Rortyan Cultural Politics and the Problem of Speaking for Others

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This paper examines Rorty’s notion of philosophy as cultural politics. Highlighting its explicitly Deweyan origins, I trace this idea to Rorty’s call in the 1970s for philosophers to be more involved in the cause of enlarging human freedom. Rorty brings philosophy into his project of expanding the conversation beyond the West to include excluded voices through literature and narrative. After underscoring Rorty’s important contributions, I argue that rather than merely assimilating non-Western voices to “our” conversation, cultural politics demands that privileged philosophers start joining the conversations of others.

In the preface to Philosophy as Cultural Politics, the fourth and final volume of his philosophical papers, Richard Rorty encourages philosophers “to contribute to humanity’s ongoing conversation about what to do with itself,” invoking – and broadening – his call nearly three decades earlier in the final section of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature for “continuing the conversation of the West.” For philosophers to “intervene in cultural politics” means not just continuing the conversation but, importantly, “changing the course of the conversation” by suggesting new vocabularies and practices designed to make a pragmatic difference in the world. Citing pragmatism’s potential for generating “radical cultural change,” Rorty calls cultural politics “the growing point of culture” and suggests, in a Deweyan spirit, that philosophers get more involved in the cause of human freedom by seeing intervening in cultural politics as “their principal assignment.”

Rorty’s call for philosophers to intervene in cultural politics marks a striking development in the thought of a figure once regarded as heralding the end of philosophy. Over the course of three decades, Rorty has gone from inviting but being rather noncommittal about philosophy getting involved in cultural politics in the 1970s, to believing in the 1980s and 1990s that novelists, poets, and journalists alone can do the work, to thinking in his final collection that the intervention of philosophers is absolutely necessary. In this essay I argue that this embrace of what he calls cultural politics marks a self-conscious attempt by Rorty to expand “the conversation of mankind” beyond the Western...
world to encompass previously excluded and marginalized voices of the non-West. At the same time, he also has directed this conversation more explicitly toward issues of justice. Framed in this light, Rorty’s approach promises to take up what Edward Said called “the fundamental historical problem of modernism” – namely, taking the Other seriously.

This largely interpretive essay offers a critical evaluation of Rorty’s laudable effort to bring marginalized voices into the conversation. In important and as yet largely unrecognized ways, his evolving position over the last two decades of his life did strive to take the Other seriously. Contained in this work are key social and political, as well as philosophical, insights that, taken together, reconstruct pragmatist thought in ways that render it more directly relevant to contemporary concerns arising from the politics of difference. Most prominent here are the leveling of Western epistemological privilege inherent in his notion of pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism, his abandonment of the idea that reason and argument will lead all inquirers to the same set of beliefs, and his conception of moral progress as a function of “poetic achievement by ‘radically situated’ individuals and communities” (ORT, p. 189). When it comes to justice, Rorty’s account attends to both the “what” and the “who,” to borrow Nancy Fraser’s vocabulary, by calling attention to the need to expand what he calls the logical space necessary for moral deliberation for previously unrecognized claims to injustice to receive a hearing. The first two sections of this essay lay out these contributions, which come together in his notion of “cultural politics.”

Despite the greater respect for difference behind these philosophical moves, Rorty’s conviction that “the vocabulary of the ‘twentieth-century Western social democratic intellectuals’ may well be the best anybody has yet come up with” (CO, p. 53) effectively undermines these benefits in practice. In the final section of the essay I chart the places where Rorty’s otherwise salutary moves fall short. Even though he understands how taking seriously an irreducible pluralism of values and perspectives means the criteria themselves that govern agreement are up for grabs, he still envisions a single conversation as capable of achieving all of our ends. While he sketches an account of social change driven by the voices of excluded groups, this vision still lacks a means for making our concepts and our practices accountable to the experiences of different social positions.

1. From Clearing the Road to Cultural Politics

The idea of “philosophy as cultural politics” that suddenly emerges in Rorty’s final collection of essays is less of a departure than it initially seems. Although he argued in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity and essays of the late 1980s for the novel in particular and narrative in general replacing philosophy and theory as the primary vehicles of democratic transformation toward greater social justice, his later appeal to philosophy as cultural politics is of a piece with his
call in essays of the mid-1970s for philosophers to be more involved in the cause of enlarging human freedom. What changes is the sense of urgency he believes this task requires. In the introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism, Rorty writes of a “post-Philosophical culture.” He describes small “p” philosophy’s role after the outmoded vocabularies of the Plato-Kant tradition have been abandoned as the “study of the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the various ways of talking which our race has invented,” an approach he saw at the time as “much like what is sometimes called ‘culture criticism’” (CP, p. xl). Two decades later in a 2003 essay, he reiterates this stance: “I am content to see philosophy professors as practicing cultural politics,” which he explains in similar language as “suggesting changes in the uses of words and by putting new words into circulation – hoping thereby to break through impasses and to make conversation more fruitful” (PCP, p. 124).

