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Steven B. Schoonover

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- 1 The late philosopher Richard Rorty was at root an honest liberal, fearlessly ready to trace the implications of his democratic commitments into deep domains of metaphysical inquiry. He managed an intellectual modesty that was also ruthlessly iconoclastic, situating himself as a great warrior in the sophistic tradition stretching back to Gorgias and continuing up through Nietzsche and later Wittgenstein. Like all sophistry, Rorty took aim at the notion of Truth itself, challenging the idea that philosophy can sort out those vocabularies which provide access to The World as It Is from those that cannot. In doing so, Rorty saw himself as increasing democratic respect for what Foucault called "the multiplicity of discourses," emphasizing that ways of seeing the world supposed to lack epistemic rigor need not be understood as imperfect approximations of science or mathematics. Instead, Rorty envisioned a culture in which science and math are seen as useful descriptions, but not because they deploy a "method" which approximates the one true reality nor because they possess some property supposed to distinguish their ontological nature from, say, literature, poetry, anthropology, or economics. The Rortian strategy for further democratizing culture, then, was to drop the presumption of western philosophy as an activity that can bestow epistemic privilege on deserving modes of inquiry. Replacing themes of objectivity with themes of solidarity and hope is supposed to democratize discourse by equalizing them

as instruments assessed strictly in terms of their greater or lesser contribution to reducing suffering and cruelty, increasing prosperity and freedom, and promoting originality and happiness.

- 2 This neopragmatist deflation of metaphysical concepts commits itself to assessing the historical trajectory of ideas strictly in terms of increases in human utility rather than in virtue of their nearness to reality. Concretely, Rorty's justification for the shift in western science from Aristotle to Newton is not that Newton more *accurately* describes the world, but that Newton's discourse allows society to *do and be* what was previously impossible. More generally, the ultimate justificatory criteria for any vocabulary is expansion of human capabilities, not correspondence between sign and signified. No sphere of inquiry gets human beings "more in touch" with the non-human world, but some ways of speaking and thinking help achieve human goals better than others. Rorty spent most of his life working out criticisms of non-pragmatist philosophy, cobbling together various historical sources to use as ammunition against the western philosophical tradition, and constructing a neopragmatist vocabulary that – as he himself once put it – shows loyalty to philosophy at the moment of its fall. His work is important both to those looking for intellectual allies interested in moving philosophy further toward pragmatism and to those who seek formidable opponents against which to define their own positions as they seek to return philosophy to something of a firm Platonic pathway.¹
- 3 Skowroński has written a short book (henceforth VVANN) that seeks to harness the "enormous potential" he finds in Rorty by offering a "sympathetic polemic" along with repetitions of neopragmatist gestures in new and sometimes exciting contexts. At its best, the book reads as a genuine discussion between thinkers inspired by Rorty, exploring the nature, limits, and possibilities of neopragmatism today. Skowroński is clear that he does not seek an exhaustive interpretation of Rorty's work and so feels refreshingly free to propose lines of thought, developing them just so far as he sees fit before abandoning them in favor of more fruitful topics. He encourages readers to engage chapters in any order they prefer and to sift through the text for whatever suggestions they take to be provocative and insightful. The result is a text that may strike readers as having a sort of freewheeling spirit, surely more systematic than, say, the writings of Slavoj Žižek but far short of systematicity.
- 4 This means, however, that those who read the book from beginning to end may be frustrated by a certain lack of cohesion in the text. They may find themselves struggling to identify unifying threads as Skowroński takes Rortian themes on an intellectual romp through a near hodgepodge of questions concerning parallels to Kantian moral philosophy (Ch. 2), Rorty's relation to humanist traditions (Ch. 3), neopragmatist readings of literature and aesthetics (Ch. 4), film theory and cultural politics (Ch. 5), and even Rorty's supposed contributions to economics (Ch. 6). The author is comfortable to leave these topics gathered under the label of *cultural politics* – a phrase that draws its propriety from Rorty's fourth volume of collected papers *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* – without always explicitly explaining their interconnections to readers. This being the case the text sometimes reads like a discombobulated collection of reflections written between lengthy intervals rather than a single coherent book project.
- 5 But as a final verdict this would be unfair to Skowroński. One prominent theme that unites the six chapters of VVANN is an attempt to identify and improve on Rorty's

failure to think the factors that decisively explain the reception and influence of any given discourse. Skowroński accepts that “correspondence to the World” cannot be sufficient ground for why it is a particular audience favors one description of things over another (not least of all because relations of correspondence are not themselves literally verifiable), but he is similarly weary of Rorty’s *de facto* belief that “internal factors” within a vocabulary – say, coherence, consistency, elegance, beauty, subtlety, or marking of new possibilities – explain its cultural impact. Skowroński emphasizes that “external factors” such as the operation of socio-economic norms and institutions significantly explain when and where redescriptions become popular and influential. It is the collection of contingent power relations and not rational argumentation or ideas of the common good that govern adoption and elaboration of discourse.

