

INTRODUCTION

THE QUESTION OF MODERNITY

The question of modernity is the fundamental intellectual issue of our time. “Modernity” means at a minimum a way of thought and life that announces our independence of arbitrary, external authorities and urges that we put ourselves under the control of our own rational faculties. The modern age began with surges of optimism about what a liberated and enlightened humankind might achieve, particularly through science and politics. There were always questions about the project, and these have increased rapidly since the end of the nineteenth century. Surveying, from our *fin-de-siècle* peak, the debris of the twentieth century, we are tempted to renounce the enterprise. Certainly, outside the “hard sciences”, almost every major intellectual and cultural domain has centrally engaged questions about the nature and value of the modern commitment to rational autonomy.

Analytic philosophy, which has defined the American and British mainstream for most of this century, is a prominent exception. Most analytic philosophers pursue clarity of explication and rigor of argument with no thought that there might be some fatal corruption at the heart of their projects of rational analysis. Analytic philosophy appears as an arch-modernism – a manifestation of the problems of modernity rather than a means to their solution. Among humanistic disciplines, there is no better example of wholehearted commitment to the original ideals of the Enlightenment. This explains the marginal position of mainstream analytic philosophy on the contemporary intellectual scene. Intellectuals centrally concerned with critiques

of modernity see analytic philosophers as begging all the key questions. For their part, analytic philosophers typically cherish their separation from the confusions of intellectuals who do not share their standpoint. Thomas Nagel speaks for many when he says that “arid technicalities are preferable to the blend of oversimplification and fake profundity that is too often the form taken by popular philosophy.”¹

Whether analytic philosophy should be as marginal as it is depends on our understanding of the current debates over modernity. “Modern” means “happening now”, a “now” that for us encompasses the roughly 500 years since people in the West began questioning long established political, religious, and intellectual authorities in the name of autonomous human reason.² The idea that there is something distinctive about this period is still best formulated in Kant’s terms. The modern age is one of “enlightenment”, where enlightenment means a rejection of the “self-incurred tutelage” of humankind.³ Previously, Kant said, we accepted outside authorities as the guide to what we should think or do. Now (in the modern age) we should accept only what our own reason tells us.

As long as the dichotomy of authority versus reason is understood as a contrast between an arbitrary imposition of standards and an acceptance of what can be reasonably shown to constrain us, hardly any of us now will opt for arbitrary external authority; in this sense we are all moderns. (Nor should we forget that having gotten even this far is a major advance in human history.) But this minimal commitment to modernity leaves open the question of whether there might be some external authorities that are not arbitrary, authorities to which we reasonably should subordinate ourselves. A typical Enlightenment figure such as Voltaire, for example, thought that the authoritative claims of dogmatic theology and Aristotelian philosophy were merely arbitrary, but that we should accept the claims of natural science and of commonsense morality. The multiple and ever-shifting disputes about

1 Thomas Nagel, *Other Minds*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 8–9.

2 Although I will often speak of “reason” in this generic way, the convenient locution should not be taken to imply that I think there is some ahistorical essence of rationality or even, à la Hegel, some privileged manifestation of reason in any given historical period. As my argument develops, it should be clear that generic talk of “reason” is just a marker for specific disputes about the role of experience and argument, as opposed to other alleged sources of cognitive authority (faith, feeling, divine commands), in various domains such as science, philosophy, religion, ethics, and politics. The “question of reason” is merely a series of – sometimes interestingly related – questions about what sorts of appeal should have ultimate weight in various domains of inquiry.

3 Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” translated by Lewis White Beck, in Lewis White Beck (ed.), *On History*, New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963, 3.

INTRODUCTION

3

“modernity” over the last 400 years have mostly concerned just what authorities a reasonable person should accept. For us (i.e., educated citizens of the Western democracies), some of these disputes have been pretty much resolved. We have, for example, concluded that political claims of privileged nondemocratic authority are arbitrary and nonbinding. We have also concluded that, even though individuals may have a right to accept the claims of specific religious revelations, such claims are not generally compelling. We have accordingly gone a stage beyond the minimal modernity of mere preference in principle for reasoned constraints over arbitrary authority. We have decided that some of the main traditional external authorities do not meet our standards of rationality and so should be rejected.

