“. . . And to define America, her athletic democracy”: The Philosopher and the Language Shaper; In Memory of Richard Rorty*

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DEAR MARY, DEAR FRIENDS and Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Given the highly personal occasion that brings us together here today, please allow me to start with a private memory.

I first met Richard Rorty in 1974 at a conference on Heidegger in San Diego. At the beginning of the convention, a video was screened of an interview with the absent Herbert Marcuse, who in it described his relationship to Heidegger in the early 1930s more mildly than the sharp postwar correspondence between the two men would have suggested. Much to my annoyance, this set the tone for the entire conference, where an unpatriotic veneration of Heidegger prevailed. Only Marjorie Green, who had likewise studied in Freiburg prior to 1933, passed critical comment, saying that back then at best the closer circle of Heidegger students, and Marcuse belonged to it, could have been deceived as to the real political outlook of their mentor.

In this ambivalent mood I then heard a professor from Princeton, known to me until then only as the editor of a famed collection of essays on the Linguistic Turn, put forward a provocative comparison. He tried to strike harmony between the dissonant voices of three world-famous soloists in the frame of a strange concert: Dewey, the radical democrat and the most political of the pragmatists, performed in this orchestra alongside Heidegger, that embodiment of the arrogant German mandarin par excellence. And the third in this unlikely league was Wittgenstein, whose Philosophical Investigations had taught me so much; but he, too, was not completely free of the prejudices of the German ideology, with its fetishization of spirit, and cut a strange figure as a comrade of Dewey.¹

Certainly, from the perspective of Humboldt and philosophical hermeneutics, a look at the world-disclosing function of language reveals an affinity between Heidegger and Wittgenstein. And that discovery must have fascinated Rorty, given that Thomas Kuhn had convinced him to

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read the history of science from a contextualist vantage point. But how did Dewey fit in this constellation—the embodiment of that democratic wing of the Young Hegelians that we had so sorely lacked in Europe? After all, Dewey’s way of thinking stood in strident contrast to the Greco-German pretension, the high tone and elitist gesture of the Few who claim a privileged access to truth against the many.

At that time, I found the association so obscene that I quite lost my cool in the discussion. Surprisingly, however, the important colleague from Princeton was by no means irritated by the resilient protest from the backwoods of Germany and instead was so kind as to invite me into his seminar. For me, my visit to Princeton marked the beginning of a friendship as happy and rewarding as instructive. On the bedrock of shared political convictions we were easily able to discuss and endure our philosophical differences. Thus, the kind of “priority of politics over philosophy” that Dick defended as a topic tacitly served as a source of our continuing relation. As regards Heidegger, incidentally, my initial agitation was unfounded. Dick likewise felt a greater affinity to the pragmatic Heidegger of the early parts of Being and Time than to the esoteric thinker who devoutly listened to the voice of Being.²

After the first meeting, Dick sent me an offprint of his essay “The World Well Lost”;³ at the time, the title’s ironic allusion could itself have drawn my attention to the intellectual and the writer behind the philosopher Richard Rorty. However, I read the essay, with its stringent analytical argumentation, the way one tends to read articles from the Journal of Philosophy. Only with hindsight did I realize that it was a preliminary piece for that critique of the modern paradigm of epistemology that he was to publish a few years later as Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979), a book that was to have such an impact. What was revolutionary in the study was less the careful explication and critical reconstruction of the linguistic turn performed in different ways by both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and more the insistence on one crucial consequence of the shift from “consciousness” to “language.” Step by step, Rorty deconstructs the spectator model of “representative” or “fact-copying” thought. And this critique went to the heart of a discipline that, since Russell and Carnap, was concerned with achieving scientific respectability by a logical and semantic treatment of fundamental epistemological issues first raised in the seventeenth century.

Allow me briefly to remind you of the key issue here. If facts cannot be construed independently of the propositional structure of our language and if the truth of opinions or statements can only be corrected by other opinions or statements, then any idea of truth as a correspondence between sentences and facts “out there” is misleading. We cannot describe nature in a language we assume to be nature’s own language.
According to the pragmatist interpretation, the “copying” of reality is replaced by a problem-solving “coping” with the challenges of an overcomplex world. In other words, we acquire our knowledge of facts in the course of a constructive approach to a surprising environment. Nature only provides indirect answers as all its answers refer to the grammar of our questions. What we call the “world” therefore does not consist of the totality of facts. For us, it is the sum total of the cognitively relevant constraints imposed on our attempts to learn from and achieve control over contingent natural processes through reliable predictions.