- 6 Rorty did not disagree with Skowroński that external factors exert decisive causal influence over intellectual history but insisted that precisely because that reception is contingent and therefore historically singular not much can be said about it – certainly not by philosophers – in any politically effective way. He held a sour view of retrospective genealogical analysis, as one sees in his appropriation of both Nietzsche and Foucault as “private ironists” whose writings he thought were of limited political use. Indeed, Rorty’s conservative assessment of many continental figures prompted some to claim that if his engagement would be typical of the Anglo-Saxon “analytic tradition,” then perhaps the gap between English and non-English speakers should be maintained. Rorty’s *de facto* skepticism toward historical theorization was once on display in response to questions about why it was that ocular metaphors concerning the “mirror of nature” so prominently entered the fray of modern philosophy in the 17th century. “I don’t think we can have a good answer to that question,” Rorty quipped. His neopragmatism, then, embodies a deep distrust of abilities to deliver on Skowroński’s demand that philosophers explain the institutional socio-economic conditions that ground the historical movement of discourses. Rorty embraced the contingency of history in a way that prevents saying much of anything very general even in retrospect about historical flux in ways that would allow the drawing of political lessons.
- 7 Rorty, then, stands accused by Skowroński of what might be called a naive or truncated historicism. His neopragmatic anti-foundationalism abandons along with essentialist metaphysics the possibility of socio-theoretical explanations for the comprehensive power dynamics that entrench discourses and give them their influential power. This leaves Rorty reliant on a mere academic history of ideas as his historical explanation for the rise and fall of discourses. But, as Skowroński notes, one need not throw out the socially progressive baby with the foundationalist bathwater. To do so is to effectively neglect the discourses that would further Rorty’s axiological democratic and humanistic norms if they were not suppressed by dominant powers. Creating a democratic circulation of discourses requires theorizing the concrete levers of power that suppress some discourses while elevating others. Moreover, rather than abandoning outright the best of social theory, it is quite possible to adopt an ironist attitude toward those bodies of thinking themselves and to link them on an experimental basis to oppressed groups whose discourses are now being marginalized. Skowroński’s proposal, then, hopes to link Rorty’s anti-foundationalism with social theory in a politically experimental way that need not discard the neopragmatic commitment to historical contingency.

- 8 Rorty's unwillingness to theorize relations of power can be traced to his beliefs about the dangers of ironic social theory and to his famous "hunch that Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs" (1989: 63). In Rorty's view, intellectuals serve the limited political role of expanding empathy and solidarity while "discoveries about who is being made to suffer can be left to the workings of a free press, free universities, and enlightened public opinion." In passages like these, Rorty's rejection of fallibilistic social theory is grounded in his belief that the risks they introduce endanger a liberal institutional form that is ultimately the best human beings can hope for. Radical change brought on by deep analysis of power dynamics is to be shunned in favor of traditional 'bread and butter' piecemeal reform advanced via traditional liberal political parties.
- 9 Skowroński notes one particularly deep practical problem moral in nature that arises from Rorty's ironist Utilitarian liberalism concerning the possibility of interpersonal comparison of well-being. If we were to agree with Rorty's axiological normative claim that the reduction of suffering is the proper vision of justice on which to advance political society, "How do we describe suffering so as to limit it when we have different and incompatible descriptions of suffering at hand?" (54). This is in fact a classic problem facing any account of human well being that relies ultimately on discrete mental states as a basis for judgment, but as Skowroński points out, the problem is even deeper for Rorty given that he stresses the relativistic nature of suffering and abandons all objective criteria for such assessments. For example, whose suffering is to be counted as most deserving of finite resources, the very sick or the uneducated? Refugees fleeing persecution or victims of domestic violence? How should we allocate money between groups aimed at preventing police brutality and those aimed at protecting the environment?
- 10 Rorty thinks that if we sustain liberal institutions such as a free press and free universities, then the "truth" on key matters will "take care of itself" (2005). But it is obvious today that ideological plurality, deep division, and political polarization extends even beyond disagreement about the proper content and ranking of descriptions of suffering to the very notion of freedom itself. Even where shared, the concept of freedom cannot serve as an uncontested normative basis on which to adjudicate other disputes because the thick meaning of freedom itself is contested terrain. Liberal capitalist democracies are today experiencing a crisis of trust and solidarity regarding not only universities (which are increasingly being privatized) and the press (which is increasingly being branded as fake news), but also regarding the competent operation of major legal and economic institutions themselves. The success of figures such as Trump and Le Pen are mere symptoms of this decline. Seen with this in mind, Rorty's reliance on thinly 'free' institutions for the circulation of ideas is nothing more than capitulation to whatever dominant forces hegemonize our concepts along with an often blithe confidence that those forces will be capable of sustaining liberal values.
- 11 The problem is that liberal capitalism is now producing potentially catastrophic global problems in the midst of an historical moment when we see not only the absence of effective global institutions but a weakening of traditional nation-states vis-a-vis private capital. Terrorism, environmental issues, severe poverty, "posthuman" biotechnology, and elite capture of political institutions are challenges insurmountable without new forms of international institutional cooperation. There is a moment of

