



Rorty and His Critics

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 110, No. 4 (October 2001)

RORTY AND HIS CRITICS. ROBERT B. BRANDOM, Ed. Malden: Blackwell, 2000.
Pp. xx, 410.

This is the best collection of essays on Rorty's philosophy that has been published in the last decade. It will be of great interest not only to Rorty specialists but to anyone concerned with the difficulties contemporary analytic philosophy faces in its search for a viable self-understanding. The contributors are Barry Allen, Akeel Bilgrami, Jacques Bouveresse (whose essay has previously appeared in French), Robert Brandom (who has also written a thought-provoking introduction to the volume), James Conant, Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett, Jürgen Habermas, John McDowell, Hilary Putnam, Bjørn Ramberg, and Michael Williams. Rorty himself has also written an essay, plus individual and fairly extensive replies to each of his critics.

The exchanges are lively and sometimes intense, yet largely free from the sort of anxious moralizing that too often mars discussions of Rorty's philosophy. Many of the central aspects of his thinking get examined in detail: his views on truth, justification, and rationality; his criticism of Cartesian and empiricist conceptions of the mind; his notion that philosophers should strive to replace epistemology, metaphysics, and "the vocabulary of objectivity" with sociology, history, and "the vocabulary of solidarity"; and, finally, his claim that such a replacement would complete the liberating, anti-authoritarian project of the Enlightenment.

What, then, do Rorty and his critics disagree about? In fact, that is itself a matter of some controversy. The critics all claim to agree with Rorty that what he calls "realist" or "representationalist" epistemology and metaphysics are hopeless undertakings that should be rejected. However, many argue that the sort of rejection Rorty offers is not root-and-branch—indeed, that his alternative, "ironist" position retains many of the prejudices that need to be abandoned. Some critics (most clearly Bilgrami, Conant, McDowell, and Putnam) contend that the established uses of "the vocabulary of objectivity," rightly understood, are metaphysically innocuous and worth preserving, and that Rorty's blindness to those innocent ways of talking reveals that he is still held captive by the philosophical pictures he claims to discard. Rorty replies that this innocence is an illusion, that as long as one does not let go of the old linguistic habits one will remain seized by the old philosophical worries, and, hence, that it is his opponents who unwittingly hold on to representationalist patterns of thought.

Central to this conflict is Rorty's revisionist conception of philosophy. He wants philosophy to change things—to replace stale modes of discourse with new, imaginative ways of talking. Thus, where many of his opponents see confusion, Rorty finds promising innovation. Hilary Putnam, for instance, argues that Rorty's characterization of everyday and scientific descriptions as ways of

“coping” with the environment deprives him of the resources required to do full justice to our conception of what such descriptions accomplish. According to Putnam, Rorty’s account is no better off than, say, a phenomenalist construal of what talking about reality involves. Putnam says both sorts of account “violate our deepest intuitions” about what we are doing when we speak of, say, our spouses and children (82). Rorty’s reply is, in effect, to deny the significance of doing full justice to what Putnam describes as deep intuitions. According to Rorty, the important task is rather to invent a new way of looking at language that does not lure us into skeptical worries. He says Putnam’s objection is no less misplaced than a complaint to the effect that the surgeon operating on my daughter treats her as a mere assemblage of tissues. No matter how counterintuitive, this perspective helps the surgeon heal his patient; and, similarly, the characterization of language that Rorty offers is intended to help philosophers eradicate the plague of skepticism.

The exchange with Akeel Bilgrami has a similar character. Bilgrami discusses Rorty’s and Davidson’s criticism of the idea that truth can constitute a norm or a goal of inquiry. Rorty and Davidson both claim that we can never tell which of our beliefs are true, since, as Davidson puts it in his contribution to this volume, “truths do not come with a ‘mark’, like the date in the corner of some photographs, which distinguishes them from falsehoods” (67). According to Rorty and Davidson, the absence of such a mark implies that the notion of truth as a goal of inquiry must be abandoned. Here is Davidson again: “Since it is neither visible as a target, nor recognizable when achieved, there is no point in calling truth a goal. Truth is not a value, so the ‘pursuit of truth’ is an empty enterprise unless it means only that it is often worthwhile to increase our confidence in our beliefs, by collecting further evidence or checking our calculations” (67).

