

RORTY'S HERMENEUTIC ROAR

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In his parable on three metamorphoses Nietzsche calls attention to a transition made by creative individual while reaching for a justifiable conviction or belief. One begins with the stage of the camel: absorbing all relevant knowledge accumulated so far. Only after mastering the knowledge created by predecessors can a person strike out on his own; a lion's roar is deserved only by the one who has done a respectable job as a camel. There is a third stage, that of the child, when the initial fervor is transformed into creative self-absorption and the discovered value is cherished for its own sake.¹

I would like to make use of this parable to discuss the current interest in the philosophical activity of Richard Rorty. His recent work strikes many of his readers as iconoclastic; they see it as the breaking of old tablets on which contemporary philosophy is still being written. Those tablets, bearing the signatures of their prominent makers – Parmenides, Plato, Descartes, and Kant, proclaimed the primacy of epistemology, to which, according to Rorty, the contemporary analytic philosophy is a faithful heir. "But I say unto you," roars Richard the Lionhearted, "both the tablets and the writing still being produced on them point to a dead end." To many practitioners in the epistemological-analytic smithy this proclamation sounds like an invitation to abandon philosophy. They are disconcerted by the thought, however, that this apparent attack on the *raison* of their *etre* comes not from an uninformed outsider but from someone who has considerable credentials in analytic philosophy. Rorty has done a creditable job as Nietzsche's camel before letting out his roar in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

The charge of total iconoclasm wouldn't be quite fair. Rorty is not advocating or promoting "the end of philosophy,"

as is evident from the following remark. "Philosophy resembles space and time: it is hard to imagine what an 'end' to any of these three would look like."² Also, in partial agreement with Derrida, he says: ". . . no one can make sense of the notion of a last commentary, a last discussion note, a good piece of writing which is more than the occasion for a better piece."³ Nor is he inveighing against doing epistemology and analytic philosophy. He regards it to be a legitimate intellectual enterprise, along with many others. "The analytic style is, I think, a *good* style. The *esprit de corps* among analytic philosophers is healthy and useful."⁴ The only thing that needs to be warned against is the *pretensions* of that philosophical genre. It is time to admit that it has not succeeded in providing a mirror of nature; it has not discovered, as Rorty puts it, "Nature's Own Language." Nor is it likely to do so, as the work of such people as Quine, Sellars, and Kuhn have shown. Furthermore, other philosophers, principally Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, having meanwhile realized that the spectatorial picture of philosophy has failed to live up to its promise, have produced alternative modes of dealing with human experience.

To mark this transition from a rather narrow band of "perennial" epistemological problems to a wider, more inclusive territory for intellectual "conversation," Rorty suggested that we leave Philosophy to those who prefer to work in their marginalized vineyard, and do philosophy with a small "p", which will include coping or grappling with a broader spectrum of humanly important issues. Philosophers with a small "p" would not be those who knew a Secret, who had won through to the Truth, but simply people who were good at being human.⁵

For Rorty "being good at being human" is not co-extensive with pursuing purported objectives of current analytic philosophy, which seeks to realize the ideal of seeing "the entire universe of possible assertions in all their inferential relationships to one another."⁶ Such a pursuit quickly develops familiar ruts into which all current research must fit, on pain of being declared unphilosophical, thus discouraging attention to

new problems and programs. Rorty suggests that "it is a mark of humanistic culture *not* to try to reduce the new to the old, not to insist upon a canonical list of problems and methods, nor upon a canonical vocabulary in which problems are to be stated."⁷

One reason for calling into question the preoccupation of Philosophers with problems of their own making may be the suspicion that that activity is performed at the expense of the cultural needs of people at large. The general public may come to regard professional philosophers as irrelevant, as not being the people one turns to for help when there is need for intellectual discussion and opinion. Without going as far as accusing the profession of committing a *trahison des philosophes*, the public may decide that that profession has nothing to say on society's important issues and turn instead to politicians, literary critics, psychologists, columnists, and clergy. Philosophers may appear irrelevant precisely because of their refusal to be satisfied with anything less than an abstract, ahistorical account of concepts employed in a discussion of any given issue. By insisting upon "a canonical vocabulary in which problems are to be stated," and then engaging in a interminable debate among themselves what vocabulary to adopt, Philosophers either indefinitely postpone the tasks of addressing the issues themselves or reject out of hand as unphilosophical discussions that stop short of taking an a historical, universal perspective.

