

# From Radical Philosophy to Conservative Politics: Richard Rorty on Liberal Democracy

*Mike Murphy*

Throughout the history of political thought, political arguments have frequently been linked to particular epistemological positions. Notably, a number of these discussions have centred around the question: What is the relationship between our knowledge of the so-called natural and social worlds and those decisions we take with respect to the ordering of our social and political institutions, the nature and content of our legislation, and our ethical or moral attitudes?

Richard Rorty's contribution to this discussion has been the resurrection of pragmatism, what some have called "the only original American movement in philosophy" (Klepp, 1990: 57). Rorty's provocative and controversial reworking of this doctrine has raised the ire of theorists across the entire spectrum of philosophical and political debate. Setting his sights on the analytic tradition which informed his own earlier work, he challenges not only the notion that philosophy is a discipline within itself, with its own distinct set of problems and methods of investigation, he denies that philosophers have any special knowledge or insights to aid in the solution of the important questions facing humanity (in his opinion, poets and novelists have more interesting and useful things to

say in this regard). Foremost among these problems are those which confront a liberal society, a society he believes would be better off if freed from the rationalist philosophical fetters it inherited during the enlightenment.

Rorty develops his views on epistemology in conjunction with his conception of the nature of science and scientific progress, in that he considers the quest for objective truth to be ill-fated and unhelpful in the pursuit of our various human purposes. He is not arguing that there is no such thing as a reality independent of our theories about such, nor is he challenging the logical possibility that some of our theories may, in some sense or another, correspond with this independent reality. He is saying simply that he can see no way in which we could possibly ascertain whether such a correspondence is taking place. Rorty believes that we would be better off asking the question "What is useful?" rather than "What is true?"

On a more basic level, Rorty wants to abandon epistemology altogether, and to engage in what he calls hermeneutics. In contradistinction to epistemology, in which the quest for knowledge is viewed as a process that will culminate in a final indisputable answer to which all knowing beings will give their assent, hermeneutic philosophy is more like a never-ending conversation, in which no particular mode of enquiry is epistemically privileged, and in which the primary goal is simply to keep the conversation going.

## **Rorty: Pragmatism and the Demystification of Truth**

Rorty rejects the notion that science allows us to progress towards knowledge of the objective truth about reality. As he sees it, human beings make the truth rather than discover it. Scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for predicting and controlling the natural world, while philosophers, artists, and politicians invent descriptions

which are useful for other purposes (Rorty, 1989: 4). In Rorty's schema, truth is as applicable to questions regarding art and politics as it is regarding biology and quantum physics. To put it another way, truth is a property of sentences (*ibid.*: 7). The world may be out there e.g., objects in space and time, whose cause cannot be reduced simply to human mental states, but truth cannot be.

Truth cannot be out there - cannot exist independently of the human mind - because sentences cannot so exist or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false (*ibid.*: 5).

Thus, there is no sense for Rorty in which any of these descriptions can be said to represent accurately the world as it is in itself.

As a pragmatist, Rorty wants to set aside those questions epistemologists have been asking for decades regarding the correspondence of our theories with reality or the objective truth. In fact, he wants to set aside epistemology and metaphysics as possible disciplines (*ibid.*: 6). However, he is not offering arguments against these disciplines; that is, he is not saying that he is right and they have been wrong about the truth. He is saying only that he would like to see a world without these disciplines and the problems which form their subject-matter.

To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or true as a term which repays analysis (*ibid.*: 7-8).

Rorty has come to this latter conclusion via his observation of the failure of philosophers over the last one hundred years to make sense of the notion of our theories somehow corresponding with the objective facts (Rorty,

1982: xvii). In fact, he finds even the suggestion that our theories have a grounding in objective reality to be unintelligible.

The question is not whether human knowledge in fact has foundations, but whether it makes sense to suggest that it does - whether the idea of epistemic...authority having a ground in nature is a coherent one (Rorty, 1979: 178).

Rorty cannot see what such a 'grounding' would consist in or what a 'foundation' of our knowledge would look like. Essentially, he can see no way in which we could somehow get outside of our beliefs and our language, in order to provide some sort of test of their validity other than simply coherence with other beliefs that we hold (*ibid.*).

Rorty is not, therefore, attempting to replace one theory of knowledge with another; rather, he simply wants knowledge or truth to be recognized as nothing more than a social phenomenon - a matter of intersubjective agreement among the members of a particular group or community (*ibid.*: 9). He is careful to distinguish pragmatism from crude relativism - the doctrine that every view on a subject is as good as another. Pragmatists simply concede that there is no way to adjudicate such claims in a neutral or objective manner (Rorty, 1982: 166). In their view:

All that can be done to explicate 'truth', 'knowledge'...is to refer us back to the concrete details of the culture in which these terms grew up or developed (*ibid.*: 173).