Rorty’s painstaking analysis of the assumed representative function of the knowing mind deserves the respect also of those colleagues who are not willing to follow the ambitious thrust of the author’s conclusions. This ambition was revealed back then by the way the English title was expanded on for the German translation: here, The Mirror of Nature was subtitled A Critique of Philosophy—meaning philosophy as such. I myself first grasped the entire range of Rorty’s project, and thus the meaning behind that strange constellation of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Dewey, when I read the introduction to his essay collection Consequences of Pragmatism (1982). If one knew the author in person it was not easy to match the extraordinary claims of this philosopher, writer, and political intellectual with the modest, shy, and sensitive habit of the person of the same name. His public appearances were characterized by rhetorical brilliance, controlled passion, the charm of a youthful, at times polemically acute mind, indeed by a certain pathos. Deflation and understatement can have a pathos of their own. But behind the aura of the impressive speaker and writer and the passionate teacher lay concealed that honest and soft, nobly restrained and infinitely loveable man who hated nothing more than any pretense of profundity. Yet, for all our reverence for the character of a friend, we must not fail to mention the pretensions of the philosophical claims he championed.

Richard Rorty had in mind nothing less than to foster a culture that liberated itself from what he saw as the conceptual obsessions of Greek philosophy and a fetishism of science that sprouted from the furrows of that metaphysics. What he understood “metaphysics” to mean and what he criticized about it can best be seen if we bear in mind what this critique was borne of: “Philosophers became preoccupied with images of the future only after they gave up the hope of gaining knowledge of the eternal.” Platonism keeps its gaze fixed on the immutable ideas of the good and the true and spawns a web of categorical distinctions in which the creative energies of a self-generating human species ossify. Rorty does not construe the priority of essence over appearance, of the universal over the particular, of necessity over contingency, or of nature over history as a purely theoretical matter. Because this is a matter of structuring
ways of life, he seeks to train his contemporaries in a vocabulary that articulates a different view of the world and of ourselves.

A second, radical boost of the Enlightenment, so Rorty hoped, would rejuvenate the authentic motifs of a shattered Modernity. Modernity must scoop all normativity from within itself. There is no longer any authority or foundation beyond the opaque ebb and flow of contingencies. No one is able to exit from her local context without finding herself in a different one. At the same time, the human condition is characterized by the fact that the sober recognition of the finitude and corruptibility of human beings—the recognition of the fallibility of the mind, the vulnerability of the body, and the fragility of social bonds—can and should become the motor driving the creativity of a restless self-transformation of society and culture. Against this backdrop, we must, said Rorty, learn to see ourselves as the sons and daughters of a self-confident Modernity, if in our politically, economically, and socially torn global society Walt Whitman’s belief in a better future is to have a chance at all. The democratic voice of hope for a brotherly and inclusive form of social life must not fall silent.

The moving songs of the public intellectual Richard Rorty—his interviews and lectures, his exoteric doctrines of “contingency, irony, and solidarity,” the treatises that were disseminated worldwide—they are all infused with the peculiarly romantic, and very personal triple voice of metaphilosophy, neopragmatism, and leftist patriotism. For this life and work I can think of no more fitting an epitaph than an inscription by Walt Whitman dating from 1871. Under the heading of To Foreign Lands these are words that Dick might also have directed to his European friends:

I heard that you ask’d for something to prove this puzzle the New World,
And to define America, her athletic Democracy,
Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what you wanted.5

Ladies and Gentlemen, for this hour you invited a philosophical colleague to speak and can thus expect that I will attempt to explain how Richard Rorty proceeded from that “metacritique of knowledge” to which I drew to your attention, to a critique of metaphysics, and from there to the cosmopolitan patriotism of a very American democrat.6