Thus when Rorty suggests that there is no such perspective on human problems, that it is time to question the value of the load on the back of the traditional camel as undermining the entire philosophical enterprise. But he is not. He is merely suggesting that if it is a delusion to look for Nature's Own Language, then it is equally a delusion to look for the *Human Nature's Own Language*. We do not have God's view of what human nature is *intrinsically*, so when we speak of human rights or human dignity or the moral law we are putting forward particular findings that we, as a social group living at a certain place and time of history, have found to be justifiable

and defensible. He denies that anyone can claim to be in possession of impartial criteria for deciding the rightness or wrongness of practices without having derived these criteria from a particular tradition. But this does not make the criteria to which we appeal relative in the sense that they are as good as any other criteria. They can of course be *contrasted* with criteria advanced by other traditions. When such contrasts and comparisons are made, they can be evaluated only in terms of reasons derivable from the values vying for consideration and not from overarching universal values which somehow transcend the dispute in question. For if they do transcend it, they are irrelevant to it, as Kant's Categorical Imperative, understood as a purely formal or noumenal principle, is irrelevant to settling concrete moral issues. The charge of relativism sticks only when it is made to ride on the back of Platonic realism or Kantian noumenalism.

The question which Rorty raises is this: Is it possible to engage in a language of justification with persons who disagree with us without identifying oneself as member of a super-community – humanity as such?⁸ His answer is yes. This is what everyone is doing in actual life anyhow, and not without success. The discussions, conversations, arguments, and debates in which we engage make use of whatever logical tools we can bring to bear on them, including formal syllogisms when there is room for them, and to the extent that the demands of logic are observed, the debates deserve to be called rational. They do not become rational only on condition that we identify and agree upon some overarching principles wholly neutral to the respective positions each side defends. To impose this requirement is to *change* the notion of rationality as we are actually employing it. This ordinary sense of rationality is also at work as so-called "universal hermeneutics" when it dissolves the hardened categories imposed on human thought by such "schools" as logical empiricism. As Rorty notes, we should not elevate "universal hermeneutics" to a status of a newly discovered philosophical *method*, but we may welcome in it "a universal willingness to view inquiry as muddling through, rather than conforming to canons of rationality – coping with people and

things rather than corresponding to reality by discovering essences."⁹

If we take the notion of hermeneutics in this general, loose sense as sending conversation off in new directions, then it is applicable to what Rorty is urging us to do. In effect, his "message" amounts to a recommendation that in our dealing with one another and with groups to which we do not belong we stop the pretense of invoking the authority of superconcepts to which we supposedly have privileged access. If we speak of human dignity, it is not some generalized essence inherent in all humanity, but the characteristic of particular persons or group of persons with whom we identify through our tradition our tradition, education, and imagination. Similarly, there is nothing to which we are morally responsible "except persons and actual or possible historical communities."¹⁰ This is the way Socrates felt responsible to his friends and to the Athenian state as it existed at his time and as it might become as a consequence of his taking the stand he actually took.

This is not to say that there may not be occasions on which we find ourselves responsible for and speak up for the common interests of humanity, as is certainly the case today, when, as Americans or as Russians, we face the task of preventing a nuclear holocaust. But when we speak up on behalf of humanity, what we understand by it is a wider community which preserves the values we actually cherish in our more limited communities. It is because we support these values, find them worth upholding and defending, that we are inclined to justify them to our opponents, in the hope that they too can understand what is at stake and what we are talking about. Conversely, when our opponents put forward considerations as deserving attention, to the extent that they treat us as rational, they also expect us to consider the possibility that their considerations have validity and ought to be taken into account in whatever mutual accommodation both parties finally can agree upon.

