

process, he provides a number of reflections on artificial intelligence, the mind-body problem, and multiple-personality-disorder, claiming that computers have intentionality and that MPD patients, in having radically severed temporal structures for their lives, literally possess different selves at the same time. Mensch also provides a refreshing interpretation of the history of philosophy, most notably in his descriptions of Husserl and Aristotle. For anyone who takes seriously the problems of Postmodernity, Mensch's book is a powerful force to be reckoned with.

JAMES B. STEEVES, McMaster University

Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3

RICHARD RORTY

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, viii + 355 p.

It is difficult to remain unmoved by Rorty's work, and that's surely his intention. In this third volume of his philosophical papers, the provocation continues, even though (or, perhaps, precisely because) the tone he strikes is decidedly un-apocalyptic. This latest collection contains seventeen essays, most of which have already appeared in print sometime in the last decade, and this serves to maximize our convenience even as it diminishes any sense of occasion. Although the conjunction in the title suggests a philosophically intimate connection between the themes of truth and progress, the table of contents reveals a somewhat less coherent study. The first eight papers read like responses or critical notices to the work of predominantly analytical philosophers like Davidson, Putnam, Searle, Dennett and other usual suspects on current debates about truth, relativism, and skepticism. The next four essays, which depart significantly from the epistemic concerns of Part One, fall beneath the heading of "Moral Progress: Toward More Inclusive Communities." As a group, these four papers are vintage Rorty; collectively they are the most philosophically wide-ranging and rhetorically free-wheeling of the entire book. The final five papers deal generally with the relationship between philosophy and human progress, but they, unfortunately, tend to read like beefed-up book reviews, where the books reviewed either deal with figures in the history of philosophy or are written by a 'Continental' philosopher (broadly construed).

Somewhat belatedly perhaps, Rorty does attempt to articulate the themes of truth and progress in his brief Introduction. He begins by reiterating his familiar complaint that Western philosophy's preoccupation with "the intrinsic nature of reality," along with the supposedly indispensable correspondence theory of truth, have only led to hundreds of years of tiresome

intellectual debate, a "pendulum swinging between dogmatism and skepticism" (4). Rorty confesses, however, that when we change our minds about what philosophy is good for and abandon this hapless search for such an 'unserviceable' goal, we leave ourselves open to the charge of relativism, and this charge is hard to shake.

But Rorty insists that he is no relativist. He argues persuasively that because 'truth' is an absolute notion, it does not make sense to adopt the relativist's vocabulary of 'true for me but not for you' or 'true today but not tomorrow'. These, Rorty states, are "weird, pointless locutions" (2). But talk of justification is possible since justification is always relative to the particular beliefs, values or aims of an audience. Hence we should only use 'true' when we mean 'justified' and rest content with our inability to "hypostatize ... 'true' into 'Truth'" (4). The problem with resting content in this way, however, is that we must give up any claims to scientific progress if by this we mean getting closer and closer to reality in our scientific language. We are certainly better at making predictions than, say, the Greeks, and we have managed to solve old problems and invent newer, more interesting ones for ourselves, but Rorty insists that the undeniable successes of science should not be invoked to authorize truth-claims about the way reality is in itself. This position has important consequences, not the least of which involves the very way in which philosophy is 'practiced' in today's academy. Indeed, once we abandon any ontological priority to the world described by the natural scientist, we can similarly reject the epistemic stature of the scientist within our culture. Philosophers, as a result, should abandon the "bad idea" (8) of aping the scientists in their quest for legitimacy, for the rigor they seek is illusory and comes at the expense of their philosophical imaginations. This criticism is not new; Heidegger and others arrived at the same conclusion decades ago, but Rorty gets there from his own novel, and certainly un-Heideggerian, premises.

Similarly, in the case of moral progress, Rorty is very clear that the moral values of our human rights culture, prevalent in today's secure, wealthy, North Atlantic democracies, should not be regulated or justified by appeals to certain 'facts' about human beings, such as our rationality, dignity or freedom. What Rorty disavows, then, is the possibility of checking our treatment of other people with intuitions about some ahistorical moral 'nature' of human beings, whatever this may be. This does not mean that we should stop *treating* people as ends in themselves, but it does entail that we abandon our attempts to ground such treatment in dubious ontological claims about human rights. As Rorty states in "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality," he is simply not interested in, as a pragmatist, the differences between the moral realist and the moral antirealist, for this meta-ethical squabbling will never help us with the immediate, practical questions of solving particular moral disputes. In another essay, "The End of Leninism,"

Rorty is almost wistful about the dissolution of the old “*global* leftist strategy,” under which “local hopes” were previously subsumed, and explains that such a void is now filled by the contemporary academic left’s preoccupation with “‘transgressive’ and ‘subversive’ cultural studies” which upset students’ parents instead of upsetting unjust institutions (238). It seems that on a practical level the left’s retreat has gone too far. But despite these present consequences, we are still better off in a world purged of metaphysical specters. To sum up: how we act ought not to be justified by transcendental arguments, but rather in light of our own contingent aims, interests, and purposes: in other words, ethnocentrically.