The pragmatist conception of knowledge that Rorty develops in The Mirror of Nature should be seen in the context of a Hegelian naturalism. In this view, the basic conditions for a culture created by man are the result of natural evolution. All cultural achievements in the past can be construed functionally as “tools” that have proved their worth in practical as well as instrumental interaction with risky environments.
This way of looking at anthropology and history leads only to a “soft” naturalism, as the Darwinist language does not undermine the everyday self-understanding of socialized individuals as autonomous, creative, and learning actors. By contrast, the line between soft and hard naturalism is crossed by those reductionist explanations that in a speculative manner combine insights from biogenetics and neurology in the framework of a neo-Darwinist theory of evolution. They cross the boundary of a naturalist self-objectification of man, beyond which we can no longer grasp ourselves as the authors of our actions, discoveries, and inventions. Under the sway of such objectivistic self-descriptions, if they purport to be the only true ones, it is the awareness of a “self” that disappears. They treat exactly that as an illusion which neopragmatism—a kind of Lebensphilosophie—so celebrates in man, namely the consciousness of freedom, creativity, and learning.

Rorty quite simply had to protest this move toward scientism. Because he fully elaborates his own concept of man in a Darwinist language, he had now to introduce a stop rule into this kind of soft naturalism. In order to be able to reject the hard naturalism of a Daniel Dennett as “scientism,” he has to offer an explanation of the uncautious inflation of objectifying research approaches to the status of a pseudoscientific objectivism. He hoped to find such an explanation by embedding the spectator model of knowledge in a sweeping deconstruction of the history of metaphysics. In this broader context he established scientism’s affinity to Platonism. Both share the bad habit of conceiving of human knowledge as a vision from nowhere, thus moving all of our constructive research practices beyond the limits of our, or of any, world: “The last line of defense for essentialist philosophers is the belief that physical science gets us outside ourselves, outside our language and our purposes to something splendidly nonhuman and nonrelational.” With the help of Heidegger’s and Wittgenstein’s critique of the ontological implications of the language of physicalism, Rorty claims to uncover, even in the reductionist strategies of cognitive scientists and biologists, the Platonic heritage of the assumption of world-less objectivity that supposedly allows for a view from nowhere.

Rorty’s critique of metaphysics pays the price of an antirealism that Dewey had not paid in his key anti-Platonist text, “The Reconstruction in Philosophy.” Rorty felt he had to combine soft naturalism with radical historicism if he wanted to keep it from sliding into scientism. He felt that a modern culture, exclusively standing on feet of its own, would only avoid an appealing scientistic self-reification if it foregoes both traps: first, the assumption of an objective world that exists independently of our descriptions and, secondly, the innerworldly transcendence of universalist claims to validity. Also, our standards of rationality to which we performatively lay claim bow down to the ups and downs of cultural practices.
Rorty may have found it easy to take this rather controversial step, because he obviously found Heidegger’s deconstruction appealing for another reason too. There is a streak of nostalgia about claiming to offer a philosophy that cleans up with all extant philosophy, a sentiment resulting from deep disappointment with metaphysics’s unredeemed promises. The melancholy in this gesture of breaking away and surpassing reveals a Platonist motivation behind Rorty’s anti-Platonism, as in Heidegger’s. Rorty bemoans the state of a discipline that retains the name philosophy but has forfeited any public relevance. In particular, the analytical orthodoxy whence Rorty himself originated has eased and accelerated philosophy’s transformation into a highly specialized and departmentalized discipline. Here, only those questions raised by the profession are considered seriously, not those raised by “life.” Rorty was troubled by this development as early as 1967 and it pained him. At that time, his doubts led him to taunt the profession by denying even the basic presupposition of our business, “that there are philosophical truths to be discovered and demonstrated by argument.” A quite different perspective arises from the question of what can or should remain of philosophy after the end of metaphysics.

In Rorty’s view, the critique of Platonism can give rise only to a philosophy that has a historical consciousness of itself and captures its own time in thought, in other words that continues the discourse of Modernity once initiated by Hegel. At this point, the paths of Heidegger and Rorty part, however. Rorty was never tempted to pursue the arrogant self-celebration of a train of thought that felt it could dispense with all argumentation. Like Dewey, he conducted two discourses simultaneously, one with his fellow philosophers on technical questions and the other with the general public on issues relating to how Modernity understands itself. He conducted this exoteric discourse in Wittgenstein’s therapeutic vein. Once the human mind becomes ensnared in the conceptual network of Platonism, it is not theory that helps to cure this diseasing self-misunderstanding, but only the deflation of unnecessary theoretical claims. This accounts for a typical trait in Rorty’s public appearances, his rhetoric of debunking, of forget it, of shrugging off or filing away, his recommendation that an issue be “dropped” because it “has become uninteresting.”

