

**RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY**

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*Reviving American  
Philosophy*

"On Goodman, Putnam, and Rorty: The Return to the 'Given'" by Mark Lilla, in *Partisan Review* (no. 2, 1984), 121 Bay State Rd., Boston, Mass. 02215.

Since the turn of the century, philosophers in the United States and Great Britain have been preoccupied with increasingly esoteric studies of language. In the process, they have become "peripheral to American intellectual life," writes Lilla, executive editor of the *Public Interest*. But he sees signs of a "postmodern" revival in American philosophy.

Anglo-American philosophers first focused their attention on language under the influence of logical positivists Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The two thinkers argued that there is a single reality; understanding it is largely a matter of devising accurate descriptions of it. Improving accuracy became philosophers' chief task—one that led them to concentrate on methodology and to write ever more arcane treatises, often in mathematical jargon.

Three American postmodern philosophers—Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam of Harvard, the University of Virginia's Richard Rorty—are leading the way back to consideration of such "eternal questions" as the meaning of art or human morality, writes Lilla.

Not that they are complete traditionalists. In his *Ways of World-making* (1978), Goodman argues that there is not one reality; there are many. But they stop far short of the position staked out by Michel Foucault and others, who turn the Russell-Wittgenstein thesis on its head by arguing that language *creates* different realities. No, say the Americans, there may be different realities, but language unifies them. Language is needed to describe every reality; and, as Putnam writes, "Using any word . . . involves one in a history, a tradition."

What makes the trio distinctly American is their rejection of European hyperrationalism and nihilism, their pragmatic recognition of the importance of "the given." But Lilla believes that they have been too busy refuting the old philosophy to focus on the new. What they do next will determine whether American philosophy begins to matter again.

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**SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY**

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*The Pros and Cons  
Of Sex in Plants*

"The Flowering of Sex" by G. Ledyard Stebbins, in *The Sciences* (May-June 1984), 2 East 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

*Is Sex Necessary?* asked humorists James Thurber and E. B. White in the title of their 1929 book. The question is not as silly as it seems, writes Stebbins, a University of California, Davis, geneticist.

Nature has gone to remarkable lengths to "make sex work," he observes. In northern Africa, an orchid of the genus *Ophrys* "looks and