

| Richard Rorty and Cultural Criticism |

## RICHARD RORTY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

In the short essays that follow four scholars of American philosophy and on Richard Rorty offer their own assessments and criticisms of the cultural value and impact of Rorty's thinking. Richard Bernstein was a life-long friend and colleague of Rorty, and one of the leading expositors and critics of his philosophy. Here Bernstein offers an overview of the trajectory of Rorty's thinking and a sense of how and why Rorty has become an important figure in contemporary intellectual culture. Christopher Voparil, who with Bernstein has recently edited a selection of Rorty's writings<sup>1</sup>, outlines the "democratization of culture" that is Rorty's objective in his rejection of traditional, foundationalist philosophy. Jacquelyn Kegley, a leading specialist in the philosophy of Josiah Royce, criticizes Rorty for having too "thin" a conception of community and for making too much of the public-private distinction to achieve the kind of social reform he advocated. John Ryder focuses on the potential pitfalls of the sort of ethnocentrism that Rorty endorses as the alternative to traditional philosophical truth. Taken together these comments suggest both the importance of Rorty's ideas in our current circumstances and directions in which we may develop, expand, revise, and improve those ideas. This is, in other words, an exercise in the very sort of cultural conversation that Rorty advocated so passionately.

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**Key words:** *Richard Rorty, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, linguistic turn, cultural criticism, liberal democracy, community, ethnocentrism*

<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein, eds., *The Rorty Reader*, Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010

### Ричард Рорти и критическая теория

В четырех эссе, написанных американскими философами (специалистами в области именно американской философии), критически оценивается влияние Рорти на развитие философской и эстетической мысли. Ричард Бернштейн, близкий друг и коллега Рорти, основной интерпретатор и критик его философии, прослеживает траекторию развития идей философа и раскрывает причины их важности для современной интеллектуальной среды.

Кристофер Вопарил, недавно подготовивший к изданию собрание работ Рорти, дает общее представление о «демократизации культуры», к которой стремился Рорти, отказавшийся от традиционной фундаментальной философии.

Жаклин Кегли, ведущий специалист по философии Джосайи Ройса, критикует Рорти за недостаточно глубокое понимание сообщества и за излишний акцент на различии публичного и приватного, которые, по ее мнению, идут вразрез с установкой самого Рорти на преобразование общества.

В центре внимания Джона Райдера – потенциальные ловушки, подстерегающие нас в том этноцентризме, который Рорти считал альтернативой традиционной философской истине.

Взятые вместе, наблюдения и замечания американских философов свидетельствуют об актуальности идей Рорти и задают основные направления развития, расширения, пересмотра и совершенствования его идей. Другими словами, перед нами упражнение в стиле культурного разговора, страстным адвокатом которого всегда был сам Рорти.

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**Ключевые слова:** *Ричард Рорти, прагматизм, аналитическая философия, лингвистический поворот, культурная критика, либеральная демократия, сообщество, этноцентризм*



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## RORTY THE GADFLY

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Richard Rorty was the most provocative and controversial American philosopher of the later part of the twentieth century. He started his career with a strong training in classical and traditional philosophy. After finishing his 600 page dissertation on the concept of potentiality from the Greeks to the present, he turned his attention to the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy. In 1967 he published a classic anthology, *The Linguistic Turn*, that contained a substantial introduction discussing the different strands in linguistic analytic philosophy. During the 1960s Rorty was considered to be an outstanding young philosopher working in the analytic tradition. During the 1970s Rorty became increasingly skeptical and critical about the pretensions of analytic philosophy and, indeed, all systematic philosophy. When he published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979 it was an intellectual sensation. He began the book by declaring that Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey were the three most important philosophers of the twentieth century. But what seemed scandalous is the reason that he gave for their importance. Each tried in his early years to find a new way to make philosophy “foundational” but, so Rorty claimed, “each of the three, in his later work, broke free of the Kantian conception of philosophy as foundational, and spent his time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself had once succumbed.”

Indeed this is precisely what Rorty sought to do in much of his later writing—to warn against the pretensions of Philosophy. The reason *Philosophy* and the *Mirror of Nature* infuriated so many analytic philosophers is that Rorty used sophisticated analytic arguments to deconstruct the very foundations of analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophers accused Rorty of being a Judas who betrayed the analytic orientation. Philosophers who were more sympathetic with continental philosophy were delighted, however, with Rorty’s critique. Furthermore, Rorty who at the time was teaching at Princeton — one of the most prestigious analytic philosophy departments in the United States — seriously discussed such continental thinkers as Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas, Sartre, Derrida and Foucault. At the time (1970s) many philosophy departments in America did not consider continental philosophy to be worthy of serious consideration because it failed to meet the “rigorous” standards of analytic argumentation.

