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# The New Fuzziness: Richard Rorty on Education

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**The New Fuzziness:**

**Richard Rorty and Education**

Philip E. Devine

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.

Alasdair MacIntyre

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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.<sup>i</sup> 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.

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.<sup>ii</sup> 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).<sup>iii</sup> 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."<sup>iv</sup> 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<sup>v</sup>-- 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,"

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."<sup>vi</sup> 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.<sup>vii</sup> 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

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

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<sup>i</sup> On the question of possible discontinuities in Rorty's work, see David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) pp. 7-8.

<sup>ii</sup> See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), pp. 245ff.

<sup>iii</sup> See Leszek Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

<sup>iv</sup> *The Truth About Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. xvi.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, p. xv.

<sup>vi</sup> Hall, *Richard Rorty*, p. 115.

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

## An Overview

Richard Rorty is one of the most provocative and influential of contemporary thinkers writing in English. As the journalist of ideas L. S. Klepp has put it, in an article entitled “Every Man a Philosopher-King,”

After winning a solid reputation with densely argued articles devoted to minute technical points in language -- in the conventional fashion of academic philosophy, [he] has spent the last 20 years turning himself into a philosophical maverick, a thorn in the academic establishment’s side or, to borrow Socrates’ job description, a gadfly.<sup>i</sup>

In the process, Rorty went through divorce and remarriage (both his first wife Amélie and his second wife Mary are professional philosophers).<sup>ii</sup> He also experienced a period of personal and professional depression, and shed his institutional affiliation with philosophy. Since 1983 he has been University Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

At least some of Rorty’s fellow professional philosophers have responded favorably to his probing: he has been honored with an anthology devoted to critical studies of his work (RR)<sup>iii</sup> – and he is given the last word in Konstantin Kolenda’s handy history of philosophy,<sup>iv</sup> as well as in a series of video-taped lectures on the Western intellectual tradition produced in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution Resident Associate Program.<sup>v</sup> He was President of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association in 1979; his article “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism” (CP ch. 9) was the presidential address to Eastern Division that year. But he made some enemies within the APA by voting for an anti-analytic candidate in a bitterly contested election. He has also received the prestigious and remunerative Macarthur (“genius”) Fellowship (CIS xi). His book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* has been translated into six languages.<sup>vi</sup>

There have been three book-length expositions of his thought. One of these, by Kolenda, is almost sycophantic<sup>vii</sup> or as a somewhat more sympathetic critic has put it, “almost completely lacking in critical bite.”<sup>viii</sup> Another, by C.G. Prado, is only moderately critical.<sup>ix</sup> The third, by David L. Hall, treats Rorty more as a poet and a prophet than as a philosopher; it attempts a “Rortyan reading of Rorty,” including an occasional “strong misreading of his work.”<sup>x</sup>

Rorty’s political background is solidly left liberal. His father, James Rorty, having been active in Communist-front organizations, left them in 1933 to work with Sidney Hook in the anti-Stalinist, Trotskyite left. (Hook was later to become Rorty’s first philosophical mentor, and remains one of his heroes [TT 576 n.10].) His maternal grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch, was an eminent liberal Protestant theologian and proponent of the Social Gospel.

Rorty identifies himself politically sometimes as a (wet) liberal (PRM 451ff.), sometimes as a social democrat (TT 564) and sometimes as an (old-fashioned) cold war liberal (TT 576n.11, 578n.25). He expresses rather comic horror at the possibility of being considered a neoconservative (TT 565, 575n.5), though his political credo is as closely tied to the Cold War as is that of any writer for *Commentary* or *Encounter* (TT 565-7) -- and subject to obsolescence for exactly that reason. He defines his political ideal as “a future for the human race in which Enlightenment liberalism is carried through to its limit; eradicating in the process the last traces of Enlightenment radicalism” (TT 371). We shall see in what follows what becomes of the belief in the rational intelligibility of history that sustained the Marxist (and semi-Marxist) Left, and the belief in a providential order that sustained liberal Protestant (and other religiously motivated) social reformers.

A critic of Rorty might discuss his impact on politics, literature, religion, or morals. I here focus on his impact on education for several reasons. The question -- what sorts of people the next

generation of human beings is going to be -- is of great concern to all citizens. The low estate of the philosophy of education among professional philosophers means that those mainstream philosophers who address the educational scene are likely to exert a disproportionate influence there. And there is abundant reason to believe that education at all levels, quite independently of anything Rorty or I might say, is in both theoretical and practical crisis.<sup>xi</sup> There can be no question, in this sort of situation, of philosophy leaving everything as it is.

In short, ideas at least sometimes have consequences, and ideas such as Rorty's seem especially likely to do so. But, as Klepp puts it, "in the current fogbound cultural climate, his lucid, unassuming prose may work against him."<sup>xii</sup>

Rorty's influence among educators, particularly those interested in reforming curriculum and educational practices in the ill-defined directions associated with the cultural Left, has been enormous.<sup>xiii</sup> (I use the term *cultural Left* only for want of a better. As Irving Howe has pointed out,<sup>xiv</sup> the Marxist and social democratic traditions have never denounced inherited high culture, but have rather attempted to share its products with a wider audience.) René Acriilla<sup>xv</sup> takes his work as defining the situation in which contemporary philosophers of education must work. John Willinsky cites Rorty (along with Salman Rushdie), as showing how "the postmodern mix of feminism, new historicism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism has the potential to expand the English curriculum until it spills happily over into other subject areas in a flow of cultural studies."<sup>xvi</sup> Carol Nicholson uses Rorty's thought to advance a "rainbow coalition of postmodernists, feminists, and educators who are committed to the task of making sure that no serious voices are left out of the great conversation that shapes our curriculum and our civilization."<sup>xvii</sup> C. A. Bowers and David J. Flinders invoke his ideas against "Cartesian" ways of thinking about education, including the belief that "nonattendance ... can be objectively represented

in thought.”<sup>xviii</sup> Cleo H. Cherryholmes hails him as an apostle of something called “critical pragmatism,” whose only well-defined feature is that it does not take the purposes of existing society as givens.<sup>xix</sup> The best Cherryholmes does, by way of defining *critical pragmatism* is to contrast it with *vulgar pragmatism* or “pragmatism based on unreflective acceptance of explicit and implicit standards, conventions, rules, and discourses practices that we find around us” (p. 151).

Rorty’s influence is due in part to his virtues. One of these is his ability to identify themes, tendencies, problems, and crises common to such apparently disparate thinkers as Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein -- writers to whom he frequently professes allegiance. Thus he is able to write, with some show of authority, “James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytical philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling” (CP xvii). To combine the analytical and dialectical skill characteristic of the Anglo-American tradition with a Continental sensitivity to the spiritual malaise that underlies our theoretical and practical problems, and on that basis frame proposals about the past, present, and future course of philosophy, would be a major achievement.

A second virtue is Rorty’s willingness to bring to the surface the methodological crisis of contemporary philosophy. The Western rationalistic tradition is under attack from ideologues on the one side and apolitical aesthetes on the other. And sometimes these two radically disparate forces have entered into an opportunistic alliance.

For my part, I understand this crisis as follows. The logical positivists have attempted to safeguard rational discourse by limiting it to the exact sciences. Thus they leave religion, politics, and morals -- and education -- to the purveyors of myth. Moreover, Carnap at least ended up treating logic, and hence also philosophy, as a matter of choice or convention -- propelled by “values” concerning which no reasoning was possible.<sup>xx</sup> Hence those who would reconstruct logic and language to meet

some political program, or turn philosophy into a form of sophisticated intellectual play, can find ample warrant in Carnap's philosophy.

The side of the analytic tradition associated with the later Wittgenstein avoids attempting to force our language into a pre-established mold. Our language, it insists, is as complicated as our life. Wittgenstein has memorably expressed the resulting picture of language. "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions made from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."<sup>xxi</sup> By language is here meant not words and sentences alone, but an array of symbolic activities (or what are sometimes called "discourses"). And our city includes not only the stable elements Wittgenstein mentions, but also zones of conflict and burnt-out districts not yet rebuilt.

Rorty's argument begins with an attack on philosophy's preoccupation with epistemology (theory of knowledge) and the attempt to model philosophy on natural science. Philosophers in the *foundationalist* tradition have looked to the theory of knowledge for a method that would solve or dissolve all problems.

Rorty sees foundationalism and the view that truth is correspondence with extra-mental reality as inextricably joined. Both are linked, in his view, with a picture of the human Mind as "our Glassy Essence" (PMN 42-5) -- superior to, and in hopeless tension with, our bodily nature. In his view they are both part of a picture, inherited from the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, for which "'the Mind' [is] a separate entity in which 'processes' can occur" (PMN 4) and philosophy is foundational for other disciplines because it judges to what extent these processes adequately represent extra mental reality (PMN 3-5).

Rorty rejects foundationalism in favor of *holism*: both meaning and truth, he concludes, are only possible within a system -- though not in Rorty's case a philosophical system. Our language makes sense only as a set of activities each of whose elements is connected, at least in a rough sort of way, with the others. But he goes further and questions the centrality of beliefs in the usual sense: "It is pictures," he urges, "metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions" (PMN 12). The correspondence theory of truth he rejects in favor of a form of pragmatism, whose precise character I shall discuss below.

Rorty supports his rejection of foundationalism and the correspondence theory of truth with an appeal to the writings of Thomas Kuhn (understood in their most radical sense). Kolenda summarizes the relevant aspects of Kuhn's work, at least as many contemporary readers understand them:

Science did not adhere to its professed ideals in getting to where it is today. The course scientific development actually took reveals many paradigm shifts; much deviant, oddball experimentation; and often just sheer luck, the play of contingencies exploited by ingenious minds.<sup>xxii</sup>

In the light of all this, Rorty endorses what he, perhaps unfortunately, calls "edifying" philosophy - - the "project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (PMN 360). Or, as he puts it in another place, "All of us -- Derrideans and pragmatists alike -- should try to work ourselves out of our jobs by conscientiously blurring the literature-philosophy distinction and promoting the idea of a seamless, undifferentiated 'general text'" (PP 2:86-7).

Edifying philosophy in this sense abandons systematic reasoning in favor of a kind of muddling through problems that draws on whatever resources our cultural heritage (or "form of

life”) makes available. Its central feature is proposals to replace one set of pictures of us and our world with another.

In a closely related line of thought, Rorty proposes the replacement of epistemology with hermeneutics, or (as one commentator puts it) “the study of various different ways of looking at and approaching the world, together with the attempt to interpret one way to another and to see what they or their derivatives and combinations have to offer” (Heal, RR 103). The hermeneutic philosopher is for Rorty “the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic Socratic intermediary between various discourses. In his salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices” (PMN 317). “Hermeneutics,” he insists, “is not ‘another way of knowing’ [but] another way of coping” (PMN 356) (Rorty never explains what exactly he means by *coping*. Kolenda<sup>xxiii</sup> defines the expression as follows: “To cope is to move through the world knowingly and effectively; it is to be on the lookout for how it might be changed for the better.” On the face of it, this definition requires a realist understanding of both truth and value.)

In addition to Rorty’s professions of allegiance to Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, we can discern the more direct influence of two contemporary professional philosophers: Donald Davidson and Wilfrid Sellars. From Davidson he takes two ideas: first, that “truth” is a primitive term, not definable as, for example, correspondence to external reality; and, second, that questions of interpretation (in Rorty’s language, “hermeneutics”) are philosophically central. From Sellars he takes the concept of *we-intentions* as undergirding morality and human interactions. From these premises he argues, first, that the mind-body problem can be dismissed as unreal, but that the materialism that results from this dismissal is no threat to ethics.

To the question, whether a culture that rejects even the problems of the Seventeenth (or for that matter of the Thirteenth) Century, if possible, is desirable, Rorty can only reply:

There is no way in which the dispute between the pragmatist and his opponent can be tightened up and resolved according to criteria agreed to by both sides. This is one of these issues that puts everything up for grabs at once -- where there is no point trying to find agreement with “the data” or agreement about what would count as settling the question. But the messiness of the issue is not a reason for setting it aside. The issue between religion and secularism was no less messy, but it was important that it got settled as it did. (CP xliii)

At no stage does Rorty concentrate on producing good arguments. In his philosophy, there is not “much occasion to use the distinctions between logic and rhetoric, or between philosophy and literature, or between rational and nonrational methods of changing people’s minds” (CIS 83).

And he writes of Descartes:

[He] allowed ... much of the work of changing the notion of “Mind” to be done under the table, not by any explicit argument.... Such unconscious sleight of hand, when practiced by men of Descartes’ boldness of imagination, is an occasion for gratitude rather than censure. ... No intellectual revolution could succeed without it. (PMN 58 and n.28)

And of his own masters:

Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey ... do not devote themselves to discovering false propositions or bad arguments in the works of their predecessors (though they occasionally do that too). Rather, they glimpse the possibility of a form of intellectual life in which the vocabulary of philosophical reflection inherited from the seventeenth century would seem as pointless as the thirteenth-century philosophical vocabulary seemed to the Enlightenment. (PMN 6)

In practice Rorty advises us, at crucial points in the philosophical debate, “to abandon argument and fall back on sarcasm” (PMN 122). Or, at best, “all we can do is be hermeneutic about the

opposition -- trying to show how the odd or paradoxical or offensive things they say hang together with the rest of the things they say, and how what they say looks when put in our own alternative idiom” (PMN 365).

And philosophical argument as Rorty understands it includes imputing bad motives to one’s opponents. Thus he writes, “one reason why professional philosophers recoil from the claim that knowledge may not have foundations, or rights and duties an ontological ground, is that the kind of behaviorism which dispenses with foundations goes a fair way toward dispensing with philosophy” (PMN 179).

The title of one of Rorty’s books, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, sums up the ways his sort of philosophy differs from its rationalistic and foundationalist forebears. By contingency Rorty does not mean only that important facts about ourselves (that we are a two-sexed species for example) do not obtain in all possible worlds. He means that we should abandon the search for the nature or essence of persons, community, or language (or indeed of anything else), and admit that it is “just a happenstance of our cultural development” (PMN 83) that we, for example, view ourselves as having subjective states such as pains and not just neural stimulations. He urges that we “try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything* -- our language, our conscience, our community -- as a product of time and chance” (CIS 22).

Instead of looking for the essence of humanity, Rorty argues, we should undertake the task of re-describing our world and ourselves “in more promising, indeed liberating, ways.”<sup>xxiv</sup> In short, he proposes to “substitute Freedom for Truth as the goal of thinking and social progress” (CIS xiii) -- but the value he places on freedom rests more on inherited allegiance (see the dedication to CIS) than on any argument.

Contingency in Rorty's sense means that even our most central doctrines and concepts have at best a provisional validity. Hence he praises an ironic stance toward our "final vocabulary." He explains this concept as follows:

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives.... They are words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary."

It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. ... A small part of the final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as "true," "good," "right," and "beautiful." The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example "Christ," "England," "professional standards," "decency," "kindness," "the Revolution," "the Church," "progressive," "rigorous," "creative." The more parochial terms do most of the work. (CIS 73)

He argues that we should become the kind of people who suspect that our most pervasive concepts may not be quite right, or more precisely that it may be necessary to abandon them at any time. Thus he praises the *ironist* in the following terms:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her current vocabulary can neither underwrite nor resolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (CIS 73)

If there is any element in our outlook that can be safely held constant despite the radical contingency of both our concepts and our lives, it is an abhorrence of cruelty for which Rorty finds warrant in both Nabokov and Orwell (see CIS chs. 7 & 8).

Rorty calls the ironist's opponent (and his own) the *metaphysician*:

Metaphysicians think that human beings by nature desire to know. They think this because the vocabulary they have inherited, their common sense, provides them with a picture of knowledge as a relation between human beings and "reality," and the idea that we have a need and a duty to enter into this relation. It also tells us that "reality," if properly asked, will help us determine what our final vocabulary should be. (CIS 75)

We in fact sometimes care about what happens to others, a feature of our situation Rorty calls *solidarity*. Rather than attempt to discover a pre-existent human nature to support our sense of solidarity, Rorty argues that we should attempt to further solidarity in practice.

We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people -- people whom we still instinctively think of as "they" rather than "us." We should try to notice our similarities with them. ...

[We should] *create* a more extensive sense of solidarity than we presently have. (CIS 196)

But the claims of solidarity are not based, at any point, in convictions about how things are.

In Rorty's words,

The liberal ironist just wants *our chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by a redescription. She thinks that a common susceptibility to humiliation is the *only* social bond that is needed.... Her sense of human solidarity is based on a common danger, not on a common possession or a shared power (CIS 96).

