
Richard Rorty's Postmodern Case for Liberal Democracy: A Critique

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1. Introduction

Liberal democracy was originally founded on the Enlightenment notion that there are principles, accessible to unassisted reason, demonstrating that political life should be dedicated to the protection of rights common to all human beings. These were thought to include the right to life, property, free speech, equal standing before the law, due process in criminal proceedings, along with the right to practice the religion of one's choice. Not to mention the right to choose one's political leaders, and pursue one's own conception of happiness so long as the choices made are consistent with the rights of others and the common good. Our Enlightenment ancestors may have given different justifications for these rights—some grounding them on a deistic conception of God or nature, others on the rational dignity of human beings, and still others on social utility considerations—but they generally agreed that they were best secured by one variant or another of liberal democracy: which is to say, the combination of a politics free from the scheming of religious sects, representative institutions with separated powers regulated by checks and balances, and a commercial economic order, all of it operating within the framework of the rule of law.

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Today, however, it is widely held that no objective framework exists to decide normative and factual judgments. All such judgments are said to reflect the political, cultural, and socio-economic imperatives of the particular time and place in which they are made. This view has been christened postmodernism, which Jean Francois Lyotard has defined as an “incredulity to metanarratives,” that is, “any science that legitimates itself with reference . . . to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.”¹ With postmodernism, the original Enlightenment legitimation of liberal democracy as the regime that best accords with reason is reduced to a mere cultural prejudice.

We need not dwell on the debatable claim that the rise of postmodernism constitutes a crisis of the West and that, once it makes its way into everyday opinion, it threatens to sap the loyalty of the public towards liberal democracy. Political and moral theorists wanting to make sense of postmodernism would find more profit in considering whether it requires us to revise the nature of our personal allegiance to liberal democracy. Does postmodernism entail that we view liberal democratic institutions as something to which we should, at best, resign ourselves or, more positively, as something to which we can be wholeheartedly committed? The writings of Richard Rorty, regarded by many as America’s leading philosopher, offer a promising medium to explore this question. Rorty’s answer ends up falling somewhere between the opposing poles of sullen acquiescence and passionate devotion, though much closer to the latter than the former. In defending democracy, Rorty does not—like Jurgen Habermas,² for example—try to resurrect Enlightenment ideals of objectivity. Nor does Rorty, as is the case among various conservative thinkers, suggest we tap into pre-modern traditions, such as Judeo-Christianity or classical political philosophy, to provide objective fortification for the Enlightenment’s leaky foundations.³ What makes Rorty intriguing

¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Assumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv and xxiii.

² Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

³ The appeal to Judeo-Christian principles, or more precisely Catholic principles, is seen among the contributors to the journal *First Things*. Another ex-

is that he invites us to consider a postmodern case for democracy. He wants us to believe in democracy, while accepting, and indeed reveling in the fact, that we cannot prove its goodness.

Rorty's historicism ignores key aspects of experience.

On the whole, we conclude that Rorty's project fails to convince. While Rorty makes a sound move in attempting to defend democracy on a non-foundational basis, he goes too far in the Sophists' direction, abandoning the socially useful ideals of rationality and objectivity, leaving us with a way of thinking that just does not square with our everyday experience of the world. A moderate skepticism about normative and factual claims, by acknowledging and yielding to traditional notions of truth, presents a more viable form of non-foundationalism. So, too, Rorty's non-foundationalism expresses itself in a historicism that gives way to an overly politicized conception of philosophy, one which unashamedly descends into the most blatant partisanship. It is a brand of historicism that ignores the growing evidence in favor of a partially fixed human nature, gives too much credence to social democratic economics, while vainly trying to ennoble the self-absorption that liberal democracy inevitably encourages and tolerates by passing it off under the exalted guise of self-creation.

2. Sophism vs. Skepticism

Rorty is not the first figure in the history of Western philosophy to hold that the mind is incapable of grasping the nature of the world as it is in itself. The most prominent advocates of this position in the past have been the skeptics. The ancient skeptics, epitomized by the Pyrrhonists and their leader Sextus Empiricus, lived at a time when truth was seen as the outcome of dialectics, of a dialogue in which statements are constantly challenged until a non-contradictory view of the matter at hand is reached. Accordingly, the Pyrrhonists established their skepticism by showing that no non-contradictory statement is possible, that every claim can be countered by an opposing claim.⁴ By contrast, David Hume, the most famous and certainly the most systematic modern skeptic

ample along these lines is C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001). The appeal to classical philosophy is made by the Straussian school of political philosophy. See Thomas Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1992).

⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism, Man, and God*, ed. Philip P. Hallie (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 35.

tic, adopted the Cartesian-Lockean way of ideas, arguing that we cannot break out of our inner mental space to access the world of objects and that, except for our mathematical reasonings, nothing logically connects our ideas to each other. In both views, the mind's limitations are identified by using reason, or rather a certain conception of it, to show that the thinking subject does not come into contact with objects.

Rorty distinguishes himself from the skeptics by refusing to employ any conception of reason and altogether trying to avoid the subject-object portrayal of our mental condition. In the skeptic, Rorty sees a figure that has cast an insidious spell on philosophers, goading them into coming up with a system claiming once and for all to place a certain set of assertions beyond question. The problem is, according to Rorty, that the skeptic is able to rear his ugly head every time some philosopher develops a new teaching. Thus, the doubts expressed by the Sophists drove Plato to the forms, which was then followed by the Pyrrhonian school which, after having been revived in the Renaissance, led to Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum*. Hume then appeared on the scene, which brought Kant to the rescue, who subsequently was brought down by Nietzsche's assault on reason. Philosophy just seesaws between skepticism and dogmatism, never reaching any fruitful resolution. It is better, Rorty figures, to set aside the skeptical challenge and articulate a vision that does not rely on reason. Such a vision does not let itself be judged by the rules of reason, placing it beyond the clutches of the skeptic. Hence, "I am not going to offer arguments against the [rationalist subject/object] vocabulary I want to replace," he writes. "Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics."⁵ Rorty opts for rhetoric, as opposed to logic, for Gorgias and Protagoras as opposed to Socrates, seeking only to persuade, rather than convey truth. Like Heidegger, Rorty seems to be suggesting that Western thought went wrong early on with Plato, with the difference being that Heidegger thought the Greek philosopher's mistake was to initiate the forgetfulness of "Being" while Rorty believes his unfortunate legacy was to have made the Sophists look bad for two and a half millen-

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⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

nia. In fact, Rorty thinks the demotion of rhetoric in favor of logic served Western civilization well for most of that period, particularly insofar as the rationalism preached by the Enlightenment philosophers succeeded in emancipating people from the shackles of the nobility and clerisy. The Sophists were not onto something all along, they were just onto something that happens to be relevant now, for, according to Rorty, the appeal to logic no longer offers a useful tool in furthering the Enlightenment project of freedom and equality.

Adherence to fashionable leftism employed as means of persuasion.

If arguments based on evidence and deduction are declared out of bounds, how then does Rorty propose to convince us? A key ingredient of his persuasive power derives from his avid commitment to leftist egalitarian causes dear to much of the West's intellectual classes, especially in the universities, Rorty's habitat. His background from a family of socialists and New Deal activists enhances his moral voice. "My mother used to tell me, that when I was seven I had the honor of serving little sandwiches to the guests at a Halloween party attended both by John Dewey and by Carlo Tresca, the Italian anarchist leader."⁶ Another rhetorical advantage comes from his vast erudition, which he unabashedly displays by sustaining a higher per page citation rate of famous philosophers and novelists than anyone else writing in the contemporary academy. In his third volume of essays, Rorty explains the origins of this style in recalling his early days as a professor when he heard Stuart Hampshire asked to summarize the results of a conference. Hampshire responded that that would be no problem "for an old syncretist hack like me." To which Rorty reacted: "At that moment I realized what I wanted to be when I grew up."⁷ He has definitely realized his syncretistic aspirations with a collection of writings that read like a survey course—and a heavily idiosyncratic one at that—in Western philosophy. Mainly opposing himself to the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Kant, Russell, and the logical positivists, he advances a revived pragmatist teaching principally combining elements of, believe it or not, Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Hume, Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, Davidson, Nietzsche, Heidegger,

⁶ Rorty, *Achieving our Country* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 61.

⁷ Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10n5.

Lyotard, Foucault, Habermas, Rawls, Kuhn, Derrida, and, lest we forget his biggest hero, Dewey. The upshot of this is that Rorty ends up resorting to the oldest of rhetorical tactics—the appeal to authority. It certainly helps Rorty’s rhetorical cause as well that the thinkers he combines in forming his own vision include the more recent and fashionable ones.

Impressive as his synthesis might seem, one wonders whether Rorty actually believes in his own sophism. Beyond a few reflective moments, not even the most enthusiastic anti-objectivists can stop believing that there is in fact a world independent of our minds and language and that it is pretty much the same structure as we sense and describe it. Nor can they really doubt that, say, fire causes heat or that unprotected sex with an AIDS-infected individual will cause the transmission of the virus, while sustaining the opinion that such relationships are only narratives we happen to find appealing. It is child’s play randomly to comb Rorty’s works and cite statement after statement in which he does affirm various phenomena as realities. “It is just not *true* that the sequence of texts which make up the canon of the ontotheological tradition has been imprisoned within a metaphoric . . . unchanged since the Greeks.”⁸ “It is a familiar *fact* that the term ‘literary criticism’ has been stretched further and further in the course of our century.”⁹ “The *real* and passionate opposition is over the question whether loyalty to our fellow-humans presupposes that there is something permanent.”¹⁰ “[M]orality is associated both with human solidarity and tragedy.”¹¹ Telling, too, is how Rorty describes himself as indignant about the extent of greed in our society, repeating the word indignant three times.¹² Such strong feelings could hardly be supported if a person truly thought equating greed with vice was just part of a good story, instead of reflecting some fundamental moral reality about the human condition. It is true that to escape the self-referential inconsistency being alleged here, of saying “I think it is true that there

