
LIBERALISM GOES POST-MODERN: RORTY'S PRAGMATISM

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Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

The world of contemporary philosophy has become, since the 1960s, a bewildering realm of fragmented and hermetic discourses reflecting a dissolution of social coherence throughout the West. The dispersion of thought has been characterized not only by a variety of substantive theses about some common subject matter, but has reached to a profusion of the very forms of thinking. Not only has the unity of the object been exploded but thought itself has been particularized and rendered functional to specific pursuits. All of the time-worn strategies for unification seem to have failed, most importantly that of the overmastering method, leaving culture revealed as a token of power to be cashed in for academic privilege and preferment, and beyond that for the perquisites offered by the leading institutions of the technological order. Is there a crisis of culture? One might answer in the negative, resuscitating the corpse of William James's pluralism and offering the view that variety means plenitude of possibility, the opportunity to be free to risk oneself and to create something new and better, the latter remaining undefined, of course, until it is brought forth. One has here the essence of liberal Darwinism as it was first fixed by John Stuart Mill: out of diversity shall spring productive invention. It is merely necessary to trust in humanity to separate the wheat from the chaff, which

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process will take effect so long as the road to inquiry is not blocked and discussion is left unfettered. Such is the optimistic side of the contemporary replay of the great cultural debate of the nineteenth century between optimism and pessimism. It is the side taken by Richard Rorty, who has become central to current discussions of post-modernism in American philosophy through his attempt to bring pragmatism to bear on a broad range of cultural developments including hermeneutics, deconstructionism, linguistic analysis, and cognitive science. Rorty, most generally, takes a step back from and a step above the contemporary scene, casting a benevolent gaze on dispersion and playing the role of the permissive therapist who dispels the quest for certainty and opens up the playground of experimentation in everything but attempting to gain a secure starting point. His heroes are John Dewey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger, especially Dewey.

It is surely a thankless task for an American to dispute Rorty on the only philosophical issue which exercises the American spirit to its depths, that is, how one can justify to oneself taking an optimistic stance towards the world. Rorty is as firmly within the American tradition as anyone in the 1980s could hope to be. Following Charles Sanders Peirce and Dewey he initiates his reflections with a criticism of Cartesian methodical doubt, substituting for it the "lived doubt" of Peirce, which allows one to worry oneself only about matters that in some way are actionable. And, as did his forebears, he terminates his reflections with a moral exhortation to social hope, which is based on a commitment to community, constituted here as conversation hedged by civility, both of which quite purposefully lack precise definition. Indeed, in Rorty's masterwork *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and in the supporting papers contained in his *Consequences of Pragmatism* American philosophy as a moral quest shines out more clearly than it did in the writings of any of the earlier pragmatists. The purity of the moral quest in his thought is a result of his uncompromising and foundational distinction between explanation and interpretation, which prevents him from grounding his hope in any description of how things are in general (cosmology) or in human nature (psychology). Cosmology retreats to what William James called "conceptions of the frame of things" and psychology is deemed best when strictly causal and behavioristic. Thus, metaphysics is freed to become moral poetry or, perhaps, literary criticism, providing human communities with possible self-descriptions, and psychology is freed from any taint of subjectivism, thereby depriving the individual of any purchase on interiority. Our origin is explained neurologically and our destiny is to deliver ourselves to community through the conversation, a neat update of the scission between pure and practical reason. This way of slicing the pie leaves nothing between origin and destiny that one might

call life or experience. And here is where Rorty purifies the pragmatic tradition, whose classical expositors placed themselves squarely within what they called experience. He can preach a moral optimism with such comfort because he has flicked away concern for the individual as a *res vera*. Thus, the individual has nothing to lose, no one has anything to lose, and, finally, since what will be will be, we might just as well join the fray or join the play (it could be either, depending on Rorty's mood).

