Richard Rorty’s Deep Humanism

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I first met Dick Rorty in 1949 when I went to the “Hutchins College” at the University of Chicago—the institution described by A. J. Liebling as “the biggest collection of juvenile neurotics since the Childrens’ Crusade.” Dick had already entered Chicago in 1946 at the age of fifteen and was beginning his MA in philosophy. After Chicago, Dick went on to Yale in 1952 for his doctoral studies, and he encouraged several of his Chicago friends (including me) to join him. From those early Chicago and Yale days, we became close personal friends—a friendship that lasted until his death in 2007. On the occasion of my 70th birthday in 2002, Dick Rorty wrote: “Richard Bernstein and I are almost exact contemporaries, were educated in mostly the same places by mostly the same people, have been exalted by many of the same hopes, and have been talking to one another about how to fulfill those hopes for more than fifty years. We share not only many enthusiasms, but the vast majority of our convictions, both philosophical and political.”

No other contemporary philosopher has influenced me in such a creative manner. As I developed my own interpretation of pragmatism, I frequently felt I was addressing Dick directly and indirectly—seeking to meet his penetrating challenges. Some of our philosophic disagreements were quite sharp, but they were always productive—conversations that deepened our friendship and mutual affection. Over the years I found myself defending Dick as frequently as I criticized him, especially when I felt that attacks on him were grossly unfair.

I want to address Rorty’s deep humanism. It may seem strange and ironical to speak about Rorty’s “deep humanism,” because in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he calls into question the very idea that there is something “deep” and persistent about our selves. Yet, for all the complexity of his personality and his philosophical thinking, I believe that there has been a deep and persistent humanism that is characteristic of his life and his thinking. But to bring this forth, one needs some overall perspective on his life’s work and development.

One of the misleading legends about Rorty is that he began his career as an analytic philosopher who turned against analytic philosophy. True,
his early philosophic reputation was based on a number of outstanding articles that were at the cutting edge of analytic philosophy, especially those dealing with the mind-body problem and the misleading character of conceptual and transcendental arguments. But this ignores his ten years of philosophic study at Chicago and Yale. Although Rorty studied with a variety of philosophers at Chicago, including Richard McKeon, Rudolf Carnap, and Charles Hartshorne, he wrote his master’s thesis on Alfred North Whitehead with Hartshorne. From McKeon and the general intellectual atmosphere at Chicago, Rorty developed a comprehensive and sophisticated knowledge of the history of philosophy. Rorty’s characteristic wit and self-irony are already evident in a letter that he wrote to his mother, Winifred Raushenbush, in 1950 about a paper he wrote for Carnap: “Finished a paper for Carnap—long, dull, of interest only to opponents of positivism. You can look at it if you like, but I can’t see it interesting either you, Carnap, or anybody except the little clique of reactionary metaphysicians (the rank to which I aspire) who are trying to stop the positivist invasion. Title—‘Logical Truth, Factual Truth, and the Synthetic A Priori.’ Someone suggested as a subtitle ‘How to Square the Vienna Circle.’” At Yale, Rorty worked with the boldest speculative metaphysician of the twentieth century, Paul Weiss. Dick wrote a dazzling six-hundred-page dissertation, “The Concept of Potentiality” (which he never published) under Weiss’s supervision. He focused on ancient (Aristotle), early modern (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz), and contemporary (Carnap and Nelson Goodman) treatments of potentiality. Dick’s early metaphilosophical interests are already evident in his dissertation; he provides brilliant expositions and critiques of all three treatments of potentiality. But he tells us that “one of the motives in the choice of the topic of potentiality as the subject of this dissertation is the belief that it is in regard to this topic that the relation between the problems of logical empiricism and the problems of traditional metaphysics and epistemology may be most easily perceived.”