Beyond this, most moderns have, over the last few centuries, agreed with Voltaire that the authorities of natural science and ethics are reasonable constraints on our thought and behavior. Moreover, a long tradition, from Descartes through Kant, holds that the rationality of science and ethics is grounded in a general philosophical account of the world. In this century, there has been a strong trend toward accepting science as the only rational authority but rejecting both the rational status of ethics and the need for a philosophical foundation for scientific rationality. But there remain those who insist on the rational authority of ethics and those who maintain that such authority (and perhaps that of science too) requires a philosophical grounding. Let us reserve the plain term “modernity” for the view that combines a rejection of religious and (nondemocratic) political authority with an acceptance of scientific results as deliverances of reason. To go further and maintain that science is the only rational authority is to embrace “scientific modernity”. This is opposed by “philosophical modernity”, which maintains that there is a distinctive realm of philosophical rationality grounding either or both science and ethics. My project in this book is to defend a commitment to modern reason that avoids both scientific and philosophical modernity.

Contemporary intellectual life is full of “critiques” of modernity and suggestions that we are now in, or quickly moving toward, a “postmodern” age. The unavoidability of this parasitic term suggests a continuing dominance of modernity; we need it even to characterize alleged alternatives. Most of what are taken as critiques of modernity are in fact internal disputes about the nature of the reason to which modernity commits us. This is obviously the crux of the disagreement between scientific and philosophical modernity. But even for those who have opted for a given side in this disagreement, there remain quarrels about the proper understanding of the scientific or the philosophical reason that is taken to define our commitment to modernity.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64973-5 - Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity

Gary Gutting

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

INTRODUCTION

The idea that a commitment to reason itself is at stake often arises from the tendency of proponents of specific conceptions of reason to denounce alternatives as renunciations of reason (as, in premodern times, proponents of conflicting conceptions of God called each other atheists). There are no doubt cases of genuine challenge to anything that might be plausibly regarded as a commitment to reason, particularly in literature and the arts and among certain religious believers. The phenomenon is not unknown among philosophers (I think, for example, of certain tendencies of the early Foucault and of the late Heidegger). But what look like philosophical challenges to reason (e.g., on the part of empiricists or of pragmatists) often turn out on examination to be merely critiques of some particular construal of reason and proposals of an alternative that critics find obviously inadequate. In other cases, there is a rejection of reason for certain key levels of human concern – for example, religion, ethics, art – but this rejection itself is rationally supported. This is a typically modern move, at least since Hume and Kant, whereby reason engages in a self-critique that reveals certain domains where it is not appropriate. Then our fundamental commitment to reason requires abandoning its claims in particular regions.

The widespread fascination with postmodernism notwithstanding, we have not been able to think ourselves beyond our commitment to modernity. The imputation of a fundamental rejection of the authority of reason remains an effective *reductio ad absurdum*. The question of modernity does dominate our thought, but the question is not whether to reject it but how to understand it. Those who see analytic philosophy as irrelevant because it does not question the very idea of a commitment to reason as the vehicle of human autonomy have misconstrued the question of modernity. On the other hand, much analytic philosophy has been justly marginalized because it ignores serious questions about its own particular conception of reason. As a result, analytic philosophy has not fully faced the question of whether it is trapped in a false conception of reason. The issue has typically arisen only when criteria of rationality appear to be internally inconsistent (e.g., the positivist verification principle); analytic philosophers are exceptionally good at dealing with this kind of concern. But they have been much less alert to the possibility that they are maintaining a consistent but false view of reason through unawareness of alternatives. Here analytic philosophers are often at a disadvantage because of their narrow cultural and historical perspectives. They often simply do not see as relevant to their philosophizing the historical and cultural perspectives that might offer alternatives to their conception of reason (often for the circular reason that these alternatives don't meet their assumed standards of rationality).