Kolenda sums up Rorty's philosophy as follows:

The three concepts -- contingency, irony, solidarity -- in Rorty's use of them, are interconnected. Because freedom lies in the recognition of contingency, including the contingency of intellectual structures, ironism, as a persistent worry that our final vocabulary stands in need of improvement, is a sensible attitude to cultivate. ... A liberal ironist will always prefer persuasion to force, reform to revolution. And he will be on the lookout for the danger of humiliating others by rhetorical displays of one's own intellectual or artistic powers. To think that the wish to be kind can be bolstered by argument, because to present one's preferred alternative as having a rational foundation, or being lodged in some facts of "human nature" is to load the dice in one's favor, thus opting to speak "from authority" -- a form of force.<sup>xxv</sup>

We face, at the outset of our examination of these ideas, a problem of styles of interpretation and methods of criticism. Hall believes that Rorty provides a serious challenge to the philosophical tradition, or at least to the philosophical establishment. In his own words,

Philosophers, habitually smug in their belief that their discipline is unassailable, are publicly affronted by Rorty's attack on the integrity and the autonomy of the philosophical task, while many of them have begun to struggle privately with a vague feeling that the jig, in fact, is up.<sup>xxvi</sup>

But at the same time he concedes that Rorty "has a genius, abetted by some sophisticated rhetorical devices, for isolating his thinking from critical assault."<sup>xxvii</sup>

The philosophical critic of Rorty's thought has therefore two alternatives: to insist, nonetheless, on subjecting his ideas to scrutiny according to conventional rational standards (though not necessarily as interpreted by the most narrowly analytic philosophers), or to forsake the techniques of philosophical analysis and argument for those of literary criticism and *ad hominem*

*argument.* The first alternative risks charges of question begging; the second surrenders to Rorty things that perhaps ought not to be surrendered.

The construction of narratives has a somewhat ambiguous position. Rorty clearly makes much of them: he urges “finding a description of all the things characteristic of your time of which you most approve and with which you unflinchingly identify ... a description of the end toward which the historical developments which led up to your time were means” (CIS 55).

And Hall describes him as “nominalist historicist,” one who “doesn’t argue by recourse to dialectical or historical tools. What he does, rather, is to tell a story, to construct a narrative in order to contextualize his claims about the way things are and the way things ought to be.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

What this amounts to depends on the extent to which we see history as embodying a logical sequence, in which, for example, forms of life break down under their own internal contradictions. Without some such underlying rationale -- and it is hard to see how Rorty might be able to invoke it -- there is room for an indefinitely large number of narratives, both “progressive” and “reactionary,” as the interests, temperament, or mood of the writer may dictate.<sup>xxix</sup>

I here choose a conventional academic approach, supplemented by a political argument whose relevance Rorty, if he takes his self-definition as a pragmatist at all seriously, cannot deny. I shall argue that pragmatism, at least as interpreted by Rorty, has bad *pragmatic* effects: that its adoption is destructive of education at all levels, and that an educational system centered on a robust belief in Truth is by every standard preferable. And the political consequences of Rorty’s thought, although I shall be making less of this point in these pages, seem to me at least equally deplorable. (Hall (p. 52) cites as “the best defense of Rorty’s strategy” a statement of Miguel de Unamuno, that “the fact that the consequences of a statement are disastrous says nothing against the truth of the proposition.” On Unamuno’s metaphysical and epistemological premises this

response may make sense, but not on Rorty's.) I shall also use narratives, but only as supplements to more conventional arguments. And I shall attempt to avoid misreading, strong or otherwise, of Rorty's text. (Nor shall I be centrally concerned with whether Rorty misreads his predecessors, or, if he does so, this misreading is to be considered "weak" or "strong.")

There are, in any case, deep reasons why a critique of Rorty cannot be as rigorously argued as some readers might desire. Rorty has endorsed the postmodern preference for "slimy concepts, rather than the rigorous axioms of logic."<sup>xxx</sup> His arguments -- though he does occasionally offer rigorous conceptual analysis -- are for that reason often vague and rhetorical -- a trait he inherits from one of his mentors John Dewey. There is often no alternative to answering him in kind.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> "Every Man a Philosopher-King." *New York Times Magazine*, 140 (Dec. 2, 1990), Pt. 1., p. 57.

<sup>ii</sup> Unless otherwise attributed, biographical information is taken from *ibid.*, pp. 117-8.

<sup>iii</sup> This collection contains both a bibliography of Rorty's writings through 1989 and suggestions for teaching his works. It focuses on PMN, and perhaps for that reason plays down Rorty's nihilism.

<sup>iv</sup> *Philosophy's Journey* 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1990), pp. 358-37.

<sup>v</sup> Advertisement, *New York Review of Books*, May 14, 1992.

<sup>vi</sup> Konstantin Kolenda, *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990).

<sup>vii</sup> *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism*.

<sup>viii</sup> David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Limits of Pragmatism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987).

<sup>x</sup> *Richard Rorty*; quotations, pp. 10, 6.

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<sup>xi</sup>On higher education see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) and the popular and critical reaction to it (e.g., Robert L. Stone ed., *Essays on the Closing of the American Mind* [Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1989] and Philip E. Devine, "Allan Bloom: Nihilistic Conservative," *New Oxford Review* [Oct., 1988], 4-9.) On primary and secondary education, see Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America* (New York: New American Library, 1985). For a critique of public education as such, see Myron Lieberman, *Public Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). On the larger political and cultural issues, see Paul Berman, ed., *Debating P.C.* (New York: Laurel, 1992).

<sup>xii</sup>"Every Man a Philosopher-King," p. 24.

<sup>xiii</sup> See, in addition to the authors cited in the text, James W. Garrison, "Philosophy as (Vocational) Education," *Educational Theory*, 40 (Summer, 1990), 399ff.

<sup>xiv</sup> "The Value of the Canon," in Berman, ch. 6, pp. 153-57.

<sup>xv</sup> "Education, Conversation, and Narrative," *Educational Theory* 40 (Winter, 1990), 35-44.

<sup>xvi</sup> *The Triumph of Literacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1991), p. 190.

<sup>xvii</sup> "Postmodernism, Feminism, and Education," *Educational Theory*, 39 (Summer, 1989), 204.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Responsive Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1990), pp. 9, 12.

<sup>xix</sup> *Power and Criticism* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1988), pp. 151, 171, 177, 179-80, 183-4.

<sup>xx</sup> See Michael Friedman, "The Re-evaluation of Logical Positivism," *Journal of Philosophy*, 88 (Oct., 1991), 505-519.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe tr. (New York: Macmillan, 1953), § 18.

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<sup>xxii</sup> *Philosophy's Journey*, p. 359.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism*, p. 67.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Kolenda, *Philosophy's Journey*, p. 361

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 363-4.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Richard Rorty*, p. 1.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>xxix</sup> For a narrative well outside Rorty's horizon, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>xxx</sup> John W. Murphy, *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 15.

## Pragmatism in Education

One answer to the suggestion, that we may somehow overcome philosophy, is that philosophical issues spontaneously arise from the tensions of human society. No one is likely to claim that struggles over resources, or moral disputes such as that about abortion, are inventions of some philosopher's overheated brain. And the philosophical disputes about truth and knowledge in which Rorty has participated, have their social correlate in a crisis of purpose afflicting our educational system.

But the crisis in our educational system, as in every aspect of our culture, has a history in whose light it needs to be understood. Some people would trace our difficulties to the French Revolution, some to the Thirteenth Century, some to ancient Athens, and some to the expulsion from Eden. I here choose a more manageable approach, and shape my discussion of the problems of education in terms of their roots in the Sixties.

Two obstacles stand between us and an accurate appreciation of the turbulence of that decade. One is a tradition of sentimentalism and nostalgia,<sup>i</sup> even among authors well aware of the political failure of the Sixties movements and the elements of raw will to power they contained.<sup>ii</sup> The other is the tradition of uncritical Sixties-bashing to be observed in journals like *Commentary* and *The New Criterion*. Tidal waves of culture do not take place without reason -- however misguided some of those who participated in them might have been. And the movements of the Sixties in fact contained many strands, ranging from a heartbreakingly naive belief in the capacity of mere good will to solve difficult human problems through a humanism derived chiefly from the

early Marx, and a Leninist dismissal of the desires of most men and women as the result of "false consciousness," to a nihilistic attack on moral, intellectual, and aesthetic standards of all sorts. It is thus necessary to look at the academic and educational culture of the Fifties, to see what features of it made it vulnerable to attack by Sixties radicals. I here ignore the larger historical context -- the simultaneous occurrence of a bloody and unpopular war and an awkward stage in the development of the Civil Rights Movement, and the assassination of those who might have offered needed leadership -- in order to focus on cultural and intellectual issues. (And, for the same reason, I shall not attend to the recurrent cultural and economic crises of a capitalist political economy, except as they affect education specifically.)

An academic dissident of an earlier generation, Thorstein Veblen, could take it for granted that American society valued the higher learning, even as he lamented the dominant role of business interests in the institutions supposedly devoted to it.<sup>iii</sup> But, after Veblen wrote, universities abandoned even the pretense of promoting knowledge for its own sake, and their presidents came to speak unashamedly about *The Uses of the University*.~ Clark Kerr, in his book of that title,<sup>iv</sup> is careful to insist that he is speaking descriptively only. But the facts to which he points remain, as does his implicit argument that academics had best co-operate with the inevitable. And an institution for sale to the highest bidder quickly becomes vulnerable to every possible application of the "squeaky wheel" principle.

Robert Nisbet has chronicled<sup>v</sup> the many ways in which the university, as an institution dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, has been eroded in the name of purposes (admirable or not) alien to it. It has been asked to serve as a political engine (or arena of political struggle), as a physician for the ills of society, as a therapeutic community for troubled young people, and as the research arm of the federal government or corporate America -- for every purpose, that is, except

the pursuit and transmission of knowledge as such. And the erosion of purpose observable at the upper reaches of the educational world is, if anything, even more visible at the primary and secondary levels.

This erosion took place well before the turmoil of the Sixties made the political character of the university evident to the least observant. Thus, when accused of politicizing scholarship, Staughton Lynd was able to respond:

I am employed by Yale University, the institution that produced the architect of the Bay of Pigs, Richard Bissel; the author of Plan Six for Vietnam, W. W. Rostow ... and McGeorge Bundy [presidential assistant and vigorous defender of the Vietnam War].<sup>vi</sup>

But an approach to education that subordinates the life of the mind to the ends of a given society, is tolerable only so long as consensus about those ends, and at least the broad outlines of the pertinent means, can be taken for granted. When differences arise that put the goals of a society into question, -- and when the dissidents include (as did those of the Sixties) the best students -- pragmatic educators are left without persuasive arguments why dissidents should sacrifice even marginal political advantages to protect the integrity and the autonomy of the university.

"Relevant" education initially meant education that could be defended against this sort of challenge. But the slogan soon degenerated, first, into a nihilistic attack on cultural and intellectual standards of all sorts (or else a patricidal politics without even that much content); and, then, into a vision of education as a service industry in which students are consumers, faculty entertainers, and administrators guardians and interpreters of the Nielsen ratings. Or else both curriculum and the selection and retention of faculty became a matter of placating various constituencies -- whether defined in ethnic, gender, ideological, or psychological terms.

Veblen observes that

in the apprehension of the group in whose life and esteem it takes effect, this esoteric knowledge [the higher learning] is taken to embody a systemization of fundamental and eternal truth; although it is evident to any outsider that it will take its character from the habits of life of the group.<sup>vii</sup>

Whether the disinterested pursuit of knowledge even makes sense must therefore be our first concern.

The pragmatic tradition within which Rorty writes suffers from a number of ambiguities. James writes that "the true ... is only the expedient in our way of thinking."<sup>viii</sup> And Rorty proposes to replace questions of truth with questions of what beliefs will help us cope (CP xvii). We must ask what counts as coping, and how we know what ideas help us do so. These are issues about which assertion is easy and proof difficult.

But when pragmatism is used as a philosophy of education, most of these ambiguities disappear. "Coping" will be defined in terms of the goals of the society that maintains the school or university, and which ideas help us cope will be decided by that society's conventionally accepted decision procedures (in our society, elections, the market, and the agendas of the educational bureaucracy; in other societies the will of the dictator or the party in power). For it is not possible to run an educational system in the hope that a revolutionary upheaval will dislodge existing ways, even if this hope should turn out to have a lot more substance than it has in the contemporary West. Hence pragmatism turns Marx's complaint, that the ruling ideas of an epoch are always the ideas of its ruling class, into a methodological imperative.

Or, at most, a space is created in which some minority can create its own brand of orthodoxy and impose it on students and colleagues, as long as the larger society is prepared to tolerate such behavior. If persons who do not share the goals of the larger society nonetheless find a niche

within our educational system, they will naturally pursue their own goals. But progress toward success will still be judged in ways parasitic on the institutions off which such persons live. Hence the slogan of one sort of academic: truth is what gets you tenure.

Let us now look more closely at Rorty's role in this story. He proposes that we drop the notion of truth, at least in any sense implying any correspondence with reality, and hence also the notion of its disinterested pursuit. Instead, he proposes to evaluate ideas, in science as much as in ethics or religion, by whether they help us cope (CP xvi-xvii)<sup>ix</sup>, among other things, he undermines the dogmatic secularism which permeates his writings: religious belief helps at least some people cope, and should for that reason win Rorty's approval.

Rorty suggests that we might judge between our ways of thinking about ourselves and those of his "Antipodeans" "by proposing that we raise some of our children to speak Antipodean and see whether they don't do as well as the control group" (PMN 87). But the inevitable question is, "As well by what standard?" Again, he describes a "post-Philosophical culture" (CP xxvii-xliv)-- a culture which, he admits, will strike many of his readers as decadent (CP xxxix, 108). Faced with such a claim, we need some way of answering the question whether such a culture, if possible, is also desirable. Many people would find themselves entirely aliens within it.

Rorty praises Dewey and Foucault for their attempt

to free mankind from Nietzsche's 'longest lie,' the notion that outside the haphazard and perilous experiments we perform there lies something (God, Science, Rationality, or Truth) which will, if only we perform the correct rituals, step in to save us. (CP 208; at CIS 8n.2

Rorty may take back the word *lie*.)

(The phrase about correct rituals is a slander on objectivism of any plausible sort.) But he prefers Dewey to Foucault, on the ground that Dewey allows room for an unjustifiable hope, and a

groundless but vital sense of human solidarity (CP 203-8) -- a hope of which he writes, "I would not know how to write a scenario for its return" (PP 2:179n.8).<sup>x</sup>

«USIX»In a recent article, Rorty disavows the slogan "the end of philosophy" (PRM 446-7 n.7), and develops his thought further in the following way. "I hope that we never stop reading, e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Dewey, and Heidegger, but also hope that we may, sooner or later, stop trying to sucker freshmen into taking an interest in 'the problem of the external world' and 'the problem of other minds'" (PRM 447 n.7). A quick answer is that there is no reason to teach philosophical problems that one does not find compelling, since there are many others that are of both great practical and great theoretical interest. One of these is the problem of free will and responsibility; another is the problem of relativism -- a problem that the pragmatist tradition (and Rorty's writings in particular) persistently poses.

I doubt, however, that such a shift of topics would placate the hostility toward the philosophical tradition expressed in such phrases as the "longest lie." Nor does Rorty, in the passage cited or elsewhere, ever explain what it is about Plato, for example, that makes him worth reading.

Rorty realizes that some of his readers will find his ideas alarming. For he acknowledges that they imply that«USSX»

«USBX»When the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form "There is something within you that you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you." (CP xlii)

Or as he puts it, more chillingly because less melodramatically, when it comes to the choice between two ways of life such as liberalism and Nazism,

I cannot appeal to such a "fact of the matter," any more than a species of animal that is in danger of losing its ecological niche to another species, and thus faces extinction, can find a "fact of the matter" to settle the question of which species has the right to the niche in question. (PRM 451)

Utterances of this sort concede the intellectual high ground to fascism, even as their author protests his liberal allegiances. And once liberals have made this fundamental concession, there is no limit to possibilities of combining professed liberalism with de facto authoritarianism.<sup>xi</sup> The only justification I can see for making them in public is a heroic devotion to Truth at all costs -- a sort of devotion that Rorty's doctrines exclude at every page. And even those who believe in Truth might exercise a certain discretion announcing the emptiness of our traditions of decency, especially in journals of opinion such as the *New Republic*, in a world where the practical issues such an announcement raises are only too real.

The issue here is directly pertinent to the dilemmas of contemporary education. When Congressional committees demand the dismissal of radical faculty, when student mobs pillage the library and the offices of faculty, when charges of "insensitivity" are used to suppress awkward facts, when teaching is evaluated by the standards of television programming, or when budgetary wizards demand that Dante scholarship justify itself in pecuniary terms, Rorty's views imply that there is nothing to be said to them of the form, "There is something within yourself you are betraying."

Such contentions have important civic implications. One urgent need in contemporary liberal democracies is for citizens who are able to evaluate the arguments and evidence presented on behalf of rival candidates and proposals. Without such citizens confirmation hearings, criminal trials of political importance, and Presidential races collapse into soap opera, and social conflicts of

even moderate seriousness into civil war. But pragmatism, at least of Rorty's variety, undermines the distinction between good and bad argument, and the more fundamental distinction between arguments, good *or* bad, on the one hand, and slogans and sarcasm on the other.