The importance of this early phase of Rorty’s work for his subsequent philosophizing cannot be overestimated. Before he began to take analytic philosophy seriously, he already had a comprehensive and subtle understanding of the history of philosophy. He most closely identified himself with the grand metaphysical tradition (much later he called this “Platonism”)—and sought to show its contemporary relevance. His metaphilosophical interests are evident in some of his earliest published articles. In a stunning article, “Pragmatism, Categories, and Language” (1961), he claims that pragmatism is becoming relevant again and that the most up-to-date pragmatist is Charles S. Peirce. Much later, as we shall see, he dismissed the importance of Peirce, and claimed that the true progenitors of pragmatism were William James and John Dewey.
But in 1961, Dick wrote: “Peirce’s thought envisaged, and repudiated in advance, the stages in the development of empiricism which logical positivists represented, and that it came to rest in a group of insights and a philosophical mood much like those we find in the Philosophical Investigations and in the writings of philosophers influenced by the later Wittgenstein.” In his aloof metaphilosophical stance, he makes it clear that he is not trying to show that “Peirce saw through a glass darkly what Wittgenstein saw face to face, nor the reverse. . . . What I am trying to show is that the closer one brings pragmatism to the writings of the later Wittgenstein and of those influenced by him, the more light they shed on each other.”

Dick started reading analytic philosophy seriously when he was completing his dissertation. Wilfrid Sellars was the philosopher who initially had the greatest influence on Dick. I vividly recall discussing Sellars with Dick in those early days. We both felt that Sellars represented the best of the analytic tradition because he was leading the way in showing how the linguistic turn with its subtle analytic techniques could be used to clarify and further the discussion of many traditional philosophical issues.

During the 1960s Dick published several outstanding papers that were contributions to ongoing analytic debates. For example, in his “Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories” (1965), he developed an original approach to the “Mind-Body Identity Theory” in which he eloquently defended the thesis that “it is sensible to assert that empirical inquiry will discover that sensations (not thoughts) are identical with certain brain-processes.” Rorty was not predicting what will happen, but only that it is sensible or conceptually meaningful to claim that this will happen. Rorty’s interest in the “Mind-Body Identity Theory” was a “case-study” for dealing with a much larger issue. At the time, many proponents of conceptual analysis strongly believed that the genuine task of philosophy is to expose conceptual and linguistic confusions. They argued that to say that sensations can be identified with brain states is a conceptual confusion, an egregious category mistake (a howler!). But Rorty challenged the thesis that one can “draw a firm line between the ‘conceptual’ and the ‘empirical,’ and thus . . . differentiate between a statement embodying a conceptual confusion and one that expresses a surprising empirical result” (MB 24). The article was important for a number of reasons. Rorty showed a new way of thinking about the identity theory (sometimes labeled “eliminative materialism”), and he also called into question one of the cherished dogmas of linguistic conceptual analysis—that we can sharply distinguish conceptual analysis from empirical inquiry. He challenged this “new” linguistic version of a priori transcendental argumentation. He concluded his article by warning linguistic philosophers that they should not “think that they can do
better what metaphysicians did badly—namely, prove the irreducibility of entities” (MB 54). Reading this article from the perspective of Rorty’s later development is revealing. Although he doesn’t mention “pragmatism,” the thesis that there is no sharp demarcation between conceptual analysis and empirical inquiry, that “there is simply no such thing as a method of classifying linguistic expressions that has results guaranteed to remain intact despite the results of empirical inquiry,” is one that was advocated by the classical American pragmatists (MB 25). Furthermore, he anticipates what he later called “vocabularies” and the ways in which new vocabularies can displace older ones. His basic strategy is to show that there are no good philosophical reasons to believe that it is “impossible” that a language limited to talk about brain states might someday displace our current language about sensations. And finally, we can see here Rorty’s fascination with metaphilosophy—his concern with understanding and criticizing the various strategies that philosophers use to make and justify their claims.

In 1961, after three years at Wellesley, Dick was invited by Gregory Vlastos to join the Princeton philosophy department as a one-year visitor. At the time, Princeton had one of the most outstanding graduate philosophy departments in the country. Vlastos, who had heard about Rorty’s dissertation, initially asked him to help teach ancient philosophy. In his “Intellectual Autobiography,” Dick describes what happened: “As soon as I got to Princeton in the fall of 1961 I realized that I did not know nearly enough Greek for Vlastos’ purposes, and that I was probably not the man he wanted. So I assumed I would be back at Wellesley the following fall. But, again to my surprise, I was offered a three-year further appointment.” Dick remained at Princeton until 1982 when he left to become a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia.

