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978-0-521-87544-8 - Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4

Richard Rorty

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PHILOSOPHY AS CULTURAL POLITICS

This volume presents a selection of the philosophical papers which Richard Rorty has written over the past decade, and complements three previous volumes of his papers: *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, and *Truth and Progress*. Topics discussed include the changing role of philosophy in Western culture over the course of recent centuries, the role of the imagination in intellectual and moral progress, the notion of “moral identity,” the Wittgensteinian claim that the problems of philosophy are linguistic in nature, the irrelevance of cognitive science to philosophy, and the mistaken idea that philosophers should find the “place” of such things as consciousness and moral value in a world of physical particles. The papers form a rich and distinctive collection which will appeal to anyone with a serious interest in philosophy and its relation to culture.

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521698351

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First published 2007

Printed in the United States of America

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-87544-8 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-87544-7 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-69835-1 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-69835-9 paperback

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To Ruby Rorty, Flynn Rorty, and other grandchildren still to come

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Most of the papers collected in this volume were written between 1996 and 2006. Like my previous writings, they are attempts to weave together Hegel's thesis that philosophy is its time held in thought with a non-representationalist account of language. That account, implicit in the later work of Wittgenstein, has been more carefully worked out in the writings of Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, and Robert Brandom. I argue that Hegelian historicism and a Wittgensteinian "social practice" approach to language complement and reinforce one another.

Dewey agreed with Hegel that philosophers were never going to be able to see things under the aspect of eternity; they should instead try to contribute to humanity's ongoing conversation about what to do with itself. The progress of this conversation has engendered new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation. To suggest further novelties is to intervene in cultural politics. Dewey hoped that philosophy professors would see such intervention as their principal assignment.

In Dewey's work, historicism appears as a corollary of the pragmatist maxim that what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy. "Philosophy," Dewey wrote, "is not in any sense whatever a form of knowledge." It is, instead, "a social hope reduced to a working program of action, a prophecy of the future."¹ From Dewey's point of view, the history of philosophy is best seen as a series of efforts to modify people's sense of who they are, what matters to them, what is most important.

Interventions in cultural politics have sometimes taken the form of proposals for new roles that men and women might play: the ascetic, the prophet, the dispassionate seeker after truth, the good citizen, the aesthete,

¹ John Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), vol. XI, 43.

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the revolutionary. Sometimes they have been sketches of an ideal community – the perfected Greek polis, the Christian Church, the republic of letters, the cooperative commonwealth. Sometimes they have been suggestions about how to reconcile seemingly incompatible outlooks – to resolve the conflict between Greek rationalism and Christian faith, or between natural science and the common moral consciousness. These are just a few of the ways in which philosophers, poets, and other intellectuals have made a difference to the way human beings live.

In many of these papers, I urge that we look at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the light of our hopes for cultural change. Philosophers should choose sides in those debates with an eye to the possibility of changing the course of the conversation. They should ask themselves whether taking one side rather than another will make any difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future. If it will not, it may not be worth doing. If it will, they should spell out what that difference amounts to.

The professionalization of philosophy, its transformation into an academic discipline, was a necessary evil. But it has encouraged attempts to make philosophy into an autonomous quasi-science. These attempts should be resisted. The more philosophy interacts with other human activities – not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics as well – the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and thus the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves.

Readers of my previous books will find little new in this volume. It contains no novel ideas or arguments. But I hope that these further efforts to tie James' and Dewey's ideas up with Hegel's and Wittgenstein's may lead a few readers to think of pragmatism in a more favorable light. In an exuberant moment, James compared pragmatism's potential for producing radical cultural change to that of the Protestant Reformation.² I would like to persuade my readers that the analogy is not as absurd as it might seem.

² Letter to Henry James, Jr. of May 4, 1907, in *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. XI, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2003).

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“Cultural politics and the question of the existence of God” was published in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy Frankenberry (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

“Pragmatism as romantic polytheism” was published in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Duke University Press, 1998).

“Justice as a larger loyalty” was written for the Seventh East–West Philosophy Conference and was first published in *Justice and Democracy: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ron Bontekoe and Marietta Stepaniants (University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

“Honest mistakes” was written for a conference on “The Cold War” organized in 2003 by Louis Menand for the English Institute. Under the title “Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss: Two Men of Honor,” the paper is forthcoming in the *Proceedings of the English Institute*.

“Grandeur, profundity, and finitude” is a revised version of the first of two Smythies Lectures given at Balliol College, Oxford, in 2004. An earlier version was read at a UNESCO conference in Benin and published as “Universalist Grandeur, Romantic Depth, Pragmatist Cunning” in *Diogenes*, no. 202.

“Philosophy as a transitional genre” is a shortened and revised version of an essay published under the same title in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (MIT Press, 2004).

“Pragmatism and romanticism” was the third of three Page-Barbour Lectures given at the University of Virginia in 2005. It has not been published previously.

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“Analytic and conversational philosophy” is a revised version of a paper published, under the same title, in *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Carlos Prado (Humanities Press, 2003).

“A pragmatist view of contemporary analytic philosophy” was published, under the same title, in *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought*, ed. William Egginton and Mike Sandbothe (State University of New York Press, 2004).

“Naturalism and quietism” has not been published previously.

“Wittgenstein and the linguistic turn” was written in response to an invitation from the Kirchberg Wittgenstein Symposium. It has not been published previously.

“Holism and historicism” is a revised and shortened version of the second of two Smythies Lectures at Oxford; an earlier version was published in *Kant im Streit der Fakultäten*, ed. Volker Gerhardt (De Gruyter, 2005).

“Kant vs. Dewey: the current situation of moral philosophy” was published under the title “Trapped between Kant and Dewey: The Current Situation of Moral Philosophy,” in *New Essays on the History of Autonomy: A Collection Honoring J. B. Schneewind*, ed. Natalie Brender and Larry Krasnoff (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

I am very grateful to the institutions mentioned above for their invitations to give lectures or to contribute to symposia. These invitations led me to write on various topics I should otherwise not have discussed. I also appreciate the willingness of the publishers I have listed to let me include previously published papers in this volume.

I also want to thank Gideon Lewis-Kraus, my former research assistant at Stanford, for indispensable assistance in preparing this volume for publication. He gave me excellent advice about which papers to include, which to omit, and which to revise. He also did most of the work of seeing it through the press.