On the basis of his analytic work Rorty was elected president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Society in 1979. This is considered to be the pinnacle of academic honor in professional philosophy in the United States. His presidential address, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism” also caused a stir. Rorty now clearly identified himself with the American pragmatic tradition, especially the legacy of William James and John Dewey. (He deemphasized the role of Peirce who many consider to be the founder of pragmatism.) Rorty’s approach to the pragmatic tradition was idiosyncratic. His interpretations of the classical American pragmatists infuriated many scholars who studied and wrote about pragmatism. Rorty’s James and Dewey sounded more like ventriloquists for his

own skeptical views rather than an authentic account of their philosophies. However, even Rorty’s severest critics (and he has many of them) would agree that he did more than anyone else to get the international philosophic community to take pragmatism seriously. Today pragmatism (and neo-pragmatism) is enjoying something of a renaissance and resurgence throughout the world.

Rorty had the gift to write with wit, charm and humor. His breadth of knowledge in philosophy and literature is impressive. He wrote about philosophers, novelists and poets with equal facility. Rorty was always more than a fine philosopher; he has been a public intellectual with a broad range of interests. In 1983, although a tenured professor at Princeton University, he decided to leave the Princeton philosophy department and join the University of Virginia where he was appointed professor of humanities. In 1998 he accepted a position in Stanford University in the department of comparative literature. From the time that he joined the University of Virginia Rorty had an increasing influence on the range of the humanistic disciplines. Although he has critics in the academic profession, his international reputation grew. He is probably the best known American philosopher of his generation.

He also began addressing a wider range of public issues including feminism, liberalism, education, and the fate of democracy. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) he outlined his understanding of a liberal utopia — an ideal that combined private (personal) irony with a public commitment to furthering liberal ideals. In *Achieving our Country* (1998), he strongly identified himself with the left tradition on American thought—and sought to combine the best of the Old Left and the New Left. The importance of the Old Left is that it grasped that real reform in society is dependent on economic reform in which there is a greater sense of equality and social justice. And the advantage of the New Left is that it was such more sensitive to such phenomena of culture as the discrimination against women, gays, and lesbians. Rorty took pride in being an American — although he did not underestimate the history of violence in America. He called for a renewed patriotism about what was best in the American tradition from Jefferson, Emerson, Whitman, James, and Dewey.

Rorty combined a number of virtues and talents that are all too rare among philosophers. He combined great intellectual sophistication, analytic finesse and an informal style. He was in active conversation with many of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century (analytic and continental). There is scarcely a major philosopher of the twentieth century that he did not encounter. Although Rorty was capable of sophisticated argumentation, he was also skeptical about the role of argumentation in philosophy. He placed a much greater emphasis on imaginative redescription. He seemed to enjoy being outrageous and provocative, which clearly annoyed many of his fellow philosophers. He wanted to shake up the philosophic scene and get thinkers to question what they took to be firm foundations and commonly accepted “truths.” There are affinities (which he stressed)



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between his orientation and that of Nietzsche and James. He thought that William James had said everything that was really important in Nietzsche. And James had the advantage of combing a Nietzschean critique with an affirmation of a pluralistic democratic ethos.

Unfortunately many of Rorty's critics fail to see the playful seriousness of his moral intention. If there is one theme that is dominant it is his anti-authoritarianism. He felt that philosophers divinized such concepts as "Truth," "Objectivity," and "Reality." These had become the new idols to be worshipped. Like Nietzsche and James he wanted to smash these idols. He envisioned a post-Philosophical culture that would be more concerned with poetic self-creation and human freedom.

There is a deep humanism that runs through his thinking. Rorty consistently defended the thesis that human beings have responsibilities only to one another, and that there is nothing that we can rely on except our fellow human beings. There is no outside authority to which we can or should appeal — whether we think of it as God, Truth, or Reality. Furthermore, Rorty was also skeptical about there being some essential moral essence to human beings. Nothing for Rorty escapes contingency, including what we make of ourselves. His ideal is imaginative self-creation — self-creation that can thrive only in a non-authoritarian liberal society. Some of Rorty's critics think that he was insensitive to the plight of the poor in his defense of rich bourgeoisie liberal societies. But he always had deep empathy for the plight of those who are oppressed. He called for enlarging our sym-

pathy with other suffering human beings. He thought that novels are frequently more successful in achieving empathy with the oppressed than philosophical arguments about moral theories.

Some critics thought that Rorty might say anything to sound outrageous. I think that there were (at least) two Rortys — the reasonable Rorty who challenges many accepted dogmas and the provocative Rorty who enjoys annoying his colleagues. Still others are offended by his interpretations of the philosophers he discusses. Students of pragmatism are outraged by the way he dismisses what has been considered the most important concept of pragmatism, experience.

It is never wise to predict how future generations will evaluate a philosopher — especially a philosopher like Rorty. But I do think that we can say that Rorty played an immensely valuable role during his lifetime. He did manage to shake up a lot of philosophers. He raised basic questions about the character and function of philosophical reflection. He warned that philosophy as a professional discipline is in danger of becoming so esoteric that it loses touch with the other humanistic disciplines and the concerns of everyday life. He was a skeptic about intellectual pretensions but he was also a visionary who dreamed of a liberal utopia in which self-creation would be practiced. He probably did more than anyone in his generation to help break down the barriers that exist between different schools of philosophy. He is a delight to read — even when he is infuriating. He was Socratic in the best sense — a genuine gadfly who provokes us to think for ourselves. That is what he most wanted to stimulate.

