

Introduction: The Unity of Richard Rorty's Philosophy

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Richard Rorty (1931–2007) was perhaps the unique philosopher of his generation. Admired in some intellectual circles, reviled in others, he was unique for the sheer breadth of his interests and expertise. In an era when philosophy was becoming increasingly hyper-specialized, Rorty seemed more to resemble the great polymaths of the early modern period, writing on a dazzling variety of topics – both the recondite topics of specialist philosophers and, more frequently as he grew older, public-facing contributions on politics, literature, and culture. He drew from an equally dazzlingly diverse group of thinkers, from Darwin and Dewey to Derrida and Davidson, from Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, to Nabokov, Orwell, and Harold Bloom. It puts the point mildly to say that Rorty's litany of intellectual heroes was an eclectic and idiosyncratic one. Writing on figures within the so-called analytic and continental traditions with (or so it seemed) equal familiarity and facility, it is no embellishment to say that Richard Rorty had a range of interests simply not found among his philosophical contemporaries.

Rorty's uniqueness as a philosopher is also partially accounted for by the fact that, throughout his long and distinguished career, he wore different professional hats. Early on he was a "thrusting young analytic philosopher" (*TP*, 10n5), a highly professionalized Princeton professor, and the author of tightly argued essays on specialist topics in the philosophy of mind bearing titles like "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism," "Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental," and "Functionalism, Machines, and Incorrigibility."¹ Later on he was a world-famous man of letters whose books and essays were cited tens of thousands of times, a MacArthur "Genius Grant" recipient whose

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reputation and influence were felt far outside the narrow confines of professional analytic philosophy.

Yet Rorty's uniqueness as a philosopher owed most to the astonishing constellation of views he held. He was simultaneously a "post-modernist" in his repudiation of "representationalism" and the correspondence theory of truth, and a "bourgeois liberal" in his politics. A man of the Left who also believed in the value and importance of American patriotism. A "raucously secular" atheist who seemed, at times anyway, to express his humanistic and democratic hopes in a quasi-religious vocabulary (*PSH*, 12–13).² A devoted follower of America's greatest theorist of democracy, John Dewey, who also took inspiration from decidedly antidemocratic thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. Rorty was both a "non-reductive physicalist" – a naturalist through and through – and someone who believed that poetry (in his expansive sense of that term) was at the apex of human accomplishment. Rorty showed reverence for what he called "Wordsworthian moments" in which one feels "touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance" (*PSH*, 7–8), while simultaneously concurring with Wilfrid Sellars that, "all awareness is a linguistic affair" (Sellars 1997, 63).

In different moods he was philosophical gadfly, literary critic, cleaner of Augean stables, "syncretist hack," skeptic, political commentator, "ironist," and practitioner of "cultural politics" (*TP*, 10n5). Sometimes Rorty was a debunker of philosophy itself: he seemed to take a certain pleasure in asking impolite questions about the grandiose pretensions of professional philosophers. At other times he maintained, in a more buoyant tone, that "changes of opinion among philosophical professors sometimes do, after a time, make a difference to the hopes and fears of non-philosophers" (*TP*, 45).

One could be forgiven for thinking, given the imposing range of his thought and the diversity of his interests, that Rorty's philosophy was ultimately scattershot and lacking in unity. I believe that the chapters in this volume, considered as a group, help dispel that thought. Together they address virtually every aspect of Rorty's

oeuvre – from his youthful obsession with wild orchids to his philosophical views on truth and representation; from his ruminations on the contemporary American Left to his various assessments of classical American pragmatism, feminism, liberalism, religion, literature, and philosophy itself. Sympathetic in some cases, in others sharply critical, the essays can and will speak for themselves. Together they will provide readers with a deep and illuminating portrait of Rorty's exciting brand of neopragmatism.

In this Introduction, I offer a sketch of some major themes in Rorty's thought and try to indicate how they hang together in a coherent (albeit controversial) whole.