Pragmatists also concede that such a view is deliberately and consciously ethnocentric, which is to say that they know of no discourse that would serve our interests better than the one we now possess (*ibid.*: 173-174). According to this notion, objective truth is understood to mean no more than the best idea we currently have of explaining and coping with the world (Rorty, 1979: 385). Thus, for pragmatists, charges of relativism become merely quaint (*ibid.*: 13), for not only are

they convinced that what counts as truth or knowledge is decided by us and not by the world, they also see no need to continue searching for some deeper explanation or justification of these terms.

To say that the world does not decide questions of truth or knowledge is to say that the external world does not tell us what vocabularies or language-games to adopt. This is not to say that the world has nothing to do with our beliefs; indeed, the world can cause us to hold certain beliefs, but only after we have adopted a particular vocabulary (Rorty, 1989: 5-6), e.g., the world may decide between sentences such as 'The ball is red' and 'The ball is blue', but it does not tell us to adopt a vocabulary in which things like colours and material objects have a place.

While recognizing the importance of remaining loyal to the traditional distinctions made between science, and such things as religion, art or politics, Rorty does not recognize any natural or essential hierarchy among these disciplines. That is, it cannot be said that disagreements regarding scientific world-views (theories) are settled any more rationally or objectively than disagreements regarding political or religious world-views, since in all of these cases we are faced with questions of opposing values (Rorty, 1979: 330-331). That is, when shifts from one world-view to another occur in any of these disciplines they are not piecemeal processes, but are holistic in nature. They involve wholesale shifts in thinking about and coping with the world (Rorty, 1989: 6). Thus, opponents backing different world-views or vocabularies espouse different criteria of how rational decisions between competing theories are to be made (Rorty, 1979: 330-331). The problem, then, is that there is no possibility of establishing a criteria for the purpose of mediating between competing vocabularies which would be neutral to the interests or standards of both.

Rorty thus concludes that there is no deep difference in the patterns of argumentation employed in science, with the stated goal of obtaining accurate representations of objective

reality, and those used to obtain agreement in more pragmatically or aesthetically oriented disciplines such as politics or art (ibid.: 332-333).

### Philosophy Without Epistemology: Hermeneutics

Rorty dreams of an alternative culture, in which the search for objective truth has been renounced, in which no representative of a particular discipline would be considered to be more rational (in any deep sense) than a representative from any other, and in which no particular vocabulary e.g., scientific rationality, would set the standard toward which other vocabularies would be expected to aim, and in terms of which their rationality would be judged (Rorty, 1982: xxxviii). Philosophy in this culture would become something like culture criticism: a practice of comparing the advantages and disadvantages of our varied discourses as different means of coping with the world (ibid., xi). Rorty wants the impetus for intellectual and moral progress to come, not from any desire to discover the truth about the world or about mankind, but from ideas about what would be more useful for achieving our specific ends in life (Rorty, 1989: 9). From this perspective, progress is rational in a purely pragmatic sense, but not in any deep logical sense.

Rorty describes the traditional philosophical distinction between the search for objective truth and less epistemically privileged areas of human inquiry as that between normal and abnormal discourse. This distinction parallels the one made by Kuhn between normal and revolutionary science. In the former, there are agreed upon means of reaching agreement, whereas in the latter there are not. Rorty's conclusion: "I argue that the attempt (which has defined traditional philosophy) to explicate 'rationality' and 'objectivity' in terms of conditions of accurate representation is a self-deceptive effort to eternalize the normal discourse of the day" (Rorty, 1979:

11). From another perspective, it is an attempt to close off further discussion or investigation which is not being pursued in the particular privileged vocabulary.

As an alternative to traditional philosophy (epistemology), Rorty advocates hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is not designed to play the same role as epistemology; rather, it is:

an expression of the hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled - that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt (ibid.: 315).

This statement refers to Rorty's hope that no longer will any particular discourse enjoy a special epistemic authority, which it could use to combat, stifle or silence other less authoritative discourses. Hermeneutics is not another way of knowing, but another way of coping with the world (ibid.: 356).

In contradistinction to epistemology, hermeneutics does not proceed on the assumption that all contributions to a particular vocabulary or discourse are ultimately commensurable - that some common ground or terms of discourse (such as Popperian rationality) could be discovered which would facilitate the logical reconciliation of all opposing positions on a particular issue or problem (ibid.: 316).

Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts (ibid.: 318).

