Ascetic Priests and O'briens

Wojciech Małecki

Institute of Polish Philology
Faculty of Philology
University of Wrocław
Plac Nankiera 15, 50-140
Wrocław, Poland

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introduction

The late Richard Rorty has sometimes been described as a controversial, or even outrageous, thinker. Yet the reasons that stand behind such a reputation are obviously quite different from in the case of, say, Georges Bataille or the Marquis de Sade. After all, Rorty’s writings have not been associated with sexual topics, let alone perversions such as sadism or masochism, and one pragmatist philosopher, Richard Shusterman, even went as far as to say that Rorty’s lack of interest in the matters of “somatic satisfactions” (sexual ones included) is due to his being a product of “a puritan America.”¹ Sex-related themes, however, do appear in Rorty’s works (which may not be that strange in the case of a person who read Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* with “wide-eyed fascination” at the tender age of 12),² but he is never interested in them as such, only in using them to promote his pragmatist agenda. This is exactly the case with sadism and masochism, as I am going to demonstrate in this article.

But first let me clarify what will not, even though probably should, be treated in the following pages. Namely, despite the fact that in discussing sadism and masochism, as in most other cases, Rorty uses notions and insights borrowed from a host of other thinkers (here: Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, etc.), I am not going to try to assess his interpretations of these authors. This is not so much because I deem such a philological exercise to be devoid of any value or that I presume those interpretations to be entirely right but rather because Rorty never aspired to be providing the ultimately true readings of anybody. What is more: in many places he openly confesses that he willfully recontextualizes what he takes from other writers,³ for example by yoking Heideggerian notions to quite non-Heideggerian purposes or by trying to fit Umberto Eco into the story of the “pragmatist’s progress.”⁴ This strategy of recontextualization is an integral part of Rorty’s ideal of philosophy conceived of as playing vocabularies off against one another,⁵ where one refers to his/her predecessors’ texts not in order to be true to the past but in order to make these texts work for the better future of human kind (and to Rorty this apparently allows for tinkering with them in a rather unceremonious way). To understand this vision of philosophy, however, one must refer to one of the fundamental distinctions made by Rorty, namely that between horizontal and vertical
thinking, which is also crucial for the topic of this paper.

authoritarian (sado-)masochism and metaphysical power freaks

In a nutshell, vertical thinking is a belief that human beings are responsible in every aspect of their existence (be it cognitive, aesthetic or ethical) to something non-human, larger than themselves and typically portrayed as situated high above them or in the deepest, ineffable depths below, something like God, Truth, Reality, Nature, or Language. Horizontal thinking, conversely, implies that we owe our responsibility only to “our fellow-humans,” especially to the future generations. The fundamentality of that distinction lies in the fact that Rorty apparently believes we will not reach the stage of a “truly humanistic culture” unless we get rid of the burden of vertical (or “authoritarian,” as he also calls it) thought and begin to “look further rather than upward.” That claim in turn allows us to understand the fierceness with which he wages the constant war against vertical thinkers such as Plato, Immanuel Kant, John Searle, Thomas Nagel and others. Irrespective of whether this bellicosity is justified, let me stress that Rorty explains the emergence of vertical thinking in quasi-psychoanalytical terms, particularly referring, in his essay “Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism,” to Freud’s “wackiest” book Moses and Monotheism.

Endorsing Freud’s story of the murder of the primal father and its role in the genesis of religion, Rorty extrapolates it on the history of philosophy, arguing that if Freud’s interest in Plato [had not been] restricted almost entirely to the discussions of Eros and of androgyny in the Symposium . . . [and if he had turned] his skeptical intelligence toward Plato’s Theory of Ideas . . . he would have seen worship of the bare Idea of Father as the origin of the conviction that it is knowledge, rather than love, which is the most distinctively human achievement. For Plato arranged things so that we could please Father best by doing mathematics, or, at a second best, mathematical physics. And it is exactly this emphasis on knowledge at the expense of love, argues Rorty, that is the defining feature of the whole tradition of the metaphysics of presence or “ontotheology” (to use Jacques Derrida’s and Heidegger’s terms, respectively) whose subsequent acolytes have elevated to the status of the Primal Father things as diverse as Ideas, History, Empirical Data, Will, Language, Reason, or Being, and which has dominated Western thought up until recent times. To be sure, Rorty admits that these were already Renaissance intellectuals who began the process of liberation from “the non-human authority.” But on the other hand, he has no doubts that the process has been finally completed, in the domain of philosophy, by no one but the pragmatists, most notably his philosophical hero John Dewey.