## RORTY, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF CULTURE

Christopher J. VOPARIL



A key intellectual figure of the late twentieth century and primary force behind the resurgence of American pragmatism, Richard Rorty gained notoriety for his sweeping critique of the Western philosophical tradition in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). The bulk of Rorty's work until his death in 2007 involves thinking through the implications of abandoning the Cartesian-Kantian conception of philosophy as a foundational discipline for politics, ethics, justice, and religion, as well as for philosophy itself. Briefly stated, the consequences of Rorty's pragmatism involve a number of important shifts: social hope replaces transcendental knowledge; a lightly sketched possible future takes the place of appeals to an independent reality; narratives and stories supplant rational arguments; abstract notions of humanity and rights are abandoned for felt, emotional identifications with particular communities; objectivity is replaced by intersubjective agreement; and transcendence is given up for imaginative novelty.

For all the renown of Rorty's philosophical critique, I would like to suggest that his philosophical positions are usefully understood as rooted in his vision of cultural change. As he outlines in "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" (2004), Rorty saw the intellectual history of the West since the Renaissance as having moved from religion through philosophy to literature as the source of re-

demption.<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, he sought to advance a movement already in motion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that would take us beyond "the entire cultural tradition which made truth [...] a central virtue," toward what he called a "post-Kantian" or "post-Philosophical," with a capital "P," culture.<sup>3</sup> From his early training in the history of ideas at the University of Chicago, Rorty was drawn to what he called "geistesgeschichtlich books," like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, that located their discussions of philosophy in the context of cultural and historical development. As he put it in a 1981 letter written on the eve of his departure from Princeton, "Roughly speaking, I tell historical stories and everybody else analyzes arguments."<sup>4</sup> From his essays of the 1970s to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to his final collection, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007), one finds references to a "new form of culture," a new "historical epoch," and even "a

<sup>2</sup> See Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (eds.), *The Rorty Reader* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). P. 473–488.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 35. Hereafter cited as CP.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 231.



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new dawn — not just a new stage in the history of philosophy, but a new self-image for humanity.” Heroes of Rorty’s, like Nietzsche, James, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, and Derrida, are valorized as heralds of this new dawn. In what follows I develop the claim that Rorty’s greatest legacy may reside in his vision of a democratized, anti-authoritarian culture.

While Rorty does not offer a complete map of this new epoch, he does point out a few signposts in the early twentieth century: the outstripping of the religious by the secular, the declining role of scientists in intellectual culture, and the displacement of preachers and philosophers by poets and novelists as “the moral teachers of the youth.” In Rorty’s story, the rise of the post-metaphysical culture is set in motion by inadvertent moves by Kant and Hegel that authorize the advent of an autonomous, secular, nonscientific, literary culture. Rorty uses the terms “literary criticism” or “culture criticism” for what follows, describing it in this way in the 1976 essay “Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture”:

Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson, a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre (CP, 66).

For lack of a better term, he calls this new genre “culture criticism,” and credits Nietzsche and James for helping to advance this notion by replacing romanticism with pragmatism. One of the reasons Rorty found pragmatism attractive is that pragmatists like Peirce, James, and Dewey, abandon the effort to keep philosophy pure and recognize that choice between competing perspectives cannot be divorced from moral and political commitments so as to be decided upon neutral grounds. As a result, on Rorty’s reading, we can give up the task of “grounding” our culture, our moral lives, our politics, our religious beliefs, upon “philosophical bases” (CP, 161).

I will now trace four dimensions of the democratization of culture that follow from giving up this foundational role for philosophy. The first is a leveling of philosophy’s claim to privileged access and a resulting call for philosophy to rethink its *raison d’être*. Rather than playing the role of cultural overseer, adjudicating the boundaries between science, morality, and art, and aspiring to the rigor of the mathematical and physical sciences, philosophy can now engage social and political questions and the arts and become an instrument of social change. As early as the 1975 essay “Dewey’s Metaphysics” Rorty finds support for this alternative conception in what he calls Dewey’s idea of “philosophy as the criticism of culture” (CP, 76). Despite his talk, going back to The Linguistic Turn (1967), of a “post-philosophical culture,” he consistently affirms that this spells not an end to philosophy as such, but to a particular tradition characterized by a need to answer unanswerable questions.<sup>4</sup> While he saw glimpses of such a discourse in the work of thinkers like Derrida, Stanley Cavell, and Arthur Danto, who were willing to take on questions about the relation between philosophy and novels, philosophy and theater, and philosophy and film, rather than the perennial problems of philosophy, Rorty at this time has greater optimism that the abandonment of the idea of “discovering the truth” common to theology and science will emerge from a literary culture and “textualists,” like Harold Bloom and Derrida, than from professional philosophy (CP, 150–1).