Hermeneuticists are willing to discuss other vocabularies in the terms in which they have been formulated, and to resist translating them into their own terms (ibid.). Their primary desire is to keep the cultural conversation going, and to send it off in new and different directions, rather than to have it end in some final, objectively true answer. Hermeneutics represents a protest against the epistemologist's attempt to

narrow or freeze this conversation, and the cultural diversity and advancement which is its product, a process whose ultimate end is the dehumanization of human beings (ibid.: 377). Indeed, what Rorty fears most in our enlightenment rationalist culture is that it could potentially reach a stage in its development when there will be objectively true and false answers to every possible question we might ask, such that human worth will consist in knowing truths, and human virtue will be nothing more than justified true belief (ibid.: 388-389).

Rorty qualifies this statement somewhat by acknowledging that nothing less than severe physical hardship and/or intense and systematic coercion could stifle cultural progress completely. In the absence of such conditions, leisured 'conversation' will ensure that this vital process continues (ibid.: 388). However, he also acknowledges that the type of philosophy he endorses has not gained a solid footing in Western philosophical circles, and that he is not sure when or even if it will do so in the future. The most he can do is insist that philosophers develop a moral concern with continuing the cultural conversation of the West, rather than insisting on a place in that conversation for the problems which have, heretofore, dominated modern philosophy (ibid.: 393-394).

Although Rorty's critique of traditional philosophy is compelling on a number of points, particularly his attack on the intelligibility of foundationalism, it is not without its own weaknesses. To begin with, even though we may agree with his statement regarding the incomprehensibility of the idea of our knowledge having grounds, it is not at all clear why this observation would lead us to abandon epistemology in order to embrace hermeneutics (Palmer, 1983: 447-448). This problem stems from Rorty's misleading and simplistic equation of all of epistemology with foundationalism (Herzog, 1980: 425). In doing so he ignores the fact that there are a number of perfectly good reasons e.g., coherence, simplicity, survival value, and ethical implications, which can be, and have been, cited in backing up the claim that a particular

epistemological viewpoint is superior to its rivals. In effect, Rorty has failed to show what, if anything, the idea of correspondence with reality has to do with anyone's degree of commitment to his or her epistemological position, and, in the process, he has failed to exhibit hermeneutic conversation as a process any more open than traditional epistemological discussion.

To be certain, Rorty's hermeneutic conversation employs its own unique form of closure, in that it excludes those voices which claim to have access to some deeper or higher truth. As it would obviously be self-refuting to argue that such individuals were not at present, or never could be in touch with such a truth, there seems to be no reason why they cannot act as equal and useful participants in the conversation in which Rorty places so much faith.

To the dialogue that philosophical hermeneutics regards as essential to the event of understanding necessarily belong different points of view, different perspectives and approaches (Mitscherling: 1987, 129).

Rorty's problems are not limited to this one, however, for it is questionable whether this hermeneutic conversation is even intelligible in the form in which he presents it; for presumably, when someone is debating an issue with an opponent she is convinced that the side she is defending is the best or right (though not necessarily the objectively true) one, and she is trying to convince her adversary of this. Therefore, it is not clear why she would be willing to discuss, in their own terms, positions which she considered to be wrong or antithetical to her own. Admittedly, she may concede that her opponent has made some good points or that her own position requires revision. She may even, in an extreme case, be completely persuaded by the opposing point of view. Nonetheless, such things are possible, and do occur, in current epistemological debates. If Rorty envisions something different it is difficult to imagine what it would look like or what value could emerge from it.

It will soon become clear that Rorty's philosophical problems translate directly into political problems as he ventures into a discussion of his vision of liberal democracy.

### Pragmatic Liberalism

Rorty rejects epistemology, not only as a discipline in its own right, but particularly in the discussion of concrete social and political problems. Questions regarding the ultimate truth about human beings, morals, society or nature are, in his view, irrelevant both to liberal political theory and to the survival of a liberal society. In his opinion:

It is not at all clear that any shift in scientific or philosophical opinion could hurt the sort of social hope which characterizes modern liberal societies - the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences (Rorty, 1989: 86).

Rorty claims that most people who hold such hopes, when informed that certain philosophers were casting doubt on the notion of an independent objective truth, would not be very concerned, for it is not philosophical beliefs which hold society together but common vocabularies and these same common hopes (ibid.).

Moreover, Rorty considers the idea of a deeper objective truth, combined with the claim that science or epistemology has some sort of privileged access to this truth, to be inimical to the freedom by means of which the ideals of a liberal society are realized. That is, by asserting the authority of scientific rationality in the discussion of social/political problems, one constrains debate to an unnecessarily narrow range of political solutions to these problems. Rorty dreams of a liberal utopia in which no particular mode of enquiry is to be given any overriding authority, in which the spectrum of political debate would thereby be broadened considerably, and, consequently, in which the chances of realizing our

liberal hopes and ideals would be greatly enhanced.

