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Rorty's Portrait of Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

According to the classical pragmatists, philosophy ought not to be about finding transcendent answers that point to something beyond humanity but something contingent, finite, and very human. Richard Rorty picks up where the classical pragmatists left off and, using updated tools in analytic philosophy from those like Quine and Davidson, manages to use philosophy against itself and questions the validity of the entire field. The result of this inquiry will lead to some of the great American philosopher's central points: picking up the anti-representationalism of the classical pragmatists, arguing that the field of epistemology along with the dreams of finding an objective foundation should disappear (in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979/2009)), what philosophy would be like without such foundations, and how this flavor of pragmatism is connected to liberal democracy (in Philosophy and Social Hope (1999)). What this idea means in regard to Rorty's vision of philosophy and politics will be the core of this essay. Its goal is to elucidate Rorty's contribution to both fields, and if the reader walks away from this piece with a better, well-rounded conception of Rorty's project, then this essay will have succeeded. Of course, no great thinker is without their flaws, and to properly understand such a philosopher is to not only understand what they stood for, but also the limitations of their ideas. For that reason, while some of Rorty's central points will be illuminated, a brief criticism will also be given. At its end, the portrait of Rorty's pragmatism will, by its own virtue, prove to be a profound contribution to the humanities that will serve as a source of inspiration for quite some time.

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Intruduction

Richard Rorty was an American philosopher (1931-2007) quite unlike his peers. At a time when analytic philosophy dominated the Anglo-American world, Rorty was one of the few who questioned the Platonic tradition of truth, thereby questioning the role of philosophy up until that point. The virtues and consequences of Rorty's portrait of pragmatism have led to a rediscovery of those like William James and John Dewey, and are nothing short of a refreshing and profound tale of intellectual openness that provides many lessons in philosophy, politics, literature, and life. This paper seeks to explain some of the strong themes in Richard Rorty's pragmatism and their significance in regard to other philosophical positions. It seeks to connect Rorty's philosophy with his liberalism and provide a brief criticism of his materialism. At its end, we'll see why Rorty's philosophy has inspired many in its pragmatic attempts to get around the traditional conversation of philosophy.

1. Rorty and the Pragmatist Project

Rorty, of course, did not begin pragmatism. That honor belongs to Charles Sanders Peirce, but what survives in modern and contemporary pragmatism was mostly done by William James and John Dewey. The pragmatists were not monolithic in nature, and each differed on some important points, but what lines them in the same tradition was a deep suspicion of the philosophy's project to search for the eternal and, in its stead, preferred human-centered thinking and contingency (Peirce aside). No other pragmatist drives this point more than Richard Rorty, but to see the horizon of Rorty's thought is to see what the pragmatist project historically was against. Rorty goes on to say:

> Pragmatists—both classical and 'neo-'— do not believe that there is a way thing really are. So, they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, they have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'. When they are asked, 'Better by what criterion?', they have no detailed answer, any more than the first mammals could specify in what respects they were better than the dying dinosaurs (Rorty, 1994/1999, 27)

Pragmatism is the escape from eternity to the finite, contingent, human world while also focusing on what is useful for our very human needs and purposes. There is no one true privileged description of the world. Anything that involves a shift to a higher realm, whether that be Plato's realm of the Forms, transcendent rationality, or Descartes' clear and distinct ideas, is not pragmatic. The pragmatists wished to move away from foundationalism and the dualisms that plagued philosophy since the days of Socrates in the marketplace. Rorty, supplied with the tools of linguistic philosophy by those like W. V. Quine (breaking the analytic/synthetic

division), Wilfred Sellars (the Myth of the Given), Donald Davidson (collapsing the conceptual scheme), and the late Wittgenstein (looking at how words are used), turned the modern inventions of late analytic philosophy against itself. All of these philosophical heroes have contributed to the Darwinian portrait of man as a clever animal not doing the business of the gods or finding absolute truth, but have actually shown why such attempts at transcendence are unintelligible and untenable. The aforementioned classical pragmatists had already attempted to do this task with terms like 'experience,' but they lacked the privilege of knowing what philosophy would be like after them. Thus, only Rorty was able to reap the rewards of the future, thereby updating and cleaning up the ideas of the classical pragmatists.

If from Kant onwards, philosophy became a matter of finding the correct foundations of epistemology, then epistemology in the traditional sense would have to disappear. Knowledge would not disappear, for the politician, scientist, and philosopher alike would still have direct and everyday knowledge. That, however, would mean that there wouldn't be anything philosophical about it. A doctor who can diagnose a patient, presumably because they know medical literature well enough, does not need a foundational theory of knowledge to explain how that process is possible. That is the want and the need of philosophers but less so of medical doctors or the painter who decides to paint the blue sky. Rorty says in his seminal text, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, that:

> Unless we are willing to revive Platonic and Aristotelian notions about grasping universals, we shall not think that knowledge of general truths is made possible by some special, metaphysically distinctive, ingredient in human beings...Unless we wish to revive the seventeenth century's somewhat awkward and inconsistent use of the Aristotelian notion of "substance" we shall not make sense of the notion of two ontological realms the mental and the physical (Rorty, 1979/2009, 125).