The second dimension involves the flipside of the leveling of philosophical privilege: the rise into legitimacy of a literary culture once

relegated to the realm of the ‘merely aesthetic’. Instead of lamenting the absence of rigorous argumentation here, Rorty takes the ability to generate new ideas without having to rely on conformity to antecedently agreed upon criteria to validate itself as a strength. Indeed, since his earliest published essays of 1960s, Rorty had called attention to the lack of presuppositionless starting points; the absence of mutually agreed upon, neutral criteria to resolve disagreements; and the role of what he calls “redescription” — namely, the way each philosophical position can and does redefine the criteria for success to legitimate itself and disallow its competitors. What he calls redescription, or, more technically, “a Quinean picture of inquiry as the continual reweaving of a web of beliefs rather than as the application of criteria to cases,” is the centerpiece of his foundationless and historicist conception of the self-criticism of culture; absent privileged contexts and accepted criteria, all we can do is redescribe things and compare one redescription to another.<sup>5</sup>

For Rorty there are no privileged contexts outside the webs of belief that constitute us. The notion that we can get outside of these webs, on this view, is a function of a conception of rational inquiry authorized by the assumption that everything can be translated into a single, widely available context and vocabulary accepted by any rational inquirer — precisely the assumption that Rorty’s paradigm seeks to move beyond. The cumulative effect of these insights is to undermine the traditional philosophical assumption of absolute neutrality, along with the possibility of a categorical imperative that would be universally binding on all parties. Once the road has been cleared of these unwarranted assumptions, the space of cultural and moral discourse can be expanded to include the contributions of novels and poems. The creation of imaginative novelty thus displaces rational argumentation as the engine of moral growth. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty links his liberal utopia with “a general turn against theory and toward narrative,” based on the idea that “the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress.”<sup>6</sup>

The third dimension or implication of Rorty’s epistemological leveling is a more inclusive and democratic public discourse. In “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” (1988) he establishes that there is nothing outside of shared beliefs that determine the reference of the word “we” to which philosophy has privileged access — nothing “common to all human beings qua human” — to which we can appeal for a non-circular justification of our moral beliefs (ORT 177). The idea that there is nothing that can claim authority over the members of a democratic community save the free decisions of that community itself — an idea Rorty derives from Dewey — is the most deeply egalitarian dimension of Rorty’s project. He calls this “pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism” — ruling out appeals to non-human authority, in his view, will “take away a few more excuses for fanaticism and intolerance.”<sup>7</sup> His final collection holds that “cultural politics” — a catch-all phrase for conversation or inquiry that takes place in the ab-

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). P. 26. Hereafter cited as ORT.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 83. For more on this idea, see Rorty, “Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism,” in John R. Shook



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sence of agreed-upon criteria to govern argument — should have “the last word” on disagreements so that “both monotheism and the kind of metaphysics or science that purports to tell you what the world is really like are replaced with democratic politics” (PCP, 30–1).

During the last two decades of his life, Rorty turned increasingly to the fourth dimension of this democratization of culture by taking up the issue of intercultural conversation. Giving up idea that rational inquiry will lead all to same beliefs makes it possible to expand the “conversation of mankind” he called for at the end of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* beyond the West. Criticizing the essentialism of Western philosophy, he suggests that the social realist novels of the West, like those of Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe, rather than its philosophical and theoretical traditions, are of greater value to the non-West because they have done more to promote “the struggle for freedom and equality.” Because they are less oriented toward providing “one right answer,” these narrative traditions offer a more fruitful basis for East-West dialogue and “finding something distinctive in the West which the East can use, and conversely.”<sup>8</sup> In “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” (1997), Rorty affirms the non-West’s skepticism toward Western claims and advocates dropping the universalist and rationalist rhetoric of philosophy so the West can approach the non-West in the role of “someone with an instructive story to tell, rather than in the role of someone purporting to be making better use of a universal human capacity.” In his view, this approach offers the best chance of achieving a “global moral community” built upon trust.<sup>9</sup>

Rorty’s reframing philosophy as cultural politics in his later work aims to subvert the idea inherent in Enlightenment rationalism that “persistent argument will lead all inquirers to the same set of beliefs” (PCP, 92). That is, if we recognize our “ethnocentrism,” which he understood merely as “human finitude,” it is no longer possible to claim that “a single moral vocabulary and a single set of moral beliefs are appropriate for every human community” (ORT, 190). The force of this claim cuts in two directions. On the one hand, it undercuts claims to epistemological and cultural privilege, thus paving

the way for greater respect for difference. On the other, it creates the difficulty that any shared ground must be made or created, rather than found. Thus, cultural change requires not only treatises and arguments but literature and novel metaphors — anything that will change the course of the conversation to make it more democratic, more socially concerned, and more just.

Rorty may have done more to clear the road for philosophers to engage in the criticism of culture than engage in this practice himself. The targets of his own efforts as a cultural critic center on intellectual rather than popular culture, particularly what he took to be an over theoretical postmodern or “cultural” Left. In works like *Achieving Our Country* (1998) he sought to counteract the prevailing mood of leftist pessimism and disdain for America, arguing that the lack of affective attachment between these critics and their country had resulted not in engaged critique to bring about greater justice, like that of James Baldwin, one of the fiercest critics of America around issues of race, but rather a complete detachment from the national political discourse and neglect of fundamental injustices, especially those related to poverty. For all Rorty’s criticisms of identity politics, he also held that a sense of national identity, exemplified by the likes of Baldwin, Dewey, and Walt Whitman, is an essential component of citizenship. The primary focus of his culture criticism was changing our “self-image,” as philosophers, as Americans, and as members of a global moral community.