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contradicts
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sophism.*

⁸ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 98 (emphasis added).

⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 81 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 171 (emphasis added).

¹¹ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 153 (emphasis added).

¹² Rorty, “The Intellectuals at the end of Socialism,” *The Yale Review* 80 (April 1992), 14.

is no truth," Rorty would remind us how his rhetorical stance enables him to say instead: "I'm just selling the idea that there is no truth." He would also point out that successfully to market his opinions he must work within the dominant worldview of our time, exploiting its tensions by using the very modes of expression that he's trying to overcome. Even so, the best salesmen—and no one can doubt the quality of Rorty's salesmanship—believe in the truth of what they are pitching, leaving us to conclude that Rorty is deceiving himself.

Rorty fails to appreciate utility of reality as neutral arbiter of intellectual conflicts.

A greater concern is how Rorty fails to appreciate the abiding utility of Plato's move to privilege logic over rhetoric. The communication of ideas is far from the only function performed by the practice of making statements about the nature of things. How assertions about the world's state of affairs influence people's minds affects the allocation of resources, the manner in which the benefits and costs of social cooperation make themselves felt amongst individuals. This is recognized by the politician who describes the economic plight of his local constituents to support a tariff, the lawyer detailing his client's alibi to win the case, and the businessperson telling prospective buyers of the effectiveness of his products. Knowing that the sway of a particular opinion can shift resources, people have an incentive to advance views that happen to serve their peculiar interests and causes. Granted complete freedom to say whatever they want about the world, then, people would inevitably come into conflict, which, if left unresolved through discussion, could turn violent. At best, people would treat each other's utterances as so much noise, greatly reducing the extent of mutually beneficial social exchanges. To avoid this intellectual state of nature, people have essentially agreed to let a neutral third party arbitrate their intellectual conflicts, a party otherwise referred to as reality. As a result, each person making a claim about a state of affairs is required to provide arguments apt to win the day in the court of truth. People are thereby checked from pursuing their interests and prejudices, instead being directed to securing the greater good that comes from obtaining the agreement of a larger community. Reaching such a consensus naturally becomes a proxy for success in realizing the truth, inasmuch as reality is assumed to impinge on everyone, or at least those who have invested significant time and resources to the issue at hand. In calling for an end to this intellectual social con-

tract, as it were, Rorty presumes that the rhetoricians unshackled by his teachings will not abuse their persuasive powers for their own interest. He forgets that Gorgias bragged how his students could manipulate words to get anything they wanted.¹³ Nor does Rorty adequately recognize the threat that rhetoricians will put their skills in the service of a group trying to aggrandize itself at the expense of others, precisely what the fascists did in rejecting objectivist ideals.

Rhetoric that is not ordered to truth can be dangerous.

Rorty's counter is that philosophic debates cannot be resolved by appeal to reality. "The world does not speak."¹⁴ To the extent any resolution can be reached, according to Rorty, it can only be when the proponents of a particular notion are able successfully to convince, in a free and open debate, the particular community in which they happen to find themselves that their opinion is superior to the alternatives. Truth comes to sight as nothing more than a local and contemporary consensus.¹⁵ Rorty's non-foundationalist leanings here are on firmer ground. The realism implicit in the intellectual social contract described above is indeed simplistic, there being no way—at least not yet—to verify claims about such philosophic topics as the nature of moral obligation, the existence of God, the fundamentals of the self, the character of the good life, or the details of the best society, in the way that one can verify Einstein's theory of relativity or that two plus three equals five. As economists would say, philosophy, like religion or a visit to the doctor, is a credence good in that its quality (in the case of philosophy, its truth value) cannot be readily determined either before or after one invests in it.¹⁶ Underlining philosophy's nature as a credence good is that in the past, whenever a discipline within the rubric of philosophy developed to the point of providing verifiable claims, the case eventually with biology and physics, it branched off and became a separate science. Also illustrative of

¹³ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 451d-453a.

¹⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 6.

¹⁵ Rorty's view has obvious affinities with Habermas's "communicative reason." Where Rorty disagrees, of course, is with Habermas's claim that the resolution of a free and open encounter among competent participants must represent the universal truth, rather than a context-dependent belief.