DARWINISM, ANTI-AUTHORITARIANISM, AND PRAGMATISM

A loosely "Darwinian" outlook was central to Rorty's philosophy, much as it was to Dewey's.³ Like Dewey, Rorty denied that human beings are in possession of an "extra added ingredient" which other creatures lack (*TP*, 186). All life – from the paramecia to the penguins; from the hummingbirds to the Homo Sapiens – is related and continuous. Rorty would often claim that the only interesting difference between human beings and other animals is that we have "extra neurons" which make us capable of becoming language users. This is a difference that turns out to make an important difference. It suggests that, unlike other creatures, we can change ourselves – our self-image and our hopes – in part by changing the words that we use.

As Rorty narrated the story, Darwin helped make possible a new way for humans to think of themselves and their relation to the rest of the cosmos. His hunch was that coming to see ourselves in broadly Darwinian terms – as "slightly-more-complicated-animals" (*TP*, 48); "clever beasts" in Nietzsche's memorable phrase – would help liberate us from "the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible" (*CIS*, 45). The belief that there *are* such forces, Rorty argued, represents the least common denominator between a belief in God and realist metaphysics. Both

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are symptoms of what Rorty would call “authoritarianism,” the idea that there is a nonhuman authority to which our respect and deference is owed. Rorty labored long and hard to repudiate the spell that this “authoritarian” idea (in all its various incarnations) has cast on our intellectual life. His great synoptic hope was that we might “try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi-divinity, where we treat *everything* – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance” (*CIS*, 22).

To see ourselves as just one more contingent product of evolution, as having only “(although to a much greater degree) the same sorts of abilities as the squids and the amoebas will make us receptive to the possibility that our descendants may transcend us, just as we have transcended the squids and the apes” (Rorty 1992a, 590). Just as evolution is “blind” and lacks a *telos* – just as “nature is not leading up to anything” (*PSH*, 266) – so is there no set of beliefs and practices that would provide a conclusive answer to Socrates’s famous question about the nature of a good human life. After all, it is hard to fathom that there might be a way of life or a set of beliefs and practices upon which it would be *impossible* to improve, even if only slightly. Thanks in large part to the legacy of Darwin and the Romantic poets, Rorty’s story goes, Western intellectuals have increasingly come to accept that we ourselves “have to dream up the point of human life” and that we “cannot appeal to a nonhuman standard” to determine whether we have chosen wisely (*PSH*, 266):

[H]uman beings (in the richer and more powerful parts of the world) have shown an increasing ability to put aside the question What is the meaning of human life? and to substitute the question What meaning shall *we* give to *our* lives? Men and women in the last two hundred years have become increasingly able to get along without the thought that there must be a deep truth about themselves, a truth that it is their job to discover. This has produced an increased ability to brush aside the suspicion that we are under the authority

of something not ourselves: that there is a narrator (roughly, God or Nature) of our lives other than ourselves, a narrator whose description of us must necessarily be superior to any that we dream up on our own. (Rorty 1995a, 71)

These are all positive developments on Rorty's view. They should be celebrated and encouraged.

An anti-authoritarian perspective was at the very heart of Rorty's philosophy, central not only to his more professionally abstruse views on truth, justification, knowledge, and rationality but also – and much more dramatically – to his histrionic retelling of Western philosophy's recent trajectory. John McDowell provides a helpful overview of the anti-authoritarianism that runs through Rorty's work and is worth quoting here at length:

The sense of sin from which Dewey freed himself was a reflection of a religious outlook according to which human beings were called on to humble themselves before a non-human authority. Such a posture is infantile in its submissiveness to something other than ourselves. If human beings are to achieve maturity, they need to follow Dewey in liberating themselves from this sort of religion of abasement before the divine Other. But a humanism that goes no further than that is still incomplete. We need a counterpart secular emancipation as well. In the period in the development of Western culture during which the God who figures in that sort of religion was stricken, so to speak, with his mortal illness, the illness that was going to lead to the demise famously announced by Nietzsche, some European intellectuals found themselves conceiving the secular world, the putative object of everyday and scientific knowledge, in ways that paralleled that humanly immature conception of the divine. This is a secular analog to a religion of abasement, and human maturity requires that we liberate ourselves from it as well as from its religious counterpart . . . Full human maturity would require us to acknowledge authority only if the acknowledgement does not involve abasing ourselves before something non-human. (McDowell 2000, 109–10)