When Rorty says that for a "postmodernist bourgeois liberal" like himself the society's "loyalty to itself is morality enough,"¹¹ he should not be taken as advocating parochialism or blind ethnocentrism. He does not consider it irresponsible to try to convince "our society that it need be responsible only to its own traditions, and not to the moral law as well."¹² A society's loyalty to itself is based on the recognition and appreciation of values contained in its tradition. To be loyal to the American society, for instance, involves the acknowledgement of and the commitment to the ideals which led to its emergence and which sustain its ongoing moral and political concerns. To be worth its name, loyalty to a community cannot consist in thoughtless allegiance but must be informed. When Rorty sides with "Hegelians" against "Kantians" and says that "bourgeois liberalism" is not *justified* by Kantian principles but merely summarizes them, he is in effect indicating that these principles are a *part* of this liberal ethos not as "metanarratives," disconnected from specifiable loyalties of the tradition, but as concretely historical narratives about "what these or other communities have done in the past" or about "what they might do in the future."¹³

Rorty admits that "it is hard to disentangle bourgeois liberal institutions from vocabulary that these institutions inherited from the Enlightenment," e.g., the vocabulary of natural rights, but he shies away from attributing these rights to a self as a metaphysical entity separable from the network of beliefs, desires and emotions attributable to a person. Rationality for him is a matter of sharing a part of this network with other members of a community. The objection to regarding oneself as a Kantian subject is raised because such a subject is presumed to be capable of constituting a meaning of its own, independently of *any* community. Rorty cites with approval Michael Sandel's view that if we try to regard ourselves as such independent entities as "Rawlsian choosers," we do so at the expense of "loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from *understanding ourselves as the particular people we are*."¹⁴ There is no

intrinsic human dignity, only "the comparative dignity of a group with which a person identifies herself."¹⁵

The distinction between metanarratives and narratives is useful because it captures the difference between metaphysical and moral selfhood. In a moral debate we have no more to offer than the particular moral beliefs which we hold at the moment and which we are prepared to put forward precisely because they are not idiosyncratic but are shared by other members of our community. We do not derive them from our status as generalized human beings, but from being spokespersons for an ongoing moral concern. This capacity to speak on behalf of a community also enables us to distinguish between morality and prudence. "A person appeals to morality rather than prudence when she appeals to this overlapping, shared part of herself."¹⁶ Since neither the moral nor the purely prudential considerations derive any support or justification from the supposed metaphysical self, the introduction of the very idea of such a self, a Kantian or a Rawlsian subject, is irrelevant for the purposes of a moral debate.

The network of a person's moral beliefs is not likely to be internally coherent because, as Rorty also points out, "most of us identify with a number of different communities."¹⁷ Moral conflicts, within a person or between persons, arise just for that reason, and the resolution of such conflicts, a partial consensus, emerges as a result of refocusing our attention and revising our allegiances to particular values we hold. Moral change and moral growth are the consequences of such shifts of self-image. Such a shift occurred in America during the Vietnam war, claims Rorty, and it consisted in the betrayal of America's self-image, hopes, and interests. Nothing is added by saying that the war was also immoral; its immorality *consisted* in this betrayal. Similarly, the desire to reclothe with dignity a person who, because of external circumstances or of cruelty of others, has lost all dignity, is part of the tradition of *our* community; it is not guaranteed by "human nature" and cannot be "derived" from it.

Although the position defended by Rorty is admittedly consonant with that held by John Dewey, it has another philosophical predecessor, namely, Arthur E. Murphy. In his unjustifiably neglected Carus Lectures, *The Theory of Practical Reason*, Murphy presents a view of morality which is also concerned to free it of "metanarratives." Such metanarratives Murphy finds not only, like Rorty, in Kantianism but also in utilitarianism and in any other ethical theory which "generalizes itself clear out of the human situation."¹⁸ A Kantian command of reason "is a sad, infertile hybrid, for its 'reason' has no moral cogency and its command, in consequence, no moral warrant."¹⁹ "We can no more moralize at large than we can live at large."²⁰

