## Conclusion

Let us suppose that Rorty's philosophy represents the private views of many educators, including professors of philosophy, or the implications of their views. Let us suppose that it is as inadequate as I have argued that it is. What sort of position would remedy the deficiencies of Rorty's position, while at the same time being in sufficient continuity with it that a person could intelligibly move to it from a Rortyan starting point?

There are four possible answers to this question, each of which will commend itself to a different set of readers. One is a frank secular conservatism, another continues Rorty's postmodern themes in a melancholy, conservative key; a third is a return to religion, and a fourth combines the first two options in a religious conservatism of a highly traditional sort. While I shall briefly indicate my own preference for the second of these positions at the end of this discussion, there can be no possible question of justifying it adequately here.

The easiest way of repairing Rorty is to drop his progressivist pretensions and frankly avow a status quo conventionalism. The aim of politics and education on this view is to stabilize our present rather confused conventions, and to inculcate them into the rising generation. And we should accept the narrowing of solidarity -- or at least the postponement of any attempt to broaden it -- that a concern with stability over justice tends strongly to entail. If someone claims that the our society is systematically unjust, we can make the common standard move -- altogether in keeping with Rorty's philosophy -- of denying that questions of justice apply to social institutions as opposed to transactions among individual persons.

The most important argument for conservatism of this sort is a fear of social chaos, leading to the acceptance of institutions one might otherwise find unjust -- an argument Rorty is incapable of answering. If one accepts this sort of conservatism, the question arises, whether the workings of

such a society -- in a world where the intimate solidarity of pre-literate tribes cannot be recaptured does not require acceptance, at least as a Platonic noble lie, <sup>ii</sup> of a conception of Truth and
Rationality which Rorty's philosophy fails to sustain.

But conservatives as much as anybody are subject to fits of melancholy, and may even succumb to despair. A conservatively minded philosopher might therefore abandon the task of managing the decline of our civilization to the politician, and content himself with a form of elegant intellectual play. As far as I can see, postmodernism has a long future ahead of it, once it abandons the bizarre claim to be somehow revolutionary or even reformist.

Those who find these sorts of resolution unacceptable may prefer a second alternative. Rorty's contemptuous dismissal of religion is a boon to the religious apologist, since it effectively excludes religion from the scope of his skeptical rhetoric, while at the same time it undermines the critique of religion generated by the Enlightenment. Hence one can make an act of faith -- or more precisely of rational faith in Kant's sense -- in a God Who has created a world that we as human beings can know, and us human beings as capable of knowing the world. This harmony between self and world can extend to questions of value as much as those of fact. And -- for anything Rorty can argue to the contrary -- we can also believe in an interventionist God, Who can rescue us from the consequences of our folly when we go astray (as we very often do).

Such a view can be used to support the broadened sense of solidarity that Rorty in some moods wants to promote, including a pro-life position in the abortion dispute he is likely to find unwelcome. (Animal rights, and some of the more extreme claims made in ecological ethics, present a harder case. But in practice such claims are more likely to reduce human beings to the level of beasts than to raise beasts to the level of human beings.)<sup>iii</sup> Belief in the expansion and revitalization of democracy, including its extension to the economic sphere, is a natural

consequence of this way of thinking. (We may call this strategy the *seamless garment*.) Education on this view will attempt to liberate students' minds from the grip of a capitalist society, but at the same time to reinforce traditional moral and religious teachings.

But perhaps this position is too sunny to win my readers' acceptance. A third possibility is a religious conservatism, which relies heavily on the doctrine of original sin to warrant acceptance of limits on human solidarity. In practice this position is very much like the first, differing chiefly in emphasizing the need to stabilize and reinforce traditional moral codes. Religious education of a traditional sort will have a natural place in this strategy.

As I remarked at the outset, it is not possible to justify accepting one or another of these positions here. I personally prefer the second: I am not yet prepared to give up altogether on the idea of social justice; I dislike the noble lie; I retain some hope of expanding human solidarity; and I believe that the use of the doctrine of original sin to defend social injustice is one of the most powerful arguments for the truth of the doctrine. But to defend my preference would carry me far beyond the confines of a critique of Rorty.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Irving Kristol, "A Capitalist Conception of Justice," in Richard T. DeGeorge and Joseph A.

Pichler eds., *Ethics, Free Enterprise, and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press,

1978). Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1980), pp.

86-90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>ii</sup> Scruton at least is prepared to accept the noble lie. See *The Meaning of Conservatism*, pp. 139-40

iii For detailed discussion see my article, "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism," *Philosophy*, Oct., 1978.

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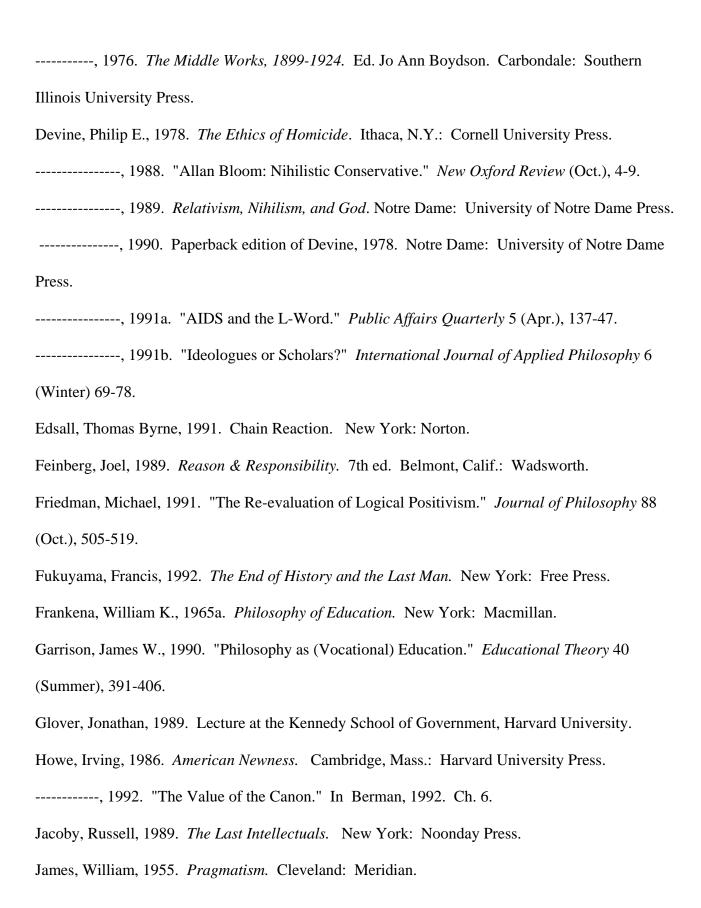
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