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William M. Curtis
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Defending Rorty

Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue

Liberal democracy needs a clear-eyed, robust defense to deal with the increasingly complex challenges it faces in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, much of contemporary liberal theory has rejected this endeavor for fear of appearing culturally hegemonic. Instead, liberal theorists have sought to gut liberalism of its ethical substance in order to render it more tolerant of nonliberal ways of life. This theoretical effort is misguided, however, because successful liberal democracy is an ethically demanding political regime that requires its citizenry to display certain virtues and habits of mind. Against the grain of contemporary theory, philosopher Richard Rorty blends American pragmatism and romanticism to produce a comprehensive vision of liberal modernity that features a virtue-based conception of liberal democracy. In doing so, Rorty defends his pragmatic liberalism against a host of notable interlocutors, including Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, Hilary Putnam, Richard J. Bernstein, and Jean Bethke Elshtain.

William M. Curtis is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Portland, where he teaches political theory, history of political thought, and constitutional law. His research focuses on liberalism, pragmatism, and the normative challenges of modernity. He has published work on liberal theory, Charles Taylor, and Richard Rorty.

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For my parents

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Preface

In spite of, or perhaps because of, liberalism's victorious emergence from the twentieth century's epic battle of ideologies, it finds itself the victim of "la nouvelle trahison des clercs." Its secular, bourgeois ideals of individual liberty and constitutional democracy continue to be, as always, bashed by the traditionalist-reactionary Right and the radical Left. What's new is that even liberal theorists no longer seem keen to defend it, as if embarrassed by its relative world-historical success. Over the last three decades, Anglophone political philosophy has engaged in a veritable contest to theorize liberalism in the most ethically minimalist terms possible, lest it appear intolerant and hegemonic toward nonliberal ways of life. I wrote the present work because I think this theoretical project to gut liberalism of its ethical substance is folly and creates confusion about what it takes to have a successful liberal society. Liberalism is an ethically demanding way of understanding and getting around the social world, which requires citizens who are socialized and educated in an ethically liberal way. Multiculturalist critics of liberalism see this clearly and rightly conclude that it is inhospitable to ways of life that neglect or reject the deep habits of mind and complex virtues that the liberal regime demands. Liberal theorists who obfuscate these demands do a disservice to both liberalism and its nonliberal rivals.

Liberalism faces serious challenges around the world today, both in the relatively liberalized parts of it as well as in the not-so-liberal parts. We cannot afford to take it for granted or misunderstand what it is. We need a clear-eyed, full-throated defense of liberal modernity that is updated to fit the contemporary liberal's more ideologically tentative, postmodern sensibilities. For this, we turn to Richard Rorty. Rorty, with his ingenious combination of American pragmatism and romanticism, shows us virtue-based liberal politics and culture that fire the imagination and embolden the liberal heart. They give us the

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hope and vision that liberals need as we face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Depending on one's perspective, there is lots of credit or blame to go around to those who have mentored, helped, and inspired me. At the risk of scandalizing those who might want to resist being associated with a defense of pragmatic liberalism or with the ever-controversial Rorty, I must acknowledge my wonderful political theory teachers at Duke University, including Evan Charney, Romand Coles, Peter Euben, Michael Gillespie, Ruth Grant, and Tom Spragens. I also would like to thank my home institution, the University of Portland, and especially my colleagues in the Political Science and History departments, as well as Andrew Eshleman in Philosophy, for their unwavering support and friendship. Only slightly less well known than Portland's foodcarts and microbreweries is its thriving political theory scene. I owe many thanks to the regulars of the PDX PT/PP group, including: Don and Tom Balmer, Nick Buccola, Malcolm Campbell, Chana Cox, John Holzwarth, Curtis Johnson, Tamara Metz, Alex Sager, Peter Steinberger, Les Swanson, Andrew Valls, and Alex Zakaras. Two other great friends and scholars on whom I inflicted much more of this work-in-progress than they deserved are Ari Kohen and Dennis Rasmussen; without their encouragement and advice, I would have been lost. Lastly, I thank my beautiful and ever-patient wife, Angelica, of whom I asked far too much as I completed this work. A primary reason for her burden was our two young sons, Soren and Alex. My gratitude toward these two guys is mixed. On the one hand, they certainly slowed the writing process, with their unceasing and irresistible pleas of "Dada, will you play with me?" On the other hand, their laughter and love are what keep me going in the first place.

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Abbreviations

Works by Rorty

AOC	*Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
CIS	*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
CP	*Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
EHO	*Essays on Heidegger and Others, Philosophical Papers*, *Volume 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
PCP	*Philosophy as Cultural Politics, Philosophical Papers*, *Volume 4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
PMN	*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
PSH	*Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin, 1999.
ORT	*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
TP	*Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Works by Other Authors

PRR	Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*. Chicago: Open Court, 2010.
RC	Robert B. Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
RR	Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, eds., *Richard Rorty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

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RRCD Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, eds., *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

R&P Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., ed., *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995.

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