

## Richard McKay Rorty (1931-2007)

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### Biography

Richard Rorty is a leading US philosopher and public intellectual, and the best-known contemporary advocate of pragmatism. Trained in both analytic and traditional philosophy, he has followed Dewey in attacking the views of knowledge, mind, language and culture that have made both approaches attractive, drawing on arguments and views of the history of philosophy from sources ranging from Heidegger and Derrida to Quine and Wilfrid Sellars. He takes pragmatism to have moved beyond Dewey by learning from analytical philosophy to make 'the linguistic turn', and from Thomas Kuhn that there is no such thing as 'scientific method'. Language and thought are tools for coping, not representations mirroring reality. Rorty's characteristic philosophical positions are what might be called 'anti-isms', positions defined primarily by what they deny. In epistemology he endorses anti-foundationalism, in philosophy of language anti-representationalism, in metaphysics anti-essentialism and anti- both realism *and* antirealism, in meta-ethics ironism. He extols pragmatism as the philosophy that can best clear the road for new ways of thinking which can be used to diminish suffering and to help us find out what we want and how to get it. In the public arena, he is a leading exponent of liberalism and critic of both left and right.

### 1. Life

Rorty's philosophical training at the University of Chicago and Yale University grounded him in the history of philosophy and the main currents of pragmatism and traditional philosophy dominant in the USA in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the techniques and goals of the analytical philosophy then winning the allegiance of younger philosophers. Starting in the 1960s, he published articles and reviews addressing a wide range of philosophical subjects, the philosophies of thinkers as disparate as Whitehead, Dewey, Royce, Austin and Wilfrid Sellars, and, always, the metaphilosophical issues that arise from the multiplicity of conceptions of philosophy and its methods. He surveyed these metaphilosophical issues from a pragmatist point of view in the introduction to his anthology *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (1967). During the later 1960s and the 1970s he won wide recognition as a leading contributor to debates in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics, epistemology and the philosophy of language, staking out radical positions in each of these fields and drawing on the attacks on the philosophical tradition in Heidegger, Derrida, the later Wittgenstein and especially Dewey. He reached the first rank of US philosophers and won international attention outside philosophical circles with the publication of his major work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). This book brought together all his lines of thought in an attempt to get philosophers, and those who look to philosophy to lend authority to their own cultural activity, to abandon the views of knowledge, mind, language and culture which give appeal to movements like analytic philosophy that claim to put philosophy on the true path of a science. Since then he has, in many articles, reviews and lectures, extended his attack on that philosophical tradition. He

has defended his version of pragmatism as the best way of thinking about those things philosophers should still be thinking about; he has sought to place his thought in relation to an ever-widening range of other twentieth-century writers both within and outside philosophy (for example, Castoriadis, Davidson, Dennett, Foucault, Freud, Habermas, Lyotard, Nabokov, Orwell, Putnam and Roberto Unger) and to make pragmatism useful to workers in other areas (for example, feminism, education, jurisprudence and literary criticism). And he has taken up the role, well-established in Europe but rare among philosophers in the United States after Dewey's death, of a public intellectual, commenting in articles and interviews in journals of general circulation on affairs of common interest in democratic societies. Rorty's wide command of modern philosophy is remarkable, as is his dialogue with a broad spectrum of philosophical movements, and he is unusual also in giving credit to a number of other thinkers (Dewey, Heidegger, Davidson, Freud, Kuhn, Dennett, Quine, Sellars, Derrida, Nietzsche) for most of the key ideas in his writings. (Dennett, however, has enunciated the *Rorty Factor*: 'Take whatever Rorty says about anyone's views and multiply it by .742' to derive what they actually said.) Many of his most important papers and lectures have been collected in four volumes (listed below). Having urged a break with the traditional project of philosophy, he left the philosophy department at Princeton University to become a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia in 1982.

## 2. Metaphilosophy

Rorty takes the three models of philosophy most attractive to contemporary philosophers to be the scientific (Carnap), the poetic (Heidegger) and the political (Dewey); he endorses the last as most congenial to pragmatism. Philosophers should emulate the moral virtues which scientific communities have exemplified, but give up belief in 'scientific method' as well as philosophical method. They should foster the invention of new metaphors that is the work of poets and prophets, creating new vocabularies and social hopes; but philosophers have no special mission to be either poets or prophets. Philosophy should be hermeneutic, helping different areas of culture to make contact with each other and to sort out conflicts, just as liberal politics tries to find a working relationship among the different and conflicting desires and hopes at play in the world (see Hermeneutics). Its most important task now is to clear away past bad philosophy and bad ideas that are getting in the way of thinking usefully about, and doing, what can be done to make people happier.