INTRODUCTION

5

Herein lies the special importance of the philosophers with whom this book engages: Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor.⁴ They are analytic in their philosophical formation and style of thought. But at the same time, they have broad historical and cultural interests that have led them to critical examinations of the modern commitment to reason, and particularly of the commitment involved in analytic philosophy.⁵ I suspect that I am not alone in experiencing a special intellectual exhilaration when reading Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor. They offer the conceptual clarity and respect for careful argument of good analytic philosophy, but without numbing technicalities, claustrophobic restriction of topics, and depressing isolation from nonphilosophical culture. At the same time, they provide the historical and cultural breadth of good continental philosophy without the pretension and obscurity. Why, I think, can't philosophy always be like this?

It is, nevertheless, not surprising that Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor are often regarded as marginal to "mainstream" philosophy of both the analytic and the continental variety. More sober analytic philosophers will remind me that, for all its interest and excitement, the work of Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor is generally marginal to the central projects of philosophical analysis. It is too historical, too metaphysical, too interdisciplinary for hard-nosed epistemologists, metaphysicians, and philosophers of mind, science, and language. A steady diet of such philosophy would lead us away from our rigorous and fundamental tasks into a fuzzy world of history and even poetry. In a parallel vein, serious continentalists will tell me that, for all their superficial appeal, these writers lack the depth and originality of a Heidegger or a Derrida, that they are helpful as metalevel commentators but are not themselves major creative thinkers.

I quite agree that *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, *After Virtue*, and *Sources of the Self* should not replace *Word and Object* and *Being and Time*. But I am also convinced that our standard division of analytic and continental philosophy does not exhaust the discipline's possibilities and that Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor offer a distinctive and essential approach to issues fundamental for

- 4 There are, of course, many other important philosophers with similar approaches – for example, Bernard Williams, Ian Hacking, Thomas Kuhn, Stanley Cavell, and the later Hilary Putnam. I will pay particular attention in Part III to Williams's views on ethics.
- 5 In this regard, of course, they are returning to what had been a primary concern of modern philosophy, particularly in the days of Kant and his immediate successors, the German idealists. Analytic philosophy originated in a reaction against idealism, one less fortunate aspect of which was an unreflective acceptance of science and mathematics as the paradigms of rationality. (The case for the centrality of German idealism in the critique of modernity is well argued in Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.)

6

INTRODUCTION

contemporary philosophy. This approach provides the historical and metaphilosophical perspective we need to situate culturally and evaluate humanly analytic and continental projects. It also, as this book intends to show, offers a particularly fruitful perspective on the problem of modernity. My specific project is to show how this approach can lead us to a very attractive and plausible version of the modern ideal of Enlightenment.

I call my version of the Enlightenment ideal “pragmatic liberalism”. Roughly, the “liberalism” expresses commitment to human freedom through the deployment of reason, and the “pragmatic” means that this commitment is not grounded on any deep (philosophical) theory of human nature.⁶ The position, particularly as I initially develop it in Part I, owes much to Rorty, although it differs with him on such central issues as the status of scientific truth and the nature of ethical norms. In Part II, I consider MacIntyre’s critique of modernity in the name of Aristotelian tradition, concluding that his criticisms are telling against only one version of modernity and, in any case, are in tension with his own implicit acceptance of modernist assumptions. Further, I argue, MacIntyre’s implicit modernity allows pragmatic liberalism to correct and enrich its account of ethics by appropriating his notion of a tradition. In Part III, I refine pragmatic liberalism in the light of Taylor’s penetrating analysis of modernity in *Sources of the Self*. Although I reject his effort to articulate in modern terms an Augustinian conception of the self, I appropriate some of his key ideas – particularly regarding the affirmation of everyday life and the nature of self-creation – to deepen my formulation of pragmatic liberalism. I also reflect on his critique of ethical naturalism to improve my account of the place of objectivity in ethics.

Since pragmatic liberalism raises serious questions about the pretensions of traditional philosophy, there will be a persistent metaphilosophical undercurrent to my discussions. In my conclusion, I bring these issues briefly to the surface and offer an account of philosophy that rejects its traditional role as arbiter of fundamental truths but still allows it a distinctive and important place in our cultural world.