The anti-Platonist thrust is directed against a grand self-image that because of an imagined participation in the ideal, that is, supra-human, world in fact degrades us to being slaves of these idols. Rorty fought against the Platonist compulsion to deceive ourselves about the merely conventional and contingent aspects of daily life; in this respect, he always shared the pragmatists’ attitudes. Wittgenstein’s style of therapy had to step back behind Dewey’s democratic commitment because Rorty’s
therapeutic practice is meant to have a transforming and liberating effect and not the quietist and thus conservative sense of restoring an undistorted status quo ante. The double front line taken against metaphysics and scientism follows objectives for which Rorty coins effective slogans. He defends the “priority of democracy over philosophy” and the “priority of technology over theory.” Philosophy and the sciences must *make themselves useful*, now that their success can no longer be measured in terms of whether statements correspond with a reality untouched by language and culture.

What counts is the contribution that philosophical and scientific practice can make to an ever more expanding consensus on shared interests and to an improved mutual understanding of competing human needs and the means to satisfy them. Just as theory formation in the natural sciences serves its possible technical success, so philosophy serves democracy and freedom: “if we take care of political freedom, we get truth as a bonus.” Be that as it may, philosophy can play a public role if it reflects sensitively on the pressing problems of the day and offers a diagnosis of its time. In this country Richard Rorty like almost no other did indeed *restore* philosophy’s public importance. It is a moot point whether his colleagues will thank him for that.

However, a philosopher who dons the role of a public intellectual can have recourse neither to the expert knowledge of the natural and social sciences nor even to the historical and aesthetic knowledge accumulated by the humanities. In his public interventions, Rorty makes a virtue of these shortcomings by turning the task of philosophy itself into a topic. He opts for metaphilosophical considerations and confronts the “scientific” philosophers with those who take their cue from literature. Like Nietzsche, he ponders the benefits and disadvantages of classical education, if in his own way: “All of these wonderful books are only rungs on a ladder that, with a bit of luck, one day we may be able to do without. If we stopped reading canonical philosophy books, we would be less aware of the forces that make us think and talk as we do. We would be less aware to grasp our contingency, less capable of being ‘ironists.’”

So that is the one task of philosophy: to exercise its addresses in an awareness of the contingencies of life on earth, in particular the contingencies that impact on the presumed foundations, on what we take to be our “final” vocabularies. In this way, Rorty practiced something of what the ancients called “wisdom.” And he used a word for this practice that is not by chance of religious origin, namely “edification.” Private edification is, of course, only half of the business of philosophical communication. Public commitment is the other, even more important task of philosophy. As a pragmatist, Rorty can prompt citizens and elites in the world’s leading power to remember their own tradition. He recommends this cultural resource as the key to interpreting the current situation.
Pragmatism is expressed by the spirit of great writers and great philosophers alike—Rorty repeatedly cites Emerson and Whitman, James and Dewey. And because this spirit is aware of its American origins, and also sees itself as a driving force of progressivism, all the pragmatist writers and philosophers more or less shared the profile of a leftist patriotism, one that is associated with cosmopolitanism. Rorty has the fortunate combination of his three rare talents to thank for the fact that he could draw on this heritage undividedly, for he was equally an important philosopher, a marvelous writer, and a successful political intellectual.

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Let me conclude our commemoration of Richard Rorty with one word each on the roles he so gloriously mastered: that of the philosopher, the writer, and the left cosmopolitan patriot.