Any moral theory becomes morally rootless when it assumes "that a local reason, rooted in preferences and folkways, is not a reason at all, but a mere preference, bias or temperamental predilection."²¹ Such an assumption initiates an ambitious but fruitless search for "moral judgments that are true for all men everywhere, unaffected by their individual differences and the culture under which they live."²² In contrast to such a hopeless demand, Murphy reminds us that "moral relations are essentially and inescapably between persons,"²³ and that it is "where we are that we must achieve such human good as is possible for us."²⁴ The alleged appeal of over-arching universals, when examined carefully, often turns out to be, in Santayana's words, "a mental grimace of passion" or, in Murphy's own words, it is "merely skepticism on stilts, affirming the 'universality' of a moral truth that could be the same for all men everywhere only as long as it had nothing particular to say."²⁵ We are not called upon, observes Murphy, to "make moral judgments at large about the Universe, or the ancient Greeks (*should* Antigone have buried her brother?) or the folkways of the Samoans." "The 'decisions' we are called upon to make are those that concern what we must do, where we are, and with the moral equipment which our own loyalties and reasons have supplied us."²⁶

Like Rorty, Murphy contends that when we offer reasons for our actions, their validity must reside *in* them and not in

something outside them. When in a moral debate we put forward reasons we deem to be good candidates for consideration, we can do so in good faith only if we either subscribe to them ourselves or are at least inclined to regard them as *worthy* of being taken seriously. In either case, we do not take an impartial or neutral position. We put forward such reasons when the disagreement in question is by both sides regarded as worth eliminating. This means that the achievement of consensus is not an abstract academic question, but an actual moral desideratum. It follows from this that moral debates would not be even engaged in, unless both parties were already acknowledging the moral desirability of consensus on the question at hand.²⁷

This feature of moral debate, I believe, is the factor which breaks the back of the charge of relativism brought against a position such as Murphy's or Rorty's. To subscribe to "local" values, or to be a member of a particular moral community, is not to be locked in a Bergsonian "closed society" if that community includes among its values the commitment to seek accommodation and consensus with communities with different interests or objectives. Regarding one concrete current situation, we may say that a "peace-loving" country subscribes to such a commitment. It earnestly seeks consensus and accommodation with its neighbors in preference to armed conflict. Of course, such an interest is not devoid of self-interest; indeed, it may be *rooted* in self-interest. But this is no moral objection, provided that the interest of the neighbors is also genuinely respected and taken into account. Unless this kind of reciprocity prevails on the problem of nuclear disarmament, the arms race will continue. Here one of Rorty's more eloquent sentences is worth quoting: ". . . what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark."²⁸

A community which includes among its values the desirability of consensus on issues generating undesirable conflict has also an additional moral tool to confront strife within itself. One of Rorty's critics, Alasdair MacIntyre, sees no hope for contemporary society unless it addresses itself to this issue

of internal fragmentation. MacIntyre's conclusion is that to deal with that issue adequately, nothing less will do than a conscious articulation of a theory rooted in what he calls "the rational tradition."²⁹ One might ask, however, whether such a theory will start with an examination of the moral validity of diverse values that bring about the fragmentation, or whether it will try to "transcend" them by ignoring them or setting them aside, in the hope of finding something general and overarching. If the latter, it will face again the problems to which both Murphy and Rorty have called our attention. If the former, then it will need to be "hermeneutic" in Rorty's minimal sense of "muddling through." Nevertheless, such a muddling through will not be morally rootless and directionless, if the debate is informed by the commitment to the desirability of limiting fragmentation through a carefully worked out consensus issues. This may at times call for inventing new vocabulary, new ways of describing our problems, in the hope of producing "new and better ways of talking and acting – not better by reference to a previously known standard, but just better in the sense that they come to *seem* clearly better than their predecessors."³⁰