It is important for me here that in some places Rorty calls this religious and metaphysical desire to please the Father “a masochistic urge” or “an authoritarian sado-masochism.” Below, I will come back to the terminological question of the possible semantic difference between Rorty’s use of the terms “masochism” and “sado-masochism”; for now, let me elaborate on why he detects a masochistic aspect in vertical thinking, especially as it is exemplified in the history of philosophy. First of all, practically throughout the whole of Rorty’s oeuvre (even in places where he does not use the exact term “(sado-)masochism”), the metaphysics of presence is portrayed as an obsession to submit to something that is not only non-human and ahistorical but also larger, more powerful, stronger, and cold, something like “hard and direct” empirical data, an “unyielding, rigid être-en-soi which stands aloof, sublimely indifferent to the attentions we lavish upon It” or “the tribunal of reason.” When one suffers from vertical thinking, one has a sense of Sin, and therefore feels the need to be punished, to humble oneself, to bow down before, or to be overwhelmed, “seized, compelled and gripped” by that God-like something which looms behind the veil of appearances. Moreover, one then longs for a kind of “purificatory askesis” and thereby becomes an “ascetic priest.” Here, Rorty’s use of the latter concept,
borrowed from Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, allows me to gloss both “masochism” and “sado-masochism” as denoting the vertical thinking.

At least some fragments of Rorty’s work suggest that for him “sado-masochism” means what we would normally call “masochism,” and that the whole confusion can be traced to the backhandedness with which Rorty usually deployed technical terms he borrowed from diverse academic disciplines. His reference to *On the Genealogy of Morality*, however (as well as to Heidegger’s interpretation of the history of metaphysics in the latter’s *Nietzsche* and other works), suggests yet another possibility, for Rorty evokes those books to bolster his thesis that ascetic priests desire something more than merely submitting to the non-human, larger authority. In fact, that desire can be seen as “just a sublimated form of the urge” to have some of this authority’s power transferred onto them so that they can dominate over other finite creatures like themselves. All ascetic priests – i.e., all metaphysicians – are thus also “power freaks” and sadists: this is why in describing them Rorty can at the same time talk about metaphysical masochism as well as about metaphysical “machismo,” which are just two sides of one authoritarian “sado-masochistic entity.”

Here I must stipulate that his repudiation of the “masochistic talk” of hard reality does not mean that for Rorty there is no external world and that everything is reduced to the vocabularies we use, or that the world is inherently plastic and yields without any resistance to our will. On the contrary, according to Rorty’s “non-reductive” naturalism, the outside world exerts “brute pressure” on us all the time. But the relation between it and us, or between it and our language, is causal and not representational. This difference indeed makes a difference in this context for in order to be a philosophical ascetic priest one must believe that our knowledge represents reality and that we can somehow measure the adequacy of the former by comparing it with the latter as it is in itself. It is only when one imagines reality, or nature, to have its own language in which it speaks only to (or that it is a book which opens itself only to) those who are properly humble, that one can think of achieving knowledge in terms of purifying our beliefs of what belongs “merely” to us, humans. From the perspective of Rorty’s brand of naturalism, such a thing does not make much sense since, to use William James’s words, “the trail of the human serpent is . . . over everything.” Thus the only criterion with which we might judge our knowledge or beliefs in general is whether they work well. And even though it is nothing else but the real world which makes some beliefs work better than others the only standards with which we can judge that are our standards – not those of reality in itself, if there are any such standards indeed. So far, his position may appear to be a Kantian wine poured into the pragmatist bottle. Yet, for Rorty, Kantianism, owing to its inventing a “quasi divine faculty called ‘reason’” and despite its refusal to treat Nature as a master to be listened to, boils down to nothing but a transference of the Primal Father from the outside of the human subject right into its very core, something which, according to Rorty, can be clearly observed in Kant’s ethics. For even though the categorical imperative does not come from God, it is inhuman in that it, by principle, has nothing to do with our contingent customs, habits, and traditions, and issues its unconditional commands from the heights of a distant and ahistorical position. Thus “the need to punish ourselves by quailing before . . . Kant’s tribunal of pure practical reason” is essentially a “sado-masochism” born of “timidity and nourished by love of authoritative prestige” and, as Rorty puts it, following Nietzsche, a bad “stench of blood and the lash hangs on [it].” In contrast, the “humanistic” view of ethics that Rorty himself advocates entails that ethical principles are contingent products of our cultures; the way to improve them is not to seek some atemporal objective foundations thereof, whose task would be to help us sort out true moral beliefs from the false ones, but rather to provide a social environment that would allow for as much freedom of conversation between different ethical viewpoints as is possible – and that very environment is obviously liberal democracy with its distinction between the public and the private sphere. Needless to say, not everyone can agree
with Rorty on that point; here, it might be useful to recount an exchange between the former and Slavoj Žižek that directly concerns these matters.

In his *Looking Awry* Žižek formulates the following charge against Rorty:

The problem with this liberal dream is that the split between the public and private never comes about without a certain remainder... [T]he very social law that, as a kind of neutral set of rules, should limit our aesthetic self-creation and deprive us of a part of our enjoyment on behalf of solidarity, is always already penetrated by an obscene, “pathological,” surplus enjoyment. The point is thus not that the split public/private is not possible, but that it is possible only on condition that the very domain of the public law is “smeared” by an obscene dimension of “private” enjoyment: public law draws the “energy” for the pressure it exerts on the subject from the very enjoyment of which it deprives him by acting as an agency of prohibition. In psychoanalytic theory, such an obscene law has a precise name: the *superego*... [T]he flaw of Rorty’s “liberal utopia [is that] it presupposes the possibility of a universal social law not smudged by a ‘pathological’ sense of enjoyment, i.e., delivered from the superego dimension”48