Older pragmatists such as Dewey evaded these problems by massively assuming a progressive view of history. They assumed, that is to say, that history had a direction, that this direction was for the good, and that they themselves were in the vanguard of its progress. Hence it made sense for Dewey to propose himself as mentor for an educational system designed to instill in the rising generation, perhaps not the true, but at least the progressive, position on disputed issues. Sometimes Rorty himself appeals to this progressive tradition, as when he takes it for granted that the science of Galileo was an advance on that of Aristotle (CP 191). But this view of history is massively rejected by his European mentors. Even Wittgenstein, not normally given to world-historical pronouncements, remarks, in a passage quoted by Rorty as a motto to PMN, that history "moves not in a straight line, but in a curve, and that its direction constantly changes." <sup>xii</sup> Wittgenstein thereby rejects not only a progressive view of history, but also its "reactionary" opponent, which holds that human history since (say) 1300 has been the history of decline. There is no such thing as a lost (or a won) intellectual or cultural cause if this line of thought is correct. There is nothing in Rorty's writings to persuade someone skeptical of a progressive view of intellectual or other history. It may be still possible to appeal to the idea of progress, if one does so in a sufficiently modest way. Thus Hilary Putnam writes: "We cannot prove that progress is possible, but our action is 'fantastic, directed to empty, imaginary ends' if we do not postulate the possibility of progress."<sup>xiii</sup> But articles of rational faith such as Putnam proposes are unacceptable to Rorty. » Even the most plausible example of intellectual progress -- "the fact that old bad [scientific] theories nonetheless present, as they approach our own time, better and better

approximations of our present theories" Rorty treats as "an inevitable artifact of historiography" (PMN 282) rather than as evidence of anything out there.

On one interpretation, Rorty has not made up his mind about the habit of writing history as an apology for the present state of affairs (or for a desired future conceived as the culmination of trends rooted in the past and continuing into the present). For the most part Rorty's references to Whig history are disparaging (see for example PMN 268, 349 [twice], 391). But at one point (PMN 287) he is prepared to endorse Whig historiography in order to "assuage the skeptic." His final word on the issue seems to be that hermeneutics, while it is inevitably Whiggish in its approach, nonetheless, in some unspecified fashion, "insofar as it proceeds nonreductively and in the hope of picking up a new angle on things, [can] transcend its own Whiggishness" (PMN 321) -- though how this can be done remains a mystery. C.G. Prado,<sup>xiv</sup> offers the following interpretation: "Rorty thinks 'better' just means doing something new; 'better' is when the new is taken up and the old is forgotten. The story of progress is the narrative told in the new vocabulary about the old vocabulary." By this account Nazi Germany would have been "better" than Weimar Germany. Nor does it help matters to say that the "better" must be a response to the deficiencies of its predecessor, for that is true of Nazi and Weimar Germany as well.»

On another interpretation, Rorty is constructing an arbitrary narrative, designed among other things to establish the legitimacy (and moral authority) of the modern age.<sup>xv</sup> (This reading of Rorty shows the influence of Hans Blumenberg.) But of course such a narrative is only a narrative: if someone wishes to tell another narrative in which the movement from St. Thomas Aquinas (or St. Augustine) one is one of decline, or in which progress toward a postmodern future of Catholic (or Buddhist) hegemony is the human future, there is nothing in Rorty's thought to justify its rejection.

Moreover, there are as many accounts of modernity as there are people giving them: David Hall is surely right when he observes that

We are in a desperate situation with respect to the idea of "the modern age" if it is a definition or a coherent characterization that we seek.... On the other hand, it is quite clear that any one of these characterizations of modernity [he has just cited a number] could appeal to a particular audience whose members will resonate with the interpretation espoused.<sup>xvi</sup>

Rorty's best attempt to deal with this issue can be found in an essay on Heidegger, where he writes: "Pragmatists like Dewey hope that things may turn out well in the end, but their sense of contingency does not permit them to write dramatic narratives about upward or downward escalators" (PP 2:49). But the pragmatic tradition presumes, at least in its rhetoric, that an upward escalator is somewhere in the background, and that the pragmatists' opponents are resisting its movement. What remains of Dewey's belief in Rorty's writings is the exploitation of progressive language in order to conceal the fact that Rorty lacks any rationale for education (or politics) -- combined with an appeal to irony as a fig-leaf to cover the inadequacies of this position. In short, the crucial problem for pragmatism, in education and elsewhere, is the danger of uncritical acceptance of the agenda of the powerful, especially when the powerful adopt, as they often do, a progressivist rhetoric. And the claims of the modern age are often little more than the claims of whatever outcome happens to result from the interaction of the market with the political process. Dewey brought to this problem a belief that history was on the right track, and that conflicts between the perceptions of individuals and the rules of society would turn out to be resolvable in the long run. Rorty's ironism represents both a loss of faith in this solution, and an abandonment of any other basis for a solution. Hence he distances himself from regnant institutions, while at the

same time avoiding serious challenge to them. When such a position confronts questions of educational practice and policy, pragmatism of the most cynical sort moves into the resulting vacuum.

At least this is my reading of the recent history of American education. Other narratives are possible -- in fact, an indefinitely large number. Further progress in evaluation of Rorty will therefore require reasoning of a more traditionally philosophical sort.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> I use *nostalgia* in Christopher Lasch's sense for a habit of oversimplifying the past, not as an all-purpose derogatory word for backward-looking politics. See his *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1991).

<sup>ii</sup> E.g., W. J. Rorebaugh, *Berkeley at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). .

<sup>iii</sup> See *The Higher Learning in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

<sup>iv</sup> *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), esp. pp. 146-149.

<sup>v</sup> *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

<sup>vi</sup> "Nonviolent Alternatives to American Violence." In *Teach-ins USA*, L. Menashe and R. Radosh eds. (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 54. Quoted in Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), p. 121.

<sup>vii</sup> *The Higher Learning*, p. 11.

<sup>viii</sup> *Pragmatism* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1955), p. 196.

<sup>ix</sup> My discussion draws on my book, *Relativism, Nihilism, and God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1989), chap. 3.

<sup>x</sup> I assume that hope and "newness" (a word Rorty takes from Irving Howe, *American Newness* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986]) amount to at least roughly the same thing. On the connection between hope and newness, see for example Lamentations 3:25-6 (RSV): "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness."

<sup>xi</sup> For one example of the possibilities here, see Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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<sup>xii</sup> *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (Frankfurt: 1977), p. 14.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 191.

<sup>xiv</sup> *The Limits of Pragmatism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), p. 106.

<sup>xv</sup> See David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994), ch. 1, esp. pp. 23-29.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

## **Contingency, Irony, Solidarity**

Richard Rorty's position is as close to the inspired madness of some contemporary Continental thinkers as can be found within the heirs of classical analytic philosophy. It is also widely influential outside the philosophy profession, for example among educationists associated with the cultural Left.<sup>1</sup> But his chief importance lies in his claim to represent the direction in which contemporary philosophy, both English-speaking and Continental, is heading. I take the title of one of his books as a framework for my critical exposition of his views.

Any critic of Rorty quickly encounters a fundamental equivocation in his writings. Sometimes he writes as a professional philosopher, whose arguments need to be evaluated accordingly, and sometimes as an "edifying" philosopher whose aim is to improve our intellectual habits (others would say: to corrupt them) by any rhetorical means available. Switching back and forth between these two roles enables him to circumvent any criticism. I shall treat him here more or less as a conventional philosopher.

## **CONTINGENCY**

A constant theme in Rorty's thought is his rejection of all positions that imply the necessity of any entity or principle. Language, like everything else in human life, "is a product of time and chance."<sup>2</sup> This is a metaphysical position, though it implies the impossibility of all metaphysical positions including itself. He formulates it in a number of different ways.

## *Pragmatism*

While Rorty's most frequent self-description is as a pragmatist (e.g. PP 1:29), for whom questions of truth are replaced by questions of what helps us cope (CP xvi-xvii), his relationship to the pragmatic tradition is ambiguous. When he gets around to defining pragmatism (CP 160-6), C.G. Prado<sup>3</sup> attempts to evade the problem of definition by treating pragmatism in entirely negative terms. "Whereas one can say what most philosophers are *for*, one can best say what pragmatists are *against*. But even in stating what they oppose, one must be careful not to characterize pragmatists -- certainly neither Rorty nor Dewey -- as critics within the philosophical tradition. The point is that they are critics of that tradition itself." But this formulation does not distinguish pragmatists from the legendary student who turned in a paper entitled "Metaphysics is Bullshit," which showed no evidence of his having ever read a single metaphysician. Rorty does not include sensitivity to the consequences of his ideas among the accounts he considers, and he frequently ignores likely bad consequences of his own ideas.

In his closest approximation to old-style pragmatism, Rorty 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), namely making "the world's inhabitants more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality" (PP 1:193). He ignores the fact that some people will take a light-minded attitude toward such a goal while others will firmly oppose it. Most of us can see the need for greater liberalism and tolerance in many parts of our world, even though liberalism and tolerance are, like most things, mixed goods. Jeffrey 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."<sup>4</sup> But many contemporary human beings are by any standard adequately (or more than adequately) responsive to the claims of instrumental rationality.

The first of Rorty's formal definitions of pragmatism is "that it is simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like 'truth,' 'language,' 'knowledge,' 'morality,' and similar objects of philosophical theorizing" (CP 162). On such a view "the distinction between reality and appearance seems merely the distinction between getting things right and getting things wrong" (PMN 184). But this is merely the sensible view of Donald Davidson, that "truth is as clear and basic a concept as we have" (RR 135), supplemented by analogous positions about language, knowledge, and morality. Even Plato is a pragmatist by this criterion.

Rorty's second definition is if anything even less distinctively pragmatist. Plato and Aristotle could agree with Rorty that "there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science" (CP 163).

Rorty's final and preferred characterization of pragmatism is: "the doctrine that there our no constraints upon inquiry except conversational ones" (CP 165). Thus he rejects all attempts to "make truth something more than what Dewey called 'warranted assertability': more than what our peers will, *ceteribus paribus*<sup>5</sup> let us get away with" (PMN 176). From Rorty's subsequent writings, it appears that his cultural peers are his fellow postmodern bourgeois liberals, rather than just any member of contemporary American, or world, society.

But the most effective conversational constraints are those imposed by those persons -- be they dictators or colleagues -- who impose, with the help of sanctions ranging from torture to ostracism, some notion of political correctness. For that reason among others, in a healthy philosophical community, one's peers will not let one get away with this sort of move.

Nonetheless, in a recent response to Hilary Putnam, Rorty has reaffirmed this way of thinking, for warrant though not for truth. He writes: "I view warrant as a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of S's statement by her peers" (PRM 449). The majority, he admits, can be wrong about some questions of warrant, but one cannot, he maintains, be warranted in holding some position in the teeth of overwhelming majority disapproval (PRM 450). Warranted assertability in this sense is truth as orthodoxy or correctness,<sup>6</sup> the sort of truth that might be claimed for statements of law.

But, in the same essay, he admits, a bit surprisingly, that a statement made by minority of one might be true, on the grounds that it might be vindicated at some time in the future (PRM 450). He is here invoking what he calls the "cautionary" use of 'true'. This is the use to be found in such sentences as 'Your arguments satisfy all our contemporary norms and standards, and I can think of nothing to say against your claim. but still, what you say might not be true'. I take this cautionary use not to be a gesture toward "the way the world might be anyway" but toward possible future generations -- toward the "better us" to whom the contradictory of what now seems unobjectionable may have come, via appropriate means, to seem better (PRM 460).

But this "cautionary use" of *true* is precisely the *Grenzbegriff* Rorty scornfully rejects when Hilary Putnam proposed it,<sup>7</sup> as "merely a way of telling ourselves that a nonexistent God would, if he did exist, be pleased with us" (PP 1:20). And -- in the absence of some version of, or replacement for, the doctrine of divine Providence -- there is no reason why we now should take an interest in the views of people in the distant future, whose judgments may be reversed by people more distant still.

Rorty himself supplies at least two self-descriptions more accurate than *pragmatism*. One of these is *left wing Kuhnianism*; another is Clark Glymour's phrase, *the new fuzziness* (PP 1:38).

All well express the view that our language and methods of reasoning lack any determinate structure, and for that reason are indefinitely manipulable.

### *Relativism*

What helps one person or group cope may not help another one do so. And there are at least three sorts of coping: managing the material world, getting other people to do what one wants, and living with oneself. Hence the inference from pragmatism to relativism is very quick.

Rorty handles this inference by a bit of definitional sleight of hand.

Relativism [he writes] is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about every topic, is as good as any other. ... The philosophers who get *called* relativists are those who say the grounds for choosing between such opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought. (CP 166)

These sentences recognize no middle ground between out-and-out subjectivism and moderate intellectual sophistication<sup>8</sup>.

A more accurate statement of relativism is that rational grounds can be given for choosing between some opinions, but other choices -- between rival scientific or philosophical paradigms, say -- are matters of choice or convention alone.<sup>9</sup> Rorty proposes at one point "to limit the opposition between rational and irrational forms of persuasion to the interior of a language game, rather than to try to apply it to the interesting and important shifts in linguistic behavior" (CIS 47). But defending moderate relativism of this sort would require showing the existence of stable "language games," protected, at least for the time being, against "interesting and important" challenge. But Rorty makes no attempt to define such language games; on the contrary, he agrees with Davidson in rejecting the attempt to delimit rival "conceptual schemes" (PMN 310; CP5-9,

12-4). And many of Rorty's formulations go beyond relativism to a thoroughly anarchic subjectivism.

Again and again Rorty's thought runs into the central contradiction of contemporary relativist culture: diversity, and the proliferation of rival doctrines, are welcomed -- so long as no one is led to "posit gods" (see PP 1:20). Thus, despite the offhand way in which Rorty treats religious issues, his thought can be understood as the working out of an atheistical program. But Rorty's form of atheism 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 (not, as such people need from time to time to be reminded, among human beings at large). 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, ... May God forgive them" (TC 240n.6).<sup>10</sup> 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 of opinion in favor of religion are in the offing. 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.

Rorty's contemptuous dismissal of religion is a boon to the 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. For anything Rorty shows, we can make an act rational faith (in Kant's sense) in a God Who has created a world that we as human beings can know, and us as 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 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). Since Rorty's atheism rests on nothing but appeal to fashion, the last word can go to the *Boston Phoenix* (December 7, 1990): "God is back."<sup>11</sup>

### *Redescription*

Rorty asserts, "man is always free to choose new descriptions (for among other things, himself)" (PMN 362n.8). And he frequently proposes to replace argument with redescription. He proposes a view of "new philosophical paradigms nudging old problems aside rather than providing new ways of stating or solving them" (PMN 264) to account for the fact that "Aristotle's remarks about knowing do not offer answers, good or bad, to Locke's questions, any more than Locke's remarks about language offer answers to Frege's" (PMN 263). As he puts it,

The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a new pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby

causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions (CIS 9).

Yet Rorty is aware of the sinister side of programs of redescription.

[Orwell's] O'Brien [he writes] reminds us that human beings who have been socialized -- socialized in any language, any culture -- do share a capacity which other animals lack.

They can all be given a special kind of pain: they can all be humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of belief in which they were socialized (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves). More specifically, they can be used, and animals cannot, to gratify O'Brien's wish to "tear human minds down and put them together again in shapes of your own choosing." (CIS 177)

The most fundamental issue here is whether we can maintain our attitude of what Putnam, following James, calls "natural realism" in the teeth of the following anti-realist challenge.<sup>12</sup> All our experiences have a multitude of causes, so that an indefinitely large number of redescriptions are consistent with a causal account of reference and belief acquisition. If I see a cat, and trust my perceptions, these events have among their causes the matings of my distant ancestors. Most of us would say that it is a cat, and not my distant ancestors, that I see, but Rorty uses the multitude of causal antecedents of perceptual beliefs to undermine our attempt to understand our language. Rorty has respectable arguments against the correspondence theory of truth -- arguments chiefly derived from other writers such as Putnam and Donald Davidson. One cannot get outside our propositions and compare them with extra-linguistic reality. And there is no way of specifying the "facts" to which our statements correspond except by reiterating those statements themselves. Yet Putnam at least insists that

it doesn't follow that language and thought do not describe something outside themselves, ... and the belief that they do plays an essential role *within* language and thought themselves and, more important, within our lives."

For example,

there is a difference -- *a difference in what justifications of conduct make sense when viewed from within our language and thought*, and not from some impossible Archimedean point -- between regarding other people as merely a convenient intellectual devices for coping with one's own experiences and (to borrow a term from Stanley Cavell) *acknowledging* them.<sup>13</sup>

In attempting to decide between Rorty and Putnam, is useful to focus on self-(re)description (see Taylor, RR, 271-3). The correspondence theory of truth works particularly badly here. For, as I change my understanding and description of myself, the self understood and described changes. But it does not follow that there cannot be progress in self-understanding: it a commonplace that people deceive themselves about their motives and character, and sometimes achieve insights that enable to overcome these self-deceptions. Nor does it follow that I can describe myself just anyhow; say as King of Peru or as having realized the God-self within, without fear of being corrected by other people or an unco-operative natural environment.