Rorty believes that philosophical theories about the self, society, and nature should be completely subordinated to concrete, pragmatic political deliberation. Individuals are free to develop such theories which comport with the values, practices, and policies of a liberal society, but these theories are necessary neither to provide these societies with foundations nor to aid in the solution of their problems (Rorty, 1988: 270). Philosophers may be useful in articulating contemporary liberal values and beliefs, and in developing visions of future liberal utopias, but the realization of these ideals must be left up to society's more practical or technical experts (economists, urban planners, judges, business executives), (Rorty, 1987: 570-572).

Nonetheless, Rorty does identify a political space for hermeneutics:

as a contribution to the attempt to achieve what Rawls calls "reflective equilibrium" between our instinctive reactions to contemporary problems and the general principles on which we have been reared. So understood, philosophy is one of the techniques for reweaving our vocabulary of moral deliberation in order to accommodate new beliefs (e.g., that women or blacks are capable of more than white males had thought, that property is not sacred, that sexual matters are of merely private concern), (Rorty, 1989: 196).

Rorty is concerned only that philosophy not be viewed as a higher tribunal which will provide a liberal society with foundations which will be conceived of as more secure than a simple commitment to liberal-democratic values, and to the benefits which flow from that way of life (ibid.: 197).

### What is a Liberal?

In the introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty introduces us to his ideal liberal citizen, the liberal

ironist. Rorty borrows his definition of a liberal from Judith Shklar, who takes liberals to be those people who think that cruelty is the worst thing that we do. An ironist is "someone who faces up to the contingency of her most central beliefs and desires" (ibid: xv). It follows that a liberal ironist must recognize as contingent even her desire and hope that cruelty can and should be diminished: "For liberal ironists there is no answer to the question 'Why not be cruel?' - no non-circular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible" (ibid.). Nonetheless, it is also the chief virtue of a liberal ironist that she remain committed to these principles in the face of their contingency (ibid.: 46).

This caricature is developed in the introduction, where Rorty dreams of a future liberal utopia in which ironism is universal (ibid.: xv). However, when we reach chapter four he presents us with a different version of this liberal utopia and the type of individuals that would inhabit it. In contrast to his earlier statements, he asserts that only the intellectuals in his liberal utopia would be ironists: everybody else would simply recognize the contingency of the liberal form of life, and of the beliefs and values which accompany that form of life (ibid.: 87). As for his revised definition of an ironist, it reads as follows: 1) she has radical doubts about the form of life into which she has been socialized, because she has been impressed by other forms of life which she has encountered, either face to face or through books, films, etc...; 2) she realizes that she cannot resolve these doubts through modes of enquiry originating from within her own form of life; and 3) philosophically speaking, she does not believe that her own form of life is closer to or corresponds better to some truth of the matter than any other, or that it has any authority beyond itself (ibid.: 73).

Rorty's revised ironist fears that she may have become the wrong kind of human being; therefore, she looks to other forms of life she has encountered in order to recreate or redescribe herself in their terms. She hopes that by experimenting with and comparing different forms of life she will

be able to make herself a better human being (ibid.: 75, 80). An ironist places the highest value on her autonomy - her ability to resist the power of the form of life into which she was born to fix or constrain the development of her human identity.

For the liberal ironist, what unites her with the rest of humanity is not her recognition of a common core of rationality e.g., Habermas's communicative rationality, but simply a common susceptibility to pain, "and in particular to that sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans - humiliation" (ibid.: 92). In her view, human solidarity is not conceived of as the recognition of a 'human essence' which constitutes the core self of all human beings.

Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation - the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us" (ibid.: 192).

What matters most to a liberal ironist is not that she find a reason to care about suffering, but only that she notice it when it occurs. In her estimation, human solidarity is not to be achieved by discovering the truth about mankind or about the world, but by imaginative acts of empathy with other individuals. An ironist seeks to decrease her chances of humiliating others by expanding her acquaintance with different moral vocabularies and forms of life, and, in the process, discovering the ways in which her own words and actions cause pain to others (ibid.: 91).

Although Rorty claims implicitly that there is no necessary connection between ironism and liberalism (ibid.: 61), he is convinced that ironists make better liberals than non-ironists. He has two reasons for thinking this: 1) the aforementioned desire of the ironist to acquaint herself with a wide variety of forms of life; and 2) the ironist's light-mindedness towards traditional philosophical questions,

which is to say her recognition of the contingency of such beliefs.

Such philosophical superficiality or light-mindedness helps along the disenchantment of the world. It helps make the world's inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality (Rorty, 1988: 272).