To which Rorty responds by saying:

I can easily agree with Žižek that there is an element of sado-masochistic enjoyment in the sacrifices of private pleasure to the general welfare which are required by the ethics of Mill’s *On Liberty*. But my reaction is “so what?”... I cannot see why my utopia presupposes either a smudgeless social law or an absence of pathological enjoyment of my social bondage. Sado-masochistic pleasure is always a matter of more or less. There is a lot less of it involved in obeying Mill’s mild commandments than in obeying those of a fierce father-figure, one who can decree eternal punishment.49

I hope this reply clarifies that Rorty’s discussion of the authoritarian sado-masochism, and of vertical and horizontal thinking, should not be understood as a general theory which strictly divides all possible modes of thought and conduct into sterile, perspicuous, and ahistorical categories. As is emphasized by Rorty, in his critique, Žižek makes the same mistake many others have made, i.e., he is imputing to Rorty the very theoretical ambitions he does not have and is, moreover, explicitly tilting against. Instead, whatever Rorty says is best understood against the background of the historicism and gradualism he inherits from his philosophical heroes Dewey and Nietzsche, according to which “the worse or evil is a rejected good”50 (which might well be welcomed by us in other historical circumstances), and that the difference between good and evil, as well as the difference between any other imaginable opposites, is only gradual. There is no denying that in his worse moments Rorty seems to be betraying his own historicism and gradualism; it is exactly when he sounds as if he deemed these very approaches as some metaphysical doctrines which provide us with eternal truths about the fabric of the universe. In most cases, however, he makes it clear that they are no less historically limited than any other doctrines and that he sticks to them mainly because of their sociopolitical usefulness he takes for granted. That is, as was said above, he thinks the culture in which horizontal thinking became commonsensical would be a better place for everyone to live. Therefore, he continues to talk “in fuzzy world-historical-cum-psychoanalytic terms about the need to bring humanity to full maturity by discarding the image of the fierce father figure.”51 But the coming of his envisaged liberal utopia requires something more than diminishing the role of ascetic priests (who cherish that image) – and here we approach Rorty’s deployment of the notion of sadism with regard to the problem of cruelty.

**socially accepted sadism and the cultural left**

As is well known, Rorty defines his liberalism, after Judith Shklar, as the belief that “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” and thinks, therefore, that the goal of every liberal should be to diminish the unnecessary suffering which people inflict upon each other. In order to prevent as much of this suffering as possible, not only to alleviate its consequences, it is obviously
necessary to know the etiology of human cruelty, a question which in Rorty’s philosophy serves as the equivalent of the perennial “Unde malum?” One possible solution here might be to turn for the answer to religion or philosophy, and come up with things such as “the original sin” or “the ignorance of what the good is.” But these are certainly not answers of which Rorty would approve, finding them too abstract and thus not translatable into the domain of practice (not to mention the fact that they are perfect examples of vertical thinking). The possibility he actually does take seriously is the following one: the main factors that determine human cruelty are selfishness and sadism. While the etiology of the former lies in simple “economic insecurity” the latter has “deeper roots”:

The delicious pleasure to be had from creating a class of putative inferiors and then humiliating individual members of that class... [can be] seen as Freud saw it – as something which would be relished even if everybody were rich.52

That distinction is used by Rorty to make a comparison between the two main traditions of the American Left. The first one, which lasted, roughly, from the 1900s to 1960s and included people like Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling and others, is the so-called “reformist Left” which concerned itself mostly with “selfishness.” Therefore, it conceived the leveling of economic inequalities to be its main task, and put much emphasis on cooperating with trade unions as well as on effecting necessary legal reforms. However, along with the outbreak of the Vietnam War, that kind of politics gave way to what Rorty describes as the cultural Left, which, according to him, has since then dominated the American leftist scene. This Left owes its name to its strict concentration on cultural matters, particularly on the eradication of the “socially accepted sadism” aimed at sexual, ethnic and racial minorities. Even though Rorty admits that that strategy has brought some unquestionably positive results, he generally deems the aforementioned shift in American leftist politics as rather unfortunate.53

First of all, the cultural Left’s concern with socially accepted sadism is spoiled by something Rorty calls “cultural politics” (by which he understands what is often called today the politics of difference, or recognition); that is studying, protecting and cultivating cultural identities of various disadvantaged groups.54 In this context, Rorty rightly observes that it was not the case that the reformist Left of the first half of the twentieth century did not pay any attention to cultural issues. It did, but in a different fashion: namely, it wanted to expand social solidarity and minimize the negative prejudices, which affect, for example, African-Americans, by stressing what all human beings have in common.55 The cultural Left, in turn, concentrates on emphasizing the ineradicable and incommensurable difference which separates one culture from another (African-American culture, gay culture, female culture), and holds, moreover, that all cultural formations have equal value and as such must be granted equal recognition56 – an idea which Rorty, a self-declared ethnocentrist, cannot make much sense of57 and finds politically paralyzing.