In the end, by eroding epistemological hierarchies and promoting an interdisciplinary conversation that, as he put it back in 1976, did not “center around anything more than anything else: neither poetry, nor social institutions, nor mysticism, nor depth psychology, nor novels, nor philosophy, nor physical science,” Rorty aimed to cultivate a democratized culture (CP, 70). In his later work, he attempted to expand the conversation beyond the Western world to encompass previously excluded and marginalized voices of the non-West. Too often, perhaps, for Rorty, expanding whom we regard as conversation partners was a matter of others joining in what we are already talking about, rather than those in the West joining the conversations of others. Still, Rorty’s wager was that a culture that understood its most cherished beliefs and practices as contingent and fallible rather than as having gotten things right, would be a culture that is more open, more tolerant, and more just. Whether events will make this statement true is an open question. Yet the work he did to promote an egalitarian community of trust where intercultural conversation is possible provides hope for the road ahead.

## RORTY AS A CRITIC, BUT NOT CRITICAL ENOUGH

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Richard Rorty, through very adroit criticism of philosophical positions, especially that of the dominant epistemological paradigm, opened the door to a focus on contemporary cultural and social issues, particularly on the possibility of self-critique and reform and community critique and reform; concern was for expansion of self

and for expansion of the human community. Rorty argued for self-creation in an ironic vein, recognizing always the irreducible pluralism of reality and the contingency of one’s own values and beliefs. The emphasis in terms of the self was on creativity, freedom and uniqueness, creating self through new vocabularies and thus giving



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“style to one’s character.”<sup>10</sup> (CIS, 35–36) On the side of community, Rorty argued for “solidarity,” for a shared collective identity and particularly for an extension of self into a larger loyalty, to extending one’s sense of ‘we’ to include or refer to people whom we have previously thought of as ‘they.’— to “stay on the lookout for marginalized people” and try “to notice our similarities with them.” (CIS, 192–96) The goal of expansion of community was to seek justice and particularly to expand the parameters of our understanding of the forms of humiliation we can inflict on our fellows, to recognize shared ability to suffer and feel pain and thus to seek to overcome this cruelty and suffering. For Rorty, the vehicle of transformation is literature, particularly novels. He argues that certain novels can make us aware of the existence of others and particularly of their suffering; novels such as Orwell’s 1984 and Nabokov’s *Lolita* can also “help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves” (CIS, 95).

These two themes—self-reform, especially an endeavor that eschewed any essentialist view of self, and community-reform, a re-making of our community, a new “achieving of our country” in the sense of what it ought to be—have had enormous appeal to many in our contemporary times. Further, Rorty was a pre-eminent critic of a dominant philosophical paradigm that has stifled philosophical thought and narrowed its field of inquiry; doors were opened to new and old forms of philosophical reflection, particularly to a resurgence of American pragmatism but also to increased dialogue with European traditions such as phenomenology and existentialism, and with figures such as Derrida. In addition increased philosophical exchange has occurred between Eastern Europe and also the Far East. However, it is my contention that Rorty fails as a cultural and political critic and even as an advocate for self-reform. The reasons for this failure, in my judgment, are that Rorty is not critically aware of his own presuppositions, as advocated by Dewey and others in the American tradition. He does not fully escape the operating philosophical paradigm of a language analyst and he operates out of the paradigms of the Enlightenment and Classical Empiricism. Thus his views of self and community are “too thin” to do the work he envisioned for them and he accepts a false dichotomy between private and public, self-creation and community remaking. He fails to understand that genuine reform of the political requires equal and related reform of the self.

There are at least three ways in which Rorty fails to move beyond prevailing paradigms. First, he adopts an individualistic stance on the self. Second, he sees the self and communities as primarily linguistic in character in that self-creation and communal change occur by the creation of private and/or new vocabularies. This focus blinds Rorty to the idea promoted by Royce and the pragmatists that self and community are “plans of action.” Self-reform and communal reform are more than creating beautiful poems; it means creating institutions, policies, and ways of changing behavior and promoting justice. Third, he is wedded to a classical empiricism and thus adopts Hume’s notions of morality as based on sentiment and fellow feeling and/or sympathy. Again, sympathy will not bring about justice or action to relieve suffering; I can read about the suffering of others and not be moved to act to relieve it. Sympathy will not lead to melioration or suffering or the coming of justice; only concrete action will do this.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) References to this work will hereafter be noted as CIS.