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This was Rorty's big "hedgehog" idea. "I think of my work," he confessed in an interview, "as trying to move people away from the notion of being in touch with something big and powerful and non-human" (Mendieta 2006, 49). The claim was not that an anti-authoritarian future of this kind would be more rational or more in touch with the intrinsic nature of reality. It was simply a promising long-term cultural experiment, a trajectory along which Western intellectuals might, with encouragement and luck, continue to travel.

ANTIREPRESENTATIONALISM, TRUTH,
 AND METAPHILOSOPHY

Rorty spent much of his time debunking the grand, self-congratulatory aspirations of traditional philosophy (with a capital 'P'), arguing, as did Dewey and James before him, that philosophers should dedicate their energy not to the "problems of philosophers" per se, but to problems that matter to everyday people.⁴ The debunking effort for which he is most well-known among philosophers is his attack on the correspondence theory of truth, and, more broadly, on the idea that language or mind has the capacity to "mirror" nature – the capacity to "represent" the way the world really is. Since truth is a property of our descriptions of the world, and since we lack the ability to get in between our descriptions of the world and the world itself to make a judgment about the "fit" between the two, he argued that the correspondence theory of truth – the ancient, intuitively banal idea that truth consists in the accurate representation of reality – should be jettisoned. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he put the argument pithily:

Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot . . . The world does not speak. Only we do. (*CIS*, 5–6)

Rorty would often suggest that in order to make sense of the idea of truth as correspondence to reality we need an account of how bits of language (viz., our descriptions) might stand in a mysterious relation called “corresponding” or “accurately representing” with bits of non-language (viz., “the world on its own, unaided by the describing activities of human beings”). What would that even mean? And how might this mysterious “correspondence” relation be understood? He would also frequently summon the familiar verificationist idea according to which, even if we could somehow explicate the notion of “correspondence,” we would remain utterly in the dark about when or if it had been achieved. “We do not know what it would mean for Nature to feel that our conventions of representations are becoming more like her own,” Rorty wrote in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, “and thus that she is nowadays being represented more adequately than in the past” (PMN, 299). This was ultimately no cause for despair on Rorty’s view. After all, he shrugged, “We should not regret our inability to perform a feat which no one has any idea how to perform” (PMN, 340).

If we cannot parse better and worse descriptions according to whether or not they correspond to the intrinsic nature of reality, then we should distinguish them in terms of what they do for us, in terms of how well they facilitate our multifarious needs for “coping.” Rorty believed that coping, and trying to find new ways to cope better still, is all we clever mammals ever do. There is no point in our development at which we cease merely “coping” with our environment in various ways and begin doing something magnificently different, namely, “representing” it. “Coping” goes all the way down on this view. Our most elegant theories, our best literature, and our most sophisticated science are just more complex varieties of coping. There is no higher kind of activity that “coping” might contrast with.

On this Darwinian, antirepresentationalist view, one description of the world can be judged superior to other rival descriptions if it serves us in ways that its rivals cannot. The “useful–useless distinction,” Rorty urged, “can take the place of the old appearance–reality

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distinction" (*TP*, 1). No description enjoys an intrinsic superiority over another, for once the notions of "correspondence to reality" and "accurate representation" go, so too does the idea of "the world itself" or "reality" adjudicating between competing descriptions. All of this makes it pointless to ask, for example: "Is the carpenter's or the particle physicist's account of tables the *true* one"? (*PSH*, 153) If neither account gets any closer to the intrinsic nature of tables (Rorty would have stoutly denied, incidentally, that tables enjoy any "intrinsic nature" which might be more or less closely approximated), then we must only ask which of the two accounts would better serve certain purposes in certain contexts. Words and descriptions on this view are like tools: some of them are better than others in virtue of their usefulness for the accomplishment of certain tasks.