6 Pragmatic liberalism is an ethical and metaphilosophical view that needs to be distinguished from liberalism as a position in political theory. The commitment to human freedom is, of course, shared with political liberalism, but pragmatic liberalism as such takes no position on the political issues of just how freedom is to be understood and what are the best means to achieve it. As I understand it, liberalism is no more characteristic of Rawls than it is of Nozick.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64973-5 - Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity

Gary Gutting

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

RICHARD RORTY

THE RUDIMENTS OF PRAGMATIC LIBERALISM

Richard Rorty has flirted with the label “postmodern”;¹ and, in any case, critics typically see his views as a rejection of modernist rationality. There is no doubt that he rejects classical modern construals of rationality in terms of representationalism and foundationalism. The question is whether his critique of epistemology is an attack on reason itself. He may think he is merely exhibiting the deficiencies of modern explications of knowledge, but, his critics maintain, he excludes any coherent notion of knowledge and leaves us caught in a morass of relativism, subjectivism, or skepticism. Critics are even more disturbed by what they take to be the moral consequences of Rorty’s pragmatism.² I think there are some important deficiencies in Rorty’s position: in epistemology, it fails to come to terms with the fundamental truth of realism (both in science and in everyday life) and, in ethics, it tends toward a deeply misleading decisionism and overrates the value of moral pluralism. Nonetheless, I still regard Rorty’s pragmatic approach as one of the best starting points for contemporary philosophical reflection, and this chapter is intended to develop the rudiments of my pragmatic liberalism by

1 He characterized his position as “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism” in an essay with that title (ORT, 197–202) but has subsequently distanced himself from the postmodern label (cf. EHO, 1).

2 For vigorous statements of both the epistemic and the moral critique of Rorty, see Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Mankind*, London: Verso, 1995.

8 RICHARD RORTY: PRAGMATIC LIBERALISM

a critical appropriation of some of his key ideas. Rorty's pragmatism is certainly critical of classical formulations of the Enlightenment project. But, as I will show, properly clarified and modified, it renews rather than rejects the fundamental Enlightenment idea of human autonomy through reason.

I begin (Section 1) with a brief reconstruction of Rorty's *Geistesgeschichte* of modern epistemology. This is followed by a discussion (Section 2) of the epistemological behaviorism Rorty offers as an alternative to the representationalism of modern epistemology. Section 3 discusses his view of justification as a social practice in the light of standard criticisms. The next three sections take up the issue of truth. Section 4 presents what I see as the proper formulation of a pragmatic view of truth, and Section 5 shows how this view is supported by Davidson's approach to knowledge. Section 6 argues that we should take a more realistic view of science than Rorty allows. Sections 7 and 8 discuss Rorty's ethical views. They sketch his pragmatic approach to ethics, the view he calls "liberal irony", reformulating and revising it in light of major criticisms of his position. At the end of this engagement with Rorty, we will have the fundamentals of the position I am calling pragmatic liberalism.

1. The Philosophy of Representations

Rorty's historical work does not fit neatly into either of the two standard categories of historical reconstruction or rational reconstruction.³ It is not, like rational reconstruction, an effort to scan the philosophical past for contributions relevant to contemporary problematics. For such an enterprise, the starting point is our own understanding of the relevant issues; and the great thinkers of the past are admitted to our discussions only to the extent that they say something we can appropriate for our own purposes. Rorty, by contrast, employs history to question the fundamental presuppositions of contemporary problematics. At the same time, Rorty is not seeking the historical reconstructionist's faithful presentation of past philosophers' ideas in their own terms. His history tries to uncover just those aspects of the past (and our standard interpretations of it) that are relevant to understanding the nature and limits of current philosophizing. Its goal then is neither to understand what past philosophers thought in their own terms nor to discover timeless philosophical truths. The enterprise is rather a variety of what

3 Rorty distinguishes these two sorts of reconstruction in "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres", in R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 49 (TP, 247).

