

**David Rondel (ed.).** *The Cambridge Companion to Rorty*. Cambridge University Press 2021. 349 pp. \$99.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781108496575); \$29.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781108733953).

Richard Rorty was a polarizing figure. For every admirer who credited him with revitalizing American pragmatism, there was a detractor who saw him as a relativist, an irrationalist, or a smug ethnocentrist. In the fifteen years since Rorty's death, the dust has settled somewhat, and it may finally be possible to reassess his legacy. *The Cambridge Companion to Rorty* is a welcome invitation to do just that. Consisting of fourteen essays plus an introduction, the book gives a nice snapshot of the current state of Rorty scholarship—which, as will become clear, is quite different than it was during Rorty's lifetime.

The introductory essay by editor David Rondel, 'The Unity of Richard Rorty's Philosophy,' sets the tone for the volume. It argues that despite the dazzling range of Rorty's interests and influences, his work is a 'coherent and largely unified whole' (17). Rondel identifies several themes that run throughout Rorty's corpus and that help show how its parts are related. One such theme is his anti-authoritarianism: his rejection of any 'nonhuman authority to which our respect and deference is owed' (4). Rondel argues that this 'big "hedgehog" idea' (6) underlies Rorty's views on 'truth, justification, knowledge,' 'rationality,' and 'Western philosophy's recent trajectory' (5). Another theme is Rorty's 'liberal ironism'—his affirmation of 'the deep contingency of things' (9), ranging from the languages we use to our deepest values. Rondel sees this theme as key to Rorty's interest in redescription, and to his valorization of 'imagination and courage' (11).

The remaining chapters could be divided into three groups. First, there are five chapters that pose big questions about what sort of philosopher Rorty is, especially about his relation to the pragmatist tradition. The perspectives proposed by these chapters are original and often fascinating. In 'Rorty's Metaphilosophy: A Pluralistic Corridor,' Colin Koopman addresses one of the most striking features of Rorty's work: its 'command of... a wide range of philosophies, and even more so his generous engagements across them' (19). Koopman proposes a way of thinking about this feature 'in terms of [Rorty's] signature idea of vocabularies' (21). He further argues that Rorty's pluralism has an 'unexpected source' (21): the influence of Richard McKeon, a student of Dewey's who taught Rorty during his undergraduate years at the University of Chicago. Neil Gascoigne's essay, 'After Metaphysics: Eliminativism and the Protreptic Dilemma,' discusses Rorty's attempt to replace big-P Philosophy, understood as 'the study of certain definite and permanent problems' (43), with small-p philosophy, defined in Sellarsian terms as the attempt to see how things hang together. Gascoigne draws a series of complex parallels between Rorty's reconstruction of philosophy and his early eliminative materialism. In much the same way that eliminativists claim that 'what people used to call "sensations" are certain brain processes' (49), Rorty suggests that what people used to think of as contributions to big-P Philosophy are better seen as contributions to small-p philosophy. The next chapter, 'Rorty and Classical Pragmatism' by Christopher Voparil, reconsiders Rorty's relationship with Peirce, James, and Dewey. Some scholars of pragmatism



accuse Rorty of misunderstanding or willfully distorting these figures. Voparil defends him from this charge, arguing that Rorty ‘reveals limitations of the often static received images of Peirce, James, and Dewey’ (68). Voparil adds that Rorty’s thought owes more to the classical pragmatists than is usually recognized—even to Peirce, whom Rorty famously denigrated. Barry Allen’s chapter, ‘A Pragmatism More Ironic Than Pragmatic,’ makes the intriguing suggestion that what distinguishes Rorty from the classical pragmatists is his commitment to nominalism. For Rorty, as for Ockham, ‘nature is an order of absolute individuals’ (89). Everything else is ‘redescription, and it is all in the mind, in the language’ (89). According to Allen, Rorty’s nominalism leads to ‘a vast linguistic reduction’ in which ‘everything about anything is just something about language’ (100). From there it is a short leap to Rorty’s emphasis on redescription and contingency, and to his downplaying of experience. The last essay in this group is Simon Blackburn’s ‘Rorty’s Semantic Minimalism,’ which takes up some of Rorty’s well-known worries about truth, representation, and reference. Blackburn argues that, contra Rorty, there is a ‘perfectly everyday sense’ (112) in which we can observe the external world to discover how things really are. Blackburn also suggests that Rorty’s worries about representation stem in part from a misreading of Dewey, and he sketches an alternative that he sees as ‘pragmatist in spirit’ (127).