In 1967, Rorty published his famous anthology, *The Linguistic Turn*, which was designed to show various ways in which linguistic philosophers had viewed philosophy and philosophical method over the last thirty-five years. His introduction is a monograph that provides a metaphilosophical overview of the different strands of linguistic philosophy. In the concluding section of his introduction, he raises the question: “Is the linguistic turn doomed to suffer the same fate as previous ‘revolutions in philosophy’?” He does not explicitly answer this question, but instead outlines “six possibilities for the future of philosophy, after the dissolution of traditional problems” (LT 34). Although Rorty did not take a definite stand about what will happen, he hints at the future direction of his own thinking. This becomes clear in the fourth possibility that he enumerates:

It might be that we would end by answering the question “Has philosophy come to an end?” with a resounding “Yes,” and that we would come to look upon a
post-philosophical culture as just as possible, and just as desirable, as a post-religious culture. We might come to see philosophy as a cultural disease which has been cured, just as many contemporary writers (notably Freudians) see religion as a cultural disease of which men are gradually being cured. The wisecrack that philosophers had worked themselves out of a job would then seem as silly a sneer as a similar charge leveled against doctors who, through a breakthrough in preventive medicine, had made therapy obsolete. Our desire, for a Weltanschauung would now be satisfied by the arts, the sciences, or both. (LT 34)

The 1970s was one of the most creative and turbulent decades of Rorty’s intellectual life. His disenchantment with the pretensions of analytic philosophers dramatically increased. He was reading avidly the thinkers that most analytic philosophers dismissed as “not really” philosophers: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, Foucault, Gadamer, and Habermas. In 1978, at the relatively early age of 47, Dick was elected vice-president (president-elect) of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association before the publication of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. At the time, the Eastern Division was the fortress of analytic philosophy. (At the business meeting where Dick presided as president in 1979, there was a rebellion of the “pluralist” philosophers who elected John E. Smith as the new president.) When elected vice-president (president-elect) of the Eastern Division of the A.P.A., Dick’s “analytic” credentials and reputation were based on his articles and the introduction to The Linguistic Turn.

But when Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature appeared in 1979, it caused a sensation. Many analytic philosophers were furious. They felt as if one of their own had betrayed them—like Judas. In a central chapter, “Privileged Representations,” Rorty argued that if we follow out the consequences of Sellars’s critique of the Myth of the Given and Quine’s skepticism about the language-fact distinctions, then the very “Kantian” foundations of analytic philosophy crumble. Together Quine and Sellars challenged the distinctions and unquestioned presuppositions that were the basis for analytic philosophy: the conceptual-empirical, analytic-synthetic, language-fact distinctions, as well as the distinction between what is given and what is postulated.

Many nonanalytic philosophers skipped the first two thirds of the book (the detailed analytic deconstructions of analytic philosophy) and were delighted with the third part where Rorty discusses Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas, Sartre, Derrida, and Foucault (though many were unhappy with his readings of these continental philosophers). Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature became the most widely discussed philosophy book of the second half of the twentieth century, not only by philosophers but by nonphilosophers in the range of the humanistic disciplines and the social sciences; it has now been translated into more than twenty lan-
Pragmatism does not explicitly figure prominently in the book, although in his introduction, Rorty tells us that Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein are “the three most important philosophers of our century.”

Even more revealing, especially in light of Dick’s early “fourth” option of the six possibilities for the future of philosophy that he outlined in *The Linguistic Turn*, are his concluding remarks to his introduction:

Dewey, . . . though he had neither Wittgenstein’s dialectical acuity nor Heidegger’s historical learning, wrote his polemics against traditional mirror-imagery out of a vision of a new kind of society. In his ideal society, culture is no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement. In that culture, as he said, the arts and the sciences would be “the unforced flowers of life.” I would hope that we are now in a position to see the charges of “relativism” and “irrationalism” once leveled against Dewey as merely the mindless defensive reflexes of the philosophical tradition which he attacked. (MN 13)

And in the final sentence of his introduction, Rorty expresses the hope that his book “will help pierce through that crust of philosophical convention which Dewey vainly hoped to shatter” (MN 13).

