

Interview

Future issues of *Symposium* will feature philosophical conversations with prominent figures in Continental thought. If it is indeed the fundamental purpose of philosophy, and its publishers, to advance the conversation that we are, it is fitting that we here provide a forum for such dialogue. For decades, the theme of conversation has figured prominently in several traditions of philosophical inquiry. Our aim in this connection is to bring about a certain rapprochement of theory and practice—insofar, of course, as the spirit of philosophical dialogue may be captured in the pages of a scholarly journal.

The Editors

A Conversation with Richard Rorty

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Richard Rorty established himself as a major force in philosophy with his Joshua-like breach of traditional philosophy's Cartesian wall. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) was an important book from a serious philosopher with all the right credentials, but a book that questioned truth and—even more audaciously—philosophy's self-attributed status as adjudicator of reason. Rorty developed his critique of traditional epistemology and his neopragmatism in various articles, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). His three-volume collection of philosophical papers, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (1991), *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (1991), and *Truth and Progress* (1998) cemented Rorty's position as one of the most influential philosophers of our time. As important is that in the process of taking on the philosophical establishment, Rorty became more than a much-discussed philosopher; he became something rarer in North America than in Europe: a public intellectual. In the manner of John Dewey, one of his "heroes," Rorty wrote many articles directed at an audience much broader than professional philosophers, and his neopragmatist ideas were widely appropriated in humanistic and social science disciplines. *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999) established him as a notable social commentator.

PRADO: Professor Rorty, I'd like to ask you some questions of two different, but related, sorts. The first set of questions has to do with philosophy, the second with humanistic education.

When I first met you at Princeton, in 1981, I was certain you were going to single-handedly change professional philosophy. Since then, I've been struck how despite your tremendous influence on many disciplines, and your undeniable impact on many individual philosophers, the professional core of our discipline not only has resisted your influence, its members have "circled the wagons" and seem to have become

more entrenched in their views on truth, realism, and the conception of philosophy as the overseer of reasoned inquiry. If you agree that this is the case, what do you think about that reaction?

RORTY: The philosophy profession needs the traditional problems about truth, realism, and so on, in order to have transgenerational disciplinary continuity, and in order to retain its self-image as a quasi-science. If people like me had our way, the good old problems would be thrown out. So there would be nothing for philosophy professors to do but reinterpret old books, while hoping for a genius (another Nietzsche, another Wittgenstein) to turn up who would say something new and startling that could then be tied in with what the old books say. But that would make us just like literary critics, and not at all like scientists. Anglophone philosophy professors have been trained, and train their students, to think that philosophy is more like a science than like culture chat. The reaction to my work is, in part, an expression of this disciplinary conservatism. The desire to remain a quasi-science accounts also for some of the current neglect of Wittgenstein among analytic philosophers.

PRADO: Of special interest to readers of *Symposium* is that despite your upbeat discussion of hermeneutics in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, you've said surprisingly little about hermeneutics since then. Did you change your mind about the importance of hermeneutics, or do you feel, as you somewhere said about Wittgenstein's thought, that hermeneutical ideas are now too thoroughly incorporated into our way of thinking to provide much intellectual stimulus?

RORTY: I tossed in Gadamer at the end of that book because I happened to be reading him when I was writing the final chapters. I agree with most of what Gadamer says, but his work, like Wittgenstein's, seems to me largely negative and therapeutic. I don't think he offers a new enterprise called "hermeneutics" for philosophers to engage in. "Hermeneutic philosophy" is as vague and unfruitful a notion as "analytic philosophy." Both terms signify little more than the dislike of each for the other.

PRADO: In connection with hermeneutics, it would also be of special interest to *Symposium*'s readers if you could comment on how you view the relation between your work and Heidegger and the phenomenological tradition.

RORTY: I have appropriated a lot of what Heidegger said in his post-1935 works about the history of philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche and about the onto-theological tradition as a form of power-worship. But I don't see that this account of Western intellectual history has any particular connection with phenomenology, a form of philosophizing whose utility continues to escape me. It does not seem to me that the early Heidegger took over anything useful from Husserl, and I would prefer to regard the neologisms of *Sein und Zeit* as imaginative redescription of human life rather than as accurate phenomenological reporting.

PRADO: You've written much on the philosophy of truth over the years, and you clearly have an enduring interest in Heidegger. I wonder what you make of Heidegger's rehabilitation of the presocratic conception of truth as *aletheia*, and whether you see this as having any relevance to your own work on truth. Are you at all sympathetic, for instance, to Heidegger's and Gadamer's claim that there is truth in art?

RORTY: I construe the stuff about *aletheia* as a way of saying that what drives history forward is the invention of new truth-candidates (in Ian Hacking's useful phrase), rather than figuring out which of the old candidates are true and which false. In other words, I think of Heideggerian *welterschliesung* as imaginative redescription. Art is one form in which things get imaginatively redescribed. But "truth in art" seems to me an unhappy slogan, since it suggests that art can tell us which previous truth-candidates have which truth-value.

PRADO: Sometime prior to the publication of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, I recall that you were supposed to be working on a "big book" on Heidegger. Is that book still in the works, or did you say what you wanted to say in *Contingency* and later in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, Volume 2?

