

Why Rorty?

One reason for Rorty's popularity is his grasp of the meta-philosophical problems of recent Anglo-American philosophy. His best work is historical and critical in character, avoids rhetorically inflated claims about the end of philosophy (LT 374), and includes Aristotle as well as Dewey and the later Wittgenstein among those who practice the "kibitzing" (LT 370) style of philosophy he recommends. But if Aristotle is a kibitzer, then Plato, Aquinas, and Kant may be kibitzers too, and what is distinctive in Rorty's position collapses.

Another of Rorty's strengths is his ability to cross the analytic-Continental divide and recover a sense of a common philosophical enterprise with common tasks and common difficulties.¹ But his achievement contradicts his endemic nihilism. It is also undermined by his unwillingness to find common problems linking the analytic and the Continental traditions, and his refusal to talk about analytic or other philosophical methods (CP 226). He is proposing to unite the rival traditions of philosophy at their lowest point, as ways of speaking and writing of questionable intellectual standing and negligible practical relevance.

Rorty's views are close enough to those of many contemporary philosophers to place on them the burden of explaining how they avoid his conclusions. He has described himself as a Left-

wing Kuhnian; he might also be called a Left Wittgensteinian. For he emphasizes the vulnerability of language to the will-to-power that arises from its open texture.

But his response to Kuhn and Wittgenstein is not the only possible one. A Right Wittgensteinian would develop, in a conservative direction, the idea that social practice is the highest criterion of knowledge (Scruton, 1980). Another sort of Wittgensteinian would extend Wittgenstein's hints about religion as a form of life to metaphysics, understanding it as stating the structural features of a civilization (along the lines suggested by Collingwood, 1984). Yet another sort of Wittgensteinian would read Wittgenstein with Marxist rather than Nietzschean eyes, arguing that the disorder that can be found among our linguistic and other practices are symptoms of a new world straining to come to birth. And all those who resist nihilism will invoke the wisdom of Aristotle -- that one should not look for more rigor than one's subject matter permits.

The most fundamental issue for understanding Rorty is how he is able to sustain his peculiar mixture of narcissistic self-culture and Left-liberal politics, of European nihilism and earnest American progressivism. This issue properly belongs to the intellectual and cultural historian (May, 1979 is indispensable), since it has to do with how a set of ideas can retain its grip on the human mind, despite or even because of its incoherence. It has also to do with the culture of the intelligentsia, which is different from, and in important respects in tension with, the requirements of the intellectual life. I here offer hypotheses only.

The style of philosophizing that Rorty commends -- a sort of elegant game playing not sustained by any commitment to the pursuit of truth -- is very common in philosophy departments these days. It resonates with the Spenglerian mood of many contemporary intellectuals -- a mood summed up in the words of Cornel West (1985, p. 259): "in the eyes of many, we live among the ruins of North Atlantic civilization." This perception is best understood if we think neither of

social injustice nor of private misbehavior, but of a loss of coherence and direction affecting both private and public life. It cannot be supported by listing the political frustrations of the Left, for example by observations such as that "Rampant racism, persistent patriarchy, extensive class inequality, brutal state repression, subtle bureaucratic surveillance, and technological abuse of nature pervade capitalist, communist and neocolonial countries" (West, 1985, p. 259). It cannot be supported by a conservative grievance list either. For extreme class inequality and loose sexual morals have existed during highly creative periods of Western history -- Elizabethan England, for example.

One element among intellectuals and policy professionals attempts to uphold liberal platitudes while having lost faith in everything, including the progressive view of history, in which these platitudes once were rooted. People of this sort would regard it as hopelessly old-fashioned to follow the Declaration of Independence and ground claims of inalienable rights in the action of a Creator God. They regard it as, if anything, less acceptable to appeal to progress, in Kantian fashion, as a necessary postulate of coherent political action.

One manifestation of this phenomenon is a nominally progressive politics that abandons its mass base for the pursuit of multitudes of fringe groups, leaving it to those generally called "conservative" (or even "reactionary") to speak to and for the ordinary man or woman (see, among a host of others, Edsall, 1991). (This sentence was written before the election of 1992. But the policy failures of the Bush Administration do not establish the coherence, workability, or acceptability of doctrinaire Left-liberal politics.) Another is the attempt to combine "Left" politics with "Right" epistemology: people officially devoted to mass-based social change appeal to the privileged insights of those who have emerged from the Cave of conventional opinion and discovered a Void. For those who think this way, central features of the experience of the ordinary

person, such as the distinction between men and women, is nothing more than a social construction.ⁱⁱ As Roger Scruton has pointed out (1986), if the distinction between male and female is socially constructed, so is the distinction between persons and things. We are dealing, in short, with a world in which intellectuals have ceased to address ordinary people with anything but slogans, and are content to leave their cultural formation to Oprah Winfrey and the *National Inquirer*.