Turning first to Rorty’s view of self, we believe he fails to see that individual self-creation need not be the lonely project of an atomized self but instead can be the self-developed life plan of a genuine individual within a genuine community that fosters and supports such projects. Rorty does not recognize that self-consciousness develops via a contrast-effect with others, and that self-interest appears later than the social connection with others, and is, in fact, learned and promoted by the social. It is the habits and states of self-consciousness, not social consciousness, that are derived and secondary. The essence of the human self is, at the deepest level, “being-with others.” Further, seeking a larger loyalty or solidarity is not just a matter of seeing others as “like me” or included in my “we.” Loyalty is, as the American philosopher Josiah Royce argued, something that provides unity and fulfillment of self, it is an intrinsic good for the self. For Royce, loyalty furnishes to a self a personal solution of the hardest of human practical problems, the problem: ‘For what do I live?’ Loyalty unifies a life, gives it a centre. Indeed, in Royce’s ethics of loyalty, loyalty overcomes the conflicts of egoism-altruism and autonomy-duty; it provides unity and fulfillment of self as well as temporal, social extension and a moral attitude that takes into account the needs and interests of others. There is in this ethic a universal intent and concern for the moral life and growth of all selves; there is one common moral obligation with room for individual freedom in fulfilling it; there is self-unification and self-fulfillment within the context of a social and moral world; and there is an emphasis on morally productive action, on bringing about a loyal world filled with loyal selves. Unlike Rorty, there is no conflict between self-creation and fulfillment and building of community or solidarity. These two efforts need each other. In dividing the public and the private, Rorty prevents this needed interaction.

Thus, Rorty’s view of self is “thin” and too individualistic, a characteristic of the dominant paradigm of liberalism. His view of self fails for another reason and this relates to the dominant philosophical paradigm he presumably overcomes. Rorty admires Nietzsche for his emphasis on creativity, freedom, uniqueness, and playfulness and, like Nietzsche, he advocates for self-creation through new vocabularies, giving a “style” to one’s personal character. The emphasis is on the literary, and maybe the aesthetic. Drawing on Freud, Rorty writes: “For Freud, nobody is dull through and through, for there is no such thing as a dull unconscious...Freud’s account of unconscious fantasy shows us how to see every human life as a poem . . . He sees every such life as an attempt to clothe itself in its own metaphors.” (CIS, 35-36) Rorty’s emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of life may well be one of the reasons he is attracted to Dewey, who emphasizes “creative living.” However, I suggest that Rorty’s emphasis on language and creation of metaphors and new vocabularies as the key task for strong poets and creative individuals leans markedly toward an essentialist view of the self as a linguistic being. In contrast, Dewey emphasized, as did Royce, the full range of an experiencing human person: to be alert to the nuances of experience, to have our senses operating at full power.

Indeed, Rorty seems wedded to a traditional empiricist view of life rather than the more enriched ‘reconstructive empiricism’ associated with the pragmatic approach broadly interpreted to include other figures such as Josiah Royce. This type of empiricism argues that ‘experience’ is what takes place for a concrete, living, believing, and acting self when it has dealings with other selves and with the



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world at large. Experience is a highly interactive affair involving the self in various encounters and relationships with the world and with other persons; experience is conceived as the life and career of an organic being. It is through concrete experience, in community and in social interaction, that a self learns about other selves—indeed, for Royce this interaction provides the stimulus for self-creation and self-evaluation. Literature is a fine vehicle for learning about others, but it cannot substitute for concrete experience and community—these move one to action and to seek to relieve suffering.

My belief that Rorty has not completely abandoned classical empiricism seems somewhat justified in his reliance on Hume and the notion of sympathy to explicate his notion of solidarity and the process of building a larger loyalty. Rorty believes that one needs to develop a sense of fellow feeling, to cultivate our ability to identify imaginatively with others, so that we can extend the reach of our sense of social justice. This notion is at the heart of Rorty's program of sentimental education and the use of novels to expand our understanding of the suffering of others and to see our own tendency to cruelty. But Rorty fails to understand, unlike Hume, the limits of sympathy. Josiah Royce insightfully captures one of these limits when he critiques Schopenhauer's view that a genuine feeling of pity for another's suffering always leads one to try unselfishly to alleviate it. Royce argues that pity is an indeterminate impulse and, in fact, for most people the first impulse is to get rid of the pain that the neighbor is causing you to feel. Sympathy can lead to recoil in terror from the pathos of the sufferer's condition and pity can end in hatred of suffering and contempt for the sufferer. Another limit of sympathy is that it may well lead one to revel in the feelings of pain but not move one to act or do anything about the suffering and pain of the other person or persons.

Indeed, Rorty's attraction to Freud also leads him into difficulty, for Freud recognizes full well the partiality of sympathy. Rorty notes that Freud

Gives us a way of thinking of the sense of pity not as an identification of the common human core which we share with all other members of our species, but as channeled in very specific ways toward very specific sorts of people and very particular vicissitudes. He thus helps us understand how we can take endless pains to help one friend and be entirely oblivious of the greater pain of another. (CIS 31–32)

Further, says Rorty, Freud shows us “why we deplore cruelty in some cases and relish it in others.” (CIS, 32) It is true that our human circle of concern does not extend very far from our inner core of self and significant others, but are there not cases where one can transcend this and move through the circles to others. In this connection, one can cite the controversy over Rorty's contention that Danes and Italians rescued Jews not because they were “fellow human beings” but because they were members of the same union or profession or were fellow bocce players. Human beings are much more complicated than that and being in these communal relationships is indeed one way to begin to see others as a “fellow human being.” Rorty poses a false dichotomy here—a universal notion of human nature versus a particularized one. He also engages in a false dichotomy of individual versus community and here his tendency toward a communitarian view rises to the fore. Thus Rorty argues for instilling a set of common values, the good liberal Western values of tolerance, openness, pluralism and concern for the suffering and pain of others. Might there be an element of cultural imperialism here? What about those who believe that enduring pain as a moral suffering is a value? And Royce and the pragmatists would advocate for a genuine openness toward values and see values as developed in an ongoing dialogue and critique within a democratic community.