The piecemeal and painstaking task of dealing with moral problems of our times will be facilitated by the realization that, as Rorty reminds us, "most of us identify with a number of different communities and are equally reluctant to marginalize ourselves in relation to any of them."³¹ This recognition will help us see that as members of the intellectual community we are called upon to seek optimal ways of discharging our social responsibilities to the public at large. Our reluctance to marginalize ourselves in relation to our society as a whole is, I believe, a sign that we do have such responsibilities. Whether optimal ways can be articulated by invoking what Dewey called "scientific method" and which subsequently acquired the dubious accolade of "social engineering," is a debatable question. Murphy was highly critical of Dewey on that score,³² and, in my opinion, Rorty's own criticism of Dewey's metaphysics³³ can be extended to some of the things Dewey was inclined to say about human nature and about the desirable ways of regulating its conduct.³⁴

Again, we can arrive at a sensible view of these matters if we interpret Rorty's "roar" as hermeneutic in the minimal sense of encouraging our philosophical conversations to strike out in new, more promising directions. It should be noted that he himself does not present them in an overconfident, strident fashion. This being the case, one might be inclined to say that in doing so he is in the vicinity of the third stage of Nietzschean metamorphosis. In recommending to us the self-image he finds worth cultivating, Rorty may have found a degree of peace and contentment that Nietzsche found so appealing. As Wittgenstein came to realize late in life, that peace consists in being able to stop doing philosophy when you want to.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, ed. (New York: Viking, 1954), p. 139.
2. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 29.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 109
4. *Ibid.*, p. 217
5. *Ibid.*, p. xxxix
6. *Ibid.*, p. 219
7. *Ibid.*, p. 218
8. Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," *Journal of Philosophy* 80, 1983, p. 583.
9. Richard Rorty, "A Reply to Drefus and Taylor," *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, 1980, p. 39.
10. "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," p. 584.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 585.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 585
13. *Ibid.*, p. 585
14. *Ibid.*, p. 586 (italics added)
15. *Ibid.*, p. 586
16. *Ibid.*, p. 587
17. *Ibid.*, p. 587. I have argued that the notion of "social determinism" is problematic for just this reason. Cf. pp. 102-09 in my book *The Freedom of Reason* (Principia Press of Trinity University, San Antonio, TX, 1964).
18. Arthur E. Murphy, *The Theory of Practical Reason*, (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1965), p. 320.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 299
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 323-4
21. *Ibid.*, p. 332
22. *Ibid.*, p. 333
23. *Ibid.*, p. 219
24. *Ibid.*, p. 330
25. *Ibid.*, p. 336
26. *Ibid.*, p. 338
27. In my article, "Globalism vs. Consensual Pluralism" (*Humanist Ethics*, Morris Storer, ed., Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1982) I have argued that "the desirability of a consensus is itself a moral value and thus cannot be approached in terms of pure theory." (p. 104)
28. *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 166

29. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Moral Arguments and Social Contexts," *Journal of Philosophy* 80, 1983, p. 591. This position echoes MacIntyre's conclusion in *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), where he says that "the Aristotelian tradition can be restated in a way that restores intelligibility and rationality to our moral and social attitudes and commitments." (p. 241)

A similar concern about fragmentation and aimlessness of contemporary society is evident in an article entitled "Rorty's Cultural Conversation" by Frank Lentricchia in the same 1983 issue of *Raritan*. Like MacIntyre, Lentricchia deplores the absence of a "single anchoring good or telos for the conversation" and sees the danger that it may "merge in a cacophony, a Babel-like chorus of unconstrained and incommensurable interpretations." (p. 137) Unlike MacIntyre, who sees a need for a better ethical theory, Lentricchia hints that the remedy lies in overcoming a divorce of culture and political power (p. 141). What is surprising in Lentricchia's criticism is an interpretation of Rorty's idea of conversation as calling for an integration "wholly grounded in feeling," being "purely affective," or "hedonic." Nothing in Rorty's writings warrants this conclusion, especially if we keep in mind that in this regard his hero is John Dewey, a relentless critic of the position Lentricchia mistakenly attributes to Rorty.

30. *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xxxvii

31. "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," p. 587

32. *The Theory of Practical Reason*, pp. 255-61

33. *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 72-89.

34. Cf. my article "Rorty's Dewey," forthcoming in the *Journal of Value Inquiry*.