Rorty's prime significance for contemporary discourses is to have shown the terms in which the paradigm of American classical philosophy, its move from doubt to moral deliverance, can be articulated once the metaphysical illusion has been dispelled. He reveals, that is, the price at which one must purchase optimism and thereby tests the demand for it stringently. He goes to the heart of the matter in his essay, "Dewey's Metaphysics," where he notes the contradiction between the project of deconstructing the metaphysical endeavor through the criticism of the quest for certainty and the program of creating a metaphysics of experience. Rorty observes that late in his life Dewey wished that he had substituted the pair "nature and culture" for that of "nature and experience." This was an admission of failure on Dewey's part to have found any mediation between nature and culture, and it is just this failure that Rorty takes as his own badge of honor. So, in a sense, his recurrence to Dewey is to a philosopher who never was. Dewey began, as Rorty points out with the wish to institute a new psychology that would replace philosophy by treating of "experience in its absolute totality, not setting up some one aspect of it to account for the whole, as, for example, our physical evolutionists do, nor yet attempting to determine its nature from something outside and beyond itself, as, for example, our so-called empirical psychologists have done."¹ This is the very idea which Edmund Husserl took up and made into phenomenology and which has its resonances in American classical philosophy in Peirce's "phaneroscopy," James's "radical empiricism," and George Santayana's "intuition of essence." It is the alternative to Rorty's dualism, the middle realm between explanation and interpretation, the domain of what Husserl called "seeing." Dewey's career was a long struggle between the phenomenological insight, which culminated in *Art As Experience*, and the scientific method of control, the high point of which is *The Quest for Certainty*. *Experience and Nature* may be understood as an attempt to heal the split. Dewey, though he confessed failure in his correspondence with Arthur Bentley (who sarcastically called the skin "philosophy's last line of defense"), never did reach Bentley's or Rorty's position. Ironically, it is the other great American naturalist, Santayana, who eschewed the metaphysics of experience and set up a distinction between a strictly scientific "behavioral psychology" and a fully poetic and moralizing "literary psychology." He is far more Rorty's forebear than is Dewey.

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But Santayana was not an optimist; indeed, the pragmatists could not abide him because from the split between explanation and interpretation he drew the conclusion that "the only cure for birth and death is to enjoy the interval." Instead of urging, as Dewey did, that we are "all in the same boat" and, thus, should pitch in at least to stop it from sinking, Santayana set sail on his raft with a few companions, deeply doubtful about the fate of Western progressivism but ready to enjoy what his "host the world" offered him. Dewey was enabled to avoid Santayana's individualism by invoking "experience" as a matrix that bound humanity together, leading him to proclaim a "common faith," his version of Auguste Comte's "religion of humanity." Santayana, whose philosophical virtue was "candor" described such projects as "cant." And now the strange predicament into which Rorty has fallen becomes clear. He is committed, through his adherence to the analytic tradition in which he was nurtured, if not to candor then at least to precision. It is such precision which leads him to see that Dewey equivocated between experience as scientific description and experience as moral possibility, which leads him to Santayana's naturalized variant of Royce's split between "the world of description" and "the world of appreciation." Like Santayana, he cannot affirm a Roycean optimism based on the ultimate reality of the world of purposes and the inclusion of the world of causes within it, and he has rejected the foundation of Deweyan optimism in an experience which is the medium of cause and end, that is, a metaphysical category modelled on the human experience of acting, best characterized by George Herbert Mead as a "philosophy of the act." He is left with what he calls in his essay, "Method, Social Science, Social Hope," an "ungrounded hope," that is, he wants to have his cake and eat it, too, to have Santayana's candor and Dewey's optimism. The price of maintaining American philosophy as a moral quest in the 1980s, of satisfying the demand for moral optimism, is to make that optimism a mere opinion, which is just what the pragmatic tradition in political theory sought to avoid. It is deeply ironic that what James would call the "cash value" of Rorty's thought is affirmation of and commitment to the "conversation of mankind," but that the currency is mere fiat money, not even backed by full faith and credit, much less by ontological gold.

Rorty's thought is a symptom of the bankruptcy of American liberalism a generation after the suppression of the movements for liberation of the 1960s. Politically liberalism was eclipsed in the final years of the Carter Presidency when a defense build-up and a deflationary economic policy were put in place, and the internationalist empire was dealt its deepest humiliation in the "hostage crisis." The way was prepared for what was unthinkable even in the light of Kent State, Jackson State, Watergate, and OPEC — the ideological and practical cancellation of the social liberalism of which Dewey was the prophet. Cultural liberalism meanwhile has simply become what