Thus I have argued that Rorty, the pre-eminent critic, fails to be fully critical, not examining his own presuppositions or fully escaping his individualistic, liberal and linguistic perspective.

## RICHARD RORTY, CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY, AND THE PROBLEM OF ETHNOCENTRISM

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Richard Rorty is arguably one of the most influential American philosophers of the 20th century, along perhaps with W.V.O. Quine and John Rawls. Like Quine, his philosophical background is a combination of the analytic trend that was at its height in the three or four decades after the Second World War, as well as the American philosophical traditions that were particularly strong in the decades before the war. Unlike Quine, who made many of his most important contributions in the development of analytic epistemology, Rorty explicitly and famously repudiated that same tradition. Like Rawls, Rorty was a passionate defender of liberal social and political commitments and ideals. Unlike Rawls, who carefully attempted to ground his political theory in traditional forms of philosophical

justification, Rorty explicitly and famously offered no rational defense of liberalism, basically because, he thought, the effort to offer a culturally neutral defense of social and political theory is fundamentally misguided, indeed impossible.

If one looks only at influence outside the United States one can with sufficient justification say that Rorty is the most influential American philosopher since John Dewey. There are several features of Rorty's philosophical style and substance that may explain his impact around the world. First, unlike most American, especially analytic, philosophers, Rorty was eager to take seriously what he regarded as philosophical insight wherever he found it. With respect to European philosophy, his embrace especially of Heidegger and



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Gadamer gave philosophers in Europe something on which to hang their understanding and interpretation of his own ideas. Second, his conception of philosophy as a cultural conversation, more akin to literature than to mathematics, is enough in the tradition of Nietzsche or even Sartre to make sense to those who had been working in broadly Nietzschean or Sartrean traditions.

Third, and perhaps most importantly with respect to influence rather than merely reception, Rorty gave voice to philosophical pragmatism in a way that gave it sense and value to readers in Europe and elsewhere. In fact for many philosophers around the world Rorty's version of pragmatism has come to define the term. This fact is disconcerting to those pragmatist philosophers who continue to see a good deal of value in Dewey, William James, Charles S. Peirce, George Herbert Mead, and others from an earlier pragmatist tradition, even or especially in the aspects of those philosophers that Rorty rejected. For example, Rorty thought that it was uninteresting and unimportant to develop a theory of experience, but one could plausibly say that an understanding of experience is crucial to pragmatism in its earlier incarnation. Despite such disagreements Rorty has given pragmatism an international currency it had not had since Dewey's work in Japan, China, Turkey, and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s.

These aspects of Rorty's work are related to the technical method and substance of his style. One's evaluation of method and substance of the sort mentioned will bear on how one treats Rorty as a philosopher. But our concern here is with Rorty as a cultural critic, as an intellectual figure who seems to have an impact, and an importance, beyond the world of technical philosophy. Why is that, we may ask, and what do we make of it? The answer to the question why Rorty's work has a cultural influence has to do, I think, with the pragmatism to which we have already alluded. Rorty was insistent that traditional philosophical thinking was pursuing the impossible, which is to say it sought to provide grounding for our ideas of nature, knowledge, and the full span of issues relevant to human life independent of our time, place, and purposes. If this is impossible, then sophisticated, critical reflection on our world and on ourselves must take other forms. There are many forms such criticism can take, some of which, such as literature, have engaged us for millennia. But criticism may take other forms as well, and Rorty's contribution is to identify what he called cultural conversation, undertaken by the "ironist," as an intellectually appropriate activity for philosophers and other intellectual critics to undertake. Traditional philosophy is technical and makes use of methods of inquiry and analysis that set it off from other intellectual activities. Rorty's cultural conversation, the critical activity of the ironist, by contrast, intersects with the rest of the intellectual culture directly and in such a way that it allows and even encourages interaction of individuals and communities across disciplinary boundaries. As a result, Rorty has something to say to the writer, the philologist, the culturologist, the artist, and the politician. Furthermore, in the context of his pragmatism, the important criterion of philosophical valuation of an idea, policy, or practice of any kind is whether it succeeds, whether it does what we need it to do, whether it "works." It is no longer a question of being right, but of being useful. This too opens intellectual doors and windows and enables a philosopher like Rorty to breathe air from outside his discipline and to invite others into his conceptual space. Such an intellectual openness makes

for a fairly broad cultural resonance. In this respect, I would add, Rorty has done philosophy and indeed contemporary intellectual culture as a whole a considerable service.