As early as the 1975 essay “Dewey’s Metaphysics” Rorty was interested in what he refers to as Dewey’s idea of “philosophy as the criticism of culture.” While Rorty seeks to jettison the attempt to establish the “generic traits” of experience that Dewey thought relevant to this project, his overall aim is to affirm Dewey’s notion of philosophy as “an instrument of social change” (CP, p. 73–74). At this early stage, Rorty is noncommittal about a positive role for philosophy in this broad practice of culture criticism. But he already is clear that philosophers have no special privilege here: “professionalized philosophy may or may not join transcendentalist culture, but it should not try to beat it” (CP, p. 69). However, in this same essay Rorty also calls attention to the “moral leadership” philosophy provided in the “heroic period of Deweyan pragmatism” between the two World Wars (CP, p. 61). He closes with a quote from Sidney Hook, the philosopher on whose knees he was bounced as a child, that calls pragmatism “the theory and practice of enlarging human freedom in a precarious and tragic world by the arts of intelligent social control.” Rorty’s point is that professional philosophers are “not doing as much for this cause as they would like” (CP, p. 70).

Despite this early call for philosophers to do more for the project of human freedom, by the late 1980s Rorty’s developing position pretty clearly writes off philosophy, putting the burden of advancing the cause of “equality and freedom” on novels and other genres of narrative writing. At least this is the way it seems. In Contingency he links his liberal utopia with “a general turn against theory and toward narrative,” based on the idea that “the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress” (CIS, p. xvi). In “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” he associates philosophy with “a tendency toward essentialism” and sketches a story about the West in which “the novel, and particularly the novel of moral protest, rather than the philosophical treatise” is “the genre most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and equality” (EHO, pp. 66–68). Similarly, in “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” he evinces his well-known stance that democracy does not need
“philosophical backup” (ORT, p. 178). Defining philosophy as “disputes about the nature of human beings and even about whether there is such a thing as ‘human nature,’” he suggests we see moral progress as “a history of making rather than finding, of poetic achievement by ‘radically situated’ individuals and communities, rather than as the gradual unveiling, through the use of ‘reason’, of ‘principles’ or ‘rights’ or ‘values’” (ORT, pp. 182, 189).

Rorty’s embrace of the notion of “poetic achievement by radically situated individuals and communities” is followed by a turn in the 1990s to more specific political issues and concrete groups, taking up pragmatism’s implications for feminism, human rights, globalization, and justice, among others. A key dimension of this work is expanding the boundaries of the conversation beyond the West. In a 1989 essay, Rorty explicitly takes up philosophy’s role in “intercultural comparisons.” Criticizing the essentialism of Western philosophy, he suggests that the social realist novels of the West, like those of Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe, rather than its philosophical and theoretical traditions, are of greater value to the non-West because they have done more to promote “the struggle for freedom and equality.” Because they are less oriented toward providing “one right answer,” these narrative traditions offer a more fruitful basis for East-West dialogue and “finding something distinctive in the West which the East can use, and conversely” (EHO, pp. 68, 82). Almost a decade later in “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” Rorty affirms the non-West’s skepticism toward Western claims and advocates dropping the universalist and rationalist rhetoric of philosophy to “permit the West to approach the non-West in the role of someone with an instructive story to tell, rather than in the role of someone purporting to be making better use of a universal human capacity.” In his view, this approach offers the best chance of achieving a “global moral community” built upon “a community of trust” (PCP, pp. 54–55).

Although he did not yet employ the phrase, these stances are consistent with what he later calls cultural politics, which he describes as aiming to subvert the idea inherent in Enlightenment rationalism that “persistent argument will lead all inquirers to the same set of beliefs” (PCP, p. 92). Cultural politics can be understood as a catch-all phrase for the conversation or inquiry that takes place in the absence of agreed-upon criteria to govern argument. The issue of how to generate “fruitful conversation” between ostensibly opposed philosophical traditions without neutral criteria to appeal to was a preoccupation of Rorty’s from his earliest published work. In his later writings, he simply transfers this idea from the philosophical to the political realm. For Rorty, one’s “ethnos” is comprised of “those who share enough of one’s beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible” (ORT, p. 30). Being “more frankly ethnocentric,” while at the same time expanding the reach of this shared moral identity so that it is as inclusive as possible, has been an abiding aim of his later work (PCP, p. 55). The catch is “the possibility that there may not be enough overlap” between
any two networks of beliefs and desires to make agreement, even “profitable
discussion,” possible (ORT, p. 191).