utopianism in the apparently modest schemes of global taxation advanced by popular economists like Thomas Picketty. A one-percent tax on cross-border transactions seems quite reasonable from a strictly monetary perspective, but the key difficulty arises with the political task of constructing any proper enforcement agency that could effectively constrain capital at the global level. A planet capable of doing that in a way which addresses the sale of weapons, biotechnology, natural resources, and global democracy would already at the institutional level be a good distance from traditional liberal institutional arrangements as we have known them.

- 12 In the last decade of his life, Rorty began to embrace this need. In his “Globalization, the Politics of Identity and Social Hope,” he admits:

I suspect that the most socially useful thing we can do is to continually draw attention of the educated publics of our respected countries to the need for a global polity, which can develop some sort of countervailing power to that of the super-rich. We should probably be doing more than we are to dramatize the changes in the world economy which globalization is bringing about, and to remind our fellow citizens that only global and political institutions can offset the power of all that marvellously liquid and mobile capital. (1996: 233-4)

- 13 But what are we to take from this? Rorty appears in this passage to be tottering on the brink of abandoning his liberal faith. Certainly a global polity strong enough to constrain both nation-states and the destructive international movement of capital would entail a substantial departure from the institutional status quo. Further, Rorty admits that a simple strengthening of existing institutions is unlikely to work. As he writes, “I admit that the chance of revitalizing the United Nations [and other such global institutions] [...] is slim” (234).

- 14 For those of us now living in a world deeply broken and unlikely to be fixed by the mere patching up of existing liberal institutions, the need not merely to communicate realities but to identify and explain the socio-economic tendencies and reproductive modes of global capitalism cries out for the very reinvigoration of social theory outlined by Skowroński. Philosophy has always thrived in moments of crisis. The need for new and apparently revolutionary discourses demands an understanding of factors which repress them and which can disruptively explain how so many are indefatigably committed to a social order now eating itself. Seen in light of these imperatives, a failure to heed Skowroński’s suggestion would not only imply political quietism about hegemonic powers but resignation toward the fate of humanity. It is no exaggeration to say that the difficulty of grasping today’s structural power dynamics and the task of imagining a feasible social alternative has literally become an existential issue.

- 15 Unfortunately, for all the abstract power of Skowroński’s vision, VVANN has very little of the concrete analysis of structures that would explain the rise and fall of discourses. I suspect that at the end of the day, the only way to refute Rorty’s belief that philosophers have little to offer politics is to develop analyses that are in fact politically fruitful. Nonetheless, texts like those offered by Skowroński help to plant the idea that those sympathetic to ironist deflations of philosophy need not abandon philosophical social theory. In this sense, his text can be understood as an important attempt to redirect our attention both toward good social theory and the need to deploy it as a tool in the brutal political task ahead. We will need all the help we can get reimagining philosophy beyond Rorty and putting it to work staving off present threats to the democratic and humanistic values Rorty himself sought to promote.

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NOTES

1. One such prominent thinker has suggested that just as Plato wrote dialogues like *The Gorgias* in opposition to the sophists of his time, those interested in defending philosophy today should be repeating that gesture with respect to the great sophists of our own time. One of the titles he suggests is *The Rorty*. See Alain Badiou 2009.

AUTHORS

STEVEN B. SCHOONOVER

Wittenberg University

schoonovers[at]wittenberg.edu