For all the deconstructive brilliance of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty left us with little guidance about his own “positive” intellectual stance—what happens after the “end” of Philosophy with a capital “P.” In his concluding sentence, Rorty writes: “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” (MN 394). But it wasn’t at all clear what is supposed to be the *content* of this “conversation of the West” or what is the “useful kibitzing” that philosophers can provide.

Rorty was much more explicit and succinct in his 1979 presidential address. In his address, Rorty clearly identified himself with the pragmatism of James and Dewey. He tells that pragmatism “names the chief glory of our country’s intellectual tradition. No other American writers have offered so radical a suggestion for making our future different from our past, as have James and Dewey.” But Rorty’s characterization of pragmatism was idiosyncratic and controversial. He now denigrates the importance of Peirce and tells us that “his contribution to pragmatism was merely to have given it a name, and to have stimulated James” (PR 161). According to Rorty, James and Dewey were reacting *against* Peirce’s Kantianism—the misguided belief that “philosophy gave us an all-embracing ahistorical context in which every other species of discourse could be assigned its proper place and rank” (PR 161). In this respect, James and Dewey begin to look like a domesticated version of Nietzsche’s...
and Heidegger. But unlike Nietzsche and Heidegger, James and Dewey wrote in a spirit of “social hope” and liberation. Pragmatism, according to Rorty, is the “doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, the mind, or the language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers” (PR 165). From that time until the end of his life, Rorty fiercely challenged any and all attempts to argue that there are any constraints upon us—except those that come from our fellow human beings. This is the key to his claim that solidarity should replace the philosophic worry about objectivity. Increasingly, he came to believe—like Nietzsche—that the obsession with philosophic theories of Truth, Objectivity, and Reality was little more than a form of idolatry—a philosophical substitute for the religious belief in a transcendent God. In the collection of his essays spanning the period from 1972 to 1980, Consequences of Pragmatism, he even announced that he was writing a book on Heidegger. (Rorty discusses Heidegger in many of his subsequent writings, but he never published a book on Heidegger.) Friends and critics thought that Rorty was simply using the term “pragmatism” as a cover for his postmodern turn.

When Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity was published in 1989, many philosophers thought that Rorty had simply given up on philosophy. In analytic circles it became fashionable to dismiss Rorty—one no longer needed to take him seriously. He seemed to be writing for “literary types.” Whatever one’s final opinion of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, it was packed with brilliant arguments—the type of arguments that philosophers recognize, admire, and attack. But in Contingency Rorty mocked philosophic argument and favored imaginative redescription. Although he had long denied the charge of relativism, his characterization of the ironist as someone who realizes “that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed”15 looked like a “highfalutin” relativism. No one was happy with the way in which he drew a sharp distinction between our public and private lives, or with his suggestion that some philosophers should be read as we read good novelists like Proust and Nabokov—for private enjoyment.16 Everybody was attacking Rorty, and he seemed to delight in all the attention he was receiving. But there was one line of criticism that really stung him. “I am sometimes told, by exasperated people on both sides, that my views are so weird as to be merely frivolous. They suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everybody else. This hurts.”17 Rorty was right. This is precisely what many of his critics thought, regardless of their political or philosophical orientation. This type of criticism—that he was morally and politically insensitive—prompted him to write his autobiographical sketch, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” an essay in which he sought to explain how he came to his current views.
Many of Rorty’s relatives had been active in progressive circles, and John Dewey was their intellectual hero. His father James Rorty, a poet and a journalist, had broken with the Communist Party in 1932. Rorty tells us that he grew up “knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists” (TW 6). “Trotsky” became a symbol for “social justice” and for diminishing the inequality of the rich and the poor. But Rorty, whose family divided their time between New York City and a remote little village on the Delaware River in New Jersey, describes himself as also having “private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable interests” (TW 6). He developed a passion for the wild orchids in New Jersey. He prided himself on knowing where they grew, their Latin names, and their blooming times. “Wild Orchids” becomes a symbol for private interests and pleasures.