How to secure this shared overlap in the context of our ethnocentrism, by
which he means that “we have to work out from the networks we are, from the
communities with which we presently identify” (ORT, p. 202), is one of Rorty’s
central challenges. However, this recognition of our historical and cultural
particularity – as well as plurality – is also the source of the fundamental
democratic and egalitarian thrust of his project. That is, if everybody is ethno-
centric in this sense, it is no longer possible to claim “that a single moral
vocabulary and a single set of moral beliefs are appropriate for every human
community” (ORT, p. 190). The force of this claim cuts in two directions. On
the one hand, it undercuts claims to epistemological or cultural privilege, thus
paving the way for greater respect for difference. On the other, it creates the
difficulty that any shared ground must be made or created, rather than found.
With transcendental appeals no longer available, a postmetaphysical, liberal
culture’s only redress for ethnocentrism is to make a virtue of necessity and
avoid the disadvantages of this condition: “to be open to encounters with other
actual and possible cultures, and to make this openness central to its self-image.”
Liberal culture can then take pride in “its ability to increase the freedom and
openness of encounters, rather than on its possession of truth” (ORT, p. 2). Since
there is no transcending our ethnocentrism, all we can do is to “rewave” and
“recontextualize” the beliefs we happen to have in light of the new people or
new beliefs we encounter. If ethnocentric, it is a cosmopolitan ethnocentrism
that Rorty seeks, where individuals are “articulate and reflective enough to make
intercultural comparisons without much strain.”

Indeed, a principal dimension of Rorty’s political project over the last
two decades of his life is expanding the range of people we regard as “possible
conversation partners” (ORT, p. 203). In “Solidarity or Objectivity?” he estab-
lishes that “For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape
the limitations of one’s community, but simply the desire for as much inter-
subjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of ‘us’ as far
as we can” (ORT, p. 23). In essays from the mid-1980s, he takes up the issue of
those whose views fall outside the bounds of this intersubjective agreement. “En-
emies of liberal democracy, like Nietzsche or Loyola,” he tells us, are
deemed “crazy” or “mad.” Not because their views are false or incoherent or
irrational, but because “the limits of sanity are set by what we can take seriously.
This, in turn, is determined by our upbringing, our historical situation” (ORT,

How to recognize and do justice to excluded groups thus becomes a key
dimension of Rorty’s political project; the aim of cultural politics is changing
the conversation to make it more inclusive. Based on these assumptions, we get
Rorty’s by now familiar account of moral progress, as he puts it in “Justice as a
Larger Loyalty,” as “the expansion of the circle of beings who count as ‘us’”
(PCP, p. 45n3). For Rorty, to be part of a society is to be taken as a possible
conversational partner by those who shape that society’s self-image (ORT, p. 206). Now, by practicing cultural politics, which involves redescription and the generation of linguistic novelty so as to “break through impasses and to make conversation more fruitful,” we can enlarge both our individual and cultural self-descriptions to make them as inclusive as possible (PCP, p. 124). Rorty instructs that “We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people – people whom we still instinctively think of as ‘they’ rather than ‘us’” (CIS, p. 196).

2. The Problem of Speaking for Others

The project of internal reform of Western societies that Rorty advocated since the mid-1980s is attractive and compelling, and perhaps more radical in its implications than has been recognized. These moves put Rorty in the somewhat surprising company of recent thinkers who have affirmed the value of dialogue or conversation in the context of historically excluded or muted subjects. For instance, Gayatri Spivak has stressed the need “to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for),” while Linda Alcoff underscores how often “the possibility of dialogue is left unexplored or inadequately pursued by more privileged persons.”

What I hope to highlight in greater detail here are Rorty’s own efforts to engage in dialogue with marginalized voices from outside the traditional philosophical canon, most notably in the context of feminism. These engagements not only led Rorty to rethink particular stances of his own in response to injustices and exclusions he had not previously considered, but generate key insights of interest to philosophers more broadly. In this respect, Rorty’s openness to moving outside of professional philosophy and engaging in dialogue across disciplines and cultures offers a model for how pragmatism can ensure it remains relevant to the most pressing social and moral problems of the day.