Foucault has called “history of the present”: the illumination and critique of current views and practices by tracing relevant historical lines back to their origins.⁴

Whatever the inadequacies of Rorty’s account as a rigorous historical reconstruction of individual thinkers, it is very plausible as an understanding and critique of the way many readers of modern philosophy have interpreted its overall thrust. Rorty captures a very influential way of thinking about the role of philosophy in the Enlightenment project of human autonomy through reason. Once we assert this autonomy against traditional external authorities, we need to get clear about just what this newly liberated reason amounts to. One enduring temptation has been to identify it with the methods of modern empirical science. The only alternative to this radical and problematic move has seemed to be to recognize philosophy as a distinctive and central deployment of secular reason. Rorty’s *Geistesgeschichte* of modernity, however unfaithful it may be to the true intentions of particular modern philosophers, is a fair expression of how they have been read by generations of moderns committed to the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy.

Rorty’s account is based on a sharp contrast between the ancient and the modern status of philosophy. For the ancients, philosophy was the “queen of the sciences”, first, crowning and synthesizing the efforts of the special sciences and, second, providing a basis for the good human life. These two functions were closely connected because knowledge of nature – particularly of human nature – was regarded as the ground for knowledge of the good; our vision of the world and of our place in it was the basis for our knowledge of how to live. (The Middle Ages, of course, brought a significant modification of the role of philosophy, which, having been trumped by divine revelation, fell to the place of “handmaid” to the new queen, theology.) The modern period was characterized by the replacement of the ancient sciences (Aristotelian physics, biology, etc.) of which philosophy had been the culmination and queen by the new modern sciences of Galileo, Newton, Dalton, and (eventually) Darwin.

The triumph of these new sciences was quickly seen by many intellectuals – Hobbes and Descartes, for example – as the destruction of the ancient

4 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: Pantheon, 1997, 30–1; and my “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 10. I do not, of course, mean to suggest that Rorty’s history of the present shares the ethical and political intentions introduced into Foucault’s histories by their linking of knowledge and power.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64973-5 - Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity

Gary Gutting

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 RICHARD RORTY: PRAGMATIC LIBERALISM

system of philosophy, what had become the philosophy of the schools. This was fundamentally because the new science, taken realistically, undermined the metaphysical heart of scholastic philosophy. The new scientific world was one merely of inert matter and mechanistic forces; a world of, to use the old terminology, material and efficient but no formal or final causes. Then as now, this new view was most plausible for the external, material world, less so for the phenomena that we have come to call mental. Descartes initiated the modern period's efforts to come to terms with this disparity by drawing in a new way the distinction between mind and body.

Before Descartes, philosophers had typically seen the mind–body distinction as one between reason and nonreason, thus including sense perception, for example, on the side of the body rather than the mind. Descartes, in an effort to make the entire bodily realm the domain of the new mechanistic science, needed a sense of the distinction that eliminated from our understanding of “body” anything that could not be explained by this science. This led him to assign to the mind everything intentional and phenomenal (hence all “thoughts” in his maximally extended sense of all consciousness). Later modern philosophers might reject Descartes's dualism of two substances, mind and body; but they accepted his fundamental way of understanding the division between the mental and the physical as one between what was conscious and what was not. Even those who denied one or the other term of the distinction (materialists and idealists) accepted this understanding of the categories.

For Rorty, Descartes is the “father of modern philosophy” in the sense that his sharp division between mind and body provided the basis for the distinctively modern view of the mind as the object of philosophical inquiry. This was a particularly attractive approach, since, as noted earlier, the new mechanistic sciences seemed quite capable of an adequate account of matter but less capable of dealing with the mind. However, the full development of this new conception of philosophy was not achieved for over a century, with Kant's critical philosophy.

The development continued with Locke, who, like Descartes, took the mind as the proper domain of philosophical investigation. Locke, however, did not himself have a clear notion of philosophy as an independent discipline. He was inclined to see his work as the construction of a mechanistic account of the mind, a moral philosophy paralleling Newton's natural philosophy. (Similarly, Hume aspired to be “the Newton of the moral sciences”.) But at the same time, Locke was interested in questions about the justification of knowledge, the very questions that later (with Kant) come to define the distinctively philosophical discipline of epistemology. According to Rorty,