RORTY: Everything I ever had to say about Heidegger has already been said, if not by me, then by the many commentators who know a lot more about Heidegger than I do.

PRADO: Robert Brandom's recent *Tales of the Mighty Dead* reminded me very much of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with respect to its vision and scope and potential influence on philosophy. Could you say something about your perception of Brandom's work in general, and perhaps a little about that particular book?

RORTY: Brandom seems to me the most interesting philosopher now writing. His *Making it Explicit* is the philosophy of language that Wittgenstein would have written had Wittgenstein been able to argue with other people and to think systematically. There is a golden thread that runs from the later Wittgenstein through Sellars and Davidson to Brandom, and this line of philosophical thought seems to me the most interesting and profitable one to have emerged in the last fifty years. Brandom's way of bringing together Hegelian historicism with Fregean inferentialism is a breathtaking achievement. I'm still in the middle of *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, and am constantly learning new things, and appropriating new insights, as I turn its pages.

PRADO: Another recent book that has captured a good deal of attention is Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*. In your review of it you note that Williams doesn't like your attempt to "detach the spirit of liberal critique from the concept of truth." The reason has to do with Williams's claim that truth is intrinsically valuable and, as such, essential to liberalism. As I read Williams, and as Barry Allen remarks in his forthcoming review, truth's intrinsic value amounts to our adopting what Allen calls the "ethical stance" of valuing truth intrinsically rather than only instrumentally;

Williams isn't positing an essential or transcendental nature. If what is at issue is a stance we take up, I don't see Williams's position as so different from your "liberal irony." Could you say something about this?

RORTY: In my review of Williams I explained why I could not find much use for the notion of "intrinsic value." There is a distinction between values I know how to argue for and those I do not. I haven't a clue, for example, how to convince somebody who doubts that avoiding unnecessary human suffering is a good thing. But it seems an empty gesture for me to excuse my rhetorical incapacity by saying that the value in question is "intrinsic."

PRADO: In your contribution to *A House Divided* (see review in this issue), you speak of "ambidexterity" regarding the ability to read and appreciate the work of philosophers on both sides of the analytic-Continental divide. David Hoy commented that you could have described "those who attempt such commensuration as 'bilingual,' for they must be fluent in the vocabularies of each tradition." Do you see a unilingual future for philosophy, a time when those traditions will meld, or do you feel, as some of us do, that philosophy's future is less as a single discipline than as a more abstract aspect of several other disciplines?

RORTY: Philosophy can be thought of as a single discipline if it is viewed as an attempt to relate certain canonical texts (the usual sequence: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, ... Descartes, Locke, ... Kant, Hegel, ... Mill, Nietzsche ...) to what is currently happening in various areas of culture. We need philosophy as an academic speciality because we need people who have read these books and who understand the influence they have had and the objections that can be raised against them. The only overlap between the analytics and the Continentals is their common familiarity with these texts. I agree with Hoy that to become ambidextrous you must become bilingual—as able to appreciate what Heidegger and Gadamer do with Plato as to appreciate what Owen and Vlastos do with him. I have no idea whether some day the majority of the world's philosophy professors will be able to appreciate Vattimo and Brandom equally, and to speak and write in the manner of either, as seems best for the occasion. I have no way of estimating the likelihood of this happy state of affairs.

PRADO: One hears a lot these days about the plight of the humanities. Certainly funding for the humanities has declined and the prestige of an Arts degree has declined with, or ahead of, it. You'll recall that in your debate with John Searle, published in 1999, he expressed concern about what widespread appropriation—or misappropriation—of your, and what we can call postmodern, views was doing to education in the humanities. You responded by saying that Searle was making too much of the activities of a small number of people, largely in literature departments. Do you still feel the same way some five years later?

RORTY: I feel uncertain about what is going to happen to the humanities in the Anglophone universities. They were revitalized in the 1970s and the 1980s by being

infused with "Continental" philosophical ideas. But by the 1990s the use of these ideas in departments of literature had become so routinized and unimaginative as to be merely irritating. Now a reaction has set in. The gurus satirized in Frederic Crews's *Postmodern Pooh* are widely mocked by young people entering graduate programs in literature. I do not know what literary studies in Anglophone universities will be like twenty years from now, but I would doubt that Lacan, Foucault, and the rest will loom as large as they do now.

PRADO: In this connection, late in his career John Dewey wrote *Experience and Education*, expressing something very like dismay with how his work was interpreted and implemented by many educators. Do you ever entertain similar feelings about how your work is interpreted and implemented in courses ranging from philosophy to film studies?

RORTY: No. There is no point in worrying about how one's ideas are picked up and used. *Habent sua fata libelli*.

PRADO: I believe that you were at the University of Virginia while E. D. Hirsch was there. I'd expect that you were unsympathetic to his strenuous efforts to reinstate a "core curriculum"; were you unsympathetic, and if so, do you still feel the same way?

RORTY: On the contrary. I agreed with pretty much everything Hirsch said. I heartily endorse his views in some of the essays included in my *Philosophy and Social Hope*. I wish that his "core learning" project could be adopted by all American elementary schools. Dewey, in his day, helped American elementary education break out of an outdated mold. But Dewey's followers went too far when they began saying "teach the child, not the subject." Hirsch's work is a needed corrective to the idea of skill-centered instruction.