A prime example of the kind of critical rethinking prompted by Rorty’s engagement with other voices can be seen in his view of how to respond to the situation of the oppressed. The position he adopts in Contingency is that “victims of cruelty, people who are suffering do not have much in the way of language.” He continues,

That is why there is no such things as the ‘voice of the oppressed’ or the ‘language of the victims. The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else (CIS, p. 94).

Calling for others to put the experience of marginalized groups into language for them is what entangles Rorty in what has been called “the problem of speaking for others.” Spivak, Alcoff, and Said, among others, have compellingly detailed the perils that exist for those attempting to improve the condition of victims of
injustice as a result of the way a discourse of “speaking for” can reinforce existing hierarchies and privileges, silencing victims’ own ability to speak and be heard. In his initial stance, Rorty seems to overlook entirely what Gilles Deleuze once referred to as “the indignity of speaking for others.”17 Often the result of well-intentioned and right-minded attempts to bring the voices of oppressed and marginalized groups into the conversation, the problem of speaking for others is informed by Michel Foucault’s claim that when it comes to generating counter-discourses that challenge rather than extend existing constellations of power, “only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf.”18 Rather than speaking for others, which extends the reach of hegemonic discourse, on this view the task is to create the conditions that enable individuals to speak for themselves.

My claim here is that Rorty’s essay 1991, “Feminism and Pragmatism,” not only marks a revision of his earlier stance in Contingency, but offers an important contribution to the debate around the problem of speaking for others, suggesting insights into how both to identify and incorporate “a voice saying something never heard before” (TP, p. 202). Called a “paradigm-breaking transformation” that takes his pragmatism “in a new direction,” this essay offers some of Rorty’s most sophisticated thinking about politics, in particular about the politics of marginalized groups.19 Drawing on the work of Catherine MacKinnon, Marilyn Frye, Adrienne Rich, and other feminists, Rorty outlines a process of social change through which marginalized groups who have been voiceless can speak for themselves and be heard. One of these insights is his diagnosis of the condition of “meaninglessness” in which oppressed groups may find themselves: even if the oppressed do speak for themselves, they may find that they are in a condition of “meaninglessness,” where they are “in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices – unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one” (TP, p. 217). What is needed in this marginalized state is not argumentative procedures, a la Habermas, or “the claim that something large like Nature or Reason or History or the Moral Law is on the side of the oppressed,” but rather “courageous and imaginative experimentation.” As Rorty puts it in a gloss on a passage from Dewey: “if you find yourself a slave, do not accept your masters’ descriptions of the real; do not work within the boundaries of their moral universe. Instead, try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world that lend themselves to the support of your judgment of the worthwhile life” (TP, p. 216).20

The value of this stance is that it elides the need to speak for others by calling for members of oppressed groups not only to speak for themselves, but to offer an alternative description or vision of reality. Long one of Rorty’s most astute readers and incisive critics, Nancy Fraser identifies in this essay an important shift away from the conception of social change that dominates Contingency, where the private, novel metaphor-generating capacity of strong poets obsessed with the “anxiety of influence” is the sole locus of agency, with
victims of oppression, as we have seen, needing someone to put their experience into language for them. As a result of his engagement with a variety of feminist perspectives, Rorty reconceives linguistic innovation in collective, political terms, thus paving the way for broad-scale social movements to struggle against dominant constellations of meaning. For example, Rorty holds that “we have to think of gays, blacks, and women inventing themselves rather than discovering themselves” \(TP\, p. 225\).

On the view expressed in “Feminism and Pragmatism,” the voices of marginalized groups play a central role in Rorty’s picture of social or moral progress.\(^{21}\) Returning to the situation of marginalized groups discussed in \textit{Contingency} where “only the language of the oppressor is available,” Rorty now draws on the insights of Frye, specifically her notion of “semantic authority.”\(^{22}\) Semantic authority refers to the power to create narratives of self-understanding that define roles and identities not currently available within the existing discourse or language game. The absence of semantic authority means an inability to offer alternative descriptions of oneself, the group of which one is a member, and one’s reality. Rather than appealing to the creative genius of elite strong poets, Rorty now emphasizes that imagination is not enough; achieving semantic authority requires that linguistic innovations be incorporated into a shared practice: “People in search of such authority need to band together and form clubs, exclusive clubs” \(TP\, p. 223\).\(^{23}\) Once the members of such groups build their moral strength by increasing semantic authority over its members and thus making it easier for members to find their moral identities in their membership in those groups, the next step in this picture of social change is the gradual weaving of “the new language spoken by the separatist group” into the language that is taught in schools \(TP\, p. 223\). In sum, he now offers a rather different picture than the conception of political progress as “the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need” sketched in \textit{Contingency} (\textit{CIS}, p. 37).\(^{24}\)

