be a ‘theory’ about such a notion, although much useful can be said about knowledge in the “vocabulary of practice rather than theory, of action rather than contemplation” (Rorty 1982, 160-164). All in all, after rejecting the ‘vocabulary of contemplation and theoria’ and finally considering epistemology to be a ‘quaint antique,’ the need for a new ‘theory of knowledge’ is ultimately ignored (2000i, 264-6).

Now, based on everything we know about Bloor, it is quite clear that the main focus of his project revolves around ‘knowledge,’ which consequently makes it vulnerable to the first criticism. More significantly, as will be shown below, Bloor’s ‘theory’-focused approach is exposed to a variation of the second, more radical, objection.

Before discussing Bloor’s ‘theory’ of knowledge, it is worth noting that Rorty would identify another anti-Wittgensteinian theory-focused theme in Bloor’s work. As noted earlier, sociological meaning finitism is a ‘theory’ of meaning that asserts that meaning is always open-ended and created in a step-by-step fashion (Bloor 1996, 850). Regardless of its specifics, Rorty would see this attempt as hostile to Wittgenstein’s anti-theoretical, practical alternative approach. First, it goes against Wittgenstein’s maxim “Don’t look for the meaning, look for the use,” which, far from being a ‘use theory’ of meaning, refutes the very need for a way of determining meanings (Rorty 2007, 172). Second, it is at odds with the emphasis on simply ‘describing’ the uses and employments of words and how they function within a form of life. More importantly, Rorty explicitly sees the main debate as being over whether the content of a sentence varies from one utterer/context/audience to another. Evidently, if something remains ‘invariant’ and unchanging in such a

'constant flux,' then there must be entities with intrinsic properties that a philosophical or scientific theory can articulate (122-125). Thus, despite his deconstructive stance, Bloor still seems to cling to the idea that we can extract certain theoretical aspects from the ever-changing flow of uses and insert them into a rigid 'theory' for scientific study.

In this regard, Rorty would consider his 'holistic social practice' view to be more faithful to Wittgenstein. This view, which grounds the meaning of a sentence in the 'social practices' of the people who use it, has several anti-theoretical implications. First, it eschews the theory-oriented hope that language can be viewed 'sideways-on' (Rorty 2007, 172-173) and avoids trying to draw a relation between the large entities 'Language' and 'World.' Instead, it simply 'describes' common linguistic behavior and merely 'distinguishes' between uses of linguistic expressions (Rorty 2000c, 77). Second, it naturalizes 'language use' in a way that leaves no room for 'scientific encroachment' (Malachowski 2020, 360-362) by abandoning the goal of discovering 'non-empirical conditions for the possibility of linguistic description' and dropping the notion of language as a 'bounded whole' (Rorty 1991, 57). Third, as implied by its Davidsonian background, it indicates that a 'systematic theory' of the meaning of language is unattainable (57), implying that a complete scientific theory, as in Bloor's systematic study of language-games, cannot be constructed.<sup>5</sup>

Most notably, Rorty would discern another prominent theoretical aspect in Bloor's sociologism that does not seem implausible, namely his attempt to present a 'theory of knowledge' that portrays knowing as a social process and knowledge as a collective achievement (Bloor 2004, 919). Rorty would see Bloor's attempt to establish a correlation between 'society' and 'knowledge' as yet another attempt to restore modern philosophy's fixation on the 'subject-object' relation. In this context, 'society' takes the place of the 'knowing subject' of modern epistemology, and, as evidenced by the title of Bloor's seminal work, society becomes the 'mirror' of nature and 'social representations' replaces 'mental representations.' Thus, from a Rortyan perspective, the whole project of the 'sociology of knowledge,' as best represented by Bloor, appears as a social 'theory of knowledge' that has simply changed the unit of analysis from the individual mind to the collective group. In doing so, Bloor not

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<sup>5</sup> Remarkably, Rorty has such a remarkably robust anti-theoretical, anti-constructivist orientation that, as a self-proclaimed Wittgensteinian who is "happier with uses than with meanings" and truth-conditions make him nervous (Rorty 2000c, 74-75), he sees no need for the Davidsonian truth-conditional 'theory of meaning' built on a Tarskian 'theory of truth' to capture a knowledge-how of the sort involved in linguistic communication. Nor does he see any point in treating 'our constant coping with' linguistic behavior as the construction of formalized, systematized, structuralized theories for 'nonce languages.'



only presents a 'theory' of knowledge that Rorty considers anti-Wittgensteinian, but also grapples with the same problems that besets traditional epistemology in attempting to establish firm relations between knowledge claims and the social forces that (causally or constitutively) construct them, including the vexing problems surrounding the metaphors of 'constitution' or 'construction' (Rorty 1991, 113-125; 1999, introduction).

