

READING RORTY POLITICALLY

CHRISTOPHER J. VOPARIL, Humanities & Society, Union Institute & University, Cincinnati, USA

VOPARIL, CH. J.: Reading Rorty Politically
FILOZOFIA 66, 2011, No 10, p. 963

My aim in these remarks is to sketch a way of approaching the thought of Richard Rorty that I will call reading Rorty politically. I argue that reading Rorty politically is not only the most fruitful way to read Rorty, it is necessary to understand the full force of his challenge to philosophy. After sketching Rorty's important early metaphilosophical work, I outline the fundamental shift from epistemology and metaphilosophy to the moral and political that drives the development of his thought, culminating in his notion of philosophy as cultural politics.

Keywords: R. Rorty – Politics – Pragmatism – Metaphilosophy – Culture – Democracy

My aim in these remarks is to sketch a way of approaching the thought of Richard Rorty that I will call reading Rorty politically. I argue that reading Rorty politically is not only the most fruitful way to read Rorty, it is necessary to understand the full force of his challenge to philosophy. Drawing in particular on four key essays from the period following the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and the essays from the 1970s collected in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), I examine the political turn in Rorty's thought and trace its implications for political philosophy in a pragmatist mode.¹ My claim is that Rorty's thought offers a model of pragmatist political philosophy that has particular value for pragmatists seeking to engage issues of social justice and difference in the contemporary world.

In the preface to *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, his fourth volume of philosophical papers, published a few months before his death in 2007, he sums up this approach, speaking directly to philosophers:

Philosophers "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" (PCP x).

In the 1984 essay "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," he put it more bluntly: "putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit" (ORT 178/RR 242).²

In what follows I will attempt to flesh out what Rorty means by this, and how it can usefully be understood as a pragmatist approach to political philosophy. If this putting politics first seems like something of a stretch, recall Richard Bernstein's similar claim about John Dewey: "All of his thinking – whether concerning education, experience,

aesthetics, philosophy, politics, or inquiry – sprang from and led back to his reflections on democracy.”³ I want to claim that this statement is true of Rorty as well. Yet despite his assertions about putting politics first, I suggest that, at least in terms of the development of Rorty’s own thought, his turn to the political can be understood as the application to the political realm of a set of metaphilosophical positions that Rorty himself in 1961 dubbed “metaphilosophical *pragmatism*.”⁴ I will start with these metaphilosophical issues and then outline the paradigm, if you will, of political theorizing that emerges in his writing.

I. Rorty’s Metaphilosophical Pragmatism

From his earliest published essays Rorty was preoccupied with the problem in the history of philosophy of “dialectical impasses between competing schools” and, more broadly, “the spectacle of philosophers quarreling endlessly over the same issues.”⁵ Escape from these endless quarrels, he thought, would entail two things: a presuppositionless starting point not dependent itself upon a substantive philosophical thesis, and a criterion for success in solving a philosophical problem that admits of rational agreement (LT 4). However, he also understood that “In philosophical controversy, the terms used to state criteria for the resolution of arguments mean different things to different philosophers; thus each side can take the rules of the game of controversy in a sense that will guarantee its own success (thus in effect, changing the rules [of the game]).”⁶ So, he concludes, “each system can and does create its own private metaphilosophical criteria, designed to authenticate itself and disallow its competitors.”⁷

What I would like to suggest is that the metaphilosophical difficulties Rorty describes here – in particular, the absence of presuppositionless starting points and mutually agreed-upon criteria – can be seen as characterizing political, as well as philosophical, disagreement. The lack of presuppositionless starting points translates in a political context to what he later calls “ethnocentrism,” by which he means “an inescapable condition – roughly synonymous with human finitude” (ORT 15). The lack of neutral criteria to settle disputes can be understood as what Rawls calls the “irreducible pluralism” of contemporary life. To be clear, this is my assertion; I don’t know that Rorty ever drew this explicit a link between his early metaphilosophical positions to his later discussions of politics. And he himself does not take up these political issues directly for another two decades.