Stated simply, these individuals, recognizing the groundlessness of their own and of others' beliefs, and aware of the lack of any absolute or neutral standard of justification to arbitrate between competing beliefs or belief systems, will be less willing to persecute others whose beliefs differ from their own; as a consequence, they will be more likely to take other points of view seriously, and possibly to revise their own views in the process.

It is at this point that Rorty's failure to develop a consistent description of the citizens of his liberal utopia begins to cause him some problems; for if only the intellectuals in this utopia are to be ironists, and the rest of the population is to remain indifferent to philosophical questions, then only a small portion of the population (the ironists) would, for the reasons he outlines, become better liberals. This liberalizing effect, which he originally intends to be universal (Rorty, 1988: 272; 1989: xv), ends up being severely limited in scope.

Rorty's difficulties extend beyond this question of 'Who is to become more liberal?' to the question 'Why would these individuals become more liberal?' He describes his ideal society as one in which freedom of thought and discussion will be enhanced through the rejection of the ultimate authority of any one particular mode of enquiry e.g., scientific rationality, in the search for solutions to our human problems. A liberal society is one which is content to call true whatever the upshot of such free and open discussions turns out to be.

That is why a liberal society is badly served by attempts to supply it with philosophical foundations. For the attempt to supply it with such foundations presupposes a natural order of topics and arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies [modes of enquiry] (Rorty, 1989: 52).

However, the connection which Rorty attempts to make between tolerance and the recognition of the contingency of our most central beliefs and desires is far from convincing. The problem here runs parallel to the one he encounters in his discussion of the "superiority" of hermeneutics over epistemology, for although pragmatists or ironists may eschew questions of ultimate truth or justification, within their respective vocabularies or language-games, beliefs are still judged to be true or false, good or bad, and right or wrong. Thus, it is not at all clear why any of these individuals would be less committed to their own contingent beliefs, and more open to other contingent beliefs.

The liberal ironist (or pragmatist) may argue that, since their beliefs also cannot be proven wrong, they have no reason to give them up, or that a particular version of the truth must be imposed or disseminated in order to maintain social order. Perhaps the most damaging criticism of Rorty's position, however, is that he completely fails to show that questions of ultimate truth or correspondence are even at issue in people's social, political, and moral deliberations, and unless he does so his attack on foundationalism will remain without much political relevance.

Rorty encounters some additional problems when he outlines the sort of limits he wishes to see placed on tolerance. His awareness of the charge of political irresponsibility that is often levelled against the desire for autonomy and self-creation among ironist intellectuals leads him to draw his own peculiar version of the public/private distinction. He recognizes demands for human autonomy (self-creation) and human solidarity (public obligation) to be equally valid but

forever incommensurable. Whereas the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private and unshared, the vocabulary of solidarity or justice is necessarily public and shared (*ibid.*: xiv-xv). For this reason, Rorty confines projects of self-creation purely to the domain of private thought and expression--to the development or creation of one's own mind. This right to private self-development is to be balanced by an equal right of others to be protected from cruelty and suffering (Rorty, 1989: 27, 68).

Within this schema, private beliefs must be sacrificed to public expediency; that is, individuals must moderate or abandon those beliefs which necessitate public actions (and/or public policies) which cannot be justified to the majority of their fellow citizens (Rorty, 1988: 257). Rorty's distinction is very much like the one made by J.S. Mill, involving freely arrived at agreements on public purposes set against a radical diversity of private purposes (Rorty, 1989: 67). The major difference, however, is that Rorty's 'experiments in living' seem to be more purely theoretical in nature.

Rorty readily admits that those beliefs which are to be tolerated will be differentiated from those which are not in a relatively local and ethnocentric manner--that is, with reference to the traditions of a particular community or the consensus of a particular culture. "According to this view, what counts as rational or as fanatical is relative to the group to which we think it necessary to justify ourselves - to the body of shared belief that determines the reference of the word "we"" (Rorty, 1988: 259). It follows that all opponents or "enemies" of liberal democracy will be viewed as mad. We will be unable to comprehend them as fellow citizens, as individuals whose chosen form of life could mesh with that of the rest of the citizenry. We would not judge them 'insane' because they have made some essential mistake in their determination of the way a human being should live her life, but simply because it does not mesh with our own determination on that subject (*ibid.*: 266-267).

This aspect of Rorty's thought has drawn a lot of fire



from his critics. As Richard Bernstein notes, despite Rorty's best intentions and desire to increase tolerance, the opposite will be achieved unless he can distinguish between benign and pernicious forms of ethnocentrism (Bernstein, 1987: 550). Along similar lines, Robert Burch observes that Rorty's 'conversation' marginalizes and excludes fringe groups who do not conform to its standards: either they must adopt our discourse or remain as non-participants.