Bilgrami claims that this argument falsifies what inquiry means from the point of view of the inquirer. According to Bilgrami, Rorty’s and Davidson’s criticism presupposes a detached, third-person perspective on our knowledge-seeking activities. From such a detached position, truth does indeed seem void of all normative significance, and justification will appear only as a matter of increasing the amount of confidence in certain beliefs by measuring them against other beliefs that are presently withdrawn from doubt. However, Bilgrami argues, if we think about what inquiry looks like from within, the picture changes. After all, what Rorty and Davidson describe as beliefs withdrawn from doubt are beliefs held *true* by the inquirer. The fact that those beliefs do not come with a “mark” that (in some yet-to-be-clarified sense) allows even the detached outsider to decide their truth value, does not make the inquirer’s commitment to those beliefs any less legitimate. Rather, such commitment is constitutive of inquiry: we have to hold some things true in order to investigate anything at all. So, from an insider’s viewpoint—and what viewpoint can be more adequate if we want to know what characterizes inquiry *qua* inquiry?—it

is perfectly all right to say that truth plays a significant normative role in justification, in that it “provides the background standard by which we steer and seek to relieve doubt on matters about which there is still doubt, that is, hypothesis, conjecture, etc.” (259).

Rorty agrees that his and Davidson’s conception “can reasonably be called a ‘third-person’ view.... Bilgrami is right to say that we must take such a view before we can swallow such counter-intuitive claims as ‘we can never tell which of our beliefs are true’ and ‘truth is not a goal of inquiry’” (264). However, Rorty does not regard this as a counterargument to his and Davidson’s position. What Bilgrami fails to realize, he argues, is that learning to talk about ourselves as “organisms coping with their environment by using language to develop projects of social cooperation” (263) might be a very useful exercise—not because such a third-person perspective is more faithful to what inquiry is really like, but because it makes it possible for us to characterize our practices of justification without having to worry about whether those practices constitute reliable guides to truth.

What comes to the fore in the exchanges with both Putnam and Bilgrami is Rorty’s confidence in what he calls the method of “vocabulary replacement” for dissolving philosophical problems. Rorty’s fondness for this technique is usefully contrasted with Wittgenstein’s interest in Freud’s methods. For Rorty, dissolving philosophical problems means, in the end, to obstruct their formulation by invoking new vocabularies within which the problems can no longer receive verbal expression. In effect, Rorty tries to convince the philosophically worried person to suppress his worries by willfully ceasing to articulate them. What Wittgenstein and Freud have in common is precisely the fight against such suppression. They both insist that a treatment can be successful only to the extent that it manages to really address the troubled person’s own ways of experiencing and expressing his difficulties. Thus, *pace* Rorty, they think it is only by encouraging and provoking the person to articulate his worries that we can identify the relevant misunderstandings, and tear up the problems by their roots.

I believe the dissatisfaction of some of Rorty’s critics stems at least partly from their sensing that in his philosophy, problem and method pass one another by. No one who is *really troubled* by a philosophical difficulty can experience a replacement of vocabulary as a solution. Rather, such a person will feel that his problem is swept under the rug—that to forget about a problem is not to solve it. This raises the worry that Rorty’s methodology presupposes what it is intended to achieve: his revisionist approach can seem thoroughly appealing only to someone who is already fed up with the sort of questions Rorty wants us to stop asking. To such a person, Rorty may indeed seem to replace old, futile problems with something new and exciting. But to someone who is not already convinced that the old problems are futile, though, the treatment Rorty offers will ultimately seem irrelevant.

However, in seeking to evaluate Rorty's philosophical achievement it would be a mistake to restrict the terms of evaluation to the question of what sort of progress his revisionism allows us to make with "philosophical" problems narrowly conceived. For the innovations in vocabulary that he envisages are not only meant to help philosophers get rid of their difficulties. According to Rorty, these innovations also have wider cultural significance. Without taking this aspect of his revisionism into consideration, a discussion of his philosophical ambitions would be seriously incomplete.

Not that it is entirely clear what the wider cultural significance of adopting new ways of speaking is supposed to be. In the essay he contributes to this volume, Rorty claims that with respect to philosophically controversial concepts, "[t]he only thing that matters is which way of reshaping them will, in the long run, make them more useful for democratic politics. ... Philosophers have long wanted to understand concepts, but the point is to change them so as to make them serve our purposes better" (25). This might seem to suggest a pretty crude conception, according to which the value of philosophical views is somehow reducible to their sociopolitical effects. However, to ascribe such a crude conception to Rorty would be a mistake. In fact, there are other passages where he seems to doubt that philosophy can have any politically relevant effects at all. Thus, in the very same essay, he says, "I do not think that disciplines like philosophy ... can do much for democratic politics. I see the development of the social conventions in which Habermas and I both rejoice as a lucky accident" (14).

What are we to make of such seemingly contradictory statements? It is undeniable that Rorty has wobbled on this issue. However, if pressed for a non-contradictory answer, he would say, I guess, that the changes in vocabulary he proposes have no strict or immediate sociopolitical implications. He often compares such innovations with the process of secularization. Just as secularized societies can have political systems of very different sorts, Rorty would admit that replacing objectivity with solidarity is compatible with a wide variety of sociopolitical agendas (both democratic and antidemocratic). In the long run, however, he does seem to think that the odds are at least reasonably high that such a reform would promote tolerance and democratic institutions. Hence, he argues, it is a social experiment well worth trying.