If social change is to produce anything but chaos, we require a public understanding of what the world and human beings are like, and what sort of society we are trying to create; the thought that ordinary perceptions are illusory is, if anything, conservative in its social and political implications. Rorty has opposed over-theoretical politics, and in particular opposes the "Nietzscheanization of the rhetoric of the left." He is "concerned to emphasize our relation to, and identification with, our communal past. Without such a relation, [he argues] ... the stance of the intellectuals toward the surrounding community becomes the undesirably elitist tone Marxist intellectuals often assumed" (D 44). But his arguments undermine appeals to common sense and deprive our communal past of the capacity to govern, to correct, or to renew our practices.

A related phenomenon is the militantly intolerant relativism, known as "political correctness," which attempts to enforce tolerance for all ways of life by suppressing -- in practice, harassing -- those who believe in truth or "traditional values" (Devine, 1991b, esp. pp. 73-4). Just as Rorty opposes over-theoretical politics and the "Leftspeak" it engenders, so also he refuses to accept political correctness. But his critique of what he aptly calls, following Harold Bloom, the "School of Resentment" amounts to little more than nostalgia for a hopeful mood (PP 2:179-84) -- for "a romanticism for which we Alexandrans no longer have the strength" (PP 2:192).ⁱⁱⁱ We need also consider the neoconservative attempt to impose "values" sustaining the position of the rich and

powerful, while dismissing criticism of ruling class ideas (Devine, 1991b, esp. pp. 74-5). Rorty's educational philosophy for primary and secondary education has a certain affinity with the neoconservative position, despite his rhetorical gestures to the contrary. It seems to me that the end of the Cold War, and the spiritual and economic crisis the lack of an Evil Empire has engendered, have made both neoconservatism and political correctness irrelevant. But the broader issues about the aims of education and the intellectual life, which the conflict between them has posed, remain urgent. And Rorty's work is entirely irrelevant to these issues.

Rorty works within the conviction, all-pervasive within the contemporary world, that the attempt to be rational about questions of value leads only to skepticism, so that the alternatives for public discourse are a repressive scientism, whose highest standard is the efficient pursuit of arbitrarily imposed ends, and a passionate irrationalism, for which sincere and fervent protest is its own justification (see Booth, 1974, especially the discussion of Bertrand Russell in ch. 2). In another version, questions of value are left to each individual, with no one of us being authorized to "impose his values" on the others. Society becomes an enormous shopping mall, in which the value of everything is its price; and those things, principles, and people whose continued existence is a burden may simply be discarded. But the whole enterprise collapses when it becomes necessary, as in public education (and the state regulation of private education), for the community to take a stand on some question of value. And since Rorty does not accept the positivists' belief in a metaphysical chasm between fact and value, his nihilism extends to questions of fact as well.

A further reason for Rorty's popularity is more delicate, and requires me once again to emphasize the tentative character of my suggestions. Rorty observes that "the issue between Kantian and non-Kantian philosophy is ... about as serious as that the issue between normal and deviant sexual practices" (CP 106). This remark raises three issues: whether there is in fact a

difference between normal and deviant sexuality, how important this difference is, and how exactly we should draw the line between the two kinds of sexuality. However difficult it may be to find a connecting tissue of principles, Rorty's sympathy with the gay liberation movement (PP 2:138) will seem to many readers an expectable outgrowth of his general philosophical position. (Rorty also supports Derrida's rejection of Plato's insistence that homosexual *Eros* should be chaste, so that, though it cannot produce children of the body, it will produce children of the soul (CIS 128n.16).)

I doubt that any direct argument goes from premises about the nature of truth to concrete questions of sexual or other personal morality (but see Devine, 1989, pp. 62-9). Yet a remarkable number of contemporary people see a connection here. Rorty suggests a theoretical basis for radical sexual liberation when he advocates (and attributes to Freud) an ethics of "self-enlargement": one that expresses "the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and the future" (PP 2:154). Rorty mentions three ways in which an ethics of self-enlargement could be expressed: in "sexual experimentation," in "political engagement," and in "the enrichment of language" (PP 2:154). Those bent on self-enlargement, whose worldviews dispose them to be hostile to the concept of the natural, might, for example, express their philosophies by bringing themselves to desire what they, given their cultural background, spontaneously regard as repulsive. But, for some unexplained reason, Rorty holds that the prohibition on sex with near relations belongs with commonsense requirements such as the Golden Rule, and thus "swings free of religion, science, metaphysics, and psychology" (PP 2:153). Other writers might support gay rights on other grounds, say that inherited sexual morality is irrational, or that we have a natural right to sexual fulfillment regardless of the *mores* of our

society. But such arguments, whatever their merits, cannot be squared either with Rorty's philosophy or the postmodern worldview that in part inspires it.

Yet it would be an error to regard Rorty's sensibility as the exclusive possession of groups regarded as decadent. We must recognize the despair prevalent among many elements of our society, before we can effectively address its causes. The attempt to remedy despair by producing an extraordinarily rigorous set of reasons for one's positions collapses immediately, and in its failure reinforces the nihilism it was intended to combat.

Despite the offhand way in which Rorty treats religious issues, his thought can be understood as the working out a form of atheism that has undercut its own claims to superior rationality and is content to rest its claims on the brute fact of its prevalence among academics, educators and other intellectuals. (James Seaton (1992) compares this side of Rorty with Stanley Fish and Edward Said.) One thing that holds his thought together is a dogmatic closedness to the transcendent, combined with an unwillingness (of the sort despised by Nietzsche) to pay the moral and political price for the rejection of God.