That is to say, they are significant participants only insofar as their discourses conform to the modish standards of polite, liberal academic talk, taken to be the discourse of humanity (or at least that segment of humanity which is thought cultured enough really to count), (Burch: 1987, 101-102).

Rorty is not unaware of such criticism, acknowledging that this refusal to engage in debate with these so-called fanatics or enemies of liberalism "seems to show a contempt for the spirit of accommodation and tolerance, which is essential to democracy" (Rorty, 1988: 268). However, his reply appears to indicate that sometimes this result cannot be avoided.

We have to insist that not every argument needs to be met in the terms in which it is presented. Accommodation and tolerance must stop short of a willingness to work within any vocabulary that one's interlocutor wishes to use, to take seriously any topic he puts forward for discussion (Rorty: 1988, 268).

As Rorty sees it, at times there may not be enough overlap between vocabularies or networks of belief to achieve any useful agreement, or even to make discussion useful or profitable. Sometimes we may have to realize, after serious attempts, that such a discussion cannot possibly get us anywhere (*ibid.*: 269).

Although initially this reply may seem to be quite balanced and reasonable, it is disturbingly vague. It is neither

clear where Rorty draws the line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of life, between whose beliefs are to be represented in public policy and whose beliefs are to be censured, nor is it clear what criteria he would use to draw such a line. Rorty may find it easier to deal with the more ruthless and violent enemies of liberalism (fascists, totalitarians, anarchists), but he will have trouble dealing with the more moderate, non-violent enemies of status quo liberalism, e.g., women's, aboriginal, and gay rights groups, or environmental and racial equality groups, whose notions of how a human life should or can justifiably be lived do not conform to the status quo in their particular communities. It is not at all inconceivable that Rortyan pragmatism could lead to the suppression of such dissenting groups. Hence, there is no guarantee or even likelihood that the pragmatic approach to socio-political problems will not lead to the compromising of such essential liberal values as freedom and tolerance.

Rorty may want to seek partial respite from such problems through his public/private distinction, but this distinction is in itself problematic. Rorty seems to assume that the process of human self-creation can be confined solely to the domain of private thought and expression (Rorty, 1989: 27, 68), but it is perfectly conceivable, indeed it is even likely, that such self-development will require the performance, in public, of certain actions, ceremonies or rituals that will affect the interests of other people. While one could quite easily justify banning such displays if they caused physical harm to others, what about cases in which the harm done is non-physical e.g., humiliation, indignation? How are we to balance the harm done to the ironist if we bar her from such displays, against the non-physical harm that the allowance of such a display may cause to others? If we confine the ironist purely to the realm of thought and discussion, this would be to place less value on her non-physical pain than on the non-physical pain of others, an action for which there appears to be little justification. Rorty's unfortunate silence on this matter presents, as its consequence,

the distinct possibility that his public/private distinction could be given a decidedly intolerant interpretation.

In fact, Rorty simply dismisses the more radical critics of liberalism, in particular ironists like Foucault and Derrida, as well as a group of nameless others whom he refers to only as a "generation of idealistic young leftists" (Rorty, 1987: 569). As far as he is concerned, their project - the unmasking of bourgeois ideology - has been so overworked it has become self-parody (ibid.: 569). In that they have for so long focussed their critiques on the ideologies of liberal-democracies without proposing any concrete strategies for reform, Rorty charges these critics with having become over-theoretical or over-philosophical (ibid.: 570). His one qualification of this criticism is his acknowledgement of feminism as a "useful spin-off from this leftist philosophy fetishism" (ibid.: 577, fn. 16). Feminism derives its "usefulness" from the fact that it has presented us with some new ideas: it has unmasked something that has not been unmasked ad nauseam. Rorty speculates that this may be partly because the patriarchy/non-patriarchy distinction swings free of the capitalism/socialism distinction (ibid.).

Although intended to be placatory, these comments prove to be very irksome. To start with, Rorty presents us with a grossly counterfactual homogenization of feminist critique; moreover, he would seem to be indicating that if feminist thinkers themselves stop coming up with new ideas then feminist theory will also turn into self-parody. Must ideas necessarily be new to be considered important or relevant? Rorty appears to be indifferent to the hypothesis that the reason so many of the critics of liberalism have been repeating the same message for so long is that their critiques have been continually marginalized or suppressed by more powerful interests in liberal societies.

