The New Fuzziness:

Richard Rorty and Education

One key task of philosophy is to criticize other philosophy, not only -- even if most importantly -- in the interests of truth but because, whether philosophers will it so or not, philosophical ideas are influential in social, moral, and political life.

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List of Abbreviations

(By Richard Rorty unless otherwise indicated.)

- D "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication: Reply to Acrilla and Nicholson," *Educational Theory*, 40 (Winter 1990), 41-44.
- CIS *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge:

 Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- CP Consequences of Pragmatism. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- LT Introduction, "Metaphilosophical Difficulties in

 Linguistic Philosophy," and "Two Retrospective Essays" in

 Rorty's collection *The Linguistic Turn*. Chicago:

 University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- PMN *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- PP Philosophical *Papers*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge

 University Press, 1991. Vol. 1: *Objectivism, Relativism, and Truth*; vol. 2: *Essays on Heidegger and Others*. Cited by volume and page or part.
- PRM "Putnam and the Relativist Menace." *Journal of Philosophy*, 90, no. 9 (Sept., 1993), 443-461.
- RR Alan Malachowski ed., *Reading Rorty*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. Cited by contributor and chapter or page.
- SAB "Straussianism, Democracy, and Allan Bloom I: That Old

Time Philosophy," *New Republic*, (April 4, 1988), 28-33, as reprinted in Robert L. Stone ed., Essays *on the Closing of the American Mind*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1989. Ch. 20.

- TC "Two Cheers for the Cultural Left." In Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith eds., The *Politics of Liberal Education*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.
- TPS "Taking Philosophy Seriously." *New Republic* 198 (April 11, 1988), 31-34.
- TT "Thugs and Theories." *Political Theory* 15 (Nov. 1987), 564-80.

Author's Note

I have tried throughout to avoid educational and other jargon, and the sort of rhetoric in which nothing is clear except the author's indignation. There is also the vexed question of common gender pronouns. Rorty sometimes uses the common gender *he* (see PMN 4n.1); he also uses *he* or *she* (e.g., PP 2:44, 146, and 154). But he also uses the common gender *she* for anti-essentialists (PP 1:101), ironists (CIS ch. 4), victims (CIS ch. 8), and lost children (PP 1:202). He subjects Orwell's Winston Smith to the one humiliation (from Smith's point of view) that O'Brien forgot to inflict, and emasculates him by a pronoun (CIS 178). None of this has prevented feminist critics from pointing out that the heroes of his stories "are always figured as sons seeking to displace their cultural fathers" (Fraser, RR 308). In my view, ideologically motivated pronouns only impede communication; hence I use *he* to refer to both men and women, except when the context involves a male individual.

I am indebted to Brian Ellerbeck for suggesting this project to me, and for providing me with some examples of the educational literature. I am also indebted to Mark Henrie, Pawel Oskdowski, Hilary Putnam, George Rutherglen, Joseph Ryshpan, Richard Velkley, Celia Wolf-Devine, and Michael Wreen for help along the way. Mario Valdez suggested my title, and Patrick Walker helped with the proofreading. None of these is responsible for my errors.

Introduction

There was a time when philosophers feared, or hoped, that the problems that fueled their discipline could somehow be made to go away. The fly could find its way out of the fly-bottle, and we could then proceed with the business of life unimpeded by perplexities such as the Mind-Body Problem and the Problem of Other Minds.

This epoch in our intellectual history can now be safely consigned to the past. We have problems aplenty, living as we do in a society deeply perplexed about itself, its past, and its future. Our educational institutions must continue working in an environment in which truth itself, and the Western tradition which has carried our conception of it, have been violently rejected by some thinkers. And the unfortunate habit of regarding education as a concern of third-rate thinkers only, despite the example of such luminaries as Plato and Rousseau, is likely to continue to bear bitter fruit.

Richard Rorty has been a central figure both in the philosophical and in the educational disputes of our day. A critical examination of his writings might therefore enable us to proceed with the educational enterprise with a sense that its deepest intellectual problems can at least be managed.