¹⁶ For an analysis of philosophy using economic concepts, see George Bragues, "The Market for Philosophers: An Interpretation of Lucian's Satire on Philosophy," *The Independent Review* 9 (Fall 2004), 227-251.

philosophy's condition is the prevalence of sharp disagreements within the field.

Yet the moderate skeptic offers a way of acknowledging philosophy's lack of foundations without having to assume the dangers of Rorty's rhetorical project. Instead of trying to flee from reason, the skeptic begins by taking seriously the claim made, both by philosophy and common sense, that the mind can grasp truth. The skeptic uses reason to analyze the relations between the facts that are thought to justify commonly made inferences. Except for a few trite observations, however, the skeptic does not find any relations in the realm accessible to our senses that necessitate one fact to follow from another. Reason undermines itself. Thus, reason shows that my having the sensation of the same bed whenever I walk into my bedroom does not mandate concluding that the bed exists independently of my mind. Nor does the fact that I have seen a thousand instances of a pool ball hitting another give rise to motion in the impacted ball necessarily mean that the first ball's movement is the cause of the second. The truth is there is no truth. But this statement ceases to be paradoxical, though not, as Rorty would have it, because one is simply telling a story. Rather, it ceases to be paradoxical because the moderate skeptic understands that statement to only signify the following: there are in fact no significant, inherent connections between the objects of experience. Having reached this point, though, the moderate skeptic still finds himself with sensations, desires, and passions impelling him to make judgments about the world. Sensing it is pointless to fight these natural inclinations, the moderate skeptic forgets about his skepticism, accepts the commonsense notion that we are in touch with a causally driven reality, and even, particularly if he is a Humean skeptic, adopts scientific rules of reasoning to better assess the merit of assenting to his sensations and better serve his passions and desires. Where science does not, or cannot, definitively pronounce a verdict, the moderate skeptic will defer to the accumulated experience of humanity, to that which has passed the test of time. As Hume put it, "speculative reasons, which cost so much pains to philosophers, are often form'd by the world naturally, and without reflection."¹⁷ With Edmund Burke, and against

¹⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd Edition, edited by L. A. Selbey-Bigge and with text revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 572.

postmodernists like Rorty, the moderate skeptic will thus discern, amidst the multiplicity and uniqueness of historical events, a repository of universal and abiding insights, and not just view the past as a scene of utter particularity and contingency.¹⁸ All the while, however, the moderate skeptic, whether in appealing to science or history, is very careful in forming his conclusions and is always open to having his views revised by new arguments and experience, ever mindful of the mental limitations uncovered in philosophical analysis. It is in this spirit that the moderate skeptic evaluates democracy.

History includes a repository of universal and abiding insights.

3. *The Hegelian Descent to Partisan Politics*

Rather than appealing to a Burkean conception of history, Rorty takes his cues from Hegel. It was Hegel, Rorty claims, who revealed the historicity of thought, liberating us from the idea, held by most figures in the Plato-Kant tradition, of there being something greater beyond chance and the space-time coordinates we happen to occupy, namely a realm of eternal, unconditional truth. To use a metaphor from Plato's *The Republic*, Hegel showed that we are stuck within the boundaries of the cave, with all the shadowy illusion on its walls, unable to proceed to the light of the sun outside. The images on the wall are all we have to go by, which means they cease to be illusions, since there is nothing more genuine by which to contrast them, thereby eliminating the appearance-reality distinction. Once we grasp Hegel's point, Rorty insists, we no longer see any need to guide our lives by some eternal standard—such as God, reason, or nature—standing above the supposed idols and delusions foisted onto us by society. Hegel allows us to accept our contingent social fate so that we can, in good conscience, direct our energies to the current problems of our society, instead of losing ourselves in the pseudo-permanent dilemmas of the human condition. It becomes intellectually and spiritually respectable to be relevant.

Accordingly, Rorty proposes that philosophers no longer distance themselves from everyday politics in the search for truth, that they become engaged and put philosophy in the service of

¹⁸ The historicism that the moderate skeptic is willing to adopt is thus akin to the kind most recently defended by Claes G. Ryn, "Defining Historicism," *Humanitas*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (1998), 86-101.

liberal democracy. It is an oft-heard demand that truth speak to power, but this proposal seems to call for the reverse, the frightening Orwellian prospect of power speaking to truth, of our losing the mental freedom and consolation that comes from being able to appeal to a standard above the prevailing political order. Rorty does not see it this way, of course, since for him there is no truth, leaving us only with power. He presses this point by quoting the following passage from Sartre:

Tomorrow, after my death, certain people may decide to establish fascism, and the others may be cowardly or miserable enough to let them get away with it. At that point, fascism will be the truth for man, and so much the worse for us. In reality, things will be as much as man has decided they are.¹⁹

That leaves our freedom dependent on how we go about the task of steering power in the political sphere. As we are about to see, Rorty does not manage this task well, exemplifying the risks of subordinating philosophy to a political project.