Rorty himself is clearly unwilling to break with this pattern. He swiftly brushes aside the 'generation of young leftists', declaring that people like Dewey and Weber have absorbed everything useful in Marx and discarded the rest,

and that, therefore, there is no sense in either reworking or restudying him (ibid.: 571). As for the ironist philosophers like Derrida and Foucault, he doubts that they have given us any new tools for unmasking the evils inherent in our liberal socio-political system. He concedes that Foucault has done a lot of useful work with respect to particular institutions (prisons and asylums), but he considers his general philosophical approach (de-construction) to have little relevance to social reform or current political dilemmas (Rorty, 1987: 571). Furthermore, although Rorty agrees with thinkers like Foucault, who argue that the patterns of acculturation characteristic of a liberal society have imposed constraints on their members never before imposed in pre-modern societies, unlike Foucault, he believes that these constraints have been balanced by a corresponding decrease in pain (Rorty, 1989: 65).

Indeed, Rorty assures us that contemporary liberal societies already contain the institutions for their own improvement, institutions which could help alleviate the dangers Foucault sees.

Indeed, my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs. J.S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to *optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering* seems to me to be pretty much the last word. Discoveries about who is being made to suffer can be left to the workings of a free press, free universities, and enlightened public opinion (ibid.: 63).

Rorty's final pronouncement on the ironists is that they are, as public philosophers, at worst dangerous and at best useless. As a consequence, he deems that their philosophical concerns cannot be addressed in public policy initiatives. Their only relevance is in the private realm, where they may play a role in helping other ironists accommodate their private senses of identity to their liberal hopes. The emphasis here is on accommodation rather than synthesis, for in Rorty's ideal

liberal culture people will have given up the attempt to unite their efforts at private self-development with their public obligation to avoid cruelty, and to respect the freedom of other human beings (ibid.: 68).

To summarize, then, Rorty dismisses the radical or ironic critics of liberalism as irrelevant, overtheoretical, useless, and even dangerous; however, he never states specifically what it is he objects to in their criticisms, why he thinks their arguments are faulty or why the problems they address are either not real problems or at least not as serious as they indicate. Instead, he is content to assert that the problems of a liberal society are both easily identifiable, and, with increased time and effort, fairly easy to deal with. For example, he claims that the prevalence of massive inequalities of wealth and standards of living in our liberal democracies is simply a result of the diversion, by the political right in the West, of money, attention, and energy away from these problems towards combatting Soviet imperialism. Once this threat has either disappeared or been eliminated, the process of eradicating these evils can resume once again (Rorty, 1987: 566).

Rorty might gain some credibility if he chose to back up his statements, but as Bernstein notes, "Rorty does not argue his case, he simply asserts it" (Bernstein, 1987: 533). For instance, if an ironist like Foucault has done useful work with particular social institutions, how is it that his general philosophical approach is irrelevant to social reform or current political dilemmas? What more does Rorty expect of him? As for the other ironists and leftists Rorty alludes to, even if they have not, at present, developed concrete political alternatives to the institutions they are criticizing (which is not to say that all of them, whoever they are, have not already done so), who is to say that they will not be able to do so in the future? Rorty seems to think that until they come up with alternatives they should desist from criticizing the present order of things; but one must ask from what other source are these alternatives to arise if not from some form of critical

discussion of the prevailing order of things?

Even when he does acknowledge that some of these critics have valid concerns, Rorty claims that they can be mitigated by existing liberal institutions. Unfortunately, Rorty does not specifically identify the particular institutions he is referring to, and thus it is impossible to decide whether this answer would prove to be a satisfying one e.g., a number of these critics may argue that many of the institutions in a liberal society are themselves illiberal (police forces, mass media, asylums, judiciaries), and therefore are part of the problem. Nonetheless, even if one ignores the testimony of the more radical critics of liberalism, Rorty's endorsement of Mill's framework for guiding public policy is disturbing; for how could he allow such an ambiguous formula to stand as the final word on the subject? It provides us with no idea as to what sort of balance is to be struck between the preservation of individual freedom and the prevention of cruelty, or of what criterion is to be used in making this decision. It does not even provide us with a precise definition of either of the terms 'freedom' or 'suffering'.

It is also curious that Rorty would exhort us to dream about future liberal utopias (Rorty, 1989: xv) when he thinks that Western social and political thought has already gone through the last conceptual revolution it needs. Either it is just a game to keep political thinkers from getting bored or Rorty sees the possibility of something genuinely new in the future of liberalism. In either case, it is a secret he appears to be keeping to himself.

## Conclusion

Clearly, there is a disjunction between Rorty's radical philosophical critique and his conservative political program, a split which he himself appears to find unproblematic. However, as critics such as Richard Bernstein have pointed out, Rorty manages this only by homogenizing a

controversy-ridden liberal tradition. Rorty, he writes, speaks widely and generally about liberal democracy without investigating the plethora of historical controversies regarding what liberal democracy is or should be (Bernstein, 1987: 545-546). Liberal democracy is not so easily defined as Rorty seems to think it is:

For as soon as one attempts to clarify what one takes to be primary or secondary about liberal democracy, one is caught up in controversy. What for one "liberal" is basic for liberty or freedom is to another "liberal" a mark of coercion (Bernstein: 1987, 546-547).