Furthermore, Rorty contrasts cultural politics with “real politics” (i.e., “initiatives for reducing misery”58 and “building a consensus on the need for specific reforms” 59) professed by the reformist Left he favors, and blames the cultural Left for allowing, through its neglect of economic issues, the gap between the poor and the rich in the USA to have grown bigger in the last decades. As he says, for instance, “[o]ne of the scariest social trends is illustrated by the fact that in 1979 kids from the top socioeconomic quarter of American families were four times more likely to get a college degree than those from the bottom quarter; now [1997] they are ten times more likely.”60 And commenting on the fact that an important element of contemporary leftist politics in America is all sorts of educational and research programs run under the label of “cultural studies” (which, as Rorty approvingly recalls, have been dubbed “victim studies” by Stefan Collini), he adds sardonically:

Nobody is setting up a program in unemployed studies, homeless studies, or trailer-park studies, because the unemployed, the homeless, and residents of trailer parks are not “other” in the relevant sense. To be other in this sense you must bear an ineradicable
stigma, one which makes you a victim of a socially accepted sadism rather than merely of economic selfishness.61

It is thus understandable why, while not forgetting about cultural politics and its advantages, he urges his compatriots to go “back to class politics,” i.e., “a politics that centres on the struggle to prevent the rich from ripping off the rest of the country” and aims at “the goal that matters most: the classless society.”62 This feature of Rorty’s thought is especially worth emphasizing here as he has actually become a tried-and-tested liberal whipping boy for many leftist academics who, not bothering to consult his actual oeuvre or basing their judgment on isolated elements thereof, can indulge in claims such as the following one made by Jason Baker in his introduction to Alain Badiou’s *Metapolitics*:

Today, the mere spectacle of democracy (and few are more skilled at waxing lyrical on the benefits of liberal democracy than the contemporary armchair philosophers) lives on in the work of Richard Rorty, whose preference of “irony” over real politics is well documented.63

The question of cultural studies brings me to another negative feature of the cultural Left put forward by Rorty, namely that its struggle against sadism is significantly over-academicized. He complains that the radical academics, who constitute the core of the cultural Left, are apparently, and complacently, convinced that by doing what they were professionally trained in (i.e., performing transgressive textual analysis, or interpreting cultures and providing theoretical justifications for the recognition of their distinctive identities) they can bring about the transformation of unjust social hierarchies, while in fact they are very far from it.64 But here a cautious reader may ask: isn’t the latter claim contradicted by Rorty’s own approval of some of the achievements of the cultural Left, which was mentioned above? That is, if the cultural Left indeed operates on the high level of theory, yet has succeeded in fighting “socially accepted sadism” (by eliminating some of racist and homophobic behavior from the public sphere), then doesn’t that mean that Rorty’s dismissal of the political value of theory is at least overhasty? There should be no doubt, however, that Rorty would respond with a simple “no,” adding that the cultural Left’s successes are due neither to the supposed overwhelming power of the theoretical edifices it constructs nor to its “subversive” treatment of the structures of power underlying, for instance, various phenomena of popular culture (a strategy which results in the production of books and articles Rorty dubs “metahypes” and describes as “hyping the very process of media hyping, hoping to find what’s happening by examining the entrails of magazines”).65 Rather, one should associate the diminishing of socially accepted sadism with the fact that university students in America have begun to be assigned novels like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which made them aware that what is often conceived of as a normal attitude toward “putative inferiors” is actually a form of sadistic behavior one should be ashamed of.66 I will not go into the details of Rorty’s well-known conception of the moral value of literature, which underlies the latter claim.67 Instead, let me point out that in order to illustrate some of the crucial features of sadism, as he conceives of it, Rorty himself deploys literary examples.

It has already been indicated that sadism is a kind of cruelty not related to economic factors (i.e., we can find sadists both among the rich and the poor). But Rorty goes a step further and wants to sensitize his readers to the fact that it might well be them who are sadists. In order to do so he refers, among other books, to George Orwell’s 1984 and to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. For such novels, Rorty argues, make us realize that “sadism” is a label which can also be applied to sensitive, erudite, talented people who read or write sophisticated books, people we – members of the academe – often imagine ourselves to be. For Rorty, Nabokov’s greatest artistic achievements, his true “contribution to our knowledge of human possibilities,” are characters like Humbert or Kinbote; “sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets,”68 accordingly, Rorty praises Orwell for inventing O’Brien who “is as terrifying a character as we are likely to meet in a book.” And he is so not only because
of his sophisticated taste for torture but also because Orwell succeeded in convincing his readers that O'Brien “is a plausible character-type of a future society, one in which intellectuals had accepted the fact that liberal hopes had no chance of realization.”

Moreover, in Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, the latter character is evoked to illustrate yet another feature of sadism. Citing Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, Rorty describes sadism as aiming not at pain as such but rather at the kind of humiliation which consists in forcing a person “to do or say things” she cannot incorporate into her own self-image, thus making her/him unable to eventually “reconstitute” herself/himself. And here let me add an interpretive gloss, even though in the beginning of the paper I explicitly refrained from making any, and say that to be exact Scarry’s respective insights, instead of embracing sadism in general, refer specifically to the structure of tortures used for political purposes.