As his metaphilosophy suggests, Rorty's characteristic philosophical positions are what might be called 'anti-isms', positions defined primarily by what they deny. In epistemology he endorses anti-foundationalism, in philosophy of language anti-representationalism, in metaphysics anti-essentialism and anti-both realism *and* antirealism, in meta-ethics ironism (see Foundationalism; Essentialism; Realism and antirealism). None of these is a theory but, rather, a collection of considerations for the rejection of theorizing in these areas.

## 3. Knowledge and truth

Rorty's anti-foundationalism, drawing on arguments of Quine and Wilfrid Sellars, denies that the justification of our knowledge claims must or can terminate in beliefs or statements that provide

a foundation for knowledge. Nor does Rorty think that knowledge has any other overall structure. On his view (epistemological behaviourism), one justifies a belief or statement by adducing other beliefs or statements that do not require justification in that context, so as to satisfy the standards implicit in our social practice of justification (see Contextualism, epistemological). He consequently denies both that scepticism is a problem for philosophy and the theories whose appeal is that they purport to solve the problem of scepticism (see Scepticism). Rorty's anti-foundationalism also denies that there is some particular discipline or part of culture that has the job of providing justification for, or making sense of, all the rest. In particular, he insists that it is a mistake to try to justify practices and institutions like liberal democracy, academic freedom and scientific research by appeal to philosophical theories that show them to correspond to or be in touch with the ultimate nature of reality or the human self or the will of God or something else bigger or deeper than our actual practices. This is not the view that such practices do not need any justification, which some critics have accused Rorty of holding, but rather that appropriate justifications will always be piecemeal and local (see Justification, epistemic §7).

Epistemological behaviourism is an account of justification but not a theory of truth. Rorty denies that there is any interesting theory of truth, that is, any general account of what makes beliefs and sentences true. He endorses James' dictum that the true is just the good in the realm of belief; there is no general account of why beliefs are true any more than there is a general account of why things are good. He rejects correspondence theories and coherence theories of truth alike. His anti-representationalism denies that the essence of language is to represent or picture reality in such a way that bits of language match up with bits of reality; languages – the noises, gestures and marks we humans make – and thoughts – the brain states we get into – are part of the repertory of devices we have accumulated for coping with the world (including ourselves). While some stretches of language or thought might work by such matching-up techniques, these stretches have no special privilege or philosophical importance. Rorty rejects both realism and antirealism (or idealism) as products of a misguided representational view of language. No class of truths has foundational status with respect to the rest of the truths. While we usually call beliefs true when they are better justified than their competitors, 'true' does not *mean* 'justified' or 'warranted'; it is indefinable and ineliminable.

Since there is no foundation for truth or knowledge, there is nothing outside our social practices to ground them, according to Rorty. Hence, he has sometimes rejected objectivity as a goal of inquiry (and objective–subjective as a relevant dimension of appraisal in the cognitive realm) in favour of solidarity with our community of inquirers; less provocatively, he urges that objectivity be understood as intersubjectivity or taken as shorthand for practices, like not taking bribes, that we have found very helpful in most kinds of inquiry.

Rorty is often accused of relativism and as often rejects the accusation. He claims that relativism about truth is easily refutable. The alternative to relativism about justification that he espouses is 'ethnocentrism', the view that justification is relative to *our* practices. The defence of our beliefs against challenges by other communities (Nazis, religious fundamentalists, the Nuer) must always be question-begging, but this does not vitiate the defence, since no other kind of defence

is better or even as good, and appraisal must always be against relevant alternatives (see Cognitive pluralism).

Opponents with epistemological and political concerns have regarded Rorty's ethnocentrism and epistemological behaviourism as viciously circular and conservative, making existing practices and institutions self-justifying and impervious to rational criticism, an objection also brought against other epistemological behaviourists such as Wittgenstein. Rorty's response has been to appeal to Kuhn and Davidson. According to Kuhn's account of scientific revolutions, relatively large-scale changes in the standards and practices of rhetorical communities are not justifiable by criteria available to those in the community before the change, but one result of the change is that new criteria become available to the reconstituted community after the revolution. Rational justification of the new beliefs and vocabulary, and rational criticism of the old beliefs and old vocabulary are available, but only when the new vocabulary and its attendant standards are established. According to Davidson's account of metaphor, metaphorical uses of old words to make new judgments that are false and even irrational by existing practices of justification, can change people's practices so that, as dead metaphors, the sentences are true and justified. Our accounts of the development of thought to its present (or future) achievements are always 'Whiggish'. The recognition that our most important values and practices are without foundation or non-question-begging justification is *ironism*.