The consequence of this view is that the "spooky"stuff of both universals and Cartesian dualism, as well as epistemology, is thrown out the window. What Rorty has in its place will be touched on soon, but for the moment, it's important to get a very crucial piece of his thinking clear: Rorty does have a vision for the future of philosophy, one that obviously does not align with the origins of the traditional view of knowledge. The question remains: what then can philosophy look like without the search for certainty or transcendent knowledge that made it special? What becomes of philosophy and its philosophers?

2. A Philosophy Without Mirrors

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty treats hermeneutics as the hope that once epistemology is gone, nothing takes its place as an heir, but that interesting and insightful discourse never ceases. For Rorty:

> Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts (Rorty, 1979/2009, 318).

Epistemology can be said to be the opposite: it hopes to find a common ground or disciplinary matrix that underlies discourse and all rational interlocutors. In other words, it wishes to find an objective common ground so that it can put discussion to an end. Epistemology is the hope for foundational certainty. The only problem is that while philosophy has had plenty of time to find such a foundation, it hasn't yet done so. It is time to move on from the wishful thinking of foundations and perhaps enter an era of discourse for education's sake and to keep the conversation going. Two kinds of philosophers encompass the revolutionary kind who can keep and refresh the literature of philosophy going. One of them transforms and founds new schools within the traditional lines of philosophy. They are the philosophers who continue asking the big picture questions and assume those epistemological grounds of rationality (systematic). Another kind, and Rorty's preferred kind, are the edifying philosophers who break the rules of the game. They aren't there to lay transcendent truths on our feet, but are there to richly educate and remind us that what they're after has nothing to do with gaining more accurate representations about how things are (Rorty, 1979/2009, 369-371).

Now the fate of philosophy can be discussed. Both the Rorty of *Mirror* and the late Rorty did not wish for philosophy to erode, but for its classical fixation of having a God's bird's-eye view of things to be dropped. Rorty did not know where philosophy would turn moving forward, nor did he think that philosophy would come to an end. No one can indeed know the future, but Rorty ends *Mirror* with, "The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation" (Rorty, 1979/2009, 394). Philosophy is about education and continuing the great conversation of the West. Philosophers do not need the traditional problems of epistemology to keep the conversation going—the edifying philosophers prove as much. And despite Rorty later coming to repudiate the split between the systematic and edifying philosophers, his vision of what philosophy ought to be largely remained the same. Michael Williams a good friend of Rorty and a fellow philosopher, once said that:

> In later writings, he (Rorty) argues that philosophy should concern itself with cultural politics: conversation about what to have conversations about. But even in Mirror, this suggestion is just below the surface. Rorty extends, rather than replaces, his conception of philosophy as hermeneutic and edifying (Williams, 2009, xxix).

The late Rorty is not a different beast, but a more fine-tuned version than that of *Mirror*. And like any great edifying teacher, his writings were always at odds with the common currents of philosophy.

3. Criticism of Rorty's Materialism

Rorty's stance on philosophy has drawn the ire of plenty of critics. On that note, a good philosopher always has plenty of critics, and in most cases, criticism is a form of deep respect and engagement with one's ideas. Rorty wouldn't have been able to disagree with Kant or Locke, for instance, if he hadn't read them and took time to stew with their texts. To do a philosopher justice is to show them the limits of their thinking, so out of respect for Richard Rorty, it is important to know at least one minor contention in his philosophy, if not at the very least, to better understand his perspective.

To begin, Rorty does not deny reality or experience, for that'd be absurd. What he is hardline about, however, is that reality and talking about reality are two different things. He is against the correspondence theory of truth, which is based on the conflation of both these points in traditional philosophy:

> The giveaway comes, I think, when we find that the usual excuse for invidious treatment is that we are shoved around by physical reality but not by values. Yet what does being shoved around have to do with objectivity, accurate representation, or correspondence? Nothing, I think, unless we confuse contact with reality (a causal, non-intentional, non-description-relative relation) with dealing with reality (describing, explaining, predicting, and modifying it—all of which are things we do under descriptions) ...The absence of a description is confused with a privilege attaching to a certain description (Rorty, 1979/2009, 375).