One of Rorty’s key insights in “Feminism and Pragmatism” is his recognition of the obstacles faced, in the context of appeals to justice, by “a voice saying something never heard before.” Unless what he refers to as “the logical space necessary for moral deliberation” is expanded, these claims will fail to register in the dominant discourse, even if victims of oppression are able to give voice to their suffering.\(^{25}\) Here Rorty’s characteristic emphasis on linguistic novelty remains. This logical space can only be expanded by “non-logical” means – novel metaphors, redescriptions, and creative misuses of language.\(^{26}\) For Rorty, the problem of universalist philosophers, like Kant, is the assumption that “all the logical space necessary for moral deliberation is now available – that all important truths about right and wrong can not only be stated but be made plausible, in language already at hand” \(TP\, p. 203\). When it operates unchecked, this assumption is precisely what renders us deaf to a voice saying something never heard before and blind to those whom we may exclude as conversation partners. Because logical means of argumentation and
persuasion rely on appeals to antecedently shared criteria to function, they are incapable of expanding the frame.\textsuperscript{27}

The second insight that emerges here concerns the role of philosophers – specifically, philosophers writing from privileged social standpoints. As Fraser observes, in making this argument Rorty deemphasizes the role of male philosophers, suggesting that pragmatist philosophers, in her words, should be “the junior partner” in the proposed alliance with feminism, confining themselves to “the relatively unimportant role of support work ... while we feminists will be out on the main stage of history, doing the truly important work of changing language, changing the culture, and changing the world.”\textsuperscript{28} As philosophers, we must take seriously the idea that there are moments in the struggle for social justice when we simply must get out of the way, especially when it comes to making authoritative claims about the nature or extent of justice and injustice. That said, philosophers need not stand by idly. With a nod to Dewey, Rorty establishes that philosophy’s function is “to clear the road for prophets and poets, to make intellectual life a bit simpler and safer for those who have visions of new communities” (\textit{TP}, pp. 214–215).\textsuperscript{29}

3. The Limits of Rortyan Cultural Politics

Rorty’s notion of moral progress as “poetic achievement by ‘radically situated’ individuals and groups” promises to engage precisely what Said called “the fundamental historical problem of modernism” – namely, Europe and the West “being asked to take the Other seriously.”\textsuperscript{30} The question we must now consider is whether Rorty’s account offers the resources to bring those outside of our practices and beliefs into the conversation in a way not only that respects but learns from difference, or whether it is yet another version of the caricature of the tolerant liberal who says, “I am tolerant, I am open-minded, I am willing to accept individual differences – as long as you basically act and talk like me – as long as you suppress your group identity and cultural differences and behave like a ‘good’ liberal.”\textsuperscript{31} I argue that while Rorty’s theory of moral progress and social change actually requires the different perspectives on reality that marginalized groups provide, in practice his conviction that Enlightenment political vocabularies are already pragmatically justified as the best ones humans have come up with so far closes down the kind of openness to difference his theoretical stance makes possible. In this final section I outline what I take to be four limitations of Rorty’s otherwise attractive perspective, in the hope of highlighting areas into which subsequent pragmatic thought might move.

The first limitation is that for all of Rorty’s important attention to excluded voices, a singular conversation or discursive public dominates his thinking. Expanding whom we regard as conversation partners is in his view ultimately a matter of others joining in what we are already talking about, rather than spurring a new or fundamentally different conversation. If by Rorty’s own account moral progress requires poetic achievement by the radically situated, it
is not clear that his conception is congenial to such participation if it threatens to disrupt the conversation already underway. In the essay “Globalization, the Politics of Identity, and Social Hope” he explicitly takes up the “humiliations caused by colonialist arrogance” and affirms the importance, for example, of seeing gays as an “oppressed minority.” Nevertheless, he explains that “As I see it, the emergence of feminism, gay liberation, various sorts of ethnic separatism, aboriginal rights, and the like, simply add further concreteness to sketches of the good old egalitarian utopia.” He makes clear that he has nothing against these movements; he just does not see them as necessitating a “new sort of politics.” What these movements teach us for Rorty is the need to expand our self-descriptions and utopian political vision so that they accommodate injustices and forms of suffering that previously have fallen outside our frame of moral concern. Our conception of a just global society merely needs a bit of updating (PSH, pp. 235–236).