The ongoing debates between libertarians and defenders of the welfare state or between liberals and communitarians clearly illustrate Bernstein's point.

With one broad stroke Rorty paints over such differences in our liberal communities, thereby masking the potentially invidious nature of the power structures underlying our various traditions, all in order to make intelligible his portrayal of the justification of these traditions as a matter of intersubjective agreement among community members (Wallach, 1987: 599). In the absence of this kind of agreement, Rorty's 'justification' of liberal democratic institutions is rendered little more than a pleasant fiction.

It would be difficult to argue that it is Rorty's intention to install his vision of liberalism as a foundational truth, but this is immaterial, since this is, indeed, a consequence of his redescription of liberal beliefs, practices, and institutions. He is not sufficiently suspicious of the pervasiveness and the tenacity of particular values and interests that permeate our institutions and shape our traditions, and which limit the freedom of certain individuals and groups in a liberal society. Rorty, by failing to recognize the power of these entrenched values and interests, privileges them by default (Wallach, *ibid.*). That is, in the "open" political discussion which he envisions these more powerful voices could easily muffle or even silence the much feebler voices of dissent. Regrettably,

Rorty's version of liberalism remains purely affirmative, which is to say, conservative: "A liberalism without apology, without tension, and without the means to negate or transcend itself" (Comay, 1987: 93).

Thus, in the end, it is difficult not to agree with Rorty that a contingent justification of liberal institutions and values appears to be the only one available to us, yet it is hard to agree that the means he outlines for realizing these ideals are the best available or even sufficient for the task. The difficulties associated with his position on this matter are a symptom of the larger problem of defining a proper relationship between knowledge and politics. Rorty is able to provide neither a necessary nor even a sufficient connection between his epistemological position and political liberalism, and thus he greatly overemphasizes the importance of epistemological considerations in socio-political decision-making.

To reiterate slightly, Rorty asserts that epistemology (foundationalism) is irrelevant to politics. His basic point is that a foundationalist defense of political liberalism is not only unintelligible, it is inimical to the realization of liberal values and ideals. He believes that once liberalism is detached from its foundationalist roots the institutions and values it embodies will have a greater opportunity to flourish. However, Rorty's discussion is ultimately unconvincing, because he fails to show how foundationalist considerations are even at issue in the discussion of political questions. Hence, it is not at all apparent why a liberal society would be improved by the proliferation of Rortyan pragmatism, while there are numerous indications that it could be adversely affected.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all derives from the fact that his vision of political openness involves its own unique form of closure, which manifests itself in his marginalization of all essentialist and unconventional viewpoints, and his failure to deal seriously with the radical critics of liberalism. The upshot is that pragmatism can itself be shown to be compatible with illiberal values and practices. Rorty pays insufficient attention to either alternative epistemological

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(coherentism, existentialism) or non-epistemological (religious, ethical, utilitarian) points of view, which can and do play such an integral part in any social, moral, or political decision-making process. Alone, the philosophical/political framework outlined by Rorty is insufficient to cope with many of the fundamental problems facing our liberal societies, and for this reason it remains interesting but ultimately unsatisfying.

Murphy

Rorty on Liberal Democracy

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Szeman

Foucault, Genealogy, History

## Foucault, Genealogy, History

### Imre Szeman

Certainly one will never prove *philosophically* that *one has* to transform a given situation and proceed to an effective deconstruction in order to leave irreversible marks. In the name of what and of whom in effect? And why not permit the dictation of the norm and the rule of law *a naïve* (viz. the tympanotribe)? If the displacement of forces does not effectively transform the situation, why deprive oneself of the pleasure, and specifically of the laughter, which are never without a certain repetition? This hypothesis is not secondary. With what is one to *authorize oneself*, in the last analysis, if not once more with philosophy, in order to disqualify naïveté, incompetence, or misconstrual, in order to be concerned with passivity or to limit pleasure? And if the value of authority remained fundamentally, like the value of the critique itself, the most naïve? One can analyze or transform the desire for impertinence, but one cannot, within discourse, make it understand pertinence, and that one must (know how to) destroy what one destroys.

Jacques Derrida, "Tympan"

Are we not in danger of ourselves constructing, with our own hands, that unitary discourse to which we are invited, perhaps to lure us into a trap, by those who say to us: "All this is fine, but where are you heading?"

Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures"