

Richard Rorty: Toward a Post-Metaphysical Culture

Interview by Michael O'Shea

FOR A DECADE AND A HALF, RICHARD RORTY HAS PURSUED a trenchant critique of American academic philosophy. What distinguishes Rorty's challenge to the mainstream is that it comes from within: From the heart of the "analytic" philosophical culture, as a professor at Princeton University, Rorty emerged with a position, incorporating the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, that stands in opposition to the assumptions of that culture.

Rorty is still best known for his first book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). In the words of a contemporary commentator, this work "strikes a deathblow to North Atlantic philosophy by telling a story about the emergence, development, and decline of its primary props: the correspondence theory of truth, the notion of privileged representation, and the idea of a self-reflective transcendental subject."¹ Drawing on the work of W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson, Rorty attempts to show that analytic philosophy is a result of an inherited picture of the human mind as a "mirror of nature," a possible reflector of the a priori nature of things. Invoking the term "anti-

RICHARD RORTY IS University Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia. His writings include *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979), *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minnesota, 1982), *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), and two volumes of philosophical papers published by Cambridge University Press. He is also the editor of *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago, 1967), a collection of essays.

representationalism" to designate his own position, Rorty opposes the view that the aim of philosophy and science is to develop a picture showing how the world looks apart from human concerns. The very idea of such a picture, he claims, is incoherent.

More recently, Rorty's project has shifted from the critique of epistemology to a broader questioning of attempts to provide metaphysical foundations for liberal democracy. In his controversial book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), he sketches a kind of postmodern utopia, a society whose members have given up the search for a unifying theory of human nature, and "are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable."²

In the first chapter of *Contingency*, Rorty suggests how his early inquiries into philosophy of language might be linked with his later incarnation as a social commentator, writing that "Freud, Nietzsche, and Bloom do for our con-

science what Wittgenstein and Davidson do for our language, namely, exhibit its sheer contingency.”³ The exhibition of contingency, extending to language, society, and the self, is Rorty’s central theme. His work attempts to cure us of the desire to employ metaphysics to explain away the chance events that made us who we are; it seeks to give us the courage of our contingencies.

This interview was conducted in October 1994 on the campus of the University of Virginia, where Rorty has taught since 1982.

HRP: What is a “post-metaphysical” culture?

Rorty: A poeticized, or post-metaphysical, culture is one in which the imperative that is common to religion and metaphysics — to find an ahistorical, transcultural matrix for one’s thinking, something into which everything can fit, independent of one’s time and place — has dried up and blown away. It would be a culture in which people thought of human beings as creating their own



life-world, rather than as being responsible to God or “the nature of reality,” which tells them what kind it is.

HRP: Do you see us tending toward that kind of culture?

Rorty: I think that since the time of the Romantics, there have been strains in European and American culture that have gone in that direction. There are Emerson and Whitman in America, and various other lingering Romantic influences in Europe.

How long this can last, I don’t know. It seems to be the product of a wealthy, leisured elite which has time to worry about this kind of thing, time to imagine alternative futures. The world may not permit the existence of this kind of elite much longer.

HRP: Could the ironic, poetic worldview characteristic of this elite ever become the property of the masses?

Rorty: Yes. I think that the success of secularization in the industrialized democracies suggests that. The 16th and 17th-century notion that man would never be able to let go of religion has turned out to be wrong. The promise of the Enlightenment came true: that you *could* have a society which had a sense of community, without any religious agreement, and indeed without much attention to God at all. If you can secularize a society like that, you can probably de-metaphysicize it also.

HRP: Given their training in metaphysics and similar fields of thought, what purpose could our current professors of philosophy serve in such a culture?

Rorty: I think that the main purpose they've served in the past has been to get past common sense, past common ways of speaking, past vocabularies; modifying them in order to take account of new developments like Enlightenment secularism, democratic governments, Newton, Copernicus, Darwin, Freud.

One thing you can count on philosophy professors doing is what William James called "weaving the old and the new together," in order to assimilate weird things like Freudian psychology with moral common sense. Thomas Nagel wrote a good article in the *New York Review of Books* on how Freud's thought has become a part of our moral common sense. I think that illustrates the process nicely. Philosophers have helped with that process.

HRP: So philosophers are professional renderers of coherent worldviews?

Rorty: Yes, and the reason they'll probably always be around is that there will always be something exciting happening [in culture] that needs to be tamed and modified, woven together with the past.

HRP: Do you see the de-transcendentalization of culture as an inducement to political involvement? Jürgen Habermas and others have seen it as the opposite.