The core value commitments in liberal democracy are freedom and, more so, equality, as Alexis de Tocqueville well saw.²⁰ Freedom and equality are notoriously fuzzy terms, open to varying interpretations. But individuals whose souls are acutely enchanted by democracy will naturally tend to favor the most expansive significations. Rather than limiting freedom to the absence of state coercion, they will take it to refer to the ability to do anything one pleases. Instead of restricting equality to the uniform treatment of individuals before the law, they will understand it as requiring everyone to have the same share of goods and opportunities. As private property stands as a mighty obstacle to the realization of these conceptions of freedom and equality, inasmuch as property rights institutionalize disparities of resource ownership, deeply committed democrats are apt naturally to identify with those social movements challenging the prerogatives of the wealthy, powerful, and successful. In turn, the latter, along with those hoping to join their ranks, are apt to form their own movements in order to preserve, if not enhance, their privileges. Thus, the dutiful philosophic servant of liberal democracy finds it hard to resist the

¹⁹ Jean Paul Sartre, cited in Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xlii.

²⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 503-506.

temptation of being drawn to party politics. In the United States, such a philosopher actively supports the Democratic Party, particularly its left wing as it is more serious about challenging property to fully realize freedom and equality, against the Republicans.²¹ Such a philosopher, if we are still going to call him that, comes to be actuated by passions that typically move party men and women: the world is seen in moral black and white; one attributes evil motives to opponents, never questions one's allies, writes for the converted, and is always open to possibilities of using education as a propaganda tool to create a future set of party members.

Absent standards of truth, philosophy is reduced to intemperate partisanship.

Alas, Richard Rorty manifests every one of these qualities. He refers to the Republicans who took over Congress in 1994 as "cynical greedheads,"²² while the middle classes who voted for them are either dupes or greedheads themselves. Those who fought for socialism in the twentieth century "were the most decent, the most devoted, the most admirable people of their times."²³ That socialism was a god that utterly failed, that it brought untold bloodshed and tyranny to millions, and that this result was initially denied or rationalized away by many Western leftists during the twentieth century²⁴—these things do not cross Rorty's mind in dispensing moral praise on his political allies. Meanwhile, those who, in the defense of liberty and prosperity, fought against the phalanx of intellectuals supporting socialism, and withstood the scorn of being called "reactionaries," "capitalist dupes," or "merchants of greed" are entirely ignored by Rorty, even though they ended up being right. In Rorty's practical political writings, the concern seems mostly about what kind of strategies leftists ought to adopt right now. For instance, Rorty implores his more radical postmodernist colleagues in university literature departments to stop un-

²¹ Of course, if one happens to be more partial to freedom than equality, the lover of liberal democracy may well end up sympathizing with the libertarian wing of the Republican party. I have emphasized the attractions today's philosophers have toward the Democrats, because it applies to Rorty, and is far more common, in line with the democratic regime's partiality towards equality over freedom.

²² Rorty, "Two Cheers for Elitism," *The New Yorker* (January 30, 1995), 86.

²³ Rorty, "The Intellectuals at the end of Socialism," *The Yale Review*, 80 (April 1992), 10.

²⁴ Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publications, 1998).

dermining the traditional values of American democracy with their deconstructive analyses of texts. This recommendation is not made, however, so that students might receive an education developing them into good and thoughtful citizens of the American republic. Rather, the recommendation is made so that students will imbibe the values of freedom and equality in a way that makes them easier fodder for the efforts of college and university professors to mold them into lifelong members of the Democratic Party. Of late, Rorty admits, this indoctrination effort has not been working, with students increasingly identifying themselves with the Republicans. But this just gives Rorty another chance to vent his party biases: "May God forgive them," he says of the students.²⁵

Politically responsible philosophers will favor institutions that restrain partisanship.