### *Irrationalism*

Rorty does not appeal to the positivistic distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive; his doctrines are applicable equally to scientific and to ethical argument (see CIS 54n.8). Hence he might accept the Kantian-Platonic view that ethical evaluation is a primary exercise of reason. But he in fact believes in a world where nothing is fixed, and hence there are no standards

of argument or morals immune to revision when the desire to defend some position might lead one to change them.

In short, his philosophy supports a cynical approach to the intellectual life, in which argument is a way of winning adherents to positions dictated by interest or passion. And Rorty's writings are replete with expressions denigrating rational argument in all departments of thought.

Such arguments -- logical arguments -- are all very well in their own way, and useful as expository devices, but in the end not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices without admitting that they have done so. (CIS 78)

The charge of irrationalism that I am bringing against Rorty needs some qualification. First, he offers some serious arguments. According to one of these (CIS chap. 1), truths can only be expressed in sentences, sentences are contingent historical constructions; therefore, truth is a contingent historical construction. Or, as he also puts it, "truth cannot be out there -- cannot exist independently of the human mind -- because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there" (CIS 5). But this argument is easily evaded.

One way out is to hold that sentences express statements or propositions, i.e., abstract entities that can be true or false regardless of the linguistic *mores*. Another is to affirm, without any *systematic* attempt to explain how or why, that, to say that the candidates for truth and falsehood in ethics can be brought into being by creative human effort of moral *bricolage* is not to deny that the candidates thus brought into being really possess truth-value or can be discovered to be true or false by rational means.<sup>14</sup>

Yet another way of escape is Plato's doctrine of the Forms, or its theistic restatement for which the Forms are in the mind of God. Or alternatively, one might adopt the Aristotelian doctrine that there are universals somehow "in" things, or its theistic restatement that such essences

are God's plan for the sort of thing in question. The relative merits of these responses need not concern us here, since Rorty has not taken the trouble to examine, let alone, refute any of them. These responses to Rorty are consistent with the "methodological nominalism" he takes as central to contemporary analytic philosophy (see LT 1-39)<sup>15</sup>

For *methodological* nominalism is not a dogmatic rejection of the possibility of subsistent universals, but a decision to begin by looking at language, without postulating universals unless that should prove necessary. But if the refusal to postulate universals leads to the sorts of implications Rorty draws from it, we have excellent reasons for postulating them, reasons that closely resemble some of Plato's reasons for postulating divine originals against the sophists' insistence on the relativity and malleability of language. In other words, it is possible to defend Platonism or Aristotelianism in Wittgensteinian or pragmatic terms, by showing what such doctrines might play in our lives. We need, for example, to assume that our environment is composed of entities of stable sorts, and that we ourselves form a stable sort as well, if we are to reason about our world and the sort of life we are to live within it; no further justification is either possible or necessary.

But Rorty goes beyond methodological to dogmatic, metaphysical nominalism, stating categorically "language [is] just human beings using marks and noises to get what they want" (PP 2:127).<sup>16</sup> This move allows him to escape one horn of the dilemma only by impaling himself on the other. For statements about what language essentially is are barred by many of his statements elsewhere. And the corresponding picture of extra-linguistic reality, as not composed of any stable sorts of things, but capable of being reshaped in an indefinitely large number of ways, as our will or imagination might lead us to describe it, is strongly metaphysical as well. In any event, Rorty is

wrong when he remarks of Platonic notions that "there is no way to ... connect them with the rest of inquiry, or culture, or life" (PMN 311).

Not only does Rorty offer some serious arguments; in several places he backtracks from his aspersions on the appeals to reason characteristic of "metaphysicians,"<sup>17</sup> and makes limited room for rational argument in his philosophy. For example, he writes:

All the traditional metaphysical distinctions can be given a respectable ironist sense by sociologizing them -- treating them as distinctions between contingently existing practices, or strategies employed within such practices, rather than between natural kinds. (CIS 83n.4)

But, judged by these standards, appeals to racial prejudice and sexual scandal about opponents are as effective as the argumentative practices taught in logic books.

A glance at Rorty's argumentative practice is also in order. His most characteristic argument is an appeal to the authority. Strings of names are in fact one of the most noticeable -- and most annoying -- features of Rorty's philosophical style. At one point he appeals to the beliefs of "most contemporary intellectuals" to support a controversial premise (CIS 3). The crux of his critique of Allan Bloom (SDA) is that Bloom has dared to reject Dewey's teaching that democracy is not just the best form of government available under present circumstances, but also the supreme principle of all thought and action. But since in each case the authorities are selected only for their agreement with Rorty, this "argument" has little if any force.

Sometimes, however, Rorty talks like a thoroughly traditional philosopher. He is prepared to demand consistency when it suits his argumentative purposes: he dismisses Marxism as "an inconsistent mixture of the pragmatism of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' with the scientism common to Marxism and positivism" (PP 2:10n.3). He is even prepared to use essentialist language to make a

rhetorical point, as when he remarks "although Heidegger was only accidentally a Nazi, Dewey was essentially a social democrat" (PP 2:19). He warns against *ad hominem* arguments and "attempts to simplify the thought of original thinkers by reducing them to moral or political attitudes." (TPS 33) He says things like "This thought is hard to live with" (CP xliii) in a way which implies that, far from being able to choose our beliefs to suit our purposes, we must pay the price of consistency and take the bitter with the sweet (see Taylor, RR 259).<sup>18</sup> And, while agreeing with Alasdair MacIntyre that present thought is a mixture of Aristotelian and other elements, he proposes to "make [our] discourse coherent by discarding the last vestiges of [Aristotelian] ways of thinking" (PP 2:159).

Such expressions are perhaps relics of a philosophical training not entirely thrown off, though Rorty has ceased to believe in its operative assumptions. Or perhaps he is simply working within a profession that values rational argument though he heartily wishes it did not, as a lawyer might argue from the principles of a society of whose institutions he disapproves. In that case, Rorty's "use of piecemeal argumentation is perfectly compatible with his desire to diminish the *global* role of reason" (Malachowski, RR 142).

### *Irony*

As a way of coping with the radical uncertainties his metaphysics of universal contingency generates, Rorty endorses Schumpeter's maxim: "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions, and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian" (CIS 46). In technical terms, Rorty defends liberal "ironism," and rejects liberal (or other) "metaphysics."

To stand for one's conclusions unflinchingly does not mean simply continuing to hold them. It means to hold them in such a way as to assure others that one will change them only for good reasons, and not too quickly even then. It means not changing them by way of half-conscious adaptation to circumstances, as so many people do. A man or woman of principle must also be prepared to defend his convictions by reason, and to respond intelligently to rational criticisms of them. In short, a man or woman of principle avoids the sort of behavior described by Tolstoy:

Oblonsky subscribed to and read a liberal newspaper, not extremist, but the one most people went by. ... He was firmly guided by the views that most people and the newspaper held; he only changed them wherever most people did, or rather he did not change them -- they imperceptibly changed with him of their own accord.<sup>19</sup>

I do not see how someone who accepts Rorty's philosophy can fulfill these requirements.

When Rorty distinguishes the "ironist" from his opponent the "metaphysician" he argues as if the two sorts of person represented a-historical essences, between which there is no common ground (CIS chap. 4). But he himself is prepared to talk like a "metaphysician" when it suits his argument.

Rawls and Dewey [he writes] have shown how the liberal state can ignore the difference between the moral identities of Glaucon and Thrasymachus, just as it ignores the differences between the religious identities of a Catholic archbishop and a Mormon prophet. (PP 1:192)

And the "metaphysician" can adopt many of the attitudes of the "ironist" without losing his belief in transcendent truth. He can and must acknowledge that not all people will agree with him. He should also acknowledge his own fallibility, even if he is so certain of his convictions that he is prepared to die for them. And, despite Rorty's insinuations (e.g., CIS 75), no metaphysician need

hold that his "common sense" final vocabulary is immune to revision. Socrates continues to provide a model for both moral commitment and intellectual openness.

There is also the question of the "ironist"'s relationship to others. "Ironism, as I have defined it," Rorty writes, "arises from awareness of the power of re-description. But most people do not want to be re-described" (CIS 89). "Metaphysicians" re-describe people too, but they at least offer arguments, which enable us to describe the objects of their attention "as *educated* rather than simply reprogrammed" (CIS 90). If people could be just left alone, this difference would not matter, but social conflicts sometimes require that one or both parties change if peace is to be secured. And one aim of education is to create citizens who, though they do not of course agree about all issues, are at least able to communicate with one another in rational terms. Hence the "metaphysician" would appear to have the *pragmatic* advantage -- so long as arguments supporting re-description are, in fact, available.

A fundamental paradox afflicts Rorty's war against "metaphysics" (and most other such wars). He argues that in giving up "metaphysics" we give up nothing: that as one of his admirers puts it, "what lies on the 'other side' of thought does not make any epistemological contribution to knowledge.... By ceasing to talk about it we are losing nothing at all."<sup>20</sup> But, if so, giving up "metaphysics," and adopting "irony" instead, cannot have the promised benefits either.

But Rorty's invocation of "irony" makes it possible for him to evade this criticism (and any criticism whatever).<sup>21</sup> If his statements are meant ironically, then perhaps it is inappropriate to take them seriously. But if it is a mistake to take Rorty seriously, then it is difficult to see on what grounds we supposed to pay attention to him at all.

## *Solidarity*

Following Wilfrid Sellars, Rorty proposes to replace claims to objective truth with appeals to the "we-intentions" of groups of people (PP 1:21-34). As he vividly puts it, with a rare reference to human beings as such, what is central is "our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark" (CP 166). Society should be conceived as a "band of eccentrics collaborating for the purposes of mutual protection rather than a band of fellow-spirits united by a goal" (CIS 59). Moreover, science, as much as ethics, rests on solidarity rather than objectivity (PP 1:35-45). Rorty's appeal to solidarity has some unexpected implications. As Putnam points out,<sup>22</sup> Rorty's ontology needs to include groups of people and their shared dispositions to assent or dissent from one another's statements. To use such a metaphysics as a replacement for the traditional sort "privilege[s] one story within the vast array of stories our culture has produced in just the way [he] criticize[s] other philosophers for doing."

Moreover, Rorty's framing of the opposition between solidarity and objectivity begs an important issue. He distinguishes those who give sense to their lives by "telling the story of their contribution to a community" from those who "describe themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality" (PP 1:21). He ignores a third possibility, that one might describe one's contribution to a community, that itself stands in a special relation to a nonhuman reality -- be it the People of Israel, the Church, the working class, the Party, or the scientific community. When it comes to justifying his preference for solidarity over objectivity, Rorty writes: "The best argument we partisans of solidarity have against the realistic partisans of objectivity is Nietzsche's argument that the Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn't working anymore" (PP 1:33). He is not clear about whether this failure afflicts appeals to objectivity taken alone, or whether appeals to objectivity plus solidarity, of the sort he excludes by

definition, are also supposed to have been proven failures. In any event, the only support I know of for the contention that the Western philosophical tradition has failed is the endlessness of philosophical and moral debate, and the difficulty of getting people to act on even the clearest principles of justice. But in Rorty's hands such debate is as endless as it ever was, nor does he show evidence of being in possession of any especially effective way of getting people to behave decently.

Rorty draws from Davidson the notion that truth is a primitive notion, without any necessary link to the criteria by which intellectual issues are judged (PM 300; CP xxvi; see generally PP 1 Pt. II). Hence "the distinction between true and false ... is as applicable to statements like 'Yeats was a great poet' and 'Democracy is better than tyranny' as to statements like 'The earth goes around the sun'" (CIS 54n.8). We are thus left with whatever standards of truth and falsity we were employing when he began inquiry; since we cannot "step outside our language in order to compare it with something else" (CIS 75), ethnocentrism in one sense is inescapable (PP 1:203-10). This conclusion, applied to moral issues, "coincides with Wilfrid Sellars's thesis that morality is a matter of what he calls 'we-intentions,' "that the core meaning of 'immoral action' is 'the sort of thing *we* don't do'" (CIS 59; see also PP 1:200).

But the specification of *we* cannot be taken for granted. Rorty's use of *we* is no doubt intended not to report, but to invite, consensus, but that merely raises the issue, among what groups it is reasonable even to make the attempt. And there are, at least in the present world, profound obstacles to the creation of solidarities strong to replace objectivity and reasonableness as central concepts of public discourse. He frequently uses such expressions as "we ... people who have been brought up to distrust ethnocentrism" (CIS 198). He specifically refuses to speak of "we human beings" (CIS 190), a refusal that has not

prevented his being praised for his "humanism."<sup>23</sup> Logically speaking, he could equally well speak of "we English-speaking heterosexual white males."

Rorty's choice of solidarities is determined by the conventions of the professorate, at some distance from the power centers of American life but unable to challenge them seriously, and for that reason always tempted to play at subversion. As Nancy Fraser has put it, "there is no place in Rorty's framework for genuinely radical political discourses rooted in *oppositional* solidarities" (RR 316). Among such solidarities can be included not only Marxist and feminist social criticism, but also social criticism rooted in Christian faith.

In any event, an ethics based on solidarity must first tell us what the limits of solidarity are: whether it extends to earthworms, to Iraqis, to fetuses, to serial murderers, or to intravenous drug users. Rorty (CIS chap. 9) firmly rejects any resolution not based on the contingencies of human association. In his own words,

We figure out what practices to adopt first, and then expect our philosophers to adjust the definition of "human" or "rational" to suit. For example, we know that we should not kill a fellow human being, except in our official capacity as soldier, hangman, abortionist, or the like. So are those whom we *do* kill in these capacities -- the armies of the invading tyrant, the serial murderer, the fetus -- not human? Well in a sense yes, and in a sense no -- but defining the relevant senses is an after the fact, largely scholastic exercise. We deliberate about the justice of war, or the rightness of capital punishment or of abortion first, and worry later about the "status" of the invader or the murderer or the fetus (CIS 194-5n.6).

But "we" are in disagreement about these and other life-and-death issues, disagreement that shows no sign of disappearing or even narrowing. (But I do not know of any serious moralist who defends war or capital punishment on the ground that those killed are not human.)<sup>24</sup> But we

observe constraints toward even the worst criminals that we do not observe toward mad dogs (we give them trials, for example).» All Rorty's approach does is to block the attempt to articulate principles with whose help such disagreements can be resolved or at least talked about.<sup>25</sup> In short, Rorty endorses a conventionalist approach to ethics, for which the question, "Is this a moral society?" fails to make sense (CIS 59). An immoral action, in his view, is one that "if done by one of us, or done repeatedly by one of us, that person ceases to be one of us" (CIS 59). He concedes that, on his view, "a child found wandering in the woods, the remnant of a slaughtered nation whose temples have been razed and whose books have been burned, has no share in human dignity"(PP 1:201), though he appeals to "the tradition of *our* community" as to support the requirements of human decency in such cases (PP 1:202). But he shows Orwell as portraying the sadistic police chief O'Brien as one of us (CIS 175-85, esp. 183), especially if "we" are intellectuals. In short, the appeal to "what we don't do" accomplishes nothing.

When it comes to defending liberal democracy against its critics, Rorty's conventionalism is particularly strident:

We heirs of the Enlightenment think of enemies of liberal democracy like Nietzsche and Loyola as, to use Rawls's term, "mad." We do so because there is no way to see them as fellow citizens of our constitutional democracy, people whose life plans might, with ingenuity and good will, be fitted in with those of other citizens. ... They are crazy because the limits of sanity are set by what *we* can take seriously. PP 1:187-8)

It is hard to see why he should not defend the practice of confining dissidents within mental institutions such an attitude appears to entail.<sup>26</sup>

Nor does there seem to be any possibility, on Rorty's account, that a dissident might justify himself by claiming to represent the future. For he has no plausible "story" to offer, whereby the

ambiguities and conflicts in our present conventions might yield to a better future (CIS 181-2), though he is prepared to "tell a story of progress, showing how the literalization of certain metaphors served the purpose of making possible all the good things that have recently happened" (CIS 55). As he puts it in one of his more complacent moods, "the product is *us* -- our conscience, our culture, our form of life" (CIS 55-6).

Sometimes Rorty is prepared to make the most categorical claims concerning the course of history and attitudes of future generations. "If only [literary immortality] is at stake," he writes, "then, indeed, Plato was wrong and Nabokov, Heidegger, and Derrida are right" (CIS 151). And again:

About two hundred years ago ... the French Revolution had shown that the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight. This precedent made utopian politics the rule rather the exception among intellectuals. Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society (CIS 3)

But I find it hard to imagine a world in which Derrida was read but not Plato. And the French Revolution did not replace the whole spectrum of social institutions "almost overnight," nor did utopian politics ever become the norm.