Let us treat it, however, as yet another example of Rorty’s method of strong reading. I would also like to add that Rorty’s account of sadism as aimed at humiliation, or “mental pain,” should not be seen as downplaying the role of physical pain. In fact, Rorty understands well, just as does Scarry, that it is the physical pain, or a fear thereof, which is probably the most powerful tool of humiliation. For instance, there is no doubt that when (according to a report from Bosnia quoted by Rorty in one of his essays) in an act of “sexual sadism,” “[a] Muslim man in Bosanski Petrovac . . . [was] forced to bite off the penis of a fellow-Muslim” he could do that only under the threat of pain that is virtually unimaginable for most of us. Similarly, in order to break Winston by making him consciously betray Julia, O’Brien resorts to the threat of pain which is hardly mental, that is, nothing less than having one’s face being eaten by rats.

Moreover, the aforementioned cases are perfect instances of what Rorty subsumes under the category of humiliation, since both the Muslim man and Winston were forced to do things that could not be incorporated into their previous self-images, and, as a result, their identities must have been shattered. As Rorty points out, even though O’Brien, in order to break him, made Winston “believe that two plus two equals five,” that could not affect the coherency of the latter’s personality in a totally irreversible way, as one can live quite normally with the memory that “once, in some odd circumstances” one defied the principles of arithmetic. But “Do it to Julia!” immediately killed the Winston who loved her, “cherished the glass paperweight, and could remember the clipping which showed that Rutherford was innocent,” just as the act of mutilation performed by the Muslim man on a fellow-Muslim made him unable to recognize himself in the person he had been before: a brother, father, son, and a Muslim believer.

All other differences aside, what distinguishes O’Brien from the Serbian soldiers is that he elevated sadism to the level of artistry, having carefully selected Winston for his victim and having been for many years scrupulously gathering all the necessary information, just to savor the moment when he could deconstruct him in Room 101.

To sum up Rorty’s discussion of sadism and humiliation let me stress that here, just as in the case of authoritarian (sado-)masochism, he purposely does not offer any definitive philosophical theory, and the distinctions he makes are never strict, being gradual and contextual instead. For instance, when he elevates narratives over theory, as better serving the purpose of moral education, this should not be read as a thesis that literature is universally edifying, regardless of cultural and historical circumstances, but rather as an expression of quite a bland and trivial contention that “it isn’t that we have many better tools.” Similarly, Rorty never claims that his task is the total elimination of each and every form of sadism existent in human relations; he would gladly satisfy himself with alleviating only the fiercest forms of institutionalized sadism, i.e., those that involve violence and block various groups of people from participation in social life.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate Rorty’s attitude in this regard would be to contrast him, again, with Žižek. In his *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek presents a genuinely amusing comparison between “the old-fashioned authoritarian father” and
and the “postmodern” tolerant one, in order to unmask the hidden authoritarianism of the postmodern liberal attitude. Put briefly, in the old times, when no one had heard of I-pods, Harry Potter, and children’s rights, a father could simply tell his child: “You must visit grandma, it is your duty and I don’t care what you think about it,” while now he would rather put it quite mildly: “You don’t have to go to your grandma if you don’t want to, but, you know, she would be happy to see you because she really loves you” etc. Having set the stage this way, Žižek performs his usual “and what if?” trick and encourages us to consider the possibility that it is actually the latter father who is more authoritarian since not only does he want the child to visit the grandma but also wants him to want to visit her, something which is more “tricky” than anything the old-fashioned father could come up with and obviously far more “oppressive,” as the demand here is not limited merely to the actions of the child but extends to its attitudes too.

At first sight Žižek’s argument may seem compelling; yet the devil, as usual, is in the detail, and here he can be found in Žižek’s remark that “[e]very child who is not stupid (and as a rule they are definitely not stupid) will immediately recognize the trap of this permissive attitude.”78 Of course they are not stupid, but it is exactly for this reason that they know that the sanctions their father might employ can, as a rule, be ignored, and they do ignore it quite often, which definitely was not the case in the old-fashioned parent–child relation. For if there is any recognizable achievement of the liberal culture of tolerance, it is certainly the fact that nowadays, at least in those places where that culture dominates, the use of physical force by parents against their children has become less acceptable than it used to be, just as it has become less tolerable to let the parents impose on their children whom they should marry or what profession they should take up. It is exactly this practical, palpable difference with which Rorty would be most concerned, not claiming at the same time that no pressure is exerted on children today but rather that they are now in a better position than before, being able to turn their back on what their parents say (and to get a sense

of what “better” means here it suffices to consult, for instance, Phillippe Ariès’ Centuries of Childhood79). Obviously, one can always rejoin that on some deeper level the dark and twisted ways of authoritarianism are in fact more dangerous and far-reaching than before. But Rorty would most probably respond by saying that this level seems to be so deep and obscure that we cannot do anything about it, and therefore our attention should rather be turned to problems which we have an idea how to solve in practice (even though they may not seem so exciting from a theoretical point of view), like, for example, how to make the neighbors react when they hear that a child is being beaten.