At stake here is a fundamental question regarding the ongoing value of universal Enlightenment political categories – namely, whether, even if severed from their rationalist philosophical justifications, they are adequate to addressing the claims of marginalized groups. Rorty’s attention to the always-present possibility of “a voice saying something never heard” before, as well as his grasp of the need for privileged philosophers to get out of the way, would suggest that this is a question that cannot be answered in advance, least of all settled by philosophers in privileged social positions. Given the commitment to democratizing the epistemological space inherent in Rorty’s notion of pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism, allowing a similar openness and contestation to affect the process of frame-setting – determining the grammar of politics – seems necessary as well. Indeed, the consequences of Rorty’s evolving position point toward a broader theoretical shift that could take two forms, both of which entail abandoning this Enlightenment vocabulary. One is a rejection of the conceptual possibility of a nonexclusive global community or political space; the other involves greater recognition of how communication of the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups must be allowed to correct biases embodied dominant perspectives in ways that may alter these vocabularies more fundamentally.

While Rorty introduces a salutary attention to the existence of different social positions, this is not enough. The lack of a mechanism for holding us accountable to these perspectives in some fundamental way gives rise to a second limitation. Too often Rorty casts Otherness and difference as over-theoretical constructs that can be abandoned, or reduces ‘difference’ to the misleadingly neutral notion of “variation,” as in his appeals to “the maximization of opportunities for individual variation, and group variation insofar as the latter facilitates the ability of individuals to recreate themselves” (PSH, p. 237). The problem is that these approaches smooth over social positions differentiated by inequalities of power, voice, access, recognition, and other dimensions of social and political life, while simultaneously obscuring
their sources. Here Rorty’s approach neglects Frye’s point that those excluded from the dominant conceptual scheme find themselves in that state not because of “the way things are,” but because of “something done.” Being accountable to the experiential and critical resources of marginalized voices means permitting these perspectives to disrupt the ability of privileged discourses to set the frame and offer authoritative knowledge free of challenges arising from these excluded standpoints.

The third limitation to arises from Rorty’s disinclination to discuss institutions. The importance of moving away from an abstract and ahistorical plane to the historically and socially contextualized realm of culture, such that our forms of inquiry expand to include literature and narrative, should not be underestimated, particularly for excluded groups. Yet we must also recognize how those who find themselves outside the logical space of moral deliberation or the frame of justice lack formal institutional means of redress. Adequately attending to groups excluded as conversation partners at the level of discourse is one issue. Addressing exclusion from formal institutions also is paramount. The need for global democratic institutions where issues of frame-setting not only can be expressed but linked to forms of redress, if neglected, risks insulating the inclusion of excluded from having pragmatic consequences.

The fourth limitation, simply put, is that we must be open to joining the conversations of others rather than asking them to join ours. Rorty’s political vision of a global liberal utopia seeks to subsume everyone under a grand “we.” Even though he eschewed essentialism and understood this shared moral identity as an achievement we must actively cultivate, as long as we remain convinced, like Rorty, that “the vocabulary of the ‘twentieth-century Western social democratic intellectuals’ may well be the best anybody has yet come up with” (CO, p. 53), the transformative potential of this project is short-circuited. Evaluations of this vocabulary from those who are not twentieth-century Western social democratic intellectuals themselves are necessary here. To take just one example, Nigerian philospher Amaechi Udephi has argued that “if the community is the source of epistemic authority and rationality, as Rorty has submitted, then, it makes sense to talk of African epistemology because Africans have their own way of conceptualizing events or reality.” For Udephi, Rorty’s anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist and pragmatic view of justification, knowledge, truth, and rationality paves the way for “an escalation of horizons for other discourses to sprout – one of which is African epistemology.” This is precisely the sort of conversation that Western intellectuals should consider joining and listening to before rendering a verdict on the ongoing usefulness of the Enlightenment’s political vocabulary. When non-Westerners merely enter our conversation what often results, even among African thinkers, is “the adoption of criteria of rationality developed elsewhere in assessing the cultural matrix” of their own society. For both Western and non-Western alike, it must be possible not only to join but to leave or disaffiliate from “our” conversation, and even to start another.
In the end, my criticisms of where Rorty’s developing position ended up should not mask how far beyond most of his philosophical brethren he already had gone. While we should be cognizant of these shortcomings, much still remains to be learned from Rorty before philosophers are able to move beyond them. His call in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* for philosophy to “change the conversation” is a certainly start. But philosophers simply altering the terms of “our” conversation is not enough. The conversation – and conversations – that emerge from the actual victims of the crises, conflicts, and injustices that accompany Western colonialism and globalization are required if intercultural dialogue is to be more than what Said called “so much windy hypocrisy.” While he makes allowances for the possibility that “any culture may be surpassed by another, since the human imagination may dream up many more definite descriptions,” and holds that “cultural politics has the last word” on all matters, Rorty’s epistemological egalitarianism is not enough if it provides no accountability. Nevertheless, for pragmatists, an engagement with Rorty’s thought helps bring into sharper focus the task before us.