None of this is to say that philosophers, at least those of the traditional kind dedicated to the application of logic and evidence, should altogether stay out of politics. Insofar as their studies expose them to a wider array of moral and political traditions than ordinary political participants, philosophers can bring a richer understanding of the issues to political debates. Their larger perspective, combined with their commitment to reason, renders them more apt to be immune to the ideological fashions and stormy passions that so often drive and deform political life. Knowing that no party, no matter how noble its goals may appear, has all the answers, the politically responsible philosopher will be attracted to policies that combine the best ideas from the various factions, always on the lookout for compromise solutions, instead of trying to influence the platform of a particular party. In doing so, such a philosopher adopts as his or her model, Aristotle, whose articulation of the practically best regime, namely polity, rests on an attempt to accommodate the reasonable claims of the rich and poorer classes. To forestall the domination of the political arena by one party, which would leave a segment of the population vulnerable to exploitation, the responsible philosopher will insist on the presence of institutional mechanisms that ensure political competition and deftly channel ambition and the pursuit of interest to the creation of policies apt to promote the public interest. Recognizing as well that unbridled partisanship and party rage are

²⁵ Rorty, "Two Cheers for the Cultural Left," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1990), 234n6.

inimical to any regime, especially a democracy, politically responsible philosophers will not encourage these things in their writings, engaging their opponents in a respectful manner and refraining from calling people names. Such philosophers are able to pursue this course not so much by viewing themselves as servants of liberal democracy, but more as servants of practically realizable truth, which they might understand as requiring that no one be exploited, or that everyone's rights be respected, or that the community's happiness be maximized.

4. *Self-Creation*

With the notion of eternity gone in Rorty's adoption of Hegel, so goes the idea of there being fixed limitations to the realization of any goals liberal democracy might entertain. In this way, Rorty depicts Hegel as having made us more open to personal and political change. Seconding this openness is the French Revolution, a decisive historical event for Rorty as it was for Hegel. The revolution disclosed that "the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight."²⁶ These events emboldened intellectuals and politicians to bring about dramatic reforms in the direction of freedom and equality, proving wrong persistent conservative warnings about the limits of human nature. Whereas before, the Socratic goal of self-knowledge, understood as attaining awareness of one's enduring attributes, was considered a necessary preface to political action, if not as the highest activity of human life, that has now given way to the ideal of self-creation.

This conception of the self is Rorty's replacement for the foundationalist conception that originally underwrote liberal democracy and which continues to attract many supporters. On the original view, the self is fundamentally distinct from its contingent beliefs and desires and, therefore, something whose character remains immune to historical change. As such, there is said to be a common humanity, which consists in our being rational agents equally endowed with rights and dignity. Rorty admits this view of the self worked well to legitimate democracy in the past and helped to end the oppression of labor, women, minorities, and homosexuals, in addition to promoting a more cosmopolitan outlook

²⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 3.

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on the international scene. But with the belief in objectivity waning in the culture, Rorty believes it is time to connect the fate of democracy, and that of its emancipatory projects, to a view of the self in line with his brand of historicism, a historicism denuded of permanence. Individuals are thus envisioned as being free to craft any character they wish for themselves, unencumbered by the need to respect any enduring realities of human experience.

This forms the basis of Rorty's reply to a common accusation leveled at liberal democracy. Ever since Rousseau's attack on the "bourgeois," and even more so since Nietzsche's devastating portrayal of the "last man," philosophers have often criticized liberal democracy for producing spiritually comatose, philistine, tame, selfish, petty, calculating, smug, self-satisfied individuals. Part of Rorty's response to this charge is to maintain that such individuals are the price we must pay for the prosperity, freedom, and equal opportunity that democracy gives most of its citizens. However, sensing this may be an insufficient justification, Rorty looks to Nietzsche for an existentially rich notion of the self by which to elevate democracy's image. Rorty thinks democracy can make room for Nietzsche in people's private lives. For Rorty, Nietzsche's ideal of self-creation, of a self characterized by overcoming, is perfectly suited to our increasingly historicist culture. Traditionally, people have sought to meet their spiritual yearnings by identifying themselves with some timeless order. This is how people have traditionally dealt with death. On Rorty's reading, though, Nietzsche takes a contrary approach and says the self should describe itself, as well as the social forces that molded it, in its own terms, in ways that have never been used before. When death comes, then, we can comfort ourselves with the thought that we took control of our identity and made our mark in the world. Instead of transcending death in eternity, death is allowed to devour us, but not without our having robbed it of the opportunity of taking our individuality. As Rorty puts it:

The paradigm of such a narrative is the life of the genius who can say of the relevant portion of the past, "Thus I willed it," because she has found a way to describe the past which the past never knew, and thereby found a self to be which her precursors never knew was possible.²⁷

Rorty assures us that this does not mean that there are no lim-

²⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 29.

its to what people can do privately to create a distinctive self. The selves we create must not be cruel. Better yet, selves must be sympathetic to the fate of other selves to the point of dissolving the traditional boundaries between “us” and “them,” the divide by which people define the true human as “us” and the sub-human, and therefore the dispensable, as “them.” To help this universal sentimentalism along, Rorty enlists the arts in the belief that novels, plays, paintings, music, movies, television programs, and the like will lead the community to embrace individuals conventionally considered as part of the “them”—minorities, women, non-Christians, gays, lesbians, and the disabled—as one of “us.” So, too, Rawl’s difference principle must be followed: resources that otherwise would make the least advantaged better off cannot be used. These are provisos, by the way, to which Nietzsche would not agree, who spoke of the necessity of exploitation in a universe ruled by the will to power. Rorty also insists that the state not actively encourage self-creators. The state should only interfere in the economy to ensure that everyone has the financial means to afford the leisure necessary for self-creation. Beyond that, state interference would constrain people’s freedom and likely mean the imposition of a single version, or a narrow set, of self-creative possibilities. We have “to leave people alone, to let them try out their private visions of perfection in peace.”²⁸ Liberal democracy will be enriched to the extent it encourages a diversity of selves.