Rorty wrote at great length about truth and representationalism throughout his career, saying many deflationary (and sometimes irresponsible) things about them along the way. The brief sketch offered here obviously does not do justice either to the sophistication of Rorty's views in this area, or to the tidal wave of equally sophisticated criticism he would receive for those views.⁵ But I think it is important to see how Rorty's repudiation of the "mirror of nature" idea connects with, and springs from, the Darwinism and anti-authoritarianism that were so central in his thinking. I have argued elsewhere that, despite his grouchiness about the idea that truth is an interesting concept for which a philosophical theory is urgently needed, Rorty "was no less cognizant of the importance of holding true beliefs than any other intellectually responsible person." He did not think that truth was "dispensable or unimportant," and he knew perfectly well that "a world in which we lack any true beliefs is a world in which we are all dead." What he fundamentally opposed – and this brings the connection with his Darwinism and anti-authoritarianism into sharper focus – was the "hypostatization of truth as some kind of nonhuman power to which our allegiance is owed." What he fundamentally rejected was "the *worship* of truth: the kind of (Platonic) outlook which makes truth divine, the paramount end at which humanity

can take aim, and the corresponding faith that grasping it will somehow make us free" (Rondel 2018, 5–6). In the end, then, the focal point of Rorty's attack was not truth *per se*. Rather, it was the "authoritarian" idea that there is something great and nonhuman before which we should humble ourselves, and simultaneously a rejection of the widely held assumption that truth is a "profitable topic" to which philosophers should devote their energy. As Rorty put the point, "To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be best served by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or 'true' as a term which repays 'analysis'" (CIS, 8).

BETWEEN IRONY AND LIBERALISM

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty offered a portrait of a certain kind of post-Philosophical intellectual: the liberal ironist. The liberal ironist describes someone who has come to embrace many of Rorty's central philosophical theses, someone who has fully adopted the Darwinian and "anti-authoritarian" self-image that was so predominant in Rorty's thought. With Rorty, the liberal ironist denies that our words and sentences stand in relations of "fitting" with or "corresponding" to a nonlinguistic reality. After all, if words are among the tools we clever animals have developed to enjoy more pleasure and less pain, then it makes little sense to say that some of these tools are more or less in touch with reality than others (PSH, xxiii). The liberal ironist denies that our beliefs can be given "foundations" and that the various things in which the world is replete (quarks, human beings, liberal democracies, consciousness, academic disciplines, and much more) can be tidily explicated with necessary and sufficient conditions. Crucially, liberal ironists are prepared to affirm the deep contingency of things – of their language, their self, and the various groups and causes with which they happen to be in solidarity. They concede that things might have easily been otherwise and that in rather nearby possible worlds they would be

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radically different people than they presently are. The liberal ironist, Rorty says, “faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires . . . [and] abandons the idea that those central beliefs and desires *refer back to something* beyond the reach of time and chance” (*CIS*, xv).

Rorty would frequently claim that what is distinctive about human beings is a capacity for language, and that this capacity is a prerequisite for projects of self-creation, for attempts to forge for oneself a unique and interesting identity:

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person’s ‘final vocabulary.’ It is ‘final’ in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no non-circular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity and resort to force. (*CIS*, 73)

The liberal ironist, Rorty tells us, has “continuing and radical doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered” (*CIS*, 73). The liberal ironist would regret it if Socrates turned out to be right – if there really was a final, universal ordering of worthy human ends – because she delights in expanding her ethical horizons by learning about different goods, interesting modes of life, and new ways of being human. Above all, she is consumed by the prospect of making things new, rather than discovering what has been there all along. She is forever trying to enlarge her sympathies, extend her loyalties, and seek out new modes of life with which to experiment. The liberal ironist is perpetually struggling for what Heidegger called “the hope for authenticity” – the