When Rorty discovered philosophy at Chicago, he was initially attracted by the Platonic idea of holding “reality and justice in a single vision” (TW 9). He thought that reaching the top of Plato’s divided line—the place “beyond hypotheses”—would enable him to find a grand synthesis of public justice and private pleasures. But by the time he left Chicago, Rorty was disillusioned with whether the study of philosophy would make one genuinely wise and virtuous. “Since [my] initial disillusion (which climaxed about the time I left Chicago to get a PhD in philosophy at Yale), I have spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for” (TW 10-11). Eventually, Rorty came to the conclusion that the project of seeking a synthesis between public justice and private interests is a misguided endeavor—one that had led Plato astray. He describes Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity as the book that “argues that there is no need to weave one’s personal equivalent of Trotsky and one’s personal equivalent of my wild orchids together” (TW 13). And he concludes his essay by once again identifying himself with what he takes to be Dewey’s alternative vision—a vision of a democratic community “in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters” (TW 20).

Despite the harsh (and sometimes vicious) criticisms of Contingency, many of Rorty’s characteristic themes are evident: the emphasis on radical historical contingency; his groundless sense of irony and social hope; the need to extend human sympathy and solidarity; and his belief that literature may be more effective in fostering this than philosophic argumentation. In addition, we find a vehement rejection of all forms of epistemological and semantic representationism. There is an explicit identification with romanticism; a stress on imagination rather than reason; and call for the project of self-creation. Rorty’s liberal is a figure who thinks “that cruelty is the worst thing we do” (CI xv). And
the ironist is someone who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires. “Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their hope that suffering will be diminished, that humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease” (*CI* xv).

But the political implications of Rorty’s views were not yet fully clear. This is why Rorty was such an easy target to attack by both political conservatives who accused him of being “cynical and nihilistic” and political leftists who felt that Rorty was simply defending status quo bourgeois liberal individualism. Rorty was accused of glossing over the racism, sexism, consumerism, and violence that was so much a part of America.

During the nineties Rorty became much more explicit and forthright about his political views; he engaged in what he called “cultural politics.” He strongly identified with the progressive leftist anticommunist politics of his parents. He set forth his political credo in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, where he explained how he was “a red diaper anticommunist baby” who became “a teenage Cold War liberal.” But Rorty was *never* tempted by conservatism or neoconservatism. He always saw Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey as the poets and prophets of a progressive liberal democratic society. He chided some of the excesses of the New Left, especially the legacy of a Cultural Left that disdained anything resembling “real politics” and dealing concretely with “real” economic injustices. But he praises the New Left for fostering the cultural politics of feminist, gay, and lesbian movements. He called for a reconciliation of the reformist Old Left with its primary emphasis on economic injustice and inequality with the best of the legacy of the New Left. “[A]ll of us should take pride in a country whose historians will someday honor the achievements of both of these Lefts” (*AC* 71). Rorty was certainly not blind to the violence and viciousness that has been so much a part of American history. And in the last decade of his life he frequently expressed his pessimism about the future of America. Nevertheless, he always affirmed his patriotism and his “ungrounded hope” that the best of the American liberal tradition of tolerance, individual freedom, and the demand for social equality will prevail.

I have sketched the trajectory of how the young college student who identified himself with “the little clique of reactionary metaphysicians” became disillusioned, turned into a radical critic of the pretensions of philosophy, and eventually became a controversial public intellectual who envisioned a “liberal utopia” where imagination and self-creation will prevail. I can now clarify what I mean by Rorty’s deep humanism. Whether Rorty is dealing with abstract metaphilosophical topics, or the hotly debated philosophic issues concerning Truth, Objectivity, and the nature of Reality, or ethical and political issues concerning human
rights—or even with the role of religion in our daily lives—there is a dominant theme that emerges over and over again. There is nothing that we can rely on but ourselves and our fellow human beings. There is no outside authority to which we can appeal—whether we think of it as God, Truth, or Reality. Rorty summed up what he took to be the primary dispute in contemporary philosophy: “As I see contemporary philosophy, the great divide is between representationists, the people who believe that there is an intrinsic nature of non-human reality that humans have a duty to grasp, and the anti-representationists. I think F. C. S. Schiller was on the right track when he said ‘Pragmatism . . . is in reality only the application of Humanism to the theory of knowledge.’ I take Schiller’s point to be that the humanist’s claim that human beings have responsibilities only to one another entails giving up representationism and realism.”

