BOOK REVIEWS


Pulling from a diverse group of authors, Rorty and Pragmatism offers seven critical encounters with the work of Richard Rorty, including essays from Richard Bernstein, Frank B. Farrell, James Gouinlock, Susan Haack, Allen Hance, Charles Hartshorne, Thelma Z. Lavine, as well as two from Rorty's own pen.

Whenever a collection of essays is devoted to the work of a provocative thinker, I think the format of this volume should be adopted. Following each reading, one finds a response from Rorty. This seems a decided advance over similar books (e.g. After MacIntyre), which invite the author in question to write a general response to the criticisms. Personalized responses are an advantage, for they allow the subject to reply with greater care, and even to explore the respondent's own writings, as Rorty does, for example, following the papers of Haack and Farrell. Of course, in order to put together such a volume, one will need a subject as gracious as Rorty. His responses are by far the haute cuisine of the volume, basted as they are with even temper, wit, and charm, and all in the face of some unhelpfully hostile papers. His own papers are less even, however. The first is a reprint of "Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin," but it works well with several of the commentaries, as I note below. The other piece, "Philosophy and the Future," rings a bit programmatic, and thus proves less interesting.

In a cautionary paper, Richard Bernstein claims that "Pragmatism has always been a contested concept," a fact evidenced by the differences separating Peirce, James, and Dewey, as well as their present progeny, Putnam, Rorty, and West. Following MacIntyre's claim that all traditions are argumentative, Bernstein proceeds to caution pragmatists against engaging in hurtful turf wars, directing them instead to confront contemporary problems with the help of their tradition. Unfortunately, his words come too late for some of the papers in this volume. Both Lavine and Gouinlock do little but complain that Rorty has missed the heart of Dewey, while failing to argue that this is a heart worth saving. It may be that Dewey saw his Logic and his hopes for democracy as inseparably linked (a claim both forward—pp. 45 & 88, respectively). But without arguing that such a theory of inquiry is in fact necessary for democracy (something neither do with care—see pp. 45 & 88-90, respectively), the point loses its philosophical interest. Farrell falls prey to a similar problem in the first half of his paper, claiming repeatedly that we have little reason to believe that Davidson would support Rorty's use of his work, e.g. drawing upon his metaphor theory to claim that vocabulary change is mutational from the ground up. (170) As Rorty points out, however: "If you borrow somebody's good idea and use it for a different purpose, is it really necessary to clear this novel use with the originator of the idea?" (190)

Fortunately, the rest of the papers (and the second half of Farrell's) do a better job of philosophically engaging Rorty. Susan Haack attempts to rescue epistemology from Rorty's "relativism" and "cynicism," noting that "truth" is an epistemically valuable notion (144), while claiming that Rorty offers little reason for dropping it. (127-139)

While her paper does clarify matters, Haack unfortunately loses, in Chisom-like fashion, the issue amidst the distinctions. As Rorty points out, truth would be an epistemically valuable

This is a comparative study of six writers whom the author sees as exploring the problem of situating political philosophy in the post-metaphysical era: Marx, Foucault, Habermas, Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, and Lefort. The problem is itself a difficult one—beginning with defining the "political" and "metaphysical"—but Flynn does reasonably well with it. Metaphysics is defined as the separation of the apparent from the true world, setting up the latter as the ontological foundation of the former. He cites Arendt's observations that modernity has produced social and historical philosophies but no political philosophy, and that metaphysics either makes the philosopher apolitical or installs a "taste for tyranny," such that the loss of it may be a gain for political thought.

Marx, Habermas, and Foucault are appraised for their respective analyses of the origin and demise of classical metaphysics, and their attempts at a political philosophy without metaphysical pretensions. Flynn identifies surreptitious metaphysical elements present in all three. In Marx it is the residual need to ground thought in something real, which Marx finds in human desire. Flynn nicely argues the contingency of desire in language and the symbolic order. With Habermas, who replaces the exhausted "paradigm of consciousness" with a "paradigm of mutual understanding," Flynn unearths the often-ignored premises that led Habermas to his current position, and finds unexamined presumptive "given" foundations. For Foucault, Flynn finds replacing all theory with an "analytics of power" as resting upon a new dichotomy between power and its "juridical appearance," and argues that Foucault supports the distinction by giving transcendent status to his own notion of "discursive formation."

Arendt fares somewhat better, winning praise for her nonmetaphysical assessment of the unique qualities of totalitarianism. Yet she draws criticism for overreliance on the Greek city-state as a model for modern society, as well as for using Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment as a model for political thought. Flynn questions whether her interpretation of the Critique of Judgment truly provides the basis for a "hermeneutically situated generality" necessary to the optimal attitude of