Many critics of a Leftist persuasion have noticed Rorty's status quo conventionalism.<sup>27</sup> (This is not to say that professed conservatives are happy with his arguments either).<sup>28</sup> As Cornel West has put it,

He is unashamedly ethnocentric in that he holds that no civilization is worth choosing over the modern West. Yet his viewpoint differs from both Matthew Arnold's bourgeois humanism and John Dewey's plebeian humanism because he believes that no philosophical

case can be made for this civilization.... Rorty's neo-pragmatism is, in part, a self-conscious post-philosophical ideological project to promote the basic practices of bourgeois capitalist societies while discouraging philosophical defenses of them<sup>29</sup>.

Rorty shows little interest in identifying, or attempting to overcome, the socioeconomic conditions that stand in the way of a deepened sense of solidarity, and exclude all but a tiny minority of the human race from the quest for private perfection.

David L. Hall defends Rorty against the charge of conservatism<sup>30</sup> in the following way:

For the pragmatist, personal identity is focused by a description. This description is one shaped by the linguistic resources of the community of which one is a part. Segments of a society -- minorities, social outcasts, women -- may historically have been described in manners which they themselves, upon reflection, found illegitimate. If forced by political, social, or interpersonal oppression to accept that illegitimate description, then members of these groupings experience humiliation. The pragmatist encourages the unrestrained development of new vocabularies of self-description. This is hardly conservatism.<sup>31</sup>

But, conservative or not, such a view permits both too much and too little to be useful in the cause of political or social change. A German who finds himself humiliated by insistence that his nation was responsible for the Holocaust might develop a "new vocabulary of self-description" including the assertion that the Holocaust never took place. And, if one is in a concentration camp, or without the means to support oneself or one's family, the ability to re-describe oneself as free and rich is not all that valuable. 3

The only sort of fundamental critique of existing institutions Rorty takes seriously is Foucault's refusal to accept the claims of any "we"(PP 2:193-8). He attempts to accommodate this sort of radicalism by distinguishing between authors of two sorts:

authors [who] ... are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection -- a self-created autonomous human life -- can be like [and] ... authors [who] are fellow-citizens rather than exemplars. [The latter] are engaged in a shared, social effort -- the effort to make our institutions more just and less cruel. (CIS xiv)

Or, as he puts it in another place,

we [should] distinguish between books which help us become autonomous from books which help us become less cruel. ... The books which help us become less cruel can be roughly divided into (1) books which help us see the effect of social practices and institutions on others, and (2) those which help us to see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others. (CIS 141)

In other words, we can follow Foucault on our own time, so long as we are conservative Rawlsians for public purposes.

Rorty gives some indication of what the quest for private perfection means in practice when he advocates 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). 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).

But private experiments in living can have large public effects, including demands on public money.<sup>32</sup> And intellectuals, particularly those involved in education, must defend

themselves against the charge of wasting collective resources, even if their experiments in living do no visible damage. The sponsors and constituents of an institution of higher education are unlikely to want to promote an "intricately textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism"(PP 1:510) among its faculty, nor are parents likely to want to spend large sums on subjecting their children to such influences.

There is, on Rorty's view, no common ground on which the effort to become more autonomous and the effort to become less cruel both proceed, and in terms of which conflicts between them can be resolved. He is prepared to say that it is "perfectly reasonable" for Plato to seek private perfection and for Mill to seek to serve human liberty, as if Plato were not concerned with the well-being of the political community, and Mill were not concerned with the good life for individuals (CIS 145). In Rorty's own words,

The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and aestheticist as they please, so long as they do it on their own time -- causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by the less advantaged. (CIS xiv).<sup>33</sup>

That Rorty is here ignoring the recent social movements that have urged that "the personal is the political" (cf. Fraser RR 342) might not matter, if he had anything like a clear and defensible principle marking out the division between private and public life. But Rorty manifests a disposition to reject any ordering of either self or society that would make it possible stably to harmonize the two sorts of demands.

Philosophers have distinguished the requirements of conscience from prejudice, economic interest, and the lure of pleasure; they have also distinguished the requirements of justice from the demands of social conformity. Many writers have distinguished the deepest demands of the self

from those inclinations that, however urgent, do not touch its core, and thus may be constrained for the sake of peace and justice. But Rorty praises Freud on the ground that "he breaks down all the traditional distinctions between the higher and the lower, the essential and the accidental, the central and the peripheral" (CIS 32).

Rorty also rejects the claim that the open-mindedness valued by liberals should be prized for the usual reasons:

because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail [or] because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. ...A liberal society is one which is content to call "true" whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be. (CIS 52).

Thus if a liberal society decides to abolish liberal institutions, say out of fear of freedom, a liberal of Rorty's stripe is bound to endorse this result as "true."

Rorty cites with approval a remark of Judith Shklar's, that cruelty is the worst thing we do (CIS xiv, 74, 146). His discussion of George Orwell's *1984* (CIS chap. 8) dwells on the cruelty of the society ruled by Big Brother, while neglecting the systematic deceit practiced both there and in actual fascist and Stalinist societies. Freedom, Rorty almost says, is the freedom to say that two plus two equals five: once that is granted, all else follows (see CIS 176).

But sometimes Rorty attempts to go beyond an uncritical celebration of things-as-they-are. The view I am offering [he writes] says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. ... The right way to take the slogan "We have obligations to human beings as such" is as a means of reminding us to keep trying to expand our sense of "us" as far as we can. (CIS 192, 196)

«USNX»This statement would appear to imply not only the stock liberal position on persons of other colors, cultures, and modes of life, but also a pro-life position in the abortion dispute or belief in animal rights (or both) -- and in any case a serious challenge to existing practice. But how such a position could be defended within Rorty's larger scheme escapes me.<sup>34</sup> An appeal to conversation accomplishes nothing by itself: discussion can easily intensify our sense that open or concealed warfare is the only possible relationship among contending groups.

### *Conclusion*

The most fundamental assumption of Rorty's philosophy is metaphysical despite all his avowals to the contrary -- is his endorsement of a "picture of humans-as-slightly-more-complicated-animals" (PRM 448), a picture shared, or at least not overtly challenged, by many contemporary philosophers who shun Rorty's more extreme formulations. His importance lies in his efforts to work out the implications of a thoroughly naturalized picture of humanity. In his own words,

We should try to get along without the remnant of those earlier self-images [proposed by Plato and Kant]. We should try to see what happens, if in Jean-Paul Sartre's words, "we attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheist position, a position in which such phrases as "the nature of human life" no longer distract us from the absence of a God's-eye view. (PRM 448-9)

Thus Rorty replies to Putnam's charge of decadence not with a denial but with a *tu quoque*: "as far as decadence goes, there is little to choose between us" (PRM 452n.15).

What Rorty is getting at can be gleaned from an examination of one of Putnam's recent discussions of reference.<sup>35</sup> There Putnam supports the "the Aristotelian insight that objects have

structure," but only "provided we remember that what counts as the structure of something is relative to the ways we interact with it" and consequently to our point of view (including our purposes.

But different people have different purposes, and consequently different points of view. And it is central to Putnam's arguments in many places that we can, if we will, divide up the universe in an infinitely large number of ways.<sup>36</sup> So he hastens to say that "not all points of view are reasonable, and not all rational points of view are sufficiently important to our lives ... for us to feel that what is necessary for someone who holds them to know about Xs justifies such a grand name as 'the nature of Xs.'"

The issue immediately arises, what points of view are reasonable and, if reasonable, important. It is Rorty's contention that we have no way of doing so, in the absence either of a unmediated contact with the world, of a sort Aristotle but not Putnam believes in, or of a humanly attainable God's-eye point of view from which other perspectives can be definitively ranked. We are then left with the reassertion of our own ethnocentric biases, and the ungrounded hope that they will prevail in the struggle for existence.

In short, even though Rorty's larger positions and arguments are unacceptable, he remains of importance insofar as he brings out the nihilism latent in other philosophers, or at least challenges them to show how they avoid his conclusions. The question for the naturalistic philosopher is always the same: how to avoid the collapse of the normative, and the consequent loss of the ability either to criticize any set of practices, however brutal, or to defend any set of practices, however just and necessary.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> René Acrilla ("Education, Conversation, and Narrative," *Educational Theory*, 40 [Winter, 1990], 35-44) takes Rorty's work as defining the situation in which contemporary philosophers of education must work. John Willinsky cites Rorty (along with Salman Rushdie), as showing how "the postmodern mix of feminism, new historicism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism has the potential to expand the English curriculum until it spills happily over into other subject areas in a flow of cultural studies." (*The Triumph of Literacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1991), p. 190.) Carol Nicholson uses Rorty's thought to advance a "rainbow coalition of postmodernists, feminists, and educators who are committed to the task of making sure that no serious voices are left out of the great conversation that shapes our curriculum and our civilization." ("Postmodernism, Feminism, and Education," *Educational Theory* 39 [Summer, 1989], 204.) C. A. Bowers and David J. Flinders invoke his ideas against "Cartesian" ways of thinking about education, including the belief that "nonattendance ... can be objectively represented in thought." (*Responsive Teaching* [New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1990], pp. 9, 12.) Cleo H. Cherryholmes hails him as an apostle of something called "critical pragmatism," whose only well-defined feature is that it does not take the purposes of existing society as givens. *Power and Criticism* [New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1988], pp. 151, 171, 177, 179-80, 183-4.) Rorty's response to such uses of his thought has been ambivalent; see D, TC, and (on the broader political issues) TT.

<sup>2</sup> Konstantin Kolenda, *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990), p. 12, quoting CIS 22.

<sup>3</sup> Prado, *The Limits of Pragmatism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), pp. 28-9.

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<sup>4</sup> Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), p. 231. This statement is perhaps not quite fair to MacIntyre.

<sup>5</sup>If this "all things being equal" clause means, "leaving aside mistakes, and considerations, such as power relations, irrelevant to truth," Rorty's formulation is vacuous.

<sup>6</sup> To use the language I adopted in my *Relativism, Nihilism, and God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> See Putman, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 216.

<sup>8</sup>For a somewhat more nuanced account of relativism, that still does not grasp the essential point, see PP 1:23.

<sup>9</sup> See my *Relativism*, esp. chap. 4.

<sup>10</sup> The article cited was written before the election of President Clinton, and hence also before that of younger Bush.

<sup>11</sup>For a more accurate discussion of the religion of the "baby boomers," the generational cohort closest to Rorty's outlook, see Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (N.p.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994). Of this group, 42% are "dropouts" from organized religion, 96% believe in God, and 70% desire a return to stricter moral standards. On Rorty's premises, though not on mine, this sort of sociological investigation is crucial.

<sup>12</sup> See Hilary Putnam's discussion of this issue in *Words and Life*, James Conant ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 284-7.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 297, 299.

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<sup>14</sup>Stout, *Babel*, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> Since I am severely critical of Rorty, I should say that he is a first-rate historian of recent philosophy, particularly skilled at discovering convergences between apparently disparate philosophers, and digging up issues buried in jargon or "rigor business."

<sup>16</sup>David L. Hall asserts: "Rorty's nominalism is not based on the conviction that universals do not exist, or that there are no abstract entities, or that there are no such things as nonindividuals. ...His is a linguistic nominalism which makes at least the following important claims: (1) there are no nonlinguistic entities... (2) language, as the repository of all descriptions, is contingent upon use, and (3) "meaning" is what is produced by using words in familiar manners." *Richard Rorty* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 90. These seem like strong metaphysical claims to me.

<sup>17</sup>Quotation marks indicate Rorty's special sense of the word *metaphysics* and *metaphysician* (likewise *ironist*).

<sup>18</sup>A flat-footed argument of this sort of may be found in Rorty's admirer Kolenda: "There cannot be such a thing as a paradigm human being. The attempts to subordinate human reality to some necessary pattern, biologically, theologically, or morally prestructured, *fly in the face of facts*." *Pragmatism*, p. 15; emphasis supplied. If these facts are facts of human nature (and what other sort of facts might they be?) this argument undermines itself.

<sup>19</sup>Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Joel Carmichael trans. (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Kolenda, *Pragmatism*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup>I am here indebted to a conversation with my colleague Fr. Nicholas Ingham, O.P.

<sup>22</sup> Putnam, *Words*, pp. 342-46; quotation, p. 349.

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<sup>23</sup> Kolenda, *Pragmatism*, pp. 111f. Kolenda's justification for speaking of Rorty's humanism is as follows: "Rorty's humanistic pragmatism is moved by the hope that humanity can keep bringing into being values that will help us cope with life intelligently and effectively" (ibid, p. 115). I see no grounds in Rorty's writings for speaking of "humanity" here.

<sup>24</sup>John Kleinig has mentioned the possibility that "certain kinds of sociopaths ... might be thought to lack some essential human abilities or capacities [and] might, therefore, be considered on a moral par with animals." *Valuing Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 208.

<sup>25</sup> As in my book *The Ethics of Homicide* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1978; paperback ed., Notre Dame Notre Dame University Press, 1990), where I invoke human solidarity without isolating it from rational scrutiny.

<sup>26</sup>Though in fairness to Rorty, he also says: "We do not conclude that Nietzsche and Loyola are crazy because they hold unusual views on certain 'fundamental' topics; rather we conclude this only after extensive attempts at an exchange of political views have made us realize that we are not going to get anywhere. ... Furthermore, such a conclusion is restricted to politics." PP 1:191 & n.42.

<sup>27</sup>E.g., Richard J. Bernstein, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward," *Political Theory* 13 (November, 1987), 538-563; William E. Connolly, "Mirror of America," *Raritan* 3 (1983-4), 124-35.

<sup>28</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, "Josting Richard Rorty," *First Things*, no. 8 (December, 1990): 14-24.

<sup>29</sup>"The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism," p. 267.

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<sup>30</sup> The word *charge* reflects the tone of the literature. Some philosophers are openly conservative in their outlook, and whatever other objections we may have to their positions, it is no refutation to point out the fact that they are such.

<sup>31</sup> *Richard Rorty*, p. 193. Rorty himself says: "a human being, for moral purposes, is largely a matter of how he or she describes himself or herself." "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (spring, 1991): 244, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 195. I would like to know what sort of limitations this word *largely* implies.

<sup>32</sup> See my article, "AIDS and the L-Word," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5 (April, 1991): 137-47.

<sup>33</sup> The "partition position" suggested here is not Rorty's only approach to the question of relating the Romantic impulse to self-creation with the pragmatic demand for useful ideas. The "invisible hand" view assumes that what is good for poets is good for everybody else, and the "sublimity or decency" view demands a choice between social justice and artistic creation. (See Fraser, RR 306-13.) But the first of these positions is naive, and the second position leaves the crucial question unresolved.

<sup>34</sup> Kolenda (*Pragmatism*, p. 36) suggests a possible ground for extending solidarity at least to all (normal, adult) human beings: "If anything deserves respect, it is the human struggle to give meaning to its own existence. The self-creation of human beings must be seen as something *important*, different from all other events going on around us." This statement cannot be squared with Rorty's repeated denunciations of giving anything, and in particular any conception of human nature, a privileged intellectual position.

<sup>35</sup> Putnam "Aristotle after Wittgenstein," *Words*, chap, 3; quotations p. 78.

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<sup>36</sup> Consider the theorem argued for in the Appendix to Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1988): "Every ordinary open system is a realization of every finite automaton" (p. 121).

## A Philosophical Evaluation

In this chapter, I respond to Rorty's ideas as a philosopher, in the next as a citizen concerned about the future of his society, and for that reason with the integrity of education at all levels. I then ask where those people whose position is similar to Rorty's, but who have been brought to recognize the inadequacy of his positions, might reasonably go.

In a recent article, Rorty has disavowed the "Carnapian scorn" (PRM 445) some of his earlier writings, and has urged instead that philosophical ideas be made on overtly pragmatic grounds. In his own language, "criticisms of other philosophers' distinctions and problematics should charge relative inutility, rather than 'meaninglessness' or 'illusion; or 'incoherence'" (PRM 445). But talk about inutility supposes, first, that we know what it is we are evaluating -- that, in this case, we understand the relevant philosophical concepts;<sup>i</sup> and, second, that we have some clear purpose for which these concepts are useful or the reverse. But the first of these suppositions requires precisely the sort of inquiry that Rorty wants to short circuit, whereas -- if we exclude crudities of the truth-is-what-gets-you-tenure variety -- is simply false. Many philosophers, Hume among them, have engaged in philosophy for the mere pleasure of it.

The outcome of this pragmatic aporia is a vocabulary of philosophical abuse (and sometimes of praise), for whose application there is not and cannot be any clear standards. Rorty frequently uses words like *reactionary* (e.g., PMN 11, CIS 21, PP 1:150), *regression* (PP 2:71n.7), *throwback* (CIS 156), *outworn* (PMN 12), *obsolete* (CIS 44), and *lovably old-fashioned prigs* (PP 2:86) (I distinguish such language, which at least hints at an argument, from Rorty's excursions into mere abuse, such as "the archetypical patriarchal prig, Father Parmenides" (PP 2:90)) -- and, on the other hand, words like *advances* (CIS 48), *progress* (CIS 48, PP 1:172), and *twenty years*

*ahead of* (CIS 170) -- as if he believed that intellectual and cultural history had a definite direction. And, in the same article in which he repudiates Carnapian scorn, he continues to write: "I am impatient to see what culture would be like in which [traditional philosophical] issues come to seem as obsolete as do controversies about the nature of the elements of the Eucharist" (PRM 447n.8).