Rorty counts on sentimentalism to preserve peace among undisciplined selves.

Leaving people alone in an economy that affords them with what is, by historical standards, an enormous amount of leisure time has not really caused self-creation to flourish—unless one thinks watching television, surfing the internet, going out to see Hollywood action movies, shopping at the mall, reading pulp-fiction, attending sporting events, vacationing in Disneyland, gambling, playing golf, driving luxury cars, having sex, and getting together with friends to talk about the latest New Age form of spirituality is self-creation. That is certainly not what Nietzsche meant by self-creation, but then again neither is what Rorty passes off as self-creation. Nietzsche’s self-created individuals are hard on themselves, always looking for new self-disciplining challenges, unmoved by compassion, beyond resentment, and animated by a will to dominate one’s self. The actual selves produced

²⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 194.

Rorty's
concept of
self-creation,
unlike
Nietzsche's,
does not
require self-
control.

in abundance by the affluence of liberal democracy make a mockery of Rorty's attempt to dignify that regime by connecting it to Nietzschean overcoming.

Rorty's vision of the public and private spheres just do not mesh. Natural inclination already predisposes human beings to privilege their private interests over their public duties. Realizing this, philosophers in the past, particularly those in the pre-modern tradition, taught people to control their selfish impulses and sacrifice themselves for the greater good, making their case by insisting that true happiness, the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities, results from the suppression of the self's lower potentialities. Rorty's call for self-creation does the opposite, knowingly or unknowingly reinforcing our selfish inclinations, rendering it more difficult for people to remember their public responsibilities, including those to the disadvantaged for whom Rorty voices concern.

To be sure, there is nothing necessarily wrong with giving self-interest its due. Liberal thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries encouraged people to concentrate on their private interests; still, they felt the need to demonstrate that this focus would promote the public good, with Adam Smith's invisible hand argument being perhaps the most famous instance of this type of reasoning. Rorty, on the other hand, does not bother showing how private and public can be fused: "there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange."²⁹ Rorty complains that the middle classes in the Western democracies have stopped feeling sympathy for the lower classes. Perhaps Republican (and conservative Democratic) politicians are partly to blame for this, as Rorty asserts. Still, with so many corners of our culture glorifying self-creation in various guises precisely as Rorty advocates, this, too, must be considered a possible culprit.

The deepest flaw in Rorty's notion of self-creation is that the evidence suggests that the self is not wholly and readily moldable, but is rather a partial embodiment of fixed characteristics. The origin of this view is Charles Darwin, who otherwise gets assimilated

²⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, xiv.

into Rorty's syncretic oeuvre as a qualifier to Hegel, helping expunge the notion that history has a *telos*. Darwin's fundamental teaching, of course, is that certain species flourish at the expense of others, not because they were pre-determined to do so by some intelligent designer, but because they just happened to evolve features that allowed them to adapt to their environment better than other species. Rorty claims Dewey was among the first to apply this teaching to the history of thought, asserting that one philosophical worldview replaces another, not by virtue of what Hegel called the cunning of reason but because the new view happens to do a better job of dealing with the socio-political environment of the day. Over the last thirty years or so, however, evolutionary psychologists have applied Darwinian theory to explain that humanity's struggle for survival encoded a core set of psychological predispositions in our genes. Chief among these is selfishness, as manifest in the pursuit of status, resources, and sexual mates, though evolutionary psychologists concede the degree and form by which these display themselves vary with social circumstances. Altruism, while not a negligible drive, is said to be mostly limited to kin and to those individuals with whom we expect regularly to engage in mutually back-scratching transactions.³⁰ The main evidence for evolutionary psychology includes twin studies and the identification of persistent behavioral patterns across societies.³¹ Evolutionary psychology, let it be clear, does not affirm a complete genetic determinism that precludes human beings from crafting a self of their own choosing. It only suggests that we take our in-born inclinations and talents into account when deciding what kind of self to fashion. If playing Mozart on the violin comes more effortlessly to an individual than solving systems of equations, then the genes are probably indicating that he would be better off pursuing self-creation in classical music rather than mathematics. Even by Rorty's own criterion, that truth is whatever wins people over in a free and open debate, he needs to take evolutionary psy-

Experience shows that human nature is not infinitely malleable.