The next four chapters deal with Rorty’s significance for ethics and politics. This topic has been a point of emphasis for recent Rorty scholarship, and these essays make innovative suggestions about Rorty’s approach to matters of value. Alan Malachowski’s essay, ‘Returning to the Particular: Morality and the Self After Rorty,’ asks why Rorty’s contributions to ethics have been underappreciated. It attributes this neglect to an overemphasis on Rorty’s doubts about ‘principles and rationality’ (129)—especially when these are understood in Kantian terms. According to Malachowski, this reading misses what is most interesting about Rorty’s approach: that it ‘caters for morality at ground level’ (131), calling for ‘less involvement in the competitive arena of high-level moral theorizing and more attention to the particularities of morality in its own right, as it is forged and lived’ (152). In ‘Rorty’s Political Philosophy,’ Michael Bacon and Alexis Dianda seek to ‘clarify the particulars of Rorty’s liberalism’ (155). They argue that Rorty rejects liberalism as a philosophical project while embracing it as a political one. He does not try to ground liberal values in an account of human nature or natural rights, but he still stresses ‘the desirability of liberal institutions and their advantages when compared to alternatives’ (156). Bacon and Dianda trace the interplay of these themes over the course of Rorty’s career, from his flirtation with the label ‘postmodernist bourgeois liberalism,’ through his discussion of the ‘ideally liberal society’ in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, to his turn to issues of economic and social justice in *Achieving Our Country*. The distinction between philosophical and political liberalism also runs through Susan Dieleman’s ‘Tinkering with Truth, Tinkering with Difference: Rorty and (Liberal) Feminism.’ Dieleman argues that on Rorty’s view, feminist philosophers ‘cannot radically undermine liberalism’ but can only ‘work to gradually reform it’ (182). Finally, in ‘Rorty’s Insouciant Social Thought,’ historian James Kloppenberg draws on his own interactions with Rorty to explain why he finds Rorty’s treatment of social matters ‘unsatisfying’ (205). He is especially critical of Rorty’s ‘dismissive treatment of religion’ (209), particularly what he sees as Rorty’s

failure to appreciate religion's potential to drive social change.

The last five chapters are something of a grab bag, dealing with the significance of Rorty's thought for a variety of other topics. Georgia Warnke's 'Rorty and National Pride' discusses Rorty's critique of the 'cultural left'—those 'academic leftists' (223) who focus on identity issues at the expense of social and economic justice. Rorty thinks the cultural left lacks the national pride required for genuine reform, since it accuses America of 'atrocities for which no future acts can atone' (222). Warnke finds this framing unhelpful, and proposes that we 'replace both pride and condemnation with a willingness to endure the cognitive dissonance that results from accepting aspects of our history we would rather forget while not forgetting aspects we can still respect' (241). Next, Stephen Bush's 'Rorty on Religion' suggests that Rorty's view of religion is subtler than it first appears. Rorty is known for calling religion a 'conversation stopper'—a way of appealing to 'a final, absolute court in order to settle a debate definitively' (243). This makes it sound as though Rorty sees religion as inherently irrational. In fact, Bush claims, Rorty has a keen appreciation of religion's significance: though his official view is that religion is a private rather than a public matter, Rorty recognizes that the two 'do not remain neatly compartmentalized' (258). Bush even suggests that Rorty's political views are driven by a 'private sense of the holy' (259) that shares a good deal with certain forms of organized religion.

In the following chapter, 'Rorty: Reading Continental Philosophy,' Paul Patton explores Rorty's engagements with Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault. He argues that while Rorty 'clearly enjoyed reading' these continental thinkers, 'they did not add much to his pragmatic philosophy' (261). Patton also argues that Rorty's readings of these figures are rife with misinterpretation. He saw Derrida as a playful 'literary figure engaged in essentially private pursuits' (276), largely overlooking the more constructive side of Derrida's work; and he saw Foucault as an anarchist imagining a society 'free of its historical past,' a view Patton finds highly implausible (280). In 'Rorty's Literary Culture: Reading, Redemption, and *The Heart's Invisible Furies*,' Áine Mahon and Elizabeth O'Brien try to clarify Rorty's 'turn to literature,' especially his belief in 'the redemptive power of the novel' (286). Rorty expressed the hope that a philosophical culture might be supplanted by a literary one, the ideal of salvation through true beliefs replaced by that of salvation through imaginative encounters with otherness. Mahon and O'Brien flesh out Rorty's proposal alongside John Boyne's 2017 novel *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, arguing that both authors criticize 'standard religious practice' in the name of an 'affirmation of the human as its own source of salvation' (300). The book concludes with Robert Westbrook's essay 'Wild Orchids,' which views Rorty's corpus through the lens of his autobiographical essay 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids.' Westbrook wonders why the 'Wordsworthian moments' (303) Rorty found in his love of orchids—joyful 'encounters with the nonhuman world' (320)—did not play a larger role in his work. He links this neglect to the longstanding debate over whether Rorty nudges pragmatism toward a 'linguistic idealism' (304) that ignores the importance of experience. Westbrook notes that while 'Rorty's rejection of "experience" was critical to his radical, anti-authoritarian project' (313), Rorty the person never abandoned his love of nature and his attachment to Wordsworthian moments. He suggests that Rorty's work might have been richer if it

had ‘given these [moments] their due’ (320).

A book like this one has to strike a balance between surveying a figure in a way that is helpful to newcomers, and advancing the scholarship on that figure in a way that is useful to specialists. Reasonably enough, *The Cambridge Companion to Rorty* leans toward the latter. Some of the topics that dominated Rorty scholarship two decades ago—his relations to Sellars and Davidson, for example—get less attention than one might expect, and the tired old debates about relativism have, mercifully, largely disappeared. The Rorty presented in this book is a fresh and interesting one: someone with deep significance for ethics and politics, and someone whose relations with the pragmatist tradition are more fruitful than was long supposed. With any luck, *The Cambridge Companion to Rorty* will provoke interest in him in a new generation of readers.

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