Only on the assumption that the history culture has a definite direction does it make sense to say, for example, that "getting rid of theology" was an "achievement" (CP 34). Or, to cite one of Rorty's more technical papers,

In my view the futile metaphysical struggle between idealism and physicalism was superseded, in the early years of this century, by a metaphilosophical struggle between the pragmatists (who wanted to dissolve the old metaphysical questions) and the anti-pragmatists (who still thought that there was something first-order to fight about). (PP 1:149)

This is a sort of redescription that, as he himself says, "humiliates" (CIS 90) one's opponents -- or at least attempts to do so.

But the force of Rorty's entire argument is to undermine the claim that his philosophical opponents are reactionary. As he himself puts it,

To insist that we cannot know whether philosophy has been progressing since Anaximander, or whether (as Heidegger suggested), it has been steadily declining toward nihilism, is merely to repeat a point already conceded -- that one's standards for philosophical success are dependent upon one's substantive philosophical views. (LT 2; for another recognition that talk of "philosophical progress" is on his premises question-begging see PMN 264.)

Rorty might have recourse to his ironism to cover questions about this part of his "final vocabulary," but to do so would be to make ironism an all-purpose device of evasion.

In view of his rejection of traditional ideas about Truth and Reason, the test of Rorty's writings is his success or failure in persuading readers; he cannot claim to have good arguments regardless of their effects on others. He himself is often content to declare himself persuaded without giving so much as a hint of a reason for his new beliefs (see for example PP 2:138).

For my part, I am depressed by Rorty's "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" (PP 1:197-202) -- his constant assumption that limitless indulgence in philosophical nihilism will leave liberal platitudes intact (see for example his bland endorsement of Mill at CIS 63). To be sure, if one is prepared to jettison all intellectual standards, one can be a New Deal liberal if one pleases. One can also be a Mormon, a Marxist, or a Christian Scientist, or a Flat-Earther. Hence when Rorty observes that

If we could ever be moved solely by the desire for solidarity, setting aside the desire for objectivity altogether, then we should think of human progress as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and be more interesting people, not as heading towards a place which has somehow been prepared for humanity in advance (PP 1:27-28), we should be grateful that Hannah Arendt found Eichmann banal.

I am also troubled by his unwillingness to confront the practical implications of his ideas. In a recent article, for example, Rorty shows himself "dubious about the relevance of philosophy to education, for the same reason that [he is] dubious about the relevance of philosophy to politics" (D 41). He criticizes Allan Bloom for his assumption that the decline of epistemology has political ramifications. He agrees with E. D. Hirsch that "our schools are not producing an electorate able to understand many political issues," but he doubts that he, "as a philosopher, [has] anything to say

that is relevant to that situation" (D 41) (But at TC 236 he endorses Hirsch's argument, arguing among other things that "if [his ideas] were adopted they would make things a lot easier for the cultural left in the colleges and universities." I am not sure whether he does so as a philosopher.) And in his discussion of the possible implications of Heidegger and DeMan's Nazism, he goes so far as to say that the work of an original philosopher "is the result of some neural kink that occurs independently of all other kinks" (TPS 32-3) -- language idling in the most radical sense, without importance either for the philosopher himself or for his readers.

Rorty is concerned to preserve the possibility of what he calls "abnormal discourse," by which he sometimes means discourse outside established paradigms, even if collectively undertaken; and sometimes "a discourse that consists in a solitary voice crying out in the night against an utterly undifferentiated background" (Fraser, RR 313). He must therefore deal with the suggestion that his behaviorist and naturalistic ideas threaten such discourse by confining all language to a scientific paradigm. He argues," the dangers to abnormal discourse do not come from science or naturalistic philosophy. They come from the shortage of food and the secret police" (PMN 389) -- conditions which endanger normal discourse as well. But, whatever may be the case for starvation, the power of the secret police surely has ideas among its causes.

These responses can be supported by an internal critique of Rorty's pragmatism. If ideas have no consequences, or we cannot know what these consequences are, Rorty cannot claim that liberal ironism will have good consequences. He is thus left without any way of defending such claims as "whatever good the ideas of 'objectivity' and 'transcendence' have done for our culture can be attained equally well by the idea of a community which strives after both intersubjective agreement and novelty" (PP 1:13). It will not help to say, "such justification is not by reference to a criterion, by reference to detailed practical advantages" (PP 1:29). For one requires at least implicit criteria

by which to judge that an idea will have the effects claimed for it, and that these effects are, in fact, advantages. On the other hand, if the pragmatic method can somehow be made to work, it would seem to cut against Rorty's positions.

My argument raises serious questions, not only about Rorty, but also about the entire pragmatic tradition in education and philosophy. A defender of the pragmatic tradition will respond:

You have repudiated "low church" pragmatism, or the subordination of education to the dominant ends of society or the personal ends of the teacher. But you have given no arguments against "high church" pragmatism, i.e., the rejection of foundationalism and the insistence on the social, and for that reason value-laden, character of all inquiry. To use Rorty's device of capital letters (CP iv ff.), you are accepting his pragmatism while rejecting his Pragmatism.<sup>ii</sup>

For I have not questioned Rorty's rejection of foundationalism and of the correspondence theory of truth. I do not claim to have discovered an Archimedean point from which all intellectual and cultural issues can be adjudicated. And I agree with Rorty that "there is no such thing as 'first philosophy' -- neither metaphysics nor philosophy of language nor philosophy of science" (CIS 55); just as I agree with the Plato of the *Dialogues* that the mansion of philosophy can be entered by many doors, including those, such as the philosophy of education, which have little prestige in the academic philosophical community. Nor do I have any investment in a model of knowledge according to which all of its forms are to be thought of as "*looking* at something, rather than, say, rubbing against it, or crushing it underfoot, or having sexual intercourse with it" (PMN 39). (But there are no grounds for his remark that "we must get the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphors out of our speech altogether" [PMN 371].) Rorty does not follow his own counsel, since

he uses "looking at" as a rough synonym for "thinking about" (CP 90-92), and at one point strikingly remarks: "But perhaps it is just too soon for a judgment to be rendered on whether Gauche or I am looking at Derrida from the right angle, or whether we both may not be somewhat squinty-eyed" (PP 2:128). (I have also noted visual metaphors at CP 93, 98 [twice], and CIS xv.)

Rorty has respectable arguments against the correspondence theory of truth -- arguments chiefly derived from other writers such as Hilary Putnam and Donald Davidson. One cannot get outside our propositions and compare them with extra-linguistic reality. And there is no way of specifying the "facts" to which our statements correspond except by reiterating those statements themselves. I would even agree with Rorty that "'truth' is just the name of a property which all true propositions share" (CP iii), so long as we do not take this as meaning that the distinction between true and false propositions is merely a matter of choice and convention (or otherwise unreal).

Let us take as our starting point Wilfrid Sellars's<sup>iii</sup> definition of philosophy, which Rorty repeatedly quotes (CP iv, 29, 226): "an attempt to see how things, in the broadest sense of the term, hang together in the broadest sense of the term." My understanding of this idea allows greater space than does Rorty's for linguistic analysis and the maintenance of professional standards of good argument. C. G. Prado,<sup>iv</sup> argues that, thanks to Rorty, "we cannot ask of something, 'Is this philosophy?' That question does not make sense anymore, for we now understand how it can *always* be answered in the affirmative, by providing the appropriate historical context, and how it can *always* be answered in the negative by assuming some methodology as fundamental and some judgments as apodictic." But though there may be more borderline cases than professional philosophers may like to admit, Harlequin romances are not philosophy and *The Critique of Pure Reason* is.

While professional philosophers should take seriously the work of "all-purpose intellectuals" (CP xxix) or "highbrow culture critics" (CP ch. 4) such as T. S. Eliot or Paul Goodman, we are under no obligation to accept either their arguments or their conclusions: their role, rather, is to keep philosophy supplied with problems.

I agree that philosophy is in some respects akin to politics (PP 2:9-26). To clarify, stabilize, or reform the central vocabulary of a group is in some respects a political task, even when it is carried on at some distance from the burning issues of the day. But I would also resist any attempt to turn philosophy into "mere" politics (or "mere" cultural criticism). For I would insist both on the imaginative resources available in philosophers like Plato, and on the philosophical tradition of intellectual rigor. The professionalism which Rorty persistently deplores (see CP chs. 2, 12) has to do with the maintenance of standards of good argument -- standards that cannot be changed just because one is losing the debate -- as well as a tradition of examining texts that include good arguments, instructively bad arguments, and intriguing hints of arguments, good or bad, with exciting conclusions.

The fact that we have no choice but to invoke the language and principles of our own culture is, I agree, no threat to the universalist tradition of the West (PP 1:203-10). And I would agree with Rorty in rejecting "attempts to encapsulate the West, to treat it as a finished off object which we are now in a position to subject to structural analysis" (PP 2:67). But I would resist his suggestion that we "should simply drop the distinction between rational judgment and cultural bias" (PP 1:207-08). On the contrary, we make rational judgments when we are true to our cultural tradition of eliminating cultural biases so far as this is humanly possible.

My differences with the pragmatic tradition turn on a point of considerable importance: the pragmatic value of a non-pragmatic attitude toward at least some truths. Belief in a realistic

conception of truth is a matter, not of mere professional interest, but of broader human concern. For the civilization pragmatists like Rorty value is possible only because men and women have been prepared to be prophets in the wilderness. That some of these have been vindicated by society, often long after they have died, does not do much for those who are now struggling against a society that, in their view, rejects vital truths. The insistence that there is no appeal from the judgment of human society is enough to drive a prophet to despair. Nor can the issue be evaded by reformulation: to differ with Plato and Kant on the nature of truth is to take a position with broad theoretical and practical implications, that ought not be covered over by rhetoric.

What is correct in the correspondence theory of truth can be resolved into two parts. One is the logical truism that "Snow is white" is true just in case snow is white. The other is a number of propositions to which we may give the name *principles of facticity*: that the causal power of our beliefs is at best limited, that many untoward consequences await those who neglect the limitations on human power and knowledge, and that we should be prepared to modify our beliefs (and not just our behavior) as a result of our encounters with obstacles to the attainment of our purposes.

It is the principles of facticity that require us to reject Rorty's dismissive remarks that "the realistic true believer's notion of the world is an obsession rather than an intuition" (CP 13) and that "'the world' is either the purely vacuous notion of the ineffable cause of sense and goal of intellect, or else a name for the objects that inquiry for the moment is leaving alone" (CP 15). That the world is independent of our beliefs and desires is one of those truisms of which everyone, philosophers and other intellectuals especially, needs from time to time to be reminded (by George Orwell among others). Rorty's way of dealing with Orwell is instructive. "I do not think that there are any plain moral facts out there in the world, nor any truths independent of language, nor any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness is preferable to the other.

So I want to offer a different reading of Orwell" (CIS 173). And more disturbingly still, "In the view of *1984* I am offering, Orwell has no answer to O'Brien, and is not interested in giving one" (CIS 176). Perhaps Orwell does conclude is that O'Brien is right, but, if so, his book is a work of despair.

I now illustrate this linkage between philosophical and persistent human problems with the help of a critical examination of Rorty's views on mind and body. Jennifer Hornsby has usefully summarized his argument as follows:

Philosophers, having invented the Mind, discovered some Mind-body problems; then, relatively recently, they created the philosophy of Mind. If we could gain the proper perspective, of historical contingency, on the Mind's invention, then we should no longer feel that we needed solutions to Mind-body problems. We should settle for materialism, but not the sort of philosophical materialism that has been fashioned in opposition to Cartesian dualism. (RR 41)

As several critics have pointed out, Rorty inconsistently combines this commitment to physicalism with an understanding of human beings as subjects of radical choice, and of the social sciences as sources of understanding rather than causal explanation (Holówka, RR, ch. 12; Bhaskar, RR 212ff.).

In my judgment, Rorty is guilty of a fundamental error when he writes, in defense of his sort of materialism:

Following Wittgenstein, we shall treat the fact that there is no such thing as 'a misleading appearance of pain' not as a strange fact about a special ontological genus called the mental, but just as a remark about a language-game -- the remark that we have the convention of taking people's word for what they're feeling. (PMN 32; see also 96.)

For -- as Rorty's own emphasis on self-description in fact implies -- the fact that we take people's word for what we they feel -- though under some circumstances we might be prepared to question their sincerity -- is not a convention (like driving on the right side of the road) that could be changed if we found the cost of transition worth paying. It is a feature of our way of life connected with the principle of respect for persons: while it is often necessary to override a person's feelings, we at least abstain from the sort of dismissal that would be implied in saying "I'm sorry, but you can not possibly be in pain." As Arthur Koestler, I believe, said, the problem with behaviorism<sup>v</sup> is not that it is false but that it might become true.

Those who accept our practice of accepting first-person reports of pain will also accept the philosophical principle articulated by Rorty

It is essential to whatever is incorrigibly knowable that it be a raw feel. (PMN 93)

For a "raw feel" is just what we call whatever in us prompts us to make reports that others do not question (except on grounds of insincerity).

Something of great moral importance would be lost if we gave up the practice of making and recognizing incorrigible reports. It begs a central question to make the choice between a mentalist and a behaviorist or other materialistic language turn on "predictive or explanatory or descriptive power" (PMN 120) -- at least if explanation and description are linked to prediction. And it makes things even worse to make psychology departments the ultimate judges of such issues (PMN 122). Realism about pain, and the epistemological privilege of the sufferer, are tied up with our concept of a person, in a way that has moral as well as metaphysical importance.

We can thus see what is wrong with the suggestion that in some ideal language, or in English properly understood, it would not be possible to even formulate traditional philosophical problems (LT 1-39). Philosophical problems arise from our attempt to deal, as individuals and a

society, with recurrent problems of being human; for example, the confrontation between Creon and Antigone leads naturally into philosophical issues concerning the nature of law. Hence we must resist the proposal to dissolve them, just as we must reject the proposal to dissolve the problems of political life by adopting Orwell's Newspeak (and the practices of deceit and terrorism that support this sort of language).

Rorty concedes the central point at issue when he asks: "How did these rather dusty little questions about the possible identity of pains and neurons get mixed up with the question whether man 'differed in kind' from the brutes -- whether he had dignity rather than merely value [price, rather]?" (PMN 33), and goes on to say, in his favorite therapeutic idiom: "Just as the patient needs to relive his past to answer his questions, so philosophy needs to relive its past in order to answer *its* questions" (PMN 33). But he confuses matters when he writes:

The peculiarly philosophical project of picking out what entities are persons, and therefore possess moral dignity, on the basis of some "objective criterion" -- for example, their possession of a Glassy Essence -- is confusion between, roughly, science and ethics. (PMN 127)

On the contrary, conceptions (or pictures) of human nature such as "the Glassy Essence" (and whatever might be proposed to replace it) bridge the gap between science and ethics; they supply us with an account of what it is to be a human being that has implications in both domains.

My present concern is not primarily with the mind-body problem, but with the nature of the "forms of life" or "language games" to which Wittgenstein, and after him Rorty, appeals. The pictures examined and developed by philosophers are not mere creations of an intellectual elite; they shape the lives of ordinary men and women, and there is no reason to believe that every possible change in such pictures will be desirable. I take it to be one lesson of Heidegger's Nazism

that proposals to change the way we think and talk are sometimes to be heartily resisted. (Unlike Rousseau's abandonment of his out-of-wedlock children or Frege's bigotry, Heidegger's Nazism at least purported to be an application of his philosophy.<sup>vi</sup> It is fortunately not necessary to decide the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics here.) Hence proposals that "we do our best to *stop having* such intuitions [as support realism against pragmatism], that we develop a *new* intellectual tradition" (CP xxx) should not be greeted with easy acquiescence.

Rorty's response to Heidegger's Nazism<sup>vii</sup> is as follows:

When we read Heidegger as a philosophy professor who managed to transcend his own condition by using the names and the words of the great dead metaphysicians as elements of a personal litany, he is an immensely sympathetic figure. But as a philosopher of our public life, he is resentful, squint-eyed and obsessive -- and, at his occasional worst (as in his praise for Hitler after the Jews had been kicked out of the universities) cruel. (CIS 120)

In my judgment, Hans Sluga has said the last word on this way of dealing with the case of Heidegger. (It applies also to the case of De Man, and a number of other cases in which philosophy has served tyranny.)

Interpreters speak as if Heidegger's political engagement as were primarily a problem of character and historiography. They isolate his case and ignore the fact that it raises questions of a more general and pressing kind: the general interaction between philosophy and politics.<sup>viii</sup>

And the deepest objection to Rorty is that, for all his professed pragmatism, he deals with the relationship between politics and philosophy in a profoundly irresponsible manner.

If I am right about this, we can accept Rorty's claim that

the view that there is no permanent neutral matrix within which the dramas of inquiry and history are conducted has as a corollary that criticism of one's culture can only be piecemeal and partial -- never "by reference to external standards" (PMN 179), while still honoring "the urge which drove Plato to say that Socrates' words and deeds, failing as they did to cohere with current theory and practice, nonetheless corresponded with something the Athenians could barely glimpse" (PMN196).