Rorty: I do see it as an inducement to involvement, and I think that Dewey did too. Dewey is saying: suppose you're a pragmatist about truth — i.e., you think that truth is what works. The obvious question, then, is: *whom* does it work for? This is the question that Foucault raises. You then ask political questions about whom you want it to work for, whom you want to run things, whom you want to do good to; which come prior to philosophical questions. Then let democratic politics be what sets the goals of philosophy, rather than philosophy setting the goals of politics.

Whereas Habermas seems to think that if you don't have philosophy out there as point man, telling society and politics where to go, then you're somehow stuck.

HRP: Do you have doubts about the same things that people like Habermas do, namely, that the sort of large-scale discourse about values that is needed in a democratic state can go on without an extralinguistic norm of rationality, a "master narrative"?

Rorty: Not really. I don't see why Habermas thinks it can't go on. He has this view that every assertion is a claim to universal validity, and that if you give up thinking of assertions in that way, you won't be able to take yourself seriously, or take communication seriously, or take democracy seriously. I just don't see the reasoning there. It's something like what [Hilary] Putnam thinks, when he claims that we need a "substantive" notion of truth. I never got that one either.

HRP: Perhaps such notions are meant to capture the idea of a certain responsibility that attaches to our utterances.

Rorty: Yes, but that seems an unnecessary detour in the attribution of responsibility.

ty. I think we ought to be able to be responsible to our interlocutors without being responsible to Reason or the world or the demand of universality or anything else.

HRP: Is there a way to change current patterns of education and acculturation in order to bring this sense of responsibility about?

Rorty: I don't know. But I think that a lot of that change has been accomplished by the gradual emergence of literature as the primary alternative to science. Philosophy, at the moment, is sort of occupying a halfway position between the sciences and literature. But just for that reason, it's tending to fall between two stools and to be ignored by intellectuals. Philosophy in the English-speaking world is simply not a big deal to most intellectuals, and the reason is that the weight of nonscientific culture has been thrown over to literature. The philosophers, in turn, are viewed by most as being nostalgic for the days when science was the name of the game.

HRP: What, then, do you find problematic about contemporary attitudes toward physical science?

Rorty: There's still a tendency to want somebody to occupy the social role formerly held by the priests. The physicist tends to be nominated for that role, as someone in touch with the nature of reality, with, as Bernard Williams puts

“Philosophy in the English-speaking world is simply not a big deal to most intellectuals, and the reason is that the weight of nonscientific culture has been thrown over to literature. The philosophers, in turn, are viewed by most as being nostalgic for the days when science was the name of the game.”

it, reality apart from human needs and interests. This tendency to need a priest-figure is unfortunate; it seems to me a form of self-abasement. But I'm not sure how serious that science-worship is anymore. You still find a little of it in contemporary debates; in [John] Searle's debate with Jacques Derrida [*about the philosophy of J. L. Austin; a debate reiterated in Derrida's book Limited Inc — Ed.*], for instance.

HRP: Is the situation changing in philosophy?

Rorty: Not that I can notice, at least in the English-speaking countries. It's going to be very difficult for analytic philosophy, given its professional self-image, ever to outgrow its association with the so-called hard sciences. That association really doesn't exist in non-Anglophone philosophy, and that's why I think it's going to be hard for the two [traditions] ever to merge.

HRP: Hilary Putnam, analyzing parts of your critique of reason in his *Renewing Philosophy*, declares that “relativism à la Rorty is rhetoric.” Are you

comfortable with this evaluation of your work? What role do you intend your work to play?

Rorty: Primarily persuasion. I don't much care whether it's called rhetoric or logic. I think of my work as trying to move people away from the notion of being in touch with something big and powerful and nonhuman. The reason I prefer Donald Davidson's work to Putnam's is that Davidson's views on philosophy of language and mind go further in that direction than Putnam's.

HRP: Is yours the kind of work that creates a foundation that someone else could build upon? Could it found a school?

Rorty: I would hope not. Founding a school is relatively easy. You can set up a problematic within which a generation can happily pursue professional activity, but you can never quite tell whether you've actually done something useful, or simply encouraged further, decadent Scholasticism.

One of the things I rather like about people like Derrida is that they have no real disciples. Derrida has a lot of American imitators (none of whom, I think, is any good), but he really is inimitable. There's no such thing as a "Derridian problematic." He doesn't give anybody any work to do — nor does Harold Bloom. And I admire that.

HRP: It might be argued that while your work has helped to dismantle a number of traditional philosophical dualisms, the ironist worldview you espouse seems itself to culminate in a strict dualism of the public and the private. You say that we should read some authors (Nietzsche, Derrida) in order to enrich our private, poetic existences, but others (Rawls, Mill) should be read in order to make ourselves better citizens of a liberal democracy. Is this distinction tenable? If our private beliefs are prevented from informing the social sphere, then what substance do they have?

