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; 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 redescriptions 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.ii

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 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, 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 deprecates (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 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. vi 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 Nazismvii 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.viii

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. 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."x

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


ii George Rutherglen, of the University of Virginia Law School, in conversation.


v 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.


viii Heidegger's Crisis, p. 6.