Now one can understand why Rorty has the belief that philosophy and beliefs are not only matters of linguistic affairs, but also how they can't be what many think they are. Our beliefs and outlooks—the ways in which we cope with existence—have to come to us through language and thereby descriptions. So, there is a reality in the lame sense of the word, but anything we can say afterwards does not correspond with it but is about it. In a short essay called *Truth Without Correspondence to Reality*, Rorty clarifies the position of Dewey, Davidson, and himself by saying:

> He (Davidson) and Dewey agree that we should give up the idea that knowledge is an attempt to represent reality. Rather, we should view inquiry as a way of using reality. So the relation between our truth claims and the rest of the world is causal rather than representational. It causes us to hold beliefs,

> and we continue to hold the beliefs which prove to be reliable guides to getting what we want (Rorty, 1994/1999, 33).

The goal is a noble one, but a sharp realist critic can say that these comments, despite not wanting to, still reek of dualism. It is probably better to drop the notion of "reality" as a pragmatist, as any view that then attempts to source how reality can give us beliefs and how language never quite corresponds with it begins to look far more metaphysical than intended. There is a strange tension here, and while Rorty would likely deny it and say that it would take the last vestiges of realism to point that out, there is, nevertheless, always wiggle room for disagreement, even in tight spaces of discourse. This notion is especially true when coupled with the fact that Rorty is a physicalist and a materialist (and according to him, a non-reductive kind). This harks back to earlier when discussing how he wanted to get rid of mind stuff and that there was nothing spooky or supernatural going on. Materialism for Rorty is taken seriously in *Mirror* when he says:

> Physicalism is probably right in saying that we shall someday be able, "in principle," to predict every movement of a person's body (including those of his larynx and his writing hand) by reference to microstructures within his body (Rorty, 1979/2009, 354).

And also when:

> Every speech, thought, theory, poem, composition, and philosophy will turn out to be completely predictable in purely naturalistic terms. Some atoms-and-the-void account of micro-processes within individual human beings will permit the prediction of every sound or inscription which will ever be uttered. There are no ghosts (Rorty, 1979/2009, 387).

However, since Rorty doesn't believe in the Mirror of Nature (correspondence theory of truth or privileged representations, if you like), his materialism must be taken only as seriously as its ability to predict future outcomes, and thereby how useful it is for feeding human needs, wants, and desires. In this case, materialism and science, as the former depends on the latter, have indeed been fruitful, but science still flourished while under the dominion of spirituality, dualism, and the religion of its day (processes which are, at times, at odds with materialism and are very much at odds with Rorty's preferred views). Men of religious faith, like Gregor Mendel, have made leaps in science while having beliefs at odds with the scientists of their day, and that is not to speak of earlier leaps made by figures like Isaac Newton and Galileo, who were profoundly spiritual. Perhaps some of these wacky beliefs in dualism or immaterial "spooky" stuff did, in an interesting way, help propel society forward. They are part of the story here in the West, and Rorty understands as much. And while there were also clear roadblocks and

impediments to such knowledge brought on by religion, dualism, and mind stuff, why not continue to hold onto it loosely instead of jumping ship to materialism? Why is there a harder preference for one over the other when scientific innovation (materialism's greatest ally) can indeed take place when under the spell of the mind stuff that Rorty attacks? This view is not about human dignity and the like going away under materialism, as Rorty shows that the two are compatible, but why carry the picture of materialism close to the heart when its virtues are also found elsewhere? Why is materialism the more attractive description over any other competing beliefs? Rorty does a fine job in showing the flaws of other ones such as idealism and empiricism, but I think his support for materialism can use some reinforcing because scientific progress (the main support for materialism) is not beholden to a materialist perspective despite it being quite successful with it. Is its success with materialism its only justification? To Rorty, it is, but because of the previous reasons mentioned, science is compatible with other kinds of non-materialist narratives. The non-representational favoritism for materialism and naturalism by the pragmatists like Dewey and Rorty, I think, is an unfortunate holdover from Darwin's picture of the world.

Under Rorty's thinking, it is conceivable that in the near future, human beings may find a better set of possible descriptions that can do what materialism attempts to do but better. Will materialism then be a reasonable (justified in terms of an audience) belief to hold in this hypothetical future?

4. Politics and Openness

It's normally odd to add a little bit about a philosopher's particular brand of politics in conjunction with their philosophy, but in the case of Rorty, there is a familiarity and connection with democratic liberalism. Rorty would deny that pragmatism, or that any philosophy-like tool, is intrinsically tied to one political position or another. In his words, "...any philosophical view is a tool which can be used by many different hands" (Rorty, 1994/1999, 23). For him, we can't learn what Heidegger has to say about truth or rationality from the notion that he was a Nazi (Rorty, 1994/1999, 24). Nevertheless, there is a connection between Rorty's liberalism and his philosophy.