Yet exactly at this precise moment a troubling question emerges: can there then be any possible practical value to Rorty’s own applications of the notions of sadism and masochism? (Especially given that he uses them in a rather fuzzy and speculative way, very far from how they are employed in psychology and clinical practice.) In the remainder of the article I will attempt to explain Rorty’s answer to that question, dealing first with his conception of authoritarian sadomasochism and then turning to “socially accepted sadism.”

### Conclusion

Let me begin by referring to the opening chapter of Rorty’s first major work, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, where, having provided a Wittgensteinian-Rylean “dissolution” of the mind–body problem, Rorty makes the following statement, which is worth a longer quotation as it sheds a light not only on his description of metaphysics as masochism but also on the general “philosophical” method deployed in all his subsequent works:

> As fast as dissolutions of philosophical problems go, this one [i.e. the dissolution in the fashion of language-game theory] has its points. But it would be silly to think that we had resolved anything by arriving at this diagnosis. It is as if a psychiatrist [sic] were to explain to a patient that his unhappiness is a result of his mistaken belief that his mother wanted to castrate him, together with his muddled

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attempt to think of himself as identical with his father. What the patient needs is not a list of his mistakes and confusions but rather an understanding of how he came to make these mistakes and become involved in these confusions. If we are going to get rid of the mind-body problem we need to be able to answer [some specific] questions... To answer them, I think, nothing will serve save the history of ideas. Just as the patient needs to relive his past in order to answer his questions, so philosophy needs to relive its past in order to answer its questions.80

In Rorty’s subsequent works, the above analogy only deepens, and philosophy, or rather its metaphysical branch which bears the name of Philosophy with a capital P, begins more and more to look like a patient with serious psychological problems. For instance, Rorty talks about “the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty,”831 describes Charles S. Peirce as just another “whacked-out triadomaniac,”82 and claims “that the realistic true believer’s notion of the world is an obsession rather than an intuition,”83 or that conceptual analyses are “just remnants” of a “morbid scientistic fear.”84 Moreover, in his infamous essay “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing,” inspired by what he calls Derrida’s “post-Grammatology treatment of philosophical texts,” Rorty lays out why it is suitable to describe the defining conflict of Western philosophy, i.e., that between the horizontal and the vertical thinking (here epitomized by, respectively, dialecticians and Kantians), in terms of sexual perversions:

The Freudian distinction between the normal and the abnormal, drawn with the concreteness which is given by Derrida’s exhibition of the sexual overtones of most metaphysical debate, seems to me just what is needed to be properly playful about the difference between the Kantians and the dialecticians. If one thinks of this difference as that between the partisans of Eternity and of Time, or those of theory and of Practice, Nature and History, Permanence and Change, Intellect and Intuition, the Sciences and the Arts, it all looks too momentous, too much as if there were a serious and debatable issue around. The issue between Kantian and non-Kantian philosophy is, I think, about as serious as the issue between normal and deviant sexual practice.85

As Rorty explains, by “serious” he here means simply “debatable,” and this remark enables us to understand that when he chooses not to argue with the philosophical views he abhors, preferring instead to portray them as urges, desires, obsessions, and neuroses (and he does that all the time indeed86), he actually is wanting to emphasize that they are undeniable – in need of therapy rather than refutation.87 One might expect that, by way of contrast, Rorty will insist on his own views being rational, but this is actually not the case as he rejects the passion-reason distinction.88 If anything, he rather describes his pragmatism as “healthy mindedness.”89 Yet this does not prevent him from talking about it in terms of “monomania,” too.90 Similarly, even though in “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” Kantianism plays the role of the normal man of Europe – and these are “dialecticians” (i.e., pragmatists and their allies) who are sexual deviants – in other texts, of which I have been talking above, he contrasts Platonico-Kantian sado-masochists with the pragmatists who, having released themselves from the need to be overwhelmed by the Primal Father, reached the stage of full maturity (that is, mental health). All these are actually not contradictions but rather indications of the fact that Rorty uses psychological/psychoanalytical vocabulary merely as rhetorical devices that are supposed to help him achieve his particular goals, and that these goals may vary from text to text. As far as his narrative description of the metaphysics of presence in terms of sado-masochism is concerned, the goal to is to cure metaphysicians from their obsession by making them relive its history (which consists in the chain of events that starts with the murder of the Primal Father and leads to the contemporary incarnations of the metaphysics of presence, such as the philosophy of the later Heidegger91) while at the same time not treating that obsession with too much seriousness.