Rorty has made of it, a proclamation of the "conventions" to which we were bred and to which we subscribe. He makes no effort even to justify (in his own terms he could not be expected to ground) his liberalism, but simply makes the analytical point that "there is no inferential connection between the disappearance of the transcendental subject — of 'man' as something having a nature which society can repress or understand — and the disappearance of human solidarity." And then he offers the familiar "two cheers for democracy" of E.M. Forster: "Bourgeois liberalism seems to me the best example of this solidarity we have yet achieved and Deweyan pragmatism the best articulation of it."² How far from this is Dewey, who was not a "bourgeois liberal" but a democratic socialist and who did not insert himself into a tradition but looked forward to social reconstruction. For all of his support for pluralism and poetic experiment Rorty's political thought is that of a conservative liberal, endorsing his tradition in a Burkian manner and praising the cherished norms of civility, while affecting a poetic freedom in which the artist is liberated to provide us with new self-descriptions. Again Santayana is a far better key to understanding Rorty than is Dewey. Santayana's political philosophy culminated in his utopia of "rational government," in which Oxonian bureaucrats (the political analogues of behavioral psychologists) would maintain the free cultural space necessary for the artists to offer their literary psychologies. Only Santayana did not believe in "mankind," as Rorty does, and had no interest in defending or, better, proclaiming social hope. Rorty often uses the example of theology, which has been displaced from the center of cultural concern but persists on the periphery, as a model of the future of philosophy. If so, then in the terms of Karl Barth, his political philosophy is "kerygmatic" rather than "apologetic." But it is a very weak proclamation, which is not calculated to appeal to any but those who are already comfortable with the dream of a humane "bourgeois liberalism" in the protective confines of the technological multi-versity. Rorty answers to the moral quest of American philosophy with piety towards the tradition of the Enlightenment, not with the affirmation of natural rights or the experimental democracy of self-consciously organized publics.

The social hope that Rorty professes, then, is not the continuation of Dewey's reconstructionist hope that it first appeared to be but an essentially conservative wish that a particular set of practices, conventions, and "language games" persist and spread. This is what happens when Enlightenment ideas are reinterpreted as traditions, a procedure as contradictory in terms as Dewey's of creating a "naturalistic metaphysics," which Rorty, following Santayana, exposes. Rorty tries to avoid the pure conventionalization of politics by proposing to mediate between "the 'classic' Galilean conception of 'behavioral sciences' and the French notion of '*sciences de*

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l'homme." He observes that Dewey offered a "middle ground" between the two conceptions which "inspired the social sciences in America before the failure of nerve which turned them 'behavioral.'"³ Here is the point at which the deep weakness in Rorty's thought appears. Is it a "failure of nerve" which turned the social sciences behavioral? Leaving aside the emergence of the multiversity and other conglomerate organizations as a social basis for behavioral science and analytical philosophy (Rorty never touches on sociology of knowledge, though he praises, without using it, Dewey's sociological criticism of metaphysics), in his own terms such an explanation is at best implausible. When it comes to analytic philosophy, the analogue of behavioralism in academic philosophy, Rorty is much kinder, grounding its emergence in the objective of being scientific. He notes the importance of Hans Reichenbach's *Rise of Scientific Philosophy* in forming the historical perspective of a generation of philosophers. He should not be unaware that a generation of social scientists was similarly trained, even to the point of imbibing from Reichenbach. They did not lose their nerve, but, just as philosophers did, turned against the soft, imprecise, and sentimental perspectives of pragmatism, here in its phase of social liberalism. Why should the social sciences have ignored the distinction between explanation and interpretation? Why should psychology be behavioral and social science reformist? These are rhetorical questions, since they were resolved in short order in the 1950s in favor of the idea of an explanatory and behavioral social science. Rorty deplores the assumption of the defenders of hermeneutics that "if we don't want something like Parsons, we have to take something like Foucault; i.e., that overcoming the deficiencies of Weberian *Zweckrationalität* requires going all the way, repudiating the 'will to truth.'"⁴ He perorates: "What Dewey suggested was that we keep the will to truth and the optimism that goes with it, but free them from the behaviorist notion that Behaviorese is Nature's Own Language and from the notion of man as 'transcendental or enduring subject. For, in Dewey's hands, the will to truth is not the urge to dominate but the urge to create, to 'attain working harmony among diverse desires.'"⁵ The social sciences, then, are somehow exempt from the distinction between explanation and interpretation. They are somehow to be moral sciences. And from whence comes their principle of attaining "working harmony among diverse desires?" Is this a natural morality? This is unlikely since Rorty dispenses with human nature. But, if not, it is but a corollary of Rorty's ungrounded hope, quite a weak reed when grant and consulting monies fund behavioral research and even Rorty adjures that psychology be a behavioral science. Dewey could promote the middle way for the social sciences just because he had a metaphysic of experience which told him that experience unencumbered by the quest for certainty contained a drift toward

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cooperation. He grounded his optimism and, therefore, his program for the social sciences in something beyond language games. Santayana was under no illusion about such sciences as economics and politics being principled by a moral aim. They would describe equably the dominations and the powers of human life. History was freed for literary psychology. Rorty, who wants both candor and optimism, asks the social sciences to do what he, as philosopher *cum* deconstructionist will not give them license to do, to mediate between explanation and interpretation.