This prediction is contested by many of Rorty's critics, and most meticulously by James Conant, in his discussion of Rorty's reading of Orwell's *1984*. Three themes are tied together in Conant's essay. First, he shows how Rorty's attempt to read Orwell from an "ironist" perspective distorts, or even loses sight of, the central ideas of the novel. Second, he argues that this inability to read Orwell reveals that Rorty is still obsessed with the sort of philosophical controversies he claims to have abandoned. In particular, Conant claims that this obsession manifests itself in Rorty's limited conception of the alternatives available for reading Orwell: either we ascribe a commitment to some form of meta-

physical realism to the author of *1984*, or we must take him to have no use at all for the idea of objective truth. Third, Conant casts doubt on Rorty's claim that replacing objectivity with solidarity is "useful for democratic politics." Conant thinks a more adequate reading of Orwell's novel can help us see that the consequences of Rorty's views "are in fact roughly the opposite of what he believes and wants them to be" (269); indeed, that "views such as Rorty's [make] for a *very* congenial fit with a totalitarian politics" (316 n. 3).

At first glance, the disagreement between Rorty and Conant on this last point seems to be over what sociopolitical effects certain changes in our linguistic habits would cause. Thus construed, it is difficult to see why this is an issue on which philosophers should be able to provide qualified judgments. As Rorty puts it in his reply, it seems weird to use "*a priori*, 'conceptual analysis' arguments" to try to justify a thesis that can only be supported by "arguing, on the basis of past experience, that the risks of making the suggested changes are so great that it would be foolish to perform the relevant social experiment" (345). So, wouldn't it be better to let historians, sociologists, and sociolinguists decide the issue?

It is central to Conant's discussion that he regards this sort of response as misguided. According to Conant, what can be learned from Orwell's novel is not that the disintegration of our talk of truth and objectivity is *causally* related to the establishing of totalitarian political systems, but that such disintegration forms an essential *part* of a totalitarian development. The importance of past experience to Conant's argument is not that of providing inductive evidence, but that of helping us understand what totalitarianism *is*. For example, that *1984* emerged from Orwell's experiences during the Spanish Civil War is important to Conant's discussion, not because those experiences support predictions about what might happen in the future, but because those experiences were paradigmatic for Orwell of what it means for someone to be living under a totalitarian regime. Central to those experiences is, as Orwell puts it, "the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world." Orwell says this feeling "frightens [him] much more than bombs" (quoted by Conant at 268). So, Conant's objection to Rorty is not that the sort of social experiment he proposes is, as it were, too risky, but that the very idea of it as an "experiment" that might have democratically beneficial effects presupposes a very superficial conception of the difference between totalitarian and nontotalitarian societies.

This is not the place to adjudicate the disagreement between Rorty and Conant. Suffice it to note that twentieth-century totalitarianism, in its various forms, gave rise to experiences similar to Orwell's in such abundance that the reflective reader can hardly help wondering if there isn't more apriorism in Rorty's refusal to let those experiences temper his revisionist optimism. In any case, Rorty's reply to Conant is very interesting, not least because it shows how central his revisionism is to his whole philosophical outlook: "I have no doubt

that every attempt to get rid of old problems by revisionary attempts to break old inferential connections will itself generate unexpected new inferential connections, new paradoxes, and (eventually) new ‘problems of philosophy’ for the textbooks to mummify. ... I do not believe that there is, in addition to the so-called fixations and obsessions of us philosophical revisionists, a peaceful, non-obsessed, vision of how things deeply, truly, unproblematically are. ... I see the desire for ever-new, revisionary, extraordinary, paradoxical languages and problems as the manic eros which gave us the Platonic dialogues, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’, ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’, and *The Postcard*” (348f.).

Beyond the essays I have chosen to review above, many of the other contributions to this volume are deserving of extended discussion. Brandom’s careful exposition of how the naturalist and historicist strands in Rorty’s philosophy hang together comes to mind, as does McDowell’s deeply intriguing essay, “Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity.” Williams’s historically oriented discussion of the relation between Rorty’s work and various forms of epistemology and skepticism is also very helpful. Finally, I should mention the exchange between Ramberg and Rorty. There, something very unusual happens: someone actually manages to convince Rorty to revise his position on a couple of points. First, Rorty is persuaded that his former skepticism towards Davidson’s special emphasis on the distinction between the mental and the physical was a mistake. Second, he is brought to admit that acknowledging the importance of Davidson’s variety of the mental/physical distinction forces him also to acknowledge the philosophical significance of the concept of truth. *Prima facie*, these concessions seem pretty substantial, and appear to bring Rorty closer to what he calls his “realist” critics (especially McDowell). However, in his reply to Ramberg, he emphatically denies that this is the case. Whether Rorty’s ongoing attempts to distance himself from such critics are successful is difficult to assess. It is certainly not possible to attempt such an assessment in the space of a brief review such as this. That task is left for the interested reader to pursue.¹

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