For it is one aspect of Plato's genius that he is able to show that philosophical issues arise from the problems of ordinary people -- not, as in Descartes' case, from merely hypothetical doubts. (Even Descartes' doubts are not as merely hypothetical as is sometimes thought: he was speaking to a public deeply perplexed by religious differences and the intellectual consequences of the new science.) What Rorty calls "the impossible attempt to step out of our skins -- the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism -- and compare ourselves with something absolute" (CP ix) was deeply rooted in the practice of the Athens of Socrates' day, as many Athenians (though not of course the majority) recognized. And it continues to be rooted in the larger Western tradition to which Athens has contributed. Likewise, the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem is *internal* to the Western tradition. An outside agitator theory of our cultural conflicts is always wrong.

Rorty leaves philosophers with three problems, all of which need to be explored in a non-polemical context. The first is the limits of legitimate redescription. Human beings enjoy a limited power to change themselves and one another by changing the way they speak and think. If I think of someone as a hardened criminal, I take a significant step toward making him one.

But some attempts to exploit this fact are morally vicious, others futile, and still others silly. It is for example evil to call Jews "subhumans," futile to insist that people without legs are not

crippled but "physically challenged," and silly to insist on calling black people "persons of color" while objecting to their being called "colored people." What we need is some way of moving beyond these intuitive judgments to a coherent account of what language can and cannot do.

A second issue is the defense of the universal humanism the West affirms in its virtuous moods. Granted that solidarity plays a fundamental role in moral and other reasoning, is it possible to overcome the many obstacles that stand in the way of saying "we human beings" in a way that cannot be dismissed as empty moralism? Animal rights advocates and defenders of an ecological ethics propose extend our solidarity beyond the human race. Even getting it to go that far is enough of a problem, particularly among those who are not prepared to accept traditional theological answers, or who interpret their theology in predominantly tribal terms. For it is not easy to proscribe the need many people experience for a "we" richer and more sustaining than the entire human race.<sup>ix</sup> And resource constraints give these issues an increased urgency.

A third issue concerns the metaphysics of truth, and in particular articulating the "gut" realism of the man and woman in the street. As I remarked above, Rorty has respectable arguments against a correspondence theory of truth. I am not sure whether belief in Nature as a quasi-divinity is a major player in philosophical circles at the present time (but see Sorrel, RR, ch. 1); in any case Rorty's arguments against such a position reduce to the assertion that naturalism of this sort is covertly theistic. But plenty of people believe in a Creator God, and Rorty has no arguments against such a belief. And it is hard to see how he could ever have good arguments for his atheism, even apart from his inability to defend standards of argument capable of opposing powerful passions. For the strongest such argument -- the ancient argument from evil -- presupposes a vigorous realism about questions of both fact and value. For unless the atheist is prepared to say that some things are both real and bad, whatever anyone might say or think about them, he cannot

even begin to question the perspective of an omnipotent Creator. On Rorty's account of the intellectual life, *The Boston Phoenix* should have had the last word when it informed us that "God is back."<sup>x</sup>

I conclude with some remarks on the project of evaluating someone like Rorty from a philosophical point of view. Rorty can deal with philosophical criticism by re-describing himself as a poet or a prophet, and if someone criticizes his poetry or prophecy describe himself as a philosopher once again. A double-barreled answer is what is needed: Rorty's philosophical arguments are systematically unpersuasive, and (to speak only for myself) his poetry and prophecy leave me cold.

Again, a commentator on Rorty's writings, however polemical his intentions, cannot help but try to impose some sort of coherent structure on his material. But, on Rorty's view, this whole enterprise may be, in the words of an anonymous reader of the present work, "fundamentally flawed." Rorty may be a pure sophist, concerned only with what ideas can be sold to a particular audience at a particular time and place. In that case, we can only speculate about what Rorty may do next: will he perhaps endorse Est, Russian Old Belief, or the religion of the Australian Aborigines? And further evaluation must turn on the question of practical consequences, particularly in the world of education where his ideas are likely to have the largest influence. When this evaluation is complete, I then ask where followers of Rorty who retain some need for intellectual coherence can turn to obtain it.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> As James Conant has pointed out, "Introduction." to Hilary Putnam, *Words & Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1994), p. xxx.

<sup>ii</sup> George Rutherglen, of the University of Virginia Law School, in conversation.

<sup>iii</sup> *Science and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge and K. Paul 1968).

<sup>iv</sup> *The Limits of Pragmatism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), pp. 142-3.

<sup>v</sup> Behaviorism is the belief that there is nothing more to the mind than overt behavior. (Rorty's own definition of *behaviorism*-- that "its central doctrine is that there is a necessary connection between the truth of a report of a certain raw feel and a disposition to such-and-such behavior" [PMN 98] is incidentally too weak.) Mentalism holds that the mind is in some way independent of the body; whether mentalism and behaviorism exhaust the field depends on how mentalism is further specified.

<sup>vi</sup> For evidence that Nazism is a plausible -- I do not say the correct -- application of Heidegger's thought, see Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). For other views, see Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), Charles Guignon, "History and Commitment in the Early Heidegger," and Jürgen Habermas, "Work and *Weltanschauung*," both in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall, eds. *Heidegger* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), chs. 6 and 10.

<sup>vii</sup> For another analysis of this response, see David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) pp. 160-68.

<sup>viii</sup> *Heidegger's Crisis*, p. 6.

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<sup>ix</sup> For a discussion of this problem as it arises in contemporary Germany, see Ian Baruma, "Outsiders," *New York Review of Books*, 39 (April 9, 1992), 15-19. But Baruma fails adequately to take into account communal concerns.

<sup>x</sup> Dec. 7, 1990.

## Educational Consequences

Rorty's philosophical deficiencies have important educational consequences. In order to see what these are, it is necessary to see what the implications of his positions are for the questions asked and answered by philosophers of education.

### *An Analytic Approach*

One possible approach begins by asking for a definition of *education*.<sup>i</sup> As James E. McClellan puts it, "'education' is sometimes puzzling in the distinctively philosophical way terms such as 'real' and 'meaningless' and 'value' are puzzling, and for much the same reasons."<sup>ii</sup> In other words, *education*, like *justice* or *murder*, is a contested concept, rival definitions of which express differing outlooks: just as what some people call "justice" others call "looting," so what some people call "education" others call "indoctrination."<sup>iii</sup> And the tension that leads to such disputes is built into our commonsense concept of education itself, which reflects both the intention to convey some definite content -- including some definite moral and evaluative beliefs -- and the desire that students should see "for themselves" the truth of what they are taught. As McClellan remarks, "to speak vulgarly, if you start out committed to transmitting what's worthwhile to kids in such a way that the *kids* will become committed to it, you're inevitably going to violate their 'wittingness and voluntariness.'"<sup>iv</sup> From Rorty's perspective the conceptual approach is hopeless: there is on his principles no reason -- at least if I can persuade my peers to accept my definition -- I should not count as teaching the abuse of students with racial and sexual epithets (or anything else a person employed as a teacher might choose to do). A version of this view has in fact been defended, under the name of "Komisor's Law": "there is nothing one could *do* that one could *not* do with valid

pedagogical intent."<sup>v</sup> But Komisor's Law is false: it is not possible (intentionally) to kill a person with the intention of teaching him something, even if one believes that after death God will do the teaching. And even if one accepts Komisor's Law, not everyone who intends to teach in fact teaches.

### *A Historical Approach*

Perhaps a historical approach will prove more useful. In a useful survey<sup>vi</sup> William Frankena formulates three questions to which philosophers of education from Aristotle to Dewey have given distinctive answers.

- (1) *What* dispositions are to be cultivated? *Which* dispositions are excellences?
- (2) *Why* are these dispositions to be regarded as excellences and cultivated? What are the aims or principles of education that require their cultivation?
- (3) *How* or by what methods or processes are they to be cultivated?<sup>vii</sup>

Thus, for example, Aristotle's philosophy of education is directed towards cultivating, in those persons capable of them, the moral and intellectual virtues, the chief of which is contemplation. Such virtues are to be cultivated because they are necessary to human happiness (or flourishing), as well as to the welfare of society. Aristotle's philosophy of education is politically conservative; it seeks at most the perfection of the existing constitution. (I pass over the complications that possibility of conflict between the requirements for goodness as a human being and goodness as a citizen may engender.) And the inculcation of these virtues or excellences requires, in the first place, a painful period of training.<sup>viii</sup>

Likewise, for Kant the aims of education are to instill into the pupil skills, prudence, knowledge, and (most importantly) moral virtue. In other words education promotes both natural and moral perfection, aims corresponding to the phenomenal and the noumenal side of the self

respectively. (By *prudence* Kant does not mean Aristotelian practical wisdom, but rather the art of achieving one's aims whatever they might be.) Teachers should also help bring about a new social order -- what Kant calls a regime of "perpetual peace" -- while conforming externally to the laws of the state in which they live. Providing education is a duty -- not one all people owe one another, but a special duty parents (and elders generally) owe the rising generation. In the performance of this duty they must respect the pupil's freedom and autonomy, but this does not mean, for example, giving nothing but non-directive counseling. On the contrary, education for Kant requires discipline and even a moderate asceticism so that the rising generation can learn to subordinate their inclinations to the requirements of duty.<sup>ix</sup> Dewey's views on the aims of education are not easy to pin down: statements like "Since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education"<sup>x</sup> leave us with a vaguely progressive taste in our mouths, but no way of finding out whether our present direction of movement, as individuals or as a society, is in fact progress rather than degeneration. Jacques Maritain has pointedly compared education without a general aim to architecture without any conception of the sort of building one wants to build.<sup>xi</sup> (In partial defense of the pragmatist view, a human being is never completed in the way a building is.)

Nonetheless, Dewey is right in opposing talk about the aim of education, if by that is meant some earthly state of affairs entirely distinct from the process of education itself.<sup>xii</sup> And it is possible to formulate his educational goals in oblique and approximate terms.

Dewey rejects both Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual excellence, and Kant's distinction between natural and moral perfection, as well as the more commonplace liberal distinction between morality and prudence in the sense of self-regarding virtue. "Morals," he writes, "are as broad as acts which concern our relationship with others. And potentially this

includes all our acts, even though their social bearing may not be thought of at the time of performance."<sup>xiii</sup> This doctrine plainly excludes Rorty's attempt to combine public liberalism with private ironism or aestheticism.

Negatively speaking, he opposes the fostering of any disposition out of keeping with the naturalism and experimentalism of his philosophy, in particular the transmission of either traditional philosophy or traditional forms of religious belief. On the positive side, he encourages reflective intelligence (as opposed to passive acceptance of inherited ideas), faithfulness in personal relations, devotion to democracy (and not only because our constitution happens to be democratic), aesthetic taste, and faith in the humanistic religion Dewey preaches. Education along these lines is, in Dewey's own words, "the fundamental method of social progress and reform."<sup>xiv</sup>

Underlying Dewey's views on education are two overriding aims: to release the potentialities of the individual, and to bring about a better society. He massively assumes, in the teeth of much evidence concerning the demonic side of both individuals and societies, that these aims are both compatible and mutually supporting. This philosophy means -- in sharp contrast with the tradition that emphasizes discipline and even asceticism as central features of education -- that "the child's school years must be made good in themselves and not taken as mere means to later years or another life."<sup>xv</sup> Yet Dewey defends discipline, insofar as it tends "to the power to recognize what one is about and to persistence in its accomplishment."<sup>xvi</sup>

In practice, Dewey's philosophy implies that teachers should take advantage of the child's active nature, and direct his activities in the desired direction. Maritain agrees. "The mind's natural activity on the part of the learner and the intellectual guidance on the part of the teacher are both dynamic factors in education, but ... the principal agent in education, the primary dynamic factor or propelling force, is the internal vital principle in the one to be educated; the educator or teacher is

only the secondary -- though a genuinely effective dynamic factor and a ministerial agent."<sup>xvii</sup> For Dewey, traditional culture is not to be suppressed altogether, but must be acquired only through first-hand activity on the children's part. Schools should be equipped with kitchens and shops as well as laboratories and libraries. In the catch phrase, children must learn by doing. In traditional curricular terms, history, while not to be eliminated altogether, is to be reduced in importance in favor of science. Method and subject matter are thus fused in Dewey's educational program.<sup>xviii</sup>

Dewey's philosophy of education is an expression of a new faith, hostile both to traditional religion and traditional philosophy. A central tenet of this faith is the harmony of individual fulfillment and social justice. Education for Dewey is a way of spreading this faith, and of as painlessly as possible preventing the transmission of older views to subsequent generations. Democracy is therefore not merely a system of government, but (Dewey hopes) the common religion of all citizens of a democratic society. In Rorty's philosophy of education, we see what happens when this faith collapses.

Rorty as much as Dewey is opposed to the dualisms that pervade the educational philosophies of Aristotle and Kant. But for Rorty, education must be concerned to inculcate two different sorts of dispositions -- a sense of social justice, conceived broadly along the lines set forth by Rawls; and an ironic detachment from all the mores of society including those that reflect a Rawlsian conception of justice. His philosophy thus shares the civic aims of older philosophies of education, without establishing any connection between these aims and the personal qualities it endeavors to foster. This dualism is indefensible on Dewey's principles, as on any other of which I am aware; it is tied in practice to a form of liberal democracy that no longer relies on serious and reflective belief in the rightness of its governing principles.

To the question, why these dispositions are worthy of cultivation, Rorty has no answer -- or rather he systematically refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the question. He believes neither in the Good for Man proposed by Aristotle, nor in Kant's Categorical Imperative. Nor does he accept the progressivist "meta-narrative" that holds Dewey's philosophy together -- or any other general principle capable of defining the aims of education. And while Rorty preserves Dewey's hostility to traditional philosophy and religion, he does not have (nor can he have) any principled reason for his hostility to them.

Perhaps Rorty can provide a political as opposed to a philosophical justification of his views on education and the dispositions he proposes to foster. But it is hard to see how either conservatives or reformers, if clear-headed, could accept his position at any point. For, as will become clearer as we consider methods and curriculum, there would be no place in Rorty's system for either the rational criticism or the rational defense of existing institutions. Nor would there be any place for the development and evaluation of proposals for change. His educational philosophy is conservative in the sense that it fails to support criticisms of the status quo, but it also fails to support criticisms of whatever ideas or slogans may prove fashionable at a given moment. I find it incredible that serious students would want to attend, parents to patronize, scholars or teachers to participate in, or donors or taxpayers to support, an educational institution constructed or conducted on such premises.

Rorty's indifference to the consequences of his ideas, including the undermining of the liberal institutions he claims to support, is from a political point of view particularly damaging. These bad consequences are amplified when his ideas are applied to education. For it is one thing to urge well-brought-up adults to "lighten up," and quite another to proclaim the emptiness (and not

merely the limitations) of our cultural tradition before confused and troubled young men and women. And he concedes that he is not claiming that

there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. (CIS 87)

For ironism undermines the virtues necessary to liberal democratic government (and in fact to any system except perhaps the totalitarian). Hence Rorty's philosophy not only cannot, like Dewey's, express a devotion to democracy; it cannot even be stably combined with it.

There is also reason to fear that ironism, at least if widely accepted, will contribute to the proliferation of the "disorders of the self" with which many contemporary psychotherapists are concerned. Such disorders are manifested in "feelings of meaninglessness, feelings of emptiness, pervasive depression, lack of sustaining interests, goals, ideals, and values, and feelings of unrelatedness."<sup>xix</sup> For those who suffer from such afflictions, as many of our students do, Rorty's ironism is the worst possible medicine. An educational system constructed along Rorty's lines would not provide a chance for a student to discover goals he can endorse as genuinely worthwhile, as opposed to projects he might pick up and drop with equal ease; its effect would rather be to destroy the possibility of such a discovery.

Rorty's habit of announcing himself persuaded, without citing an argument, is also a political liability. One issue on which Rorty exhibits this trait is of special interest to educators. Adolescent sexuality is frequently unformed, and many adult heterosexuals have homosexual episodes in their past. Hence some parents are likely to fear that some educators will encourage young people involved in homosexual relationships (or even undergoing homosexual feelings) to label themselves as homosexual, to their permanent injury. Without so much as a hint of an

argument, Rorty accepts Eve Kossofsky Sedgwick's inflammatory description of policies designed, well or badly, to prevent such counseling as "child abuse" (PP 2:138). In an area of life where strong feelings abound, the attempt to override some of them requires claims on behalf of reason that he neither makes nor is in any position to make.

At one level, the justification for collective support for education is easy. Knowledge is valuable -- in itself, for a career, for citizenship, and for life. We do not want the rising generation unable to write intelligible English prose, blind to the difference between reasoned argument and mere sounding off, ignorant of the American Constitution or of the Civil War, or unaware of the problems of passion as explored in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

But education is corrupted, and the case for supporting it undermined, as soon as we start talking about the "knowledge industry." For those who find the products of that industry distasteful -- on the ground, say, that they are weapons of mass destruction -- are then left without reason for modulating their demands to help keep the system working. At that point, a theoretical defense of a concept of truth becomes necessary. Education, and even sanity, requires belief in a reality that does not yield to human whims and fantasies, and of rules of good reasoning, which cannot be changed just because one is losing the argument.