Santayana, in *Character and Opinion in the United States*, reveals the presuppositions of American classical philosophy, its optimistic view of life. Most generally, the denial of any mediation between explanation and interpretation renders, as Rorty acknowledges, ungrounded any hope. But this groundlessness would not, perhaps, be problematic were affirming the hope of "bourgeois liberalism" a commitment involving no silences. For Santayana, however, the American ethos is quite restrictive, being based on what he calls "English liberty," which prescribes the maintenance of each individual's freedom through the compromise and cooperation of all.⁶ The practice of English liberty presupposes that "all concerned are fundamentally unanimous, and that each has a plastic nature, which he is willing to modify." These presuppositions are unfounded when individuals or groups claim the absolute liberty to express their particular potentials unhindered by any limitations. At that point the juncture arises for English liberty between itself becoming militant and shattering those who lack plasticity, and its becoming so attenuated that the society fragments, losing its integrity and eventually falling under tyranny, or regenerating itself on the principle of a different form of liberty. Since the 1960s the dynamic of American society has been towards the decline of English liberty and the assertion of absolute liberty by a wide range of groups, as reflected in the economy by overt and covert deregulation, in the polity by the emergence of the moralized politics of the "New Right" and the counterattacks by the successors of the "liberation movements," in the society by the appearance of hermetic lifestyle groups (a society of masses rather than a mass society), and in the culture by the very dispersion noted at the beginning of this essay. It is now opportune to raise again the question: Is there a crisis of culture? Rorty's negative may now be seen not as a permission to experiment and grow through clearing away the obstacles to inquiry but as the febrile death throes of an utterly exhausted liberalism. The step back to bring Dewey into the post-modern era carries only an ungrounded hope, given substance by piety towards tradition. The step above to entertain the panorama of diversity is less like the Confucian ideal of the Emperor who creates sufficient harmony to "let the robes fall" than the practice of the invalid father of the house who waves away the disorder around him, perhaps with

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the consoling conceit that things really never were much different and that, anyway, his family is still the best in the world. Rorty's place in the politics of our time is that of the conservative liberal counterpart to the progressive liberal, Jürgen Habermas. Both Habermas and Rorty share a faith in communication, but Habermas promotes an "emancipatory interest" rooted in human nature and aiming at a transcendentalized "ideal speech situation," whereas Rorty proposes an adherence to a given tradition accorded purpose by continuing the "conversation of mankind." It is merely a replay of Kant vs. Hegel, the liberalism of the progressive 1960s against the liberalism of the reactionary 1970s. A pragmatist might ask whether the difference makes a difference, as Rorty asks so many times about other disputes over foundations.

Rorty's liberalism is helpless against the crisis of dispersion, which now may be considered as a genuine cultural crisis, even apart from its social correlates. The criticism of foundational philosophy made by James and Dewey was effected in order to overcome the dead abstractions of modern metaphysics and epistemology, the inert Kantian categories, the detached Humian sense data, the *idée fixe* of the absolute, and the "night world" of positivism. In their place was to be the description of life and experience as individuals lived it through all of its dimensions. Here there was hope for a liberation of potentialities and capacities, just because something lay beneath the rigid formulae, waiting to be expressed and then reflected and projected into action. Husserl, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel, Samuel Alexander, Alfred North Whitehead, and the American pragmatists all had in common the horror and delight of discovering that field of pure psychology that Dewey identified in his early thought. Carlos Vaz Ferreira, their Uruguayan counterpart, summed up their emancipatory insight in the formula that thought had at last become freed from words. The "depth universal" of life or "pure experience" could be approached in many ways, but as the exploration proceeded it was found to be unfit to satisfy metaphysical aspirations and finally ran up against its limits in the "absurd" of Albert Camus. As the problem of meaning worked its way from Bergson's metaphysical vitalism of the *élan vital* to Camusian absurdism another line of philosophers applied logico-empirical criticism to theory of knowledge, which has ended today with analytical philosophy. Starting from the problem of truth, rather than meaning, they bypassed life and headed straight for language. Rather than proclaiming triumphantly that thought had been freed from words, they worked to absorb thought into its vehicle, language. The cultural crisis today is encapsulated in the formula "language without a referent." Life/experience paradoxically demand a completion that they cannot give and, so, become frustratedly boring. The path is opened wide for a new cultural play, textualism and deconstruction-