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**NOTES**


2. See “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” in *PCP*, pp. 42–55. Even in *PMN*, Rorty included amongst the aims of edifying philosophy “the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture,” p. 360. However, he does not put any flesh on this idea until much later.

4. Rorty borrows the phrase “radically situated self” from Michael Sandel. While for Sandel this is a pejorative label for any account of the self that fails to understand it as prior to its ends, Rorty embraces this phrase as a description of his conception of centerless, historically contingent selves. See “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in ORT, pp. 175–196. As Rorty turns to marginalized groups more directly in the 1990s, this description takes on a more socially particularistic meaning. For Rorty’s idea of pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism, see “Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism,” Revue Internationale de Philosophie 53.1 (1999): 7–20, reprinted in A Companion to Pragmatism, ed. John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 257–266.


6. In PSH, especially Section II, “Hope in Place of Knowledge: A Version of Pragmatism,” Rorty begins to outline this positive role for philosophy, returning again to Dewey’s idea of “making philosophy an instrument of change” (29) and to the function of philosophy as “mediat[ing] between old ways of speaking, developed to accomplish earlier tasks, with new ways of speaking, developed in response to new demands” (66). As he puts it here, we should “see philosophy as an aid to creating ourselves” (69) and pragmatism as “an attempt to alter our self-image” (72). However, he does not view this as “cultural politics” per se. At this time he still insists on a distinction between “real leftist politics” and “cultural politics” (TP, p. 231) with the latter being his shorthand for what he took to be the overtheorized, pessimistic “academic” politics of the postmodern Left that he would criticize in AOC. It is not until the last few years of his life that he drops the pejorative use of “cultural politics.” For more on this reading, see “General Introduction,” The Rorty Reader, ed. Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

7. The following year in “Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture” Rorty sketches this idea of “culture criticism” in greater depth, calling attention to the “kind of writing” that emerges in the nineteenth-century with Ralph Waldo Emerson and others, which he describes as “neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all of these things mingled together into a new genre,” CP, p. 66.

8. The most conspicuous early example is Rorty’s brief 1983 piece “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” ORT, pp. 197–202. For Rorty’s essays of the 1990s, see, for example, “Feminism and Pragmatism” and “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” both in TP; “Globalization, the Politics of Identity, and Social Hope,” in PSH; and “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” in PCP.


12. Rorty clarifies that what he means here is not reference to a particular *ethnos*, in the sense of “loyalty to the sociopolitical culture of what Marxists used to call ‘bourgeois democracies,’” but rather ethnocentrism as “an inescapable condition — roughly synonymous with ‘human finitude,’” *ORT*, p. 15.


14. See, for example, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” and “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz,” both in *ORT*.


17. This problem is more complicated than it initially seems. For one, as Spivak has argued, Deleuze and Foucault’s retreat from speaking for others conceals their own privileged positions as intellectuals who have the power to make this choice in the first place. Second, simply to promote “listening to” instead essentializes the subordinate subject position of the oppressed. Third, as Alcoff demonstrates, the notion that anyone can speak only on their own behalf is problematic itself, given the networks of discourse that implicate us and others. As she puts it, “When I ‘speak for myself’ I am participating in the creation and reproduction of discourses through which my own and other selves are constituted,” “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” pp. 21–23.


20. Interestingly, this stance echoes that of Lorde. See note 18.

21. Social and political change will happen only when, as he puts it, “the linguistic and other practices of the common culture have come to incorporate some of the practices characteristic of imaginative and courageous outcasts,” *TP*, p. 224.


23. “Individuals – even individuals of great courage and imagination,” he argues, “cannot achieve semantic authority, even semantic authority over themselves, on their own. To get such authority you have to hear your own statements as part of a shared practice,” *TP*, p. 223.

24. Interestingly, Rorty’s later call for philosophers to intervene in cultural politics appears to be a reversal of the stance he defended in his published exchange with Indian philosopher Anindita Balslev in 1990. Against Rorty’s position, which at that time, in the wake of *Contingency*, viewed philosophers as part of the problem rather than the solution, Balslev argued their contribution resides in “persuading us to abandon, for example, the customary habits of speaking about gender, race, nationalities – about all who have been marginalized, who have never occupied the central space in the dominant discourse,” *CO*, p. 62. This role is remarkably similar to the one Rorty espouses in *PCP*.