In attempting to shatter the “crust of philosophical convention,” he was intentionally rhetorically provocative. He seemed to delight in using terms that have strong negative connotations, and turning them against his opponents. He described his understanding of human sympathy and solidarity as “ethnocentrism.” When Jeffrey Stout, a friendly critic, characterized his version of pragmatism as a type of “narcissism,” Dick retorted: “What Stout calls narcissism, I would call self-reliance. As I see it, the whole point of pragmatism is to insist that we human beings are answerable only to one another. We are answerable only to those who answer to us—only to conversation partners. We are not responsible to the atoms or to God, at least not until they start conversing with us.”

Rorty’s humanism explains why he was so enthusiastic about the magnum opus of his former Princeton student, Robert Brandom, Making it Explicit. He interprets Brandom as working out a theory of discursive social practices that vindicates Rorty’s humanistic vision. Rorty praises Brandom because he advances one of the most thoroughgoing critiques of the representationism that has dominated much of epistemology and semantics since the eighteenth century—including contemporary analytic philosophy. But even more important, Brandom’s emphasis on the explanatory promise of pragmatics, his insistence that norms are implicit in our human social practices, his emphasis on our commitments, entitlements, and responsibilities, are themes that Rorty enthusiastically endorses. As Rorty reads Brandom, he has shown that we do not need to appeal to anything other than the discursive exchanges of human beings to account for conceptual norms. “There is no authority outside of convenience of human purposes that can be appealed to in order to legitimate the use of a vocabulary. We have no duties to anything nonhuman.”

There is something ironical (not in Rorty’s sense) about his enthusiastic endorsement of Brandom’s neo-Hegelian project—and Brandom’s
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respective acknowledgment of Rorty as his teacher. Brandom’s goal is a systematic one, and he carefully works through a number of epistemological, metaphysical, semantic, and pragmatic issues that have dominated contemporary analytic philosophy. The truth is that Brandom is much closer to the systematic aspirations of Sellars than he is to the insouciant dismissal of “systematic” philosophy and argumentation that are characteristic of some of Rorty’s quips and rhetorical flourishes. And unlike Rorty, Brandom does think that the philosopher has the responsibility to advance a fully developed pragmatic theory of truth and objectivity. But in Contingency, Rorty announced, “I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics.” And he adds, “Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis” (CI 9). Despite his disclaimers about philosophical argumentation, Rorty remained to the end of his life a brilliant arguer—as witnessed by his responses to such critics as Habermas, Davidson, Quine, McDowell, Williams, Putnam, Dennett (and many others).

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Frankly, I remain ambivalent about Rorty’s humanism. I admire his persistent concern for his fellow human beings and the need to extend the range of our sympathy and empathy to those who suffer from economic injustice, humiliation, and gratuitous cruelty. I agree with him, Brandom, and the classical pragmatists that we can give an adequate account of the role of norms (conceptual, moral, and political) by an appeal to social practices. I appreciate his worry that as philosophy becomes more academic, professionalized, and technical, it becomes more and more remote from, and irrelevant to, the everyday concerns of human beings. I praise his attempt to keep alive and extend the best of the American tradition of radical democracy represented by Jefferson, Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey.

William James, one of Rorty’s heroes, spoke about the importance of a philosopher’s vision—his creative imagination. James tells us that “a man’s vision is the great fact about him,” and “if we take the whole history of philosophy, the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which, under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelopes them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one’s total character and experience, and on the whole preferred—there is no other truthful word—as one’s best working attitude.” Rorty shared this
view and he exhibited just the sort of vision that James speaks about. He dreamed of a time when philosophers might finally give up their obsession with representation, truth, objectivity, and reality—a day when the conversation of humankind might really change, when imagination and self-creation might flourish. He kept alive the hope that we might come closer to what he took to be Dewey’s ideal democratic culture—a “culture no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement” (MN 13). From the early days of his disillusionment with “Platonism,” he was haunted by the question, “What is philosophy good for?” At times he despaired about giving any sensible answer to this question. But he came to think that “philosophy as cultural politics” (the title of his final collection of papers) might still play a modest role in furthering human happiness and our hopes for a liberal utopia.