Rorty: I don't think private beliefs can be fenced off [from the public sphere]; they leak through, so to speak, and influence the way one behaves toward other people. What I had in mind in making the distinction was this: the language of citizenship, of public responsibility, of participation in the affairs of the state, is not going to be an original, self-created language.

Some people, the ones we think of as poets or makers, want to invent a new language — because they want to invent a new self. And there's a tendency to try to see that poetic effort as synthesizable with the activity of taking part in public discourse. I don't think the two are synthesizable; but that doesn't mean that the one doesn't eventually interact with the other.

When people develop private vocabularies and private self-images, people like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Derrida, it's very unclear what impact, if any, this will ever have on public discourse. But over the centuries, it actually turns out to have a certain impact.

HRP: If a reader of Heidegger, for example, is struck not only by the idiosyncratic, "world-disclosing" accomplishment of his writings, but is also attracted by his vision of responsiveness to Being as the fundamental aim of man, how will this attraction show up in public behavior?

Rorty: I don't know, but I think it pays to bear in mind that during the 1950s and 60s, Heidegger managed to grab hold of the imaginations of all the interesting people in Europe. When Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida were in school, Heidegger was "their" philosopher. What they each made of him was, God knows, very different, but it's clear that we won't be able to write the intellectual history of this century without reading Heidegger. Just as there were 16 different ways of reacting to Hegel in his day, there were 16 different ways of reacting to Heidegger; and I think it's pointless to ask what was the "true" message of either Hegel or Heidegger — they were just people to bounce one's thoughts off of.

HRP: But you have written in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* that "as a philosopher of our public life," Heidegger is "at best vapid, and at worst sadistic." Is the sense of using Heidegger that you were discussing there a different sense than the one we're talking about here?

Rorty: I think that attempts to get a political message out of Heidegger, Derrida, or Nietzsche are ill-fated. We've seen what these attempts look like, and they don't succeed very well. Hitler tried to get a message out of Nietzsche, and Nietzsche would have

"I don't think private beliefs can be fenced off; they leak through, so to speak, and influence the way one behaves toward other people. [But] the language of citizenship, of public responsibility, is not going to be an original, self-created language."

been appalled by it. And people who attempt to get a political message out of Derrida produce something perfectly banal. I suspect it isn't worth bothering.

But that's not to say that these figures will always be publicly useless. Having a great imagination and altering the tradition in insensible ways is going to make a difference in public affairs somewhere down the line. We just don't know how.

HRP: Given your view that our epoch is one of increasing secularization, what do you make of the existence in this country of a fundamentalist, religious Right that does have a noticeable effect on public policy? This seems to show that traditional religion and other forms of non-ironic belief are alive and well in the public sphere.

Rorty: I think it's what happens whenever you have a middle class that gets really scared and defensive. It starts to look around for ways of dividing society into sheep and goats, in order to scapegoat somebody. The American middle class has excellent reason to be scared about its economic future, and the economic future of the country. The more there is of this fear, the more you'll see cults, quasi-fascist movements, and things of that sort, all the stuff we classify as the "crazy Right."

HRP: What is there to stave that off, beside economic recovery?

Rorty: My hunch is that the normal cycle of boom and bust doesn't matter much, as long as the long-term average income of the middle class keeps going down, and the gap between rich and poor keeps growing. I don't think there's anything that's going to reverse that. I don't have any optimistic suggestions.

HRP: Are you then a pessimist about the future?

Rorty: I'm not confident enough in economics to say anything, but all the predictions about how the globalization of the labor market will effect the standard of living in the industrialized democracies seem to me fairly convincing. I think that as long as the standard of living of the middle class in the democracies is in danger, democratic government is in danger.

HRP: You once described yourself as a "postmodern bourgeois liberal." Given that self-designation, how do you see the contemporary academic Left, a Left alternately informed by the Frankfurt School thinkers and the French post-structuralists?

Rorty: That designation ["postmodern bourgeois liberal"] was supposed to be a joke. I thought it was a cute oxymoron — but no one else seemed to think it was funny.



I think there are really two Lefts. The Frankfurt School, for example, is an attempt to modulate Marxism down into plain, social democratic, reformist Left politics. And I think of myself as belonging to that Left — it's the same as the so-called "Old Left" in America, the anti-Stalinist, social-democratic left centered

around *Dissent*. Irving Howe and people like that.

There's also what I regard as a pretty useless, Foucaultian Left, which doesn't want to be reformist, doesn't want to be social democratic. Fredric Jameson is a good example of that sort of Left. I can't see it as having any sort of utility in America; it seems merely to make the Left look ridiculous.