25. When it comes to “a voice saying something never heard before,” the problem is that “injustices may not be perceived as injustices, even by those who suffer them, until somebody invents a previously unplayed role,” *TP*, p. 203.

26. Because argument gets its traction by “working according to the rules of some familiar language-game, some familiar way of describing the current situation,” they “often just get in the way of attempts to create an unfamiliar vocabulary, a new lingua franca for those trying to transform what they see around them,” *EHO*, pp. 189, 181. Or, as he put it in a more recent essay, citing Shelley, “the sort of truth that is the product of successful argument cannot ... improve our moral condition.” See “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” in Voparil and Bernstein, *The Rorty Reader*, p. 484.

27. As Fraser compellingly argues in her recent work, which employs Rorty’s Kuhnian distinction between normal and abnormal discourse, appeals to justice from marginalized groups often take the form of a challenge to the frame or “grammar” of justice itself. Accounts of justice that focus solely on the content of justice – what Fraser refers to as the “what” of justice – which are premised upon a shared grammar, fail to recognize that in these cases it is the very frame or grammar itself that is being challenged. See Fraser, “Abnormal Justice.”

28. Fraser, “From Irony to Prophecy to Politics,” p. 260. As Fraser explains, “On this reading Rorty is in effect offering to do the housework so that we can be freed for world-historical activity in the public sphere.” However, she also notes that throughout his essay Rorty writes as if feminists themselves are not engaged in philosophy, only what he calls “linguistic innovation in the mode of prophecy.”


An important dimension here concerns the exclusivity inherent in the methods, assumptions, and tone of philosophical inquiry. As Martha Nussbaum has argued, the authority of the style and precision of Anglo-American philosophical prose often goes unquestioned: “a style that seems to be regarded as a kind of all-purpose solvent in which philosophical issues of any kind at all could be efficiently disentangled, any and all conclusions neatly disengaged,” Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature (New York: Oxford, 1990), p. 19. As a result, other ways of being precise, lucid, and complete are either not engaged or ruled out. On this issue, see also Larry M. Preston, “Theorizing Difference: Voices from the Margins,” American Political Science Review 80 (1995): 941–953.

An example of the first position is the perspective of Chantal Mouffe. See her The Democratic Paradox (New York: Verso, 2005); and The Return of the Political (New York: Verso, 1993). The second position has been compelling articulated by Iris Marion Young in Inclusion and Democracy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). By temperament, Rorty would seem closer to Young.

Said makes a similar point when he describes Rorty’s appeal to conversation at the end of Mirror as “philosophers discoursing animatedly in a handsomely appointed salon.” His point is that “the kind of scrubbed, disinfected interlocutor” that can be let into the conversation is little more than “a laboratory creation with suppressed, and therefore falsified, connections to the urgent situation of crises and conflict that brought him or her to attention in the first place,” “Representing the Colonized,” p. 210.


For an excellent account of the role of social difference, see Young, Inclusion and Democracy, esp. chapter 3. Bernstein makes this point nicely in his discussion of Hans-Georg Gadamer, noting that “understanding requires that I open myself, listen and respond to what the culture really says to me,” such that I am “responding to something that makes a claim upon me,” “The Hermeneutics of Cross-Cultural Understanding,” p. 36. To put it another way, something of ourselves needs to be risked.

Fraser makes a strong case for the importance of this dimension, calling for a “process of two-way communication between civil society and global representative
institutions,” including implementing the “all-affected principle” as the criterion for representation. See “Abnormal Justice” and “Re-framing Justice in a Globalizing World,” which focuses on how addressing contemporary claims about justice requires moving beyond the “Keynesian-Westphalian frame” more broadly.

39. By contrast, what Maria Lugones has called “complex communication” entails “a recognition of the other that does not attempt to assimilate the other into one’s own familiar meanings.” See Lugones, “On Complex Communication,” Hypatia 21.3 (2006): 75.


41. Udefi, “Rorty’s Neo-Pragmatism and the Imperative of the Discourse of African Epistemology,” p. 83. The example he gives here is of African philosophers who hold a “universalist conception of philosophy and rationality” arguing for “the adoption and deployment of the critical edge of science and technology to African proverbs, folktales, oral tradition, with a view to sifting out the philosophical contents in them.”

42. I borrow the use of “disaffiliate” in this context from Frye, The Politics of Reality, pp. 118, 126.

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