Over the years, I have been asked many times, what is the difference that makes a difference between you and Rorty? And the answer that I always give is that I began my philosophic career convinced by Dewey’s critique of the quest for certainty and his call for a reconstruction of philosophy. I never experienced the type of disillusionment that Rorty experienced. I never thought that one had to critique representation-ism, traditional epistemology, and foundationalism over and over again. The task, as Dewey had indicated, was to reconstruct philosophy. I never read Plato as the “Platonist” that Rorty caricatures, but rather as the great defender of ongoing, unending dialogue that Rorty came to advocate. Rorty suffered from the “God that failed” syndrome. When he first became enthralled with philosophy, he really did think that he could move up Plato’s divided line to the realm “beyond hypotheses” where knowledge and virtue are identical. And even when he turned to analytic philosophy, he initially half-believed that he had discovered the right way to be a philosopher. I don’t think that Dick ever fully overcame his disillusionment, and he wavered between playing the role of the philosophical therapist and prophet. Rorty paid a heavy price for this disillusionment. He lost his faith in, and patience with, philosophic argument. Consider some of the philosophers that he most admired: Sellars, Davidson, Brandom, and Habermas. For all their differences, these philosophers are distinguished by the finesse, ingenuity, and detail with which they worked out their positions—the subtlety of their philosophical arguments. But after Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty lost his patience with careful argumentation. Redescription, no matter how imaginative, is not enough. Even when Rorty is singing the praises of liberal democracy and affirming the importance of patriotism, he can sound more like a speechwriter for a presidential candidate than a serious social reformer. For a pragmatist who prides himself on paying attention to those practical differences that make a difference,
Rorty doesn’t provide us with the foggiest idea of how to achieve (or even approximate) the goals and hopes that he cherishes. And for all his skepticism about traditional philosophical dichotomies and distinctions, he introduced a whole battery of facile distinctions that tended to obscure more than they illuminated: systematic vs. edifying; public vs. private; argument vs. redescription; finding vs. making. At times he wrote as if anyone who even thought there was a proper philosophic way to speak about truth, objectivity, and “getting things right” was “guilty” of idolatry—bowing down before an external authority. But Rorty “protests too much.” His fear that philosophers would backslide led him to give up too easily on what Jeffrey Stout lists as “three core commitments of a pragmatism that steers clear of narcissism”: “(1) we inquirers have an interest in getting things right; (2) this interest needs to be understood in the context of social practices in which it is expressed; and (3) it need not be seen as implicated in a pseudo-explanatory conception of correspondence to the real.”

In one of Rorty’s last articles, he returned to the issue of the analytic-continental distinction that has become so entrenched among “professional” philosophers. He felt that the distinction was a crude and misleading one, and he suggested substituting the “analytical-conversational” distinction.

Substituting analytic-conversational for analytic-continental as a description of the most salient split among today’s philosophy professors might help us resist the temptation to treat this split either as dividing those who love truth and reason from those who prefer dramatic effects and rhetorical triumphs, or as dividing the unimaginative clods from the free spirits. It is better understood as a split between two quite different ways of thinking of the human situation . . . . This split has been deepening ever since Hegel challenged Kant’s version of the Platonic idea that philosophy could be like mathematics—that it could offer conclusive demonstrations of truths about structural features of human life, rather than simply summaries of the way human beings have conducted their lives so far.

Rorty identifies himself with the “conversational” philosophers who engage in cultural politics by suggesting “changes in the uses of words and by putting new words in circulation—hoping thereby to break through impasses and to make conversation more fruitful.” Recall that he concluded Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature by affirming that “the only point on which I would insist is that philosophers’ moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West” (MN 394). Even Rorty’s severest critics would admit that no other philosopher of the last half-century has provoked as much lively conversation as Dick Rorty.
NOTES

1 Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” in Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 3. Rorty continues: “This essay is one more attempt to restate my philosophical views in a form that may be a bit less vulnerable to Bernstein’s objections.”


9 This passage from Rorty’s “Intellectual Autobiography” is quoted by Neil Gross in Richard Rorty, 165.


19 For example, see Rorty, “Looking Backwards from the Year 2096,” in Philosophy and Social Hope, 243–51.


Consider what Rorty says about philosophic arguments:

On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of the “intrinsic nature of reality.” The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary. They are expected to show that central arguments are “inconsistent in their own terms” or that they “deconstruct themselves.” But that can never be shown. Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague, or “merely metaphorical” is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging. (C18)