And if for Rorty, in the case of philosophical debates, “too much seriousness” means describing them in terms of the big things such as
“Reason and Passion” or “Reality and Appearance” then using the same terms to discuss the question of cruelty would actually amount to not being serious enough. For even though these big things allow philosophers to play their scholastic games and conjure up one theodicy after another or cross their swords over the question of the source of human wickedness, they rarely apply to cruelty in its concreteness. In order to do so, it is better to borrow the notions of selfishness and greed from the texts such as The Communist Manifesto, and of sadism from Freud, as they are sufficiently contextual to be put into practice. Since I am concerned here primarily with sadism, I will not go into the intricacies of Rorty’s vexed relation to Marx and Marxism. Instead, let me point out that, according to Rorty, morality is “simply a matter of individual psychology”, and thus he praises Freud for allowing us to “explain how someone can be both a tender mother and a merciless concentration camp-guard, or be a just and temperate magistrate and a chilly rejecting father.” What is also important for Rorty, Freud helps us to understand cruelty not only in others but in ourselves, too:

[He] shows why we deplore cruelty in some cases and relish it in others... He shows us why our sense of guilt is aroused by certain very specific, and in theory quite minor, events, and not by others which, on any familiar moral theory, would loom much larger. Further, he gives each of us the equipment to construct our own private vocabulary of moral deliberation. For terms like “infantile” or “sadistic” or “obsessional” or “paranoid,” unlike the names of vices and virtues which we inherit from the Greeks and the Christians, have very specific and very different resonances for each individual who uses them: They bring to our minds resemblances and differences between ourselves and very particular people (our parents, for example) and between the present situation and very particular situations of our past. They enable us to sketch a narrative more finely textured, far more custom-tailored to our individual case than the moral vocabulary which the philosophical tradition offered us.

So these are the particular reasons that Rorty gives to explain his specific use of the notions of sadism, masochism and sado-masochism. Instead of assessing their soundness, however, let me return, in the end, to the question with which I began, namely that of Rorty’s strategy of reading. As I have already said, Rorty confesses to recontextualizing the works of the authors he refers to, but it should be added here that he recontextualizes them in a very specific way. Namely, when one encounters Rorty’s interpretations of the thinkers he sympathizes with (such as Freud) one cannot help but think that with every page these authors start more and more to resemble Rorty himself, while every author he disapproves of after some time begins to look like Plato or Kant (or at least like how Rorty imagines them both to look). Again, this is something Rorty seems to be aware of, but doesn’t that strategy of squeezing everybody into the mold of “pragmatism-vs.-metaphysics debate” make him a rather sadistic reader anyway? This question, I think, is good and definitely worth posing, but let us be sure that it would not make much impression on Rorty. For one can well imagine him responding calmly: “Sure, I am a sadistic interpreter. But I could always be something worse: a gay basher, a Nazi, or even, God forbid, a Platonist.”

notes
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1 Shusterman 128.
2 Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope 5.
3 Cf. the following remark:

The most that an original figure can hope to do is to recontextualize his or her predecessors. He or she cannot aspire to produce
works that are themselves uncontextualizable, any more than a commentator like myself can aspire to find the one “right” context into which to fit those works. (Rorty, Essays on Heidegger and Others 2)

4 Ibid. 19; idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 134.

5 Ibid, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity 78.

6 Ibid. 96–97; idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 82–83, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

7 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

8 Ibid. 96–97; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

9 Ibid. 19; idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 134.

10 Ibid, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity 78.

11 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

12 Ibid. 96–97; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

13 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

14 Ibid. 96–97; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

15 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

16 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

17 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

18 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

19 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

20 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

21 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

22 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

23 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

24 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.

25 Ibid. 96–97, 265–66; idem, Truth and Progress 214.
ascetic priests and o’briens

35 Ibid. 86. Cf. the following remark: “with a bit of help from Freud, one begins to hear talk about the Will to Power as just a high-falutin euphemism for the male’s hope of bullying the females into submission” (Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope 133). Here, let me add that Rorty stresses that his “adaptation of Nietzsche’s notion of ‘the ascetic priest’ is deliberately pejorative and gendered” and that by “the ascetic priest” he means someone who is male and “a phallocentric obsessive” (idem, Essays on Heidegger and Others 72).

36 It is worth emphasizing that Rorty seems to believe in the “sadomasochistic entity” which was so powerfully criticized by Deleuze. On the other hand, however, I think he would agree with Deleuze that “sadism is institutional, masochism is contractual,” but I will not pursue this, and other possible analogies, here – Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty” 134. See also idem, “From Sacher-Masoch to Masochism” 125–31.


38 Idem, Consequences of Pragmatism 193.

39 James 33.

40 In its original form as well as subsequent guises.

41 Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope xxvii.

42 See, for example, Kant 109.

43 Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism 146.

44 Idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 77.

45 Ibid. 75–76; idem, Truth, Politics, and “Post-Modernism” 44; idem, Philosophy as Cultural Politics 189.

46 Dewey 56–57 ctd in Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope 75.

47 Rorty, Truth, Politics, and “Post-Modernism” 44. Although Rorty uses this expression twice (also in Philosophy as Cultural Politics 187), in both cases referring to Nietzsche, he never gives any bibliographical reference. There is no doubt, however, that it is the following fragment of On the Genealogy of Morality that he has in mind:

In this sphere of legal obligations then, we find the breeding ground of the moral conceptual world of “guilt”, “conscience”, “duty”, “sacred duty” – all began with a thorough and prolonged blood-letting, like the beginning of all great things on earth. And may we not add that this world has never quite lost a certain odour of blood and torture? (not even with old Kant: the categorical imperative smells of cruelty). (Nietzsche 45)

48 Žižek, Looking Awry 159–60; emphasis in original.