Recent philosophy has been divided into two mutually uncomprehending schools of thought and practice -- a division Rorty among others has striven to overcome. In broad strokes, analytic or Anglo-American philosophers have been interested above all in conceptual clarity, and from time to time have hoped that such clarity would make the traditional problems of philosophy go away. Where their arguments have had nihilistic implications, they have chosen to veil this nihilism in the

apparatus of intellectual precision. Continental philosophers have been more concerned with addressing the Big Issues, and have been prepared to pay the price in obscurity. They have also been willing to indulge in a little melodrama to drive home the importance of the issues with which they have been wrestling. (These are stereotypes: Husserl does not quite fit the Continental pattern.)

Despite his interest in Heidegger and other Continental philosophers, Rorty's philosophy is best understood as one outcome of the methodological debates among Anglo-American philosophers initiated by Wittgenstein and the logical positivists. (For his own survey of possible outcomes, see LT 33-39.) His philosophy is on no account the *only* such outcome possible: in my view sounder methodological positions have been defended by Alasdair MacIntyre, Hilary Putnam, and Donald Davidson --- which of them is best I need not argue here. (Davidson amusingly remarks [RR 137] that he and Rorty differ only in their evaluation of the philosophical tradition. Which is as much as to say, Nietzsche and I disagree only about the existence of God.) In any event, understanding the issues Rorty's argument raises will require forays into the more technical aspects of recent and contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. But I have endeavored to make my discussion as widely accessible as possible.

For the most part, I shall treat Rorty's writings as if they were all produced simultaneously, and for that reason neglect questions of development.ⁱ But the disturbing aspects of Rorty's thought have become more and more evident as his career has proceeded. Two sorts of development can be detected, neither to Rorty's credit. First, in his best book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), and in some of his subsequent papers, Rorty exhibits considerable capacity for rigorous argument, and a disposition to exhaust such argument before having recourse to sarcasm or other rhetorical devices. Later on he seems to treat the production of arguments as a boring irrelevancy.

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A second line of development is suggested by the title of Rorty's second book, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982). At one stage, Rorty may have been a serious pragmatist, concerned to evaluate ideas by their consequences -- whether they helped us cope or hindered us in doing so. For such a pragmatist, Heidegger's Nazism would be a source of very serious concern. But Rorty now finds it impossible to give a conclusive answer to the charge that pragmatism is morally dangerous (as he admits at CP 159n.15), and for that reason self-destructive.

In the end, Rorty lapses into a form of apolitical aestheticism, limited by an ancestral liberalism. He endorses William James's conception of "truth ... as what is good for "MDUL»us«MDNM» to believe" (PP 1:22), but systematically fails to consider whether it is, in fact, good for us to believe the doctrines he endorses. True, the liberal societies he prefers are more hospitable to apolitical aesthetes than are societies of other sorts. But if this were all there were to the case for liberalism, the liberal cause would be quite hopeless.

I should like to set against Rorty the figure of George Orwell, most importantly his novel 1984 and his essay "Politics and the English Language." As Rorty points out, Orwell should not be read as a realistic (or other) philosopher. I am also not arguing that, if Orwell were alive today, he would agree with me rather than with Rorty. It may be that 1984 is a work of despair, to be evaded only by a leap of faith Orwell was unable or unwilling to make.

Orwell's role in my argument is that of witness. He reminds us, first, of the necessity of retaining the distinction between truth and untruth, even when it hinders the expression of our political (or other) passions; and, second, of the importance of establishing some limits on permissible re-descriptions. War is not peace, freedom is not slavery, and truth is not whatever helps us cope. And if private eccentrics, the majority, or those in power are permitted to ignore these truisms, there is no limit to the follies or to the atrocities of which they may become guilty.

And the plain man naturally has recourse to metaphysics when presented with challenges to his most central commitments.

One problem in reading Rorty is his tendency to alternate between more and less extreme versions of his positions.ⁱⁱ Sometimes he is defending the view -- consistent even with Platonism -- that *true* is a primitive expression; at other times he proposes that we forget about truth and error and devote ourselves to a light-minded celebration of exotica. My own reading emphasizes the more extreme side of Rorty, since it is also the more distinctive, and the more important for education. His less extreme statements do not have the implications he seems to believe they do, in education or elsewhere.

The core of my philosophical critique of Rorty is a self-referential argument of a sort that he is quite prepared to direct against other philosophers (see PP 2:90-92), without noticing that it also applies to himself. He both requires, and cannot consistently accept, a view of the mind, the world, and language that places limits on the sorts of (rational) discourse open to human beings.