Despite being entangled in this metaphilosophical impasse – Rorty saw no evidence of such presuppositionless starting points or mutually-agreed upon criteria (although he briefly entertained the possibility that linguistic philosophy showed such promise) – philosophy, on Rorty’s view, does in fact make progress. It makes progress because the dialogue continues, despite the impasses and endless quarrels – that is, by keeping the conversation going. If nothing else, “the combatants on both sides,” as Rorty puts it, “repair their armor, and these repairs eventually amount to a complete change of clothes” (LT 2/RR 61).⁸

Rorty’s initial attraction to pragmatism – by initial I am referring to his writings of

the early 1960s – emanates from the way pragmatism responds to these metaphilosophical difficulties. Rather than despairing of philosophers' ability to change the rules, Peirce, who receives the most attention in Rorty's early essays, and also Dewey, whom he calls a "metaphilosopher's metaphilosopher," seem to embrace it, understanding that, in Rorty's words, "to keep communication going is to win the game."⁹ Specifically, their appeal to practice "transfers the question of the acceptability of a philosophical program out of metaphilosophy and into the realm of moral choice." Rorty calls this "the dependence of criteriology on ethical norms" – an idea he believes Dewey and Kierkegaard learned from Hegel.¹⁰ Similarly, he underscores the "ethically-centered epistemology" he finds in Peirce, who in Rorty's view appeals to "self-control" – "a moral virtue rather than a theoretical insight" – as the only thing that "can save inquiry from anarchy."¹¹ Putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit, I would like to suggest, can be understood in this spirit.

II. From Metaphilosophy to Politics

This move from the epistemological and metaphilosophical to the moral and political guides Rorty's turn in the 1980s toward the "consequences" of pragmatism. Broadly speaking, this project can be understood as an attempt to move beyond "the entire cultural tradition which made truth [...] a central virtue" (CP 35), what he called a "post-Kantian" or "post-Philosophical," with a capital "P," culture. As he had put it earlier, "if we have no criteria for evaluating answers to certain questions, then we should stop asking those questions until we do" (LT 14). Why? As he puts it later in "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," it comes down to "a question of efficiency" – "how best to bring about the utopia sketched by the Enlightenment." His stance against traditional philosophy in its rationalist and foundationalist registers, then, comes down to "causal efficacy," with regard to political and moral ends, rather than "epistemic status" as such (TP 172/RR 355). Viewing issues in moral and political terms, rather than epistemological or metaphilosophical ones, he holds, "makes clearer what is at stake" (ORT 28/RR 233). So, what is at stake? Briefly stated, for Rorty what is at stake is "our identification with our community." His 1979 presidential address to the APA – Eastern Division states it most poignantly: "what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right" (CP 116/RR 115).

Rorty's work over the next decade and half attempts to think through the implications of not having recourse to neutral, mutually agreed upon criteria. "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" frames the issue in terms of breaking the link between justifiability and truth, or between justifiability and a philosophical discourse that claims to provide access to truth. If, as Rorty held back in 1961, "every philosophy will contrive to present a self-justificatory account of the criteria for choice between philosophies"¹² – that is, if the choice between philosophical positions is a moral choice rather than one that can be settled on metaphilosophical or epistemological grounds – then philosophy and its purported truths cannot settle moral or political conflicts. There is nothing outside of "the body of shared belief that determines the reference of the word 'we'" to which transcen-

dental philosophy has privileged access – nothing “common to all human beings qua human” – to which we can appeal for a non-circular justification of our moral beliefs. We can only appeal to “something relatively local and ethnocentric – the tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture” (ORT 176-177/240).

When it comes to an alternative paradigm of pragmatist political philosophy, these insights entail a number of shifts. These will be familiar to those who know Rorty. Social hope replaces transcendental knowledge. A lightly sketched possible future takes the place of appeals to an independent reality. Narratives and stories supplant rational arguments. Abstract notions of humanity and rights are abandoned for felt, emotional identifications with particular communities. Objectivity can be replaced by intersubjective agreement and transcendence with imaginative novelty. Rorty’s justification for these shifts is a pragmatic, political one: one of “efficiency,” as we have seen. In “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” he invokes Dewey to draw the distinction between providing “philosophical articulation” of liberal democracy vs. “philosophical backup” for it. Again “putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit” (ORT 178/RR 242), Rorty holds that both the institutions and culture of liberal democracy would be “better served” by an alternative “vocabulary” of moral and political reflection than one structured around notions of truth, rationality, and moral obligation (CIS 44). Thus, “the question is not about how to define words like ‘truth’ or ‘rationality’ or ‘knowledge’ or ‘philosophy’, but about what self-image our society should have of itself” (ORT 28/RR 233). If we can see vocabularies as tools for coping with reality rather than representing it, we can make room in our conception of inquiry for the insight that “narratives as well as laws, redescriptions as well as predictions, serve a useful purpose in helping us deal with the problems of society” (CP 198).