#### **4. Mind and society**

As a social philosopher, Rorty advances two different lines of thought: on the one hand, he is a bourgeois liberal democrat celebrating 'the end of ideology' and advocating an incremental meliorism; on the other hand, he tries to keep the field open for, and even to cheer on, radically imaginative utopianism (for example, by feminists), however uncongenial to the stodginess of his first line of thought, provided it does not actually clash with either his liberalism or his anti-foundationalism. This has made him a target for political thinkers from all points on the political spectrum, who accuse him, even when he agrees with them, of giving comfort to the enemy.

In philosophy of mind, Rorty, following Ryle and Dennett, takes our talk of beliefs, desires and so on to be a way of talking which we find useful for predicting, controlling, imagining and making sense of some of the things that we and some other things do, just as physics and neurology give us ways of talking which are useful for predicting, and so on, other things that we and some other things do. No one of these is primary or needs to be reduced to the others, though we need not suppose that when we mention someone's beliefs and desires we are talking about something other than what we are talking about when we mention their neural processes (non-reductive physicalism). The mind as a philosophical subject Rorty takes to be a monstrous fiction cobbled together by Descartes out of thoughts and sensations; philosophers should drop talk of the mind, as it is confusing and unhelpful (eliminative physicalism).

Many strands in Rorty's thought have been neglected in the preceding sketch – his continuing skirmishes with philosophy as a profession, his ideas on the historiography of philosophy and his attacks on socialism, for example. Rorty has exhibited the virtues of modesty and willingness to

learn from sympathetic criticism, and he has modified and extended his thought considerably throughout his career. He will undoubtedly have added new twists by the time you read this.

### **List of works**

Rorty's output runs to hundreds of articles and grows by a dozen or more items each year, often published in out-of-the-way places. A nearly complete list up to 1994 may be found in Saatkamp's 1995 work. I have listed his books and a few of the most influential or representative articles that have not, at the time of publication, yet appeared in his books.

Rorty, R. (1965) 'Mind-Body Identity, Privacy and Categories', *Review of Metaphysics* 19 (1): 24–54.

(Much anthologized early defence of eliminative materialism with metaphilosophical corollaries.)

Rorty, R. (1967) *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn, 1992.

(Anthology of metaphilosophical essays by ordinary language and ideal language analytic philosophers; long introduction by Rorty.)

Rorty, R. (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

(His major work; see §1 above.)

Rorty, R. (1982a) *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

( 'Essays which might have some interest for readers outside of philosophy' .)

Rorty, R. (1982b) 'Contemporary Philosophy of Mind', *Synthese* 53 (2): 323–348.

(Places his views in the context of views of contemporary analytic philosophers.)

Rorty, R. (1984) 'Diskussion/Discussion: A Reply to Six Critics', *Analyse & Kritik* 6: 78–98.

(A good example of Rorty's responses to criticisms.)

Rorty, R. (1987) 'Thugs and theorists: A Reply to Bernstein', *Political Theory* 15 (4): 564–580.

(Defence of Rorty's anti-Marxist social democratic liberalism.)

Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Lectures on language, selfhood and politics plus interpretations of other writers.)

Rorty, R. (1991a) *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Papers, 1980–89, dealing with issues and figures within analytic philosophy, especially Davidson.)

Rorty, R. (1991b) *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Papers, 1980–89, dealing with Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault.)

Rorty, R. (1993a) 'Feminism, ideology, and deconstruction: a pragmatist view', *Hypatia* 8 (Spring): 96–103.

(What Rorty thinks pragmatism can contribute to feminism.)

Rorty, R. (1993b) 'Putnam and the relativist menace', *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (9): 443–461.

(An attempt to settle some differences with Putnam.)

Rorty, R. (1994) 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', *Academe* 80 (6): 52–63.

(Consequences of anti-foundationalism for academic freedom.)

Rorty, R. (1996) 'Who are we? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage', *Diogenes* 44 (1): 5–15.

(Consequences of ethnocentrism for the politics of rich and poor.)

### **References and further reading**

Geras, N. (1995) *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty*, London: Verso.

(Criticism of Rorty's ethnocentrism.)

Hall, D.L. (1994) *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, Albany NY: State University of New York Press.

(Good survey of Rorty's philosophy.)

Kolenda, K. (1990) *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism: Philosophy Democratized*, Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press.

(Sympathetic exposition of Rorty's philosophy.)

Malachowski, A. (1990) *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)*, Oxford: Blackwell.

(Articles, mostly attacking Rorty's views; good bibliography.)

Saatkamp, H.J., Jr (1995) *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, Nashville, TN, and London: Vanderbilt University Press.

(Articles, mostly attacking Rorty's views, with Rorty's responses; good bibliography.)