There is, however, a problem. Let us for the sake of the discussion grant Rorty his point that there is no way to ground our social and cultural ideals in any set of ideas or principles that are not themselves culturally and socially grounded; there is no way for us to get outside our own view of things to develop a culturally and socially neutral point of view on which to base our ideas and ideals. This is a controversial point, but Rorty has done a compelling job of making it at least plausible, and even reasonable. What, then, is our alternative? Rorty's view is that we are culturally bound to such an extent that in justifying Western liberal democracy the best we can say is that this is what we think; this is who we are. In other words, Rorty defends a kind of ethnocentrism.

To be sure Rorty's ethnocentrism is not of the narrow variety. It is not, for example, a self-aggrandizing nationalism that assumes that there is something wrong with anyone who is not 'us'. He recognizes that once one makes the conceptual move to say that the best defense I can give of my, or our, ideas is to say that this is who I am and we are, I am not giving any better justification for my ideas than someone with a different set of cultural traditions and practices could give for hers; she too can only say simply that it is justifiable and worthwhile for her to think and act this way because it is who she is. Furthermore, Rorty does not attempt to bar others from access to 'us' and 'ours'. On the contrary he believes, as one might expect a liberal democrat to believe, that in general societies and nations will be better off to the extent that more people move themselves into the camp of the liberal democrat. More people will live freer and more satisfying lives, he believes, to the extent that liberal democratic principles are more broadly embraced. We might say that Rorty's is a methodological ethnocentrism that is inclusive in practice, or at least in principle. However, because we cannot offer arguments for liberal democracy, we cannot expect to convince anyone that he or she ought to embrace it. We can live it, talk about it, criticize it, and ideally improve it through our criticism and social action, and on the basis of all that we can hope that others will see its advantages in practice.

Of course others can do the same. Christians can act as if their example makes the most compelling case for the superiority of their beliefs, as can Muslims, and Communists, and anarchists, and anyone else. The problem is that if we are all communicating with our own "kind," even if we hope to make a good show of it for others, on what basis do we communicate with one another? We may see the problem in an interview Rorty gave not long before he died to the Hungarian philosopher Alexander Kremer. At one point Kremer introduces the issue of globalization and several of its dimensions and problems. He suggests, thinking primarily about Islamic cultures and about China, that "...as our world becomes smaller and smaller, we are perhaps forced by these tendencies (secularization, globalization and other economic and political tendencies, etc.) to know, to learn much more about other cultures!" Rorty's response is to say "But they are trapped in stages of history that the West has surpassed. They are only beginning to liberate women; they are only beginning to acquire the concept of citizenship, etc. We cannot help thinking of them as backward. We cannot take seriously the suggestion that their culture is on a par with our own." Kremer proposes the





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possibility that there needs to be “dialogue” between Western and other cultures to help us all to develop, and Rorty responds “I have no better idea. The problem I see with dialogue is that I have never seen a good example of it, only ritual exchanges of well-meaning platitudes. I have never heard a Western thinker specify just what it is that the West has to learn from non-Western cultures.” Kremer acknowledges that it is difficult for Westerners to understand aspects of non-Western cultures, for example the underdevelopment and poverty with which many of them struggle, and the religious and ideological constructs with which many cultures understand themselves. Kremer asks whether there might be “positive features in Far Eastern religions and philosophies” through which we can develop a better understanding of, for example, Chinese culture, to which Rorty responds, “What is positive about poverty?”<sup>11</sup>

One may or may not agree with Rorty’s assessment of the possibility of communication with non-Western cultures, indeed with his view of the stature and value of those cultures. Regardless whether or not one agrees, however, it seems to me that contemporary so-

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Kremer, “Interview with Richard Rorty,” in Alexander Kremer and John Ryder, eds., *Self and Society* (Central European Pragmatist Forum, Volume 4), Value Inquiry Book Series, Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2009. See pp 234–235.

cial, economic, and political circumstances, and the character of an inclusive liberalism both point us in the direction of the necessity to find ways for us to communicate with those beyond the borders of ‘us’. The problem is that Rorty’s ethnocentrism gives him no inclination to take an approach to other cultures that will compel us to pursue such communication. If we rest content with such an ethnocentrism, the rest of us may find ourselves in a similar position, in which case the prospects for the sort of communication that current circumstances call for are dim.

The problem does not lie with Rorty’s pragmatism, but with the conception of ethnocentrism that he draws from it. Pragmatism itself, especially in Dewey’s hands, provides other and better resources. Dewey’s understanding of democracy, for example, is couched in terms of the necessity of the pursuit of common interests across borders. By “borders” in this case Dewey means the boundaries among our communities, ethnicities, races, genders, religions, and nation-states.<sup>12</sup> If our liberalism is of this more “robust” Deweyan variety we may be able to understand our cultural groundedness in a way that does not thrust us into the counter-productive ethnocentrism in which Rorty finds himself.

<sup>12</sup> See John Ryder, «Democracy and Common Interests across Borders» *Human Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2010, pp 108–113.