Sometimes Rorty takes metaphysical indifferentism as a foundation for liberalism, as when he urges us to "treat these [metaphysical issues] as irrelevant to politics as Jefferson thought questions about the Trinity and about transubstantiation" (PP 1:180). But if there are no limits on acceptable conceptual schemes, then both religion and traditional philosophy remain open to anyone who chooses to pursue them (and many do, for reasons already explained). "There is no ground whatever for Rorty's rejection of the possibility that "finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings" (CIS 46).

In fact, Rorty has quite definite ideas of what knowledge has to be to qualify as such, and these imply definite limits on the range of possible justifications. And these not only imply a

rejection of religion and traditional philosophy, but also place limits on the range of possible forms of politics, education, and intellectual life. But if Rorty takes these limits seriously, he will have to articulate and defend them. Then he will end up, in his own words, "pay[ing] good old logocentric compliments to the enemies of logocentrism" (PP 2:121). Thus, he turns out to have a metaphysics of his own — one that takes it to be of the essence of all things (and not merely, as Sartre said, of human beings) that they have no essence (cf. PP 2:132).

Sometimes Rorty espouses a metaphysics of universal contingency, analogous to the necessitarian philosophy of Spinoza, though with signs reversed. Thus while Spinoza identifies freedom with the acceptance of necessity, Rorty holds that freedom is "the recognition of contingency" (CIS 46). But such a metaphysics will need to be defended against a criticism parallel to one made against Spinoza. *Necessary* and *contingent* are correlative terms, and it does not make sense to talk about one without at least affirming the possibility of the other.

The argument I have been making refutes all the followers of Protagoras. These include not only Rorty (who avoids calling himself a relativist) but also the self-described relativist Joseph Margolis. Margolis advances "a philosophy of the free spirit, of all those unwilling to let *any* premiss count as privileged or fixed." Yet at least one premise is privileged in Margolis's account -- the truth of relativism itself. This premise he frankly describes as "a prejudice in the old sense, in the sense of (discerning) the deep preformative themes of our operative judgment horizontally formed by the very practice of historical life -- in other words, a dogma whose claim to our assent lies in the fact that we all assent to it, even if some of us claim not to do so.

Either we accept a metaphysics of universal contingency, or we do not. If we do, it needs to be defended like any other metaphysics -- and the claim to have, in a radical way, "overcome the tradition" will not stand. If we do not, then those who wish to affirm the "permanent things,"

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whether in philosophy, politics, or religion, need not fear that we will have decisive (or even persuasive) arguments against their position.

One commentator on Rorty dismisses self-referential arguments of the sort just given as "the sleaziest weapon in the philosopher's arsenal." The ground of this condemnation is that self-referential arguments constitute an attempt to put an end to the conversation. This complaint echoes Rorty's own praise of what he calls "edifying" philosophy: "Edifying philosophers can never put an end to philosophy, but they can prevent it from attaining the secure path of a science" (PMN 372). But, while self-referential arguments are extraordinarily powerful -- and for that reason rightly prized by philosophers less light minded than Rorty -- they do not end conversation. They merely require those at whom they are directed to reformulate their positions, and thus advance the conversation rather than ending it.

The core of my educational critique of Rorty (it also applies to his politics) assumes the antinomian interpretation of his views. It draws upon Dewey's insistence that education requires encounter with a resistant medium. Whether we are dealing with education as socialization or education as training in criticism, a sense that the social and natural world, as well as the cultural tradition in which one is being educated, can oppose one's passing whims, is necessary to the development of character and self-understanding. Education is not possible if we hold that nothing students accept can be rejected without committing the offense of "denigrating their culture."

Some students at prestigious schools are convinced that Norway is more populous than India, and are offended if a professor attempts to instruct them otherwise.

When we turn from education as socialization to education as training in critical scrutiny of inherited preconceptions and existing institutions, we likewise require belief in standards against which the practice of our society can be judged. The alliance Rorty and others have attempted to

forge between anti-realism in philosophy and the political Left is entirely hopeless. In the words of Jo Burrows, "since there is no way to show 'how things really are' on the Rortyan understanding, there is no way to appeal to facts which undermine the liberal [or other socially entrenched] picture" (RR 353). Whether we are moderate reformers or radical revolutionaries, we need to know what the world is like, what changes in it are desirable and possible, and when we have succeeded in accomplishing our program. In short, Rorty's philosophy is not consistent with seeing anything that requires correction, either in the student or in the larger society (or for that matter in our educational system).