Central to this enterprise is the idea of redescription or recontextualization, as he briefly referred to it. Rorty’s early metaphilosophical work had yielded the insight that “any metaphysical, epistemological, or axiological arguments can be defeated by redefinition,” as he called it then. Thus, as he held in 1961, “nothing remains but to make a virtue of necessity and to study this process of redefinition itself.”¹³ What he calls redescription, or, more technically, “a Quinean picture of inquiry as the continual reweaving of a web of beliefs rather than as the application of criteria to cases” (ORT 26/RR 231), is the centerpiece of his foundationless and historicist conception of the self-criticism of culture; absent privileged contexts and accepted criteria, all we can do is redescribe things and compare one redescription to another. For Rorty there are no privileged contexts outside the webs of belief that constitute us. The notion that we can get outside of these webs, on this view, is a function of a conception of rational inquiry authorized by the assumption that everything can be translated into a single, widely available context and vocabulary accepted by any rational inquirer – precisely the assumption that Rorty’s paradigm seeks to move beyond.

Here too Rorty’s designs are at bottom political in the broad sense of “putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit.” Here his politics, if you will, entail a concrete strategy of self-criticism and reform of Western societies for making them more respon-

sive to suffering and injustice, both at home and abroad. Rorty embraces redescrptions over arguments because he believes that if we work only toward those programs that can be supported by arguments, we are limited to that which can be made sense of within existing assumptions via currently accepted criteria. Without the equivalent in political discourse of the moves of Kuhnian revolutionary science – namely, paradigm shifts, or redescrptions – we will never alter our self-image, and thus will close off the possibility of a previously unimagined future. Because argument gets its traction by “working according to the rules of some familiar language-game, some familiar way of describing the current situation,” they “often just get in the way of attempts to create an unfamiliar vocabulary, a new lingua franca for those trying to transform what they see around them” (EHO 189, 181). Or, as he put it in a more recent essay, citing Shelley, “the sort of truth that is the product of successful argument cannot [...] improve our moral condition.”¹⁴

What I want to underscore is the important shift that takes place away from truth and argument toward the cultivation of the imagination and felt identifications or attachments as the primary engines of social change. Rorty develops the idea of the imagination as “the cutting edge of cultural evolution”¹⁵ in the 1991 essay “Feminism and Pragmatism.” In “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” Rorty not only avers the centrality of community – our groundedness in an identification with a culturally and historically constituted “we” – but establishes this commonality as something we constitute and make, rather than uncover or find. Moral progress, on this view, is a matter of “making rather than finding, of poetic achievement by ‘radically situated’ individuals and communities, rather than as the gradual unveiling, through the use of ‘reason’, of ‘principles’ or ‘rights’ or ‘values’” (ORT 189/RR 252). Indeed, one of the common threads that runs through all four essays is cultivating the kind of inclusive moral identity necessary to create a global “community of trust,” as he calls it in “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” which in turn would make us more likely to act to remedy the suffering and injustice of distant and different others. The way to achieve this moral community is not via appeals to Kantian universal moral obligation or rational discourse, but through what he terms in “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” “sentimental education” – a Humean cultivation of sentiment through narrative and “sad and sentimental stories” that create ties of sympathy via a shared moral identity in which we “see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences” (TP 181/RR 362). This stance is what leads Rorty to embrace narrative and stories over philosophy and theory – again, a matter of efficiency for achieving this moral community.

Unlike most communitarians, however – and here we might even include the Dewey of *The Public and its Problems* – Rorty is especially attuned to the way in which community is constituted through exclusion, and to what he calls the “borderline cases” – individuals or groups that we exclude from “true humanity” (TP 168-9/RR 352). This is a key theme that I would like to highlight in these essays. For example, in “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” he treats what he calls “enemies of liberal democracy,” like Nietzsche and Loyola, who are deemed “crazy” or “mad” because “the limits of sanity are set by what *we* can take seriously” (ORT 187-8/RR 251). “Human Rights, Rationality,

and Sentimentality” deals with victims of ethnic cleansing. “Feminism and Pragmatism” takes up marginalized and oppressed groups. And in “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” he pursues the question of how to expand the conversation to include the non-West. Here Rorty’s approach generates important insights by calling attention to the logical space within which moral deliberation takes place. “A voice saying something never heard before,” particularly a voice expressing claims about injustice, may become lost in a condition of “meaninglessness,” where an individual or group is “in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices – unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one” (TP 217/RR 342). What is needed in this marginalized state is not argumentative procedures, à la Habermas, or “the claim that something large like Nature or Reason or History or the Moral Law is on the side of the oppressed,” but rather “courageous and imaginative experimentation.” As Rorty puts it in a gloss on a passage from Dewey’s “Philosophy and Democracy” about the contribution women will make to philosophy when they write from their own point of view that he cites in “Feminism and Pragmatism,” “if you find yourself a slave, do not accept your masters’ descriptions of the real; do not work within the boundaries of their moral universe. Instead, try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world that lend themselves to the support of *your* judgment of the worthwhile life” (TP 216/RR 342).