For those not sufficiently tweaked by Rorty’s glib avoidance of the philosophical difficulties that have troubled moral philosophers for centuries, his further claim in the human rights essay — that those “moral philosophers who hope to cleanse the world of prejudice and superstition” resemble Serbians “acting in the interests of true humanity by purifying the world of pseudo-humanity” (168) — will probably induce apoplexy in Kantian and Platonic camps. Now, there is a potentially interesting claim here, one that resonates with themes Derrida has articulated over the years, but as in many other instances, Rorty’s textual strategy (as I will call it) is to incite his critics by punctuating his articles with flippantly delivered overstatements. On the surface, his goal is to outrage, but Rorty’s textual strategy should always be understood against the background of his desire to continue and expand the conversation of philosophy. This means, I believe, that sometimes he intentionally subordinates his manners and perhaps, at times, even his intellectual honesty to the more circuitous goal of provoking responses to his work from across the philosophical spectrum. Like Nietzsche, it seems Rorty sets interpretive traps for his critics, who, scandalized by a surface rhetoric, often overlook the deeper arguments he is formulating in their dismissive responses. Rorty is then in a position (and we see this in his article, “Charles Taylor on Truth”) to respond, often with tremendous force and precision, to his opponent’s view.

In more conventional moments, Rorty is quite content to stake out his philosophical positions by invoking his now familiar lists of proper names of those with whom he either agrees or disagrees. In the first section of *Truth and Progress*, Davidson emerges as Rorty’s closest ally. In the final section, Rorty confesses that he thinks of “Jacques Derrida as the most intriguing and ingenious of contemporary philosophers, and of Jürgen Habermas as the most socially useful – the one who does the most for social democratic politics” (307). Although this high praise for Habermas is largely unsupported in the following essay (which contests his reading of Derrida), Rorty does manage to uniquely position himself outside the usual alliances that deconstruction provokes. Both camps read Derrida as a ‘public’ philosopher, one who is making claims about the nature of language that have implications for the

practice of politics, but Rorty rejects this view, arguing instead that Derrida is a 'private' philosopher, an ironist whose "creation of new discourses can enlarge the realm of possibility" (310). So Rorty ends up defending Derrida *qua private ironist* against both his boosters and knockers, but goes on to lament in the next essay (a review of Bennington's/Derrida's *Jacques Derrida*) that the book he is looking for – *Derrida for Davidsonians* – remains to be written. Rorty clearly admires Derrida (but not his wooden, servile imitators), yet remains baffled by the sorts of grand philosophical claims his boosters make on his behalf. For example, Rorty writes:

I do not know how to use the notion of 'quasi-transcendentality,' except as a name for the advantage that Bennington claims for Derrida over all the other philosophers whom I have just listed. But I am not clear what that advantage is supposed to be, or that it exists (337).

Given the frequent inability of Derrida's rhetorical under-laborers to write clear, understandable prose, I do sympathize with Rorty here; however, I think his eagerness to assign Derrida's work to a neutralized, private sphere is too quick and unjustified.¹ Although the public/private split may well have its political advantages, Rorty himself should perhaps be suspicious of his own apparent absolutization and enforcement of that division in his attempts to confine complex philosophical discourses to the rival camps of publicly useful and publicly useless theory.

In such a diverse group of essays, there is much that cannot be summarized or discussed. If a new trajectory in Rorty's intellectual biography can be discerned here, I would venture to say it is his growing stature as a wide-ranging, philosophically astute, cultural commentator and his diminishing stature as a philosopher with something new to contribute to cutting-edge debates in contemporary Anglo-American epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. I am convinced, however, that Rorty will remain a bold and original voice, someone from whom even his intellectual foes can learn. And given his prolific output, surely the maddening seductions of his next volume will not be far behind.

Notes

- 1 I have complained elsewhere of Rorty's hasty characterization of Hegel as an old-style metaphysician. Of course, by my own account, if Rorty's reductive comments about Hegel served the end of provoking my response, then his textual strategy was successful. See "Absolute

Knowing and Liberal Irony: Hegel, Rorty and the Criterion of Progress," forthcoming in *International Studies in Philosophy*, Spring 1999.

JONATHAN SALEM-WISEMAN, *York University*

The Gift of Touch: Embodying the Good

STEPHEN DAVID ROSS

Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998, 389 p.

What is the significance of touch for a contemporary thought of materiality and alterity? Is it possible to rethink touch in ethical terms, linking it with the notions of expression, exposure, sacrifice, general economy, and *poiēsis*? In *The Gift of Touch: Embodying the Good*, Stephen David Ross raises these and other provocative questions in a remarkable re-reading of the Western philosophical tradition in which he attempts to understand touch in terms of the Platonic Good beyond Being (*epekeina tes ousias*). This book is the third and most recent in a series of books by Ross on 'the gift' and 'giving' — a concept, or perhaps better, a *logic* borrowed from various anthropological (Mauss), literary (Bataille, Cixous), and philosophical (Heidegger, Lévinas, and especially Derrida) sources. Ross' first two books in the series (*The Gift of Beauty* and *The Gift of Truth*) deployed this logic of the gift in order to explore the relation of beauty and truth to ethics and the Good. Similarly in *The Gift of Touch*, traditional ontological concepts and entities such as materiality, flesh, touch, and bodies are re-read in an ethical register in an effort to couple touch and bodies with what Ross calls an 'ethic of inclusion' (I'll return to this ethic in more detail below).

Ross' general strategy in this book is a dazzling and impressive one: he offers informed, critical readings of nearly *all* the relevant texts on touch and bodies in the history of western philosophy and contemporary poststructuralism. Ross' readings range across authors as diverse as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Spinoza to Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Deleuze and Guatarri, Lévinas, Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, and Judith Butler. In this review I concentrate on what I take to be the most important chapters for gaining a general understanding of his project, viz., those on Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Lévinas, Grosz, and Butler.

Plato is often read as the thinker of dualism par excellence, the prime philosophical representative of those who argue for the priority and primordality of the soul over the body. Plato, it would seem, is the philosopher most removed from the body and touch, the philosopher who knows nothing of flesh or materiality. Often Plato's *Phaedo* — where Socrates, facing death, insists on the importance of the soul and the