If we take Rorty's history, partly gleaned from his autobiographical essay *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*, it's easier to see why he became a defender of liberal democracy. His family was close to political figures and intellectuals of the era, including that of Sidney Hook (who was John Dewey's favorite student). Rorty rejected Dewey's philosophy early on but later came to embrace it. Owing his maturity to what he had encountered in his youth, he took Dewey's openness and affection for liberal democracy not because humans have a specific human nature, or because transcendent reason says it's the best system, but because it allows human beings the freedom to have different answers (Rorty, 1992/1999). Liberal democracy needs no grander justification from either reason or God. "Dewey," says Rorty, "put a new twist on the idea that

if you take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself" (Rorty, 1989/1999, 118). I take that to mean that "truth" is secondary to whatever ensures political and economic freedom. This idea is confirmed when, according to Rorty, Dewey advocated "true beliefs" as whatever followed from a free and open encounter with opinions (Rorty, 1989/1999, 119). In this example, truth follows from a political environment that fosters it, and liberal democracy, with its Sunday's best, is pluralistic: a variety of beliefs and descriptions can grow in its garden.

If this liberal idea sounds familiar, it is due to the fact that it is tightly bound to Rorty's philosophical stance. If pragmatism opens the door to a multitude of ideas and potential descriptions, then one can say it sits rather cozily next to a liberalism that offers to extend the conversation, a politic where everyone gets a voice and where it's hotly debated which potential answers out of the many is more useful for our purposes. Liberal democracy is good in the eyes of Rorty precisely because of its openness and answer to freedom. Whatever blooming beliefs are grown from its soil are as much of "truth" as one can ever hope to get.

5. Hope for the Future

There is a brilliant light and strong hope for the future in Rorty's politics and philosophy. Philosophically, he wishes to show that the great texts of the West matter and that an education in literature and, to a smaller extent, the literature of philosophy can do what the empirical sciences cannot. In politics, the tolerance and cosmopolitan attitude of John Dewey meets with Rorty's humility to create a vision of the future where needless suffering is curtailed through liberal democracy. Rorty does not believe in utopianism, nor does he believe in a historical teleology that promises to end suffering wholesale. The projects of the human race belong to no extra-historical destiny, nor can they be founded on one. In Rorty, what happens when the viscous philosophical certainty is lifted out of a belief in democracy remains humble ideas of equality, community, and tolerance. Rorty remarks that:

> The idea of a universally shared source of truth called 'reason' or 'human nature' is, for us pragmatists, just the idea that such discussion ought to be capable of being made conclusive. We see this idea as a misleading way of expressing the hope, which we share, that the human race as a whole should gradually come together in a global community, a community which incorporates most of the thick morality of the European industrialized democracies (Rorty, 1996/1999, xxxii).

The "which we share" is a giveaway. The misguided search for a common ground in politics through the avenues of reason or human nature is revealed to be based upon the hope for a better world. The pragmatist shares that strong hope for a better world and future but does not need to chase ghosts to justify it. They do not argue for their hope on the basis of a rational argument; rather, they see that the tale of European tolerance and democracy is simply a good one. No

other justification is needed, and such a strong hope for the future need not come prepackaged with historical certainty either. Rorty and the pragmatists are willing to give that their dreams for the future may just be dreams:

> We think that the utopian world community envisaged by the Charter of the United Nations and the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights is no more the destiny of humanity than is an atomic holocaust or the replacement of democratic governments by feuding warlords. If either of the latter is what the future holds, our species will have been unlucky, but it will not have been irrational. It will not have failed to live up to its moral obligations. It will simply have missed a chance to be happy (Rorty, 1996/1999, xxxii).

The dream is beautiful regardless, as the humbleness and contingency of this view do not writhe in the face of an unknown and a potentially dreadful future. A great opportunity befalls the world, but whether the chance for world happiness is grasped or slips by is no part of a cosmic plan. Rorty's hope for the future is simply that we do the best we can with the tools he thinks are best provided by European, bourgeois, liberal democracy. It is held together by a full-hearted hope for the future that knows perfectly well its own flaws. Its supreme aim is simply being happy with the means provided.

Conclusion

Rorty stands at the crossroads of old philosophy and a pragmatism that is forever in search of finding new and better answers. He is one of those great edifying philosophers who continue to teach great lessons long after they have left, and his importance as a great American erudite has led to the special privilege of him being recognized and read by philosophers and the greater public. One need only pore over the countless tomes of secondary literature that cite Rorty's name and ideas as a great source of inspiration, regardless of agreement with his politics or philosophy. Leaving decades of writings behind him, the virtue of Richard Rorty's pragmatism is that it reminds us that there is no one absolute description of the world. The world thus remains open to a plurality of views that enable us to reinvent and reinterpret ourselves in the face of this never-ending education and quest for betterment. Rorty's portrait of pragmatism is then a deeply human affair, and he ensures that the virtues of philosophical titans like James and Dewey are not forgotten in the jargon of our age, while also contributing uniquely to the great literature of philosophy, the projects of his predecessors, and to the dreams of a hopeful democratic society, one that is built on the pillars of tolerance and togetherness.

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