Thus Rorty is prepared to call himself a "freeloading atheist" [PP 1:202], opportunistically appealing to ancestral Jewish and Christian beliefs whenever it suits his rhetorical purposes. He remarks of the "substantial majority of college students [who] have been voting for Reagan, and now Bush" (and I should suppose he would say the same thing about the substantial number who have supported Buchanan and Perot), "May God forgive them" (TC 240n.6). But the same time he treats the notion that "we take Christianity seriously" as a sufficient refutation of any argument that implies it (TT 577n.18).

Rorty's version of atheism involves the unargued rejection, not only of God in the traditional sense, but also of anything -- including standards of good argument -- capable of

resisting the vortex of contingency. He insists that "nobody can set *a priori* limits to what changes in philosophical opinion can do" (PP 2:6), but he is confident that no changes in favor of religion are in the offing. (When the mood strikes him, he is prepared to dictate to cultural traditions of which he knows nothing. "We need to be on the lookout," he writes in one of the most striking examples of Western arrogance on record, "not just for Japanese Heideggers, Indian Platos, and Chinese Humes, but for Chinese Sternes and Indonesian Rabelaises. I am too ignorant to know whether there *are* any people of the latter sort, but I hope and trust that there are. Somewhere in the East there *must* have been people who enjoyed unweaving the tapestries which the saints and sages had woven" (PP 2:73, emphasis Rorty's)). He is prepared to blur the philosophy-literature distinction in favor of the "general text" (PP 2:88-87), thus returning us to the situation of the Biblical writers, for whom there is no firm distinction between cosmology, history, and law. But he does so in the confidence, unsupported by anything like a reason, that none of these texts will turn out to have divine authority.

The same feature of Rorty's thought is exhibited, in more technical terms, in a discussion of Wittgenstein and Heidegger (PP 2:50-65). He there distinguishes "type A entities" or "explained explainers" which, he points out, are "in the same position as a transcendent deity" (PP 2:55), from the "lower-level" type B entities, "which stand in need of being related in order to become available" (PP 2:54). He praises the later Wittgenstein for doing without type A entities altogether, and criticizes the later Heidegger for failing to do so. As he sums up the argument:«USSX»

From the later Wittgenstein's naturalistic and pragmatic point of view, we can be grateful to Heidegger for having given us a new language game. But we should not view that language game as Heidegger did -- as a way of distancing and summing up the West. It was, instead,

simply one more in a long series of self-conceptions. Heideggerese is only Heidegger's gift to us, not Being's gift to Heidegger. (PP 2:65)

Rorty bases his "postmodern bourgeois liberalism" (PP 1:197-202) on rhetoric more suitable to fascism, the anarchic celebration of "alternative life styles," or to a politics of permanent revolution (see Sorely, RR 24) than to a scheme of ordered liberty, whether capitalist, socialist, or other. He attempts to show that "light-minded aestheticism" can have a "moral purpose" and even be "an important vehicle of moral progress" (PP 1:193-4). He ignores the fact that some people will take a light-minded attitude toward the pragmatists' goal of making "the world's inhabitants more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality" (PP 1:193), while others will firmly oppose it. Many of us can see the need for greater liberalism and tolerance in our world (or at least some parts of it), while agreeing with Jeffrey Stout that its inhabitants are at present adequately (or more than adequately) responsive to the claims of instrumental rationality (1988, p. 288). Yet liberalism and tolerance are, like most things, mixed goods. Stout's comment is to the point: "At his worst, Rorty seems to be working within something like MacIntyre's dualistic vision, content merely to take the opposite side, making liberals out to be children of light and their critics the children of darkness" (1988, p. 231).

Rorty loves and celebrates chaos, though not with the happy consistency of someone like Feyerabend. Authoritarians like Hobbes and De Maistre fear and hate it. That is the chief difference between them.

In short, Rorty manages to be at once nihilistic and complacent. It depends on us as philosophers, whether it can be said of him, as of Nietzsche, Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, that "he has his place in [the] succession of profound and stimulating failures [who have] reinvigorated philosophy by writing its epitaph" (Klepp, 1990, p. 124). And the outcome of his

cultural and educational interventions depends on us as citizens, parents, and educators: he is the philosopher of a civilization that has resigned itself to the gradual exhaustion of its moral and material resources, for which politics, where it is not mere horse-trading, has become a sideshow in which intellectuals and their camp-followers dramatize their eccentricities for the titillation of the bourgeoisie.

NOTES

ⁱ For Rorty's own account of this split, see CP 223-7; for a skillful weaving of analytic and Continental themes, see CP ch. 7; for an astute discussion of Derrida, see PP 2:85-106.

ⁱⁱ See Kessler and McKenna, 1978.

ⁱⁱⁱ See TC for a good presentation of Rorty's relationship to the cultural Left, or, in the words of Henry Gates, the "Rainbow Coalition of feminists, deconstructionists, Althusserians, Foucauldians, people working in ethnic or gay studies, etc."