HRP: What do you think has been the effect of the contemporary, Foucauldian academic Left on American universities? Do you agree with the criticisms often leveled against left-leaning academics these days?

Rorty: The Foucauldian Left is about two percent of the faculties at American universities, and it isn't very important, except that it gives the Right a terrific target. It's enabled the Right to generate an enormous amount of hostility against the uni-

versities, because it can point at these few.

HRP: Where is the political center of gravity of the humanities faculty at a typical American university?

Rorty: It's still the same sort of intellectual — left-liberal, social-democratic, reformist — but the Foucauldians make a whole lot more noise.

HRP: In the fall of 1994, you wrote an editorial about the Virginia Senate election, in which you analyzed the candidacy of Oliver North as a symptom of a crisis of values among Virginians. Is the flight toward the sort of old-style, “manly” virtue that people find in Oliver North analogous to the kind of cultic flight that you see in the contemporary American middle class? Is it born of the same fears?

Rorty: Yes. The fundamentalist preacher and the military officer become figures of strength and purity more or less simultaneously. They're both seen as people with no time for moral weakness, or any other weakness, and therefore no time for the bad people — the liberals. They're strong guardians of virtue against the weak, bad people.

HRP: What resources does American pragmatism offer us today?

Rorty: Among the philosophy professors, in the form of Davidsonian philosophy of language and mind, it offers a way out from the boring realism vs. anti-realism issue, which I think has been done to death. Davidson gives us a way of getting out from under the dogmatism/skepticism oscillation that's plagued philosophy since Kant. I see Davidson as rewriting in terms of language the same things that James and Dewey did in terms of experience.

Actually, I've just finished reading John McDowell's book [*Mind and World*]; and he thinks that Davidson will actually keep the oscillation *going* — because no one will ever accept Davidson's view that beliefs are mostly veridical. As a sociological point about the philosophy professors, this may be right. But I don't see *why* they won't accept it.

Outside of the philosophy profession, I think that pragmatism is just a continuation of the idealistic, onward-and-upward Emerson/Whitman tradition of viewing American democracy as the greatest thing ever invented, and the source of all good things.

HRP: The sort of “Emersonian theodicy” that Cornel West talks about in his history, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*.

Rorty: Yes. I think West gives a very good description there of the politico-spiritual dimension of pragmatism.

HRP: You have often spoken of Anglo-American philosophy professors' reluctance to accept a vision of philosophy that doesn't break down along fixed problematics. Do you have an idea about how to reform undergraduate and graduate education in order to change this?

Rorty: Not really, because I think the philosophy professors are in a bind in the English-speaking world. The undergraduates would really like to hear more about

Nietzsche and the other Europeans, but the professors feel that this is bad for the poor kids, that it will tempt them toward irrationalism, literature, unscientific thought, and things like that. If [the professors] can't get over that block, I think they're going to paint themselves into a corner.

So philosophy departments in the English-speaking world are cutting themselves off from the rest of the university in a way that will eventually prove debilitating. And I wish they'd stop.

HRP: In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, you suggested that we might end up with two different disciplines being taught under the rubric "philosophy": Continental thought and literary criticism on one side, and science-oriented analytic philosophy on the other. Does that diagnosis still hold?

Rorty: Yes. I don't think the issue is as much an involvement of literary criticism, as it is of historical orientation. Outside of the English-speaking world, training to be a philosophy professor is pretty much training in the history of philosophy. In Europe, you're a good philosophy professor just in so far as you have a good story to tell about [that history] which relates it to the present.

That kind of professional training is so different from the professional training you get in the English-speaking world, where you're supposed to keep up with the "pre-print culture," and spend your time getting in touch with the hot new problems in the field, that it's hard to imagine the two ever coming together. What the [two groups of] kids are trained to do in graduate school doesn't have anything in common. And by the time they're done with graduate school, each group hasn't the slightest idea what the other is worrying about.

HRP: What part of your own philosophical education have you found most valuable?

Rorty: The historical part, mostly acquired at the University of Chicago, where history of philosophy was practically all there was. The department was dominated by a historian of philosophy, Paul McKeon, and he kept your nose to the grindstone. You couldn't get a master's degree there without being able to rattle off an awful lot of history. If I hadn't been forced to read all those authors, I never would have been able to read Hegel or Heidegger, and I would have regretted that.

On the other hand, if I hadn't gotten a reasonable background in what we now call analytic philosophy, I wouldn't have been able to appreciate Wilfrid Sellars and Donald Davidson, and I would have regretted that, too. ¶

ENDNOTES

¹ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989); p. 201.

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); p. xv.

³ *ibid.*, p. 22.