First the philosopher. In his profession, Richard Rorty exchanged the most sophisticated arguments with the most prominent of his colleagues. He debated the concept of truth with Donald Davidson; he argued about realism and rationality with Hilary Putnam, about the concept of the mental with Daniel Dennet, on intersubjectivity and objectivity with John McDowell, and with his master student Robert Brandom on the status of facts. On the European continent his work is as strongly in evidence as it is in the English-speaking world, if not possibly more influential than it is here. Rorty mastered the philosophical idioms of both worlds. Two of his three philosophical heroes were, after all, Europeans. With his interpretive skills he did great service for Foucault and Derrida not only in the United States, but also in Germany. And it was through him that we in Europe indirectly communicated with one another when we found it hard to reach an understanding between the parties to the East and West of the river Rhine.

As to the writer, we have to acknowledge the fact that among those rare philosophers who can write flawless scholarly prose, Richard Rorty came closest to the spirit of poetry. His strategy of an eye-opening renovation of philosophical jargon laid the foundations for the affinity between what he achieved with his texts and the world-disclosing power of literature. Down through the decades, no other colleague surprised me with new ideas and exciting formulations the way he did. Rorty overwhelms his readers with mind-boggling rearrangements of conceptual constellations; he shocks them with thrilling binary oppositions. He often transforms complex chains of thoughts into seemingly barbaric simplifications, but at second glance such dense formulas prove to contain innovative interpretations. Rorty plays with his readers’ conventional expectations. With unusual series of names he asks them to rethink connections. Sometimes
it is only a matter of emphasis. If he names Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett, Annette Baier, and Robert Brandom in a single breath, then the subliminal discrepancy that disconcerts the reader is the real message—in this case the reference to Annette Baier’s great reconstruction of Hume’s moral philosophy, which Rorty wishes to emphasize as an “intellectual advance.”

Finally, in Rorty we encounter an old-fashioned sort of leftist intellectual who believes in education and social reform. What he finds most important about a democratic constitution is that it provides the oppressed and encumbered with instruments with which they “can defend themselves against the wealthy and the powerful.” The focus is on abolishing institutions that continue exploitation and degradation. And it is on promoting a tolerant society that keeps people together in solidarity despite growing diversity and recognizes no authority as binding that cannot be derived from deliberation and revisable agreements of all involved. Rorty terms himself a “red-diaper anticommunist baby” and a “teenage Cold War liberal.” But that past did not leave the slightest trace of resentment in him. He was completely free of the scars so typical of former radicals as well as of many of the older and some of the younger liberal hawks. If he gave a somewhat trenchant political response, then it was the one he directed against a cultural Left that he felt had bid farewell to the efforts of the arena: “Insofar as a Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left.”

With Achieving Our Country, his most personal and moving book, Richard Rorty pinned his colors to the mast of an American patriotism that the world need not fear. In the melody of this text we find a combination of the exceptional status of the world’s oldest democracy—one that can be proud of the normative substance of its principles—and the sensitivity for the new and now global diversity of cultural perspectives and voices. What is new about this global pluralism compared with the charged pluralism of a national society is the fact that within the inclusive frame of an encompassing international community the dangers of disintegration can no longer be diverted smartly onto some enemy on the outside. Today, evolutionary anthropology with its comparative research into children and chimpanzees of the same age catches up with an old pragmatist insight when it rediscovers a “perspective-taking” ability to be something on which we humans have a monopoly. Bertolt Brecht suggested reciprocal perspective-taking is the essential condition of true patriotism:

And because we improve this country,
We love it and shield it.
And it may appear most dearest to us
As other people’s find their own.
Dick knew those lines from the famous children’s hymn and knew that, for a superpower, cosmopolitanism is not the same thing as the global export of its own way of life. He knew that a democracy only preserves its robust and “athletic” character by self-criticism. In an interview conducted on September 11, 2001, he warned against Bush’s “arrogant anti-internationalism.” He reminded us instead of the very idea that had, in the wake of the horrors of the Second World War, prompted an American president to envisage a new design for a future world order and to push the establishment of the United Nations. Yet Rorty was not unrealistic in how he saw things: “That scenario now sounds much less plausible. But it is the only one I can envisage that might actually have good results.” And he then added a sentence that expresses the spirit of this person and also the spirit of the best tradition this country has brought forth: “There is, to be sure, plenty of reason for pessimism, but it would be better to do what one can to get people to follow an improbable scenario than to simply throw up one’s hands.”

That spirit is to be found throughout Richard Rorty’s oeuvre and will continue to live with and through it.

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