Some people resolve such problems by limiting their tolerance in a way suggested by a metaphysics of universal contingency. They believe that all cultural expressions are to be tolerated -- or even, in the name of diversity, welcomed -- so long as they do not claim (objective) truth. Within the relativist camp, it is not even acceptable to criticize someone's arguments, on pain of being denounced as "insensitive." But anti-relativists are subject to every form of harassment. Hence it is legitimate to say, "The very thought of homosexuality makes me and my friends sick," but not "Homosexual practices are a serious sin to which many generally admirable people have been tempted." If there is anything to be said for this sort of political correctness, I should like very much to know what it is.

In dealing with the problems of education, I neglect one important set about which Rorty has little to say: the issues of finance. These are in fact three: how much of the national income should be devoted to education, as opposed to the military budget or consumer goods; how it should be distributed among educational institutions of various sorts; and the fact that, in practice, good education is now a privilege of the well-to-do. It is unreasonable, on any premises, to expect

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a society facing resource limitations, structural maladjustments, and consequent budgetary crises to expend its resources on narcissistic exercises.

The nature of the dispute between Rorty and me is such that, if Rorty were right, sarcasm and personal attacks would be a more appropriate procedure than reasoned argument. By his own showing, his critique of traditional philosophy is nothing more than an attempt to re-describe his fellow human beings in a humiliating way. I shall, however, renounce such methods. I am afraid that only the use of collective power to make it clear to him that his ideas are not, in fact, helping him cope could change Rorty's mind. And scourge-of-God politics, though sometimes tempting, is both unjustified and unnecessary. Reality is quite capable of looking after itself. I hope, at least, to persuade those who may be wavering not to abandon belief in truth, as a premise for their own inquiries or for education.

Critics from the Left have accused Rorty of neglecting social, political, and economic inequality, and of imposing a false solidarity upon a divided society. Critics from the Right have accused him of destroying all conceptions of justice that stand between us and a war of each against all, or the rule of some elite by naked power. It is my contention that both sorts of criticism are correct, and that -- despite their differing political inspirations -- they are mutually reinforcing. Because our society, and even more so our world, are divided and full of relations of unjust domination, we need standards of truth and justice in terms of which, among other things, the oppressed can make their case. For if they have no need to make their case, and can simply take what they believe to be rightfully theirs, they are no longer among the oppressed.

The plan of the argument is as follows. Chapter 1 is an exposition of Rorty's philosophy with only a minimum of critical scrutiny. Chapter 2 turns to the problems of contemporary education and argues that pragmatism of the sort defended by Rorty, very far from being part of the

solution, is in fact part of the problem. Chapter 3 looks at Rorty's position in more detail — focusing on the key concepts of *contingency*, *irony*, and *solidarity*, and arguing that even in its most developed form Rorty's position cannot withstand critical examination. Chapter 4 sums up my philosophical evaluation of Rorty, and defends it against the charge of covertly conceding everything Rorty requires for his argument. Chapter 5 applies my argument to education: I there place Rorty within the classical and contemporary debate about the nature, ends, and means of education — including both curriculum and teaching methods. I attempt to show that Rorty's philosophy fails adequately to address the problems of moral education, of collective support for education, and of the relationship between education and social justice. With the help of figures ranging from Aristotle to Dewey to Maritain, I suggest that there are available other and better approaches to educational issues than Rorty's, without attempting to decide on one of them here.

NOTES

(Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) pp. 7-8.

ⁱ On the question of possible discontinuities in Rorty's work, see David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty*

ii See Jeffrey Stout, Ethics After Babel (Boston: Beacon, 1988), pp. 245ff.

iii See Leszek Kolakowski, Metaphysical Horror (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

iv The Truth About Relativism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. xvi.

v Ibid, p. xv.

viHall, Richard Rorty, p. 115.

vii *The Middle Works*, 1899-1924, ed. Jo Ann Boydson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 25ff.