49 Rorty, Truth, Politics, and “Post-Modernism” 51. Cf. idem, “Response to Ernesto Laclau” 75–76; and Rorty’s comments on Foucault’s critique of modern liberal societies: Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity 63–65.

50 Dewey 193 ctd in Rorty, Truth and Progress 207. Cf. Nietzsche’s remark: “All good things used to be bad things at one time; every original sin has turned into an original virtue” (87).

51 Rorty, Truth and Progress 151–52.

52 Idem, Achieving Our Country 76.

53 For Rorty’s discussion of the reformist and the cultural Left, see “The Eclipse of the Reformist Left” and “A Cultural Left” in Rorty, Achieving Our Country. Cf. idem, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth 201 and Rorty et al. 16.

54 It is important to notice, though, that in his Philosophy as Cultural Politics Rorty ascribes quite a different, and positive, meaning to the term “cultural politics.”

55 For Rorty, this recognition of our common humanity [does not] have anything to do with Kantian or Habermasian universalism. Such recognition is not a matter of believing that our consciences can be relied upon to give us the same instructions, or that moral and political discussion will converge to agreement, thanks to what Habermas and Apel call “the force of the better argument… [I]t is much more a matter of coming to think of previously despised people as like oneself in specific, concrete, banal ways: as bleeding when pricked, and crippled when shunned. (Rorty, “Is ‘Cultural Recognition’ a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?” 15)

56 Ibid. 9–10.
58 Rorty ctd in Shusterman 85. These initiatives could involve, for example, “proposing new laws” (Rorty, Achieving Our Country 15).
60 Ibid. 86.
61 Ibid. 80.
63 Baker xi.
64 Rorty, Achieving Our Country 93; idem, “Is ‘Cultural Recognition’ a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?” 12; idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 129.
65 Rorty, Achieving Our Country 120.
66 Ibid. 81.
67 For a discussion of this conception, see, for example, Johnson.
69 Ibid. 183.
70 See Scarry.
71 In fact, the term “sadism” does not even appear in the rather detailed and comprehensive index to the book. See Scarry.
72 As David Rieff writes: “Muslim prisoners, lying on the ground in rows, awaiting interrogation, were driven over by a Serb guard in a small delivery van” (Rieff ctd in Rorty, Truth and Progress 167).
73 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity 179.
74 In his Truth and Progress Rorty explicitly talks about the need to “get over the hope for a successor to Marxist theory, a general theory of oppression which will provide a fulcrum that lets us topple racial, economic, and gender injustice simultaneously” (239).
75 Rorty, Take Care of Freedom 123.
76 As he makes clear, he does not think that the democratic politics he advocates “could eliminate humiliation” (emphasis added) since, for example, “You cannot teach schoolchildren to read and write . . . without inflicting a good deal of humiliation on the underachievers” (Rorty, “Response to David Owen” 112).
77 And that, too, is not an “unconditional” principle for Rorty. See, for example, the following remark:

The humiliations inflicted on the French clergy by the laicization of primary education were a lesser evil than permitting the citizenry of a constitutional democracy to be forced to imbibe Catholic doctrine. Analogously, the humiliation of people who were raised as Catholics, when their views were laughed off by what they regard as a tyrannical majority, seems to me a lesser evil than trying to enforce a public policy which guarantees that expressions of religious conviction are greeted with respectful attention. (Ibid. 114)
78 Žižek, How to Read Lacan.
79 See Ariès.
80 Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature 33.
81 Idem, Consequences of Pragmatism 161.
82 Idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 134.
83 Idem, Consequences of Pragmatism 13. Cf. idem, Philosophy as Cultural Politics 174.
84 Idem, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth 156.
85 Idem, Consequences of Pragmatism 106.
86 Idem, Philosophy as Cultural Politics 107, 134; idem, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth 8; idem, Essays on Heidegger and Others 26, 34, 60, 65, 69, 75, 117, 176; idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 134, 157; idem, Consequences of Pragmatism xlii, 18, 94, 165; idem, Truth and Progress 318.
87 Idem, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth 61.
88 See, for example, idem, Philosophy and Social Hope 153.
89 Ibid. 162.
90 Ibid. 136.
91 As Rorty puts it, Heidegger, in his later philosophy, treats Language “as if it were . . . a brooding presence, something that stands over and against human beings” (Essays on Heidegger and Others 3).
92 See chapter 14 of Rorty’s Philosophy and Social Hope.
See, for example, Rorty’s review of Derrida’s Specters of Marx, reprinted as chapter 15 of Rorty’s Philosophy and Social Hope.

94 Rorty, Philosophy as Cultural Politics 193.

95 Idem, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity 34.

96 See chapter 9 of Philosophy and Social Hope.

bibliography


Wojciech Malecki  
Institute of Polish Philology  
Faculty of Philology  
University of Wrocław  
Plac Nankiera 15  
50-140 Wrocław  
Poland  
E-mail: wojciech.malecki@wp.pl