The most serious deficiencies in Rorty's philosophy concern the question, by what means the virtues of irony and concern for social justice are to be inculcated. Here Rorty develops Dewey's hostility to discipline and asceticism in a self-destructive way. There is no basis in Rorty's system either for a discipline designed to adapt human beings to the existing social order, or to equip them to challenge it in any but the most superficial ways. I agree with Alfred North Whitehead that "the two principles, freedom and discipline, are not antagonists, but should be so adjusted in the child's life that they correspond to a natural sway, to and fro, of the developing

personality."<sup>xx</sup> But adjusting them is a more difficult task than Whitehead supposes. Nor does Rorty provide us with any reason for preferring one curriculum or method of study to others.

As far as method is concerned, an educational system constructed on Rorty's principles would have two components (CIS 12 ff.). One would consist in faithful servants of the wealthy and powerful, and of the economic and political processes that brought them into power and sustain them in it. He explicitly defends the view that such persons should staff lower education. He argues that lower education

should aim primarily at communicating enough of what is *held to be* true by the society to which the children belong so that they can function as citizens of that society. Whether it is true or not is none of the educator's business, in his or her professional [sic] capacity. ... If a teacher thinks that the society is founded on a lie, then he had better find another profession. (D 42)

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, students in the lower grades should receive "the standard, patriotic, upbeat, narrative about our society, its history, and its values" (TC 236).

In mitigation Rorty observes, "in this particular country at this particular time it is still considered all right for teachers to suggest that our society is the result of skeptical doubt about the past" (D 42). In a slightly more liberal mood, he describes primary education as "nine parts socialization to one part liberation" (TC 236-7). (Contrast the "conservative" philosopher of education, Maritain: "The task of the teacher is above all one of liberation."<sup>xxi</sup> Or again: "From the very start the teacher must respect in the child the dignity of mind, must appeal to the child's power of understanding, and conceive of his own effort as preparing a human mind to think for itself." <sup>xxii</sup>)

In my judgment, all students should know that our society is a result of a break [or series of breaks] with the past; and, as soon as they are capable of understanding the issues, be informed of the problems as well as of the opportunities this break has caused. They should also receive training in critical thinking, which is not the same thing as indoctrination in the Left or Right wing political agenda, but lays the foundation for intelligent political convictions, whether of a radical or a conservative sort.)

The other component of an educational system constructed on Rorty's principles would consist of teachers authorized to develop private languages for the expression of their fantasies. Thus for higher education Rorty requires "teachers who do not worry about communicating knowledge, but as Acrilla nicely puts it, 'let their speech be moved by the shadowy situations they find themselves in'" (D 42).<sup>xxiii</sup> Even the most conservative parents and citizens would prefer teachers who advocate radical change supported by rational argument, from whom students who fail to be convinced can learn much, to teachers who use classroom time to explore their personal idiosyncrasies. Rorty thus combines a traditional, not to say authoritarian, array of educational methods in the lower grades with a style of education designed to give maximum scope to professorial narcissism at the college level, without making any attempt to establish a coherent relationship between the two approaches.

As for curriculum, Rorty supports "canon change" at both higher and lower levels, so long as it does not "lead us to give up the very idea of a canon" (TC 238-9). He would like to see high school students reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Giovanni's Room* as well as *Hamlet* (TC 239), not on the grounds that these works are comparable to acknowledged classics in quality or influence, but on the grounds that they represent constituencies with which he has chosen to align himself or desires to placate. In his own words, "they help students learn what it has been

like (and often still is like) to be female, or black, or gay" (TC 239). He shows no interest in helping students learn, say from Flannery O'Connor, what it is like to be an impoverished Southern white -- what is called a "redneck" by men and women otherwise horrified by derogatory names for groups of people.

Rorty's views on curriculum represent the status quo superficially modified in the interest of a handful of currently fashionable causes. Hence his form of education will equip students neither for the defense, nor for the rational critique, of existing institutions. Nor can he equip students in any other way to deal with the economic, political, and spiritual malaise that appears to be a permanent feature of our world.

### *A Problems Approach*

We reach similar conclusions if we examine some of the dilemmas of education, as they arise for parents and teachers of broadly liberal views. Moral education raises particular problems; McClellan has formulated the "paradox of moral education" as follows.

Moral education must either be immoral or ineffective. For getting a child to act in the way your moral theory requires him to act requires treating the child in ways your moral theory forbids; while not treating the child in the ways that are morally forbidden guarantees that, when a child becomes an adult he will not even acknowledge the difference between morally required and forbidden.<sup>xxiv</sup>

This paradox arises from two features of many people's moral beliefs, together with a persistent feature of our *mores*. First, most people, with varying degrees of emphasis, believe that we are obliged to respect the autonomy of other people. Second, we believe that children ought to grow up accepting a moral code, including (though not necessarily limited to) principles

commanding respect for other people's autonomy. But, third, our *mores* rest, in varying degrees, on the brute fact of their acceptance; if there are reasons for them, the wisest adult often cannot understand them, let alone explain them to a child.

Rorty cannot see the force of this paradox, nor once one sees it, do anything to resolve it. For there is no place in Rorty's system for a distinction between education and manipulation. His aspersions on logical argument (e.g., CIS 78) undercut any objection even to the most manipulative or coercive methods of education. And if we for some reason (or none) happen not to like manipulation and coercion, there is no way of bridging the gap between the means and ends of moral education either by nurturing the child's nascent rationality, or by reforming our mores in order to make them rationally intelligible. For the "child's nascent rationality" is a bit of Aristotelianism of a sort that Rorty would extirpate root and branch (see PP 2:159). And there is no way, on Rorty's showing, of concluding that our mores are irrational (see CIS 59).

A teacher tells his students what parents and other authorities want them to hear -- say that stealing or rape is wrong, or that racial discrimination is irrational and unjust. But a bright, or if you prefer a smart-alecky, student asks, "Why shouldn't I take things -- or force myself on women -- if I feel like it? Why shouldn't I discriminate against blacks (or whites, or Koreans) just because I don't like them?" And the same question can be asked in more narrowly cognitive terms. "Why shouldn't I believe in astrology, or the more exotic stories purveyed by the *National Enquirer*, if that's what I want to do?"

A teacher of Rorty's sort cannot offer a serious defense of the conventional wisdom. For on Rorty's showing his attitude must be one of irony. Nor can he say to the student, "The judgment of your society is against you; if you disagree you should examine its reasons and try to refute them." For on Rorty's premises neither society nor the dissident student can have reasons requiring an

answer. The most such a teacher can honestly say is, "I have to say this; if I didn't I would lose my job or get into serious trouble. And you would be well advised to keep your opinions to yourself if you want to get along in the world."

McClellan formulates another moral dilemma for education, arising from the relationship between education and worldly success.

On the one hand [he writes] teachers of young children are saddled with the task of getting each child to read with a degree of proficiency such that he or she will not be penalized in later life. But this task is literally impossible to accomplish. For it is *relative* proficiency in reading (together with a lot of other things highly correlated with proficiency in reading) that, in direct or indirect ways, determines access to the world's goods. And the rule relating teaching and relative proficiency (in *anything*) is this: the more effective the teaching, the greater the variation in performance. Thus, the more the teacher tries to protect the future of the individual child, the more effective is the teacher in perpetuating the system of exploitation. On the other hand, *not* to accept that impossible obligation and strive to fulfill it is to let the full weight of the exploitative system fall directly on those individual children whom one might have helped to escape its worst effects.<sup>xxv</sup>

Once again: Rorty cannot take this dilemma seriously, nor if it arises despite him, do anything toward resolving it. For he refuses to ask the question McClellan's argument directly poses, "Is this a moral society?" (CIS 59). And, on his own showing, any answer we give to a moral dilemma is a way of smoothing a change in social (in this case, educational) practice that we are adopting for other reasons or for no reason at all (see CIS 194-5n.6).

McClellan addresses these and other quandaries of education by imagining a society, which he calls the "Soo," in which only those forms of education consistent with respect for the learner's

freedom and rationality are practiced.<sup>xxvi</sup> Constructions like McClellan's are strongly encouraged by Rorty's philosophy: it is, on his view,

the aim of a just and free society [to let] its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and aestheticist as they please, so long as they do it on their own time -- causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by the less advantaged. (CIS xv)

But the very grounds on which Rorty encourages such thought experiments -- of which there are likely to be as many versions as there are experimenters -- exclude our taking them seriously when we make decisions concerning the education of our children.

The most important assumption involved in McClellan's invocation of the Soo becomes explicit on the last page of his book: "The Soo have worked it out in practice, or so we assume when we assume that they constitute a possible society."<sup>xxvii</sup> Many theorists of education would deny that a society in which children, however young, are never indoctrinated could survive from one generation to the next. McClellan's assumption makes sense within a progressive meta-narrative like Dewey's, in which what we cannot work out in practice our descendants may. But Rorty abandons this meta-narrative, or more exactly uses it only opportunistically to stigmatize opponents. Hence a society like the Soo must be for him nothing more than a fantasy.

I do not assume that McClellan's approach is the best, let alone the only possible, resolution of the quandaries of education. I cite him because he seems to be vaguely within Rorty's ideological family. (More precisely he -- and the other writers whose ideas he summarizes -- represent an older stage of the liberal tradition in education, before the disappointments of the late Sixties and afterwards registered fully.) But the burden is now on Rorty and his defenders to develop an approach to these quandaries that is coherent with Rorty's philosophical and political assumptions.

## *Conclusion*

Any philosophy of education, of whatever ideological coloration, requires three elements:«

1. An account of the human material, i.e., of the pupil(s) to be educated;
2. An account of the bits of knowledge, traits of character, and habits of thought that the teacher desires that the pupil should acquire; and
3. An account of the social and political context in which education is carried on, and in which the pupil must subsequently live.

The stand one takes on these issues will principally determine both one's methods of instruction and the subject matter that one proposes to teach. And Rorty is incapable in principle of giving adequate accounts of any of these matters.

1. Rorty's hostility to any account of human nature resistant to redescription implies that he is unable to give an account of the human material with which education works. For whenever a teacher or a pupil finds that the regnant account of human nature conflicts either with his perceptions or with his wish-fulfillment fantasies, he can simply re-describe the human material to evade the problem. Physical and mental handicaps can likewise be handled with the help of bureaucratic euphemisms. This feature of Rorty's position also has implications for the social context of learning. If a student experiences difficulty in education because his parents are getting divorced, or because he is being raised by a single mother, we could, on Rorty's view, make the problem go away by avoiding language suggesting that the two-parent family is normative.

2. Likewise, Rorty's philosophy precludes an account of the sorts of knowledge, traits of character, and habits of mind we desire to instill into our pupils. For whenever the gap between performance and accomplishment becomes serious and persistent, we can evade the problem by fiat

-- say by dismissing difficult material as "irrelevant." And if the current crop of students does poorly on the SATs, the problem can be resolved by making the SATs less challenging.

3. Nor can Rorty understand the broader social context in which education goes on. For the meaning of our laws, institutions, and practices is contested: to understand them in this way rather than that is already to take sides in social and political conflicts. But Rorty's ironism keeps him from *either* seriously endorsing *or* seriously challenging existing institutions, however understood; and hence also prevents him from understanding them, or seriously attempting to do so: it invites an unserious, aestheticized radicalism which leaves social practice untouched, except perhaps for weakening the force of moral rules. The result of all this is a hidden curriculum, as a result of which Rorty's pupils (and their pupils also) are likely to end up pursuing a yuppie way of life, for which the absurdity of the universe and the injustice of our institutions have become pretexts for self-absorption and self-indulgence.

It is likely that theoretical deficiencies of this sort will have implications for practice. Rorty himself sees how difficult it is for persons with his views to educate children; he cites with approval Derrida's rejection of "the child" (CIS 127-30) -- a ~striking position, in view of the fact that Rorty himself has three children. <sup>xxviii</sup> Many parents these days -- particularly in the declining middle class -- have experienced a loss of belief in the future of their children, and of willingness to struggle and sacrifice for their sake. And teachers also need (and have often lost) belief in their students' future: as Plato reminds us, the children of our souls can be as important as the children of our bodies. Rorty can do nothing for parents or teachers in such a situation but make their problems worse.

In any event, Rorty has conceded that, at the one point where public culture and the development of the individual personality necessarily meet -- in the formation, at home and school,

of the rising generation -- ironism collapses. And this is as close to a knockdown, drag-out refutation of Rorty's position as can be expected given the nature of the issue.

The failings of Rorty's philosophy of education are rooted in pervasive features of his thought. His refusal to draw the radical conclusions some of his followers would like him to have drawn does not reflect a failure of nerve on his part, but on the contrary represents a coherent working out of the implications of his position, insofar as one can speak of coherence in dealing with a writer like Rorty.

For denying the sorts of truth Plato and Kant believed in, without at the same time asserting something equally robust, has educational and political implications of a devastating sort. One cannot teach students the distinction between sound and unsound arguments, or reasonable and unreasonable interpretations of evidence, if there is no distinction between truth and what someone believes. Nor can one, without a robust concept of truth (and related concepts such as "good reasons"), distinguish education from its counterfeits, such as training the "pupil" to recite formulas of whose meaning he has not the faintest glimmering. The logical connections between the concept of truth and those of teaching and learning are quite complex. But it is sufficient for my purposes that some such connection exists. Appeals to prejudice, and the coining of slogans, have won far many more debates than the most carefully (or eloquently) articulated argument. There is no reason, on Rorty's account, why teachers should not employ the worst sort of sophistries and teach their pupils to do the same.

We must now raise a broader question: whether, if Rorty fails, some other liberal conception of education can succeed. And this question is at least doubtful. In the absence of an agreed-on conception of the sort of world we inhabit, and of the sort of life appropriate to that world, the education of children too young to make their own judgments is a parlous business. The

distinction between private and public, though much contested, makes some sense for adults. But for those whose characters are unformed, the question, what sort of people do we want in our world, becomes urgent and inescapable. We must now ask the question; where besides Rorty we might find answers to these questions.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> For an example of this approach, see James E. McClellan, *Philosophy of Education* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>iii</sup> For an attempt to define *indoctrination*, see *ibid.*, pp. 139-44.

<sup>iv</sup> McClellan, p. 20, quoting R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (Chicago: Scott Foresman, and Co., 1967), p. 20.

<sup>v</sup> McClellan, p. 35, citing B. P. Komisor, "Teaching: Act and Enterprise," in C.J.B. Macmillan and T.W. Nelson eds., *Concepts of Teaching* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1968).

<sup>vi</sup> *Three Historical Philosophies of Education* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1965); for a related collection of original sources see his *Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

<sup>vii</sup> *Three Historical Philosophies*, p. 8.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

<sup>x</sup> "Education as Growth," in Frankena, *Philosophy of Education*, p. 20.

<sup>xi</sup> "Man's Nature and the Aims of his Education," in Frankena, *Philosophy of Education*, pp. 41-2.

<sup>xii</sup> R.S. Peters, "Must an Educator Have an Aim?" in Frankena, *Philosophy of Education*, pp. 44-51.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Interest, Discipline, Method, and Subject Matter in Education," in Frankena, *Philosophy of Education*, pp. 73-4.

<sup>xiv</sup> *On Education*, ed. M.S. Dworkin (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1959), p. 30, quoted in Frankena, *Three Historical Philosophies of Education*, p. 153.

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<sup>xv</sup> Frankena, *Three Historical Philosophies of Education*, p. 162.

<sup>xvi</sup> "Interest, Discipline, Method, and Subject Matter in Education," in Frankena, *Philosophy of Education*, p. 53.

<sup>xvii</sup> "Intellectual and Moral Education," in Frankena, *Philosophy of Education*, p. 88.

<sup>xviii</sup> Frankena, *Three Historical Philosophies of Education*, ch. 4.

<sup>xix</sup> Morris M. Eagle, *Recent Developments in Psychoanalysis* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984), p. 73, quoted by Guignon and Hiley, RR 356

<sup>xx</sup> "The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline," in Frankena, *Philosophy of Education*, p. 77.

<sup>xxi</sup> "Intellectual and Moral Education," p. 88.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The reference is to René Acrilla, "Education, Conversation, and Narrative," *Educational Theory*, 40 (Winter 1990), 35-44.

<sup>xxiv</sup> McClellan, *Philosophy of Education*, p. 156.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 127-8.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid*, pp 132ff.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 166.

<sup>xxviii</sup> L.S. Klepp, "Every Man a Philosopher-King," *New York Times Magazine* 140 (Dec. 2, 1990), pt. 1, pp. 117-18.

### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>ii</sup> 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).<sup>iii</sup> 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

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> See Kessler and McKenna, 1978.

<sup>iii</sup> 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."

## 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.<sup>i</sup>

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

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

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

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