These alternative descriptions are what expand the logical space of moral deliberation so that previously unnoticed suffering and injustice can be recognized and addressed. The catch is that this logical space can only be expanded by “non-logical” means – novel metaphors, redescriptions, and creative misuses of language. This dilemma is what authorizes forms like prophecy, which Rorty describes as “all that nonviolent political movements can fall back on when argument fails” (TP 207/RR 334).

It is also what necessitates his call, in his final collection of essays, for “philosophy as cultural politics.” Cultural politics, to conclude, can be understood as a catch-all phrase for conversation or inquiry that takes place in the absence of agreed-upon criteria to govern argument. Cultural politics, thus, aims to subvert the idea that “persistent argument will lead all inquirers to the same set of beliefs” (PCP 92). Citing pragmatism’s potential for generating “radical cultural change,” Rorty calls cultural politics “the growing point of culture.” (Here he cites a letter where James likened pragmatism’s potential to the Protestant Reformation). By “practicing cultural politics,” which involves “suggesting changes in the uses of words,” as well as “new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation” (PCP x), we can enlarge “our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions” to make them as inclusive as possible (PCP 124). To say that cultural politics should have “the last word” (PCP 14) on disagreements and impasses is to say that they can only be decided by appeals to practice and to an inclusive democratic moral community. What this amounts to for Rorty when it comes to philosophy is that “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” (PCP x). As before, “what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy” (PCP ix). Since

there are no neutral criteria to which we can appeal, challenging an ongoing cultural practice entails explaining “what practice might be put in its place, and how this substitute will tie in with surrounding practices” (PCP 20). Most importantly, Rorty suggests, in a Deweyan spirit, that “philosophy professors” should see intervening in cultural politics as “their principal assignment” (PCP ix-x, 21). Reading Rorty politically helps us see an example of how to do so.

ABBREVIATIONS OF RORTY TEXTS

- CP *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)
- EHO *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991)
- LT *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967)
- ORT *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991)
- PCP *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- RR *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) TP *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

NOTES

¹ These key essays, which span the period from 1984-1997, are: “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” “Feminism and Pragmatism,” “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” and “Justice as a Larger Loyalty.” All are included in Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (eds.), *The Rorty Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

² Rorty addresses the relation between pragmatism and democracy in this way: “Although I do not think there is an inferential path that leads from the antirepresentationalist view of truth and knowledge common to Nietzsche, James, and Dewey either to democracy or antidemocracy, I do think there is a plausible inference from democratic convictions to such a view,” “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” in *The Rorty Reader*, p. 449.

³ Richard J. Bernstein, “Creative Democracy—The Task Still Before Us,” in Sheila Greeve Davaney and Warren G. Frisina (eds.), *The Pragmatic Century: Conversations with Richard Bernstein* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), p. 191.

⁴ Rorty, “Recent Metaphilosophy,” *Review of Metaphysics* 15, no. 2 (1961), p. 302.

⁵ Rorty, “Realism, Categories, and the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1962), p. 322; “Introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*,” in *The Rorty Reader*, p. 60.

⁶ “Recent Metaphilosophy,” p. 299.

⁷ Rorty, “The Limits of Reductionism,” in I.C. Lieb (ed.), *Experience, Existence, and the Good* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), p. 110.

⁸ In “The Philosopher as Expert,” an essay dating from the early 1960s but only recently published, he puts it this way: “Philosophies, to repeat, aren’t killed off, but they are modified almost (but never entirely) beyond recognition as the dialogue continues. This process of modification is the work not of great thinkers but of the technicians,” *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 410.

⁹ “Recent Metaphilosophy,” pp. 301-2.

¹⁰ “The Limits of Reductionism,” pp. 111; 116n11.

¹¹ “Realism, Categories, and the ‘Linguistic Turn’,” pp. 311, 317.

¹² “The Limits of Reductionism,” p. 111.

¹³ “Recent Metaphilosophy,” p. 301.

¹⁴ “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” in *The Rorty Reader*, p. 484.

¹⁵ “Ethics without Principles,” in *The Rorty Reader*, p.432.

Christopher Voparil, Ph.D.
Humanities & Society
Union Institute & University
440 East McMillan
Cincinnati, Ohio 45206
USA
e-mail: christopher.voparil@myunion.edu