Furthermore, Bloor's 'theoretical' orientation could also be criticized from the angle of his commitment to 'facts,' namely the social facts that form the basis of his social explanations. In this respect, Rorty's attack on the so-called 'facts' can be redirected to Bloor. First, 'fact' as a 'worldly item' seems to be the other side of the coin of 'representation,' which Rorty (2000k, 376) considers to be debunked: "Talk of representing goes along with talk about sentences being made true by facts" (see also Rorty 1991 1-20; 151-161). According to his anti-representationalist holism, there is no room left for the philosophical or scientific picture that depends on it, i.e. for any fact/representation-oriented theory. After all, the key point of getting rid of representation is to discard the whole Platonic image of beliefs 'cutting reality at the joints,' which aims to identify an objective, vocabulary-independent way of dividing culture into legitimate 'factual' parts and other illegitimate non-factual parts, which now seems to be transferred to 'society.' At the bare minimum, among a range of possible alternatives for sociological inquiry, Bloor's preferred theory suggests that his vocabulary is more adept at cutting at the joints, in that the 'sociological interests' that are to be individuated by his theoretical apparatus are the best window into the social life of a group and its epistemic world.

Second, if one insists on invoking 'fact' (or representation), it seems to be intelligible only 'relative to' a vocabulary, as the 'hardness of facts' is only "an artifact produced by our choice of language game... simply the hardness of the previous agreements within a community about the consequences of a certain event" (1991, 80). Accordingly, 'facts' are ultimately seen as 'hybrid entities' (1991, 81) due to the entanglement of 'fact-stating' (or "being in touch with reality") and 'communicating' ("being in touch with a human community") (see 2000a, 15-17). Therefore, from Rorty's perspective, Bloor's chosen facts for explaining knowledge, those that are constituted within his 'sociological theory' and reliant on his 'methodological claims' about the proper way of conducting sociological inquiry, as well as the final narratives or explanations produced by such a theory, are merely a reflection or 'image' of his adopted conceptual framework that, in the end, reproduces his own social interests. Consequently, despite Bloor's best efforts, the 'objectivity' of his claims is only an 'intersubjective' achievement (in Rortyan jargon, a certain 'solidarity' among other solidarities) that depends on the chosen sociological

vocabulary and on his social group and its interests (literally, the Edinburgh School supporting the ‘Strong Program’).<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, while Rorty has given up the whole project of the ‘epistemology industry,’ asserting that epistemology should finally give way to philosophy as a form of cultural criticism, it appears that Bloor, whilst radically putting an end to any individualistic epistemology, maintains a form of social ‘theory’ of knowledge that Rorty’s anti-theoretical approach finds objectionable.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a critical discussion of Bloor’s and Rorty’s post-epistemological works, exploring their contrasting approaches to the fate of philosophy. After outlining their reasons for moving beyond epistemology, and elucidating the different fates of philosophy in their post-epistemological inquiries, the paper traced their profound disagreements back to their distinct interpretations of ‘naturalism’ and ‘language.’ It was shown how Rorty’s ability to pave the way for philosophy as a cross-cultural, conversational practice is enabled and sustained by his non-scientific version of naturalism combined with his Davidsonian communicative version of language, in contrast to Bloor’s scientific naturalism coupled with his Wittgensteinian ‘rule-governed’ conception. Finally, it was argued that, in contrast to Rorty’s total rejection of the ‘epistemology industry,’ Bloor’s ‘theoretical’ approach is still influenced by some of its key components.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Bloor’s entire ‘sociology of scientific knowledge’ (SSK) has come under analogous criticism in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) from those who challenge the ‘ideology of representation’ and the ‘interest’-based theory of knowledge (see Woolgar 1988). Notably, similar to the critique of the ‘epistemology industry,’ there has been vehement criticism from scholars who, drawing on the richness of scientific culture and practice, argue that SSK’s account is thin, idealized, and reductive (see Pickering 1992), to the point where some even suggest removing both the ‘K’ and the first ‘S’ of SSK.

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Mohammadreza Esmkhani

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The Post-epistemological Inquiry and the Ultimate Fate of Philosophy...

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