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ism, the mad dance through the text, the proclamation of the irrelevance of imagination and the exhaustion and implosion of inwardness. All follows from what Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler called *ressentiment*, the sour-grapes response to the collapse of meaning.

Rorty is the legatee of both strands of the current epoch of modernity. He applies a pragmatic criticism to the problem of truth, which yields him the shattering of philosophy as the "mirror of nature," that is, of the quest of philosophers to discover reality in-and-for-itself and to express that reality in its own language. He misses, however, the depth of the cultural crisis because he does not attend at all to the problem of meaning, though two of his heroes, Dewey and Heidegger, were preoccupied with it. He is too fixed on what Simmel called the *terminus a quo* of philosophy, the grounds of knowledge, to attend to Simmel's *terminus ad quem*, the meaning of life; that is, he is preoccupied with the Kant of the first *Critique* and not at all with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.⁷ This is why he can so blithely slay the bogey of realism and then tack on to his deconstruction a groundless hope in the conversation of mankind. He is concerned to dispel the real as in-itself and forgets the for-itself, the life of each one of us, which he has immersed in language games. Failing to reach the heart of the crisis, Rorty embraces textualism and then seeks to moderate it, promotes hermeneutics and then argues that it can somehow be conjoined to natural science, and splits explanation from interpretation and then tries to show that he has not really recreated the split between "night world" and "day world" that so troubled *fin du siècle* thought. His substitute for the Deweyan mediation of "experience" is the "conversation of mankind." This is his "zero term," as Dewey called the foundation in *Experience and Nature*, and it is as amorphous and equivocal as Deweyan "experience" proved to be: it is the master language game, the new pragmatist's counterpart of structuralist rationalism. But what is this "conversation" apart from any specific language games? Is it a mere abstraction? Is it being-itself, presupposing something other than language? Is it the value of shared experience, which was Dewey's highest value? Far from being post-philosophical Rorty is but the latest and most attenuated of the naturalized Hegelians, one of the line that he calls the "weak idealists." Bold in his criticism of realism, he stands politically in the nineteenth century, concerned to carry the Enlightenment ideals forward into the Darwinian struggle of industrial society, a liberal Darwinist.

The failure of Rorty as a practical philosopher, as one who can give an adequate diagnosis of our times, might provide an opening to look at the strand of twentieth-century thought that he suppresses, the one which eschews philosophy as the mirror of nature but which does not conclude thereby that one must retreat to cultural anthropology. Have life and

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experience been logically discredited or are they merely inadequate to carry the weight of religious and metaphysical aspirations? It is possible to explore the latter alternative, with the help of such philosophical friends as Husserl, Bergson, James, Freud, Alexander, Whitehead, Scheler, Santayana, and Ortega, all of whom turned inward to grasp life and experience as a radical reality, seizing subjectivity, rather than voiding it into language. A pure psychology devoid of metaphysical aspirations gives the self to the self, first immediately in an act of self-seizure and then through a long march of self-constitution. This is not a post-modernism but an ultra-modernism, a dare not to throw oneself into the tide of significations, but upon oneself, as Descartes did before he fled to the certainty of ideas. It is the *sum*, not the *cogito* that must be claimed, and from there life opens out and conversations occur as the co-constitution of societies by individual centers, inward centers, of the expression of meaning. This is, indeed, a foundation, but not an eternal one. It is what Max Stirner called the "creative nothing" and what Unamuno meant when he said, "Not to ascend, not to forge ahead, but to go within." Is it impossible that we might find the world and others through ourselves?

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Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 78.
2. *Ibid.*, 207.
3. *Ibid.*, 206.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 207.
6. For a fuller discussion of Santayana and his relation to the other pragmatists see Michael A. Weinstein, *The Wilderness and the City: American Classical Philosophy as a Moral Quest*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 109-127.
7. For a discussion of the Simmelian distinction between epistemology and philosophy of life see Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*; tr., Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael A. Weinstein. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1986).