³⁰ A useful review of evolutionary psychology is given in Stephen K. Sanderson, *The Evolution of Human Sociality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 143-330.

³¹ Regarding twin studies, see Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002), 374-79. On universal patterns, see D.E. Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991). Pinker lists the universals identified by Brown in *The Blank Slate*, 435-39.

chology seriously, if only because it has been growing in prominence and influence. Rorty has to explain why we should continue to believe that “there is nothing ‘beneath’ socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human.”³²

Toward the end of an essay on Roberto Unger and Cornelius Castoriadis, Rorty writes this staggering passage:

Suppose that somewhere, someday, the newly-elected government of a large industrial country decreed that everyone would get the same income, regardless of occupation or disability. Simultaneously, it instituted vastly increased inheritance taxes and froze large bank transfers. Suppose that, after the initial turmoil, it worked: that is, suppose that the economy did not collapse, that people still took pride in their work (as streetcleaners, pilots, doctors, cane-cutters, Cabinet ministers, or whatever), and so on. Suppose that the next generation in that country was brought up to realize that, whatever else they might work for, it made no sense to work for wealth. But they worked anyway (for, among other things, national glory). That country would become an irresistible example for a lot of other countries, “capitalist,” “Marxist,” and in-between.³³

This was published in 1988. Only four years later, Rorty would write in *The Yale Review* about the lessons of 1989 and, as we will observe shortly, declare that we have to rely on the market economy’s harnessing of selfishness to promote the public interest. Is not Rorty now basically admitting that there is something beneath socialization and prior to history which is definatory of the human?

5. *The Cultural Left and Social Democracy*

It will be recalled that Rorty arrives at the celebration of self-creation by starting with Hegel. But Hegel insisted on the primacy of contemplation and self-knowledge, not self-creation. Indeed, Hegel held that self-knowledge is fully realized at a certain point in space-time when the end of history is reached, the point at which we, as manifestations of world-spirit, discover ourselves to be the authors of all objects. Given its metaphysical assumptions, this way of overcoming the subject-object dichotomy is not appealing to the atheistic Rorty.

Consequently, additional thinkers are brought in to Rorty’s philosophic mix, starting with Marx. The latter’s eleventh thesis

³² Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, xiii.

³³ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and others* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 191.

on Feuerbach is reaffirmed, according to which philosophers should primarily concern themselves not with interpreting the world, but with changing it. Since, with Rorty, philosophy is supposed to be the handmaiden of liberal democracy, this thesis can be restated as: philosophers should change liberal democracy, not merely interpret it. Rorty, too, embraces the way Marx turns Hegel upside down by emphasizing the material sphere of economics, instead of the spiritual sphere of religion and philosophy: "the Marxists were absolutely right about one thing: the soul of history is economic."³⁴ These two elements of Marx combine in Rorty's critique of the cultural politics being waged by the left in the universities.

Rorty shares Marx's view of economics as more influential than ideas.

This leftist movement, described by Rorty as the cultural left, holds that our society is so permeated by injustice that only a complete revolution can possibly save us. Rather than pursuing such radical change in the political arena as the old, pre-Vietnam War left did, the cultural left believes their best chance of fomenting revolution is to seize control of educational institutions and change the way people think. They seek to effect this change, in part, by writing articles and books that purportedly expose and undermine the politically repressive assumptions embedded in our language and in the writings traditionally composing the Western canon. Their goal is to make people acknowledge "the Other," comprising groups ostensibly oppressed by the pervasive machinations of Foucauldian power as a result of their gender, race, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. Members of this movement, Rorty says, "tend to think that they have done something politically useful if they have deconstructed a text, or detected totalization at work in it, or shown, in the manner of de Man, the impossibility of reading it."³⁵ To the cultural left, Hegel was right: the soul of history consists of ideas.

By contrast, Rorty does not think our society is as rife with injustice as the cultural left claims. Rather, he agrees with Czelaw Milosz's description of the United States as a "moderately corrupt republic."³⁶ As a result, Rorty thinks philosophers should change liberal democracy by reforming its institutions, not transforming

³⁴ Rorty, "Love and Money," *Common Knowledge* (Spring 1992), 15.

³⁵ Rorty, "Two Cheers for the Cultural Left," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89 (1990), 232.

³⁶ Milosz quoted in *ibid.*, 228.

them, and absorb the lessons of 1989 so as to accept the market economy, with its reliance on selfish impulses, as the best means of generating economic growth. As Bernard Mandeville would heartily agree: "Public virtues, as far as we can see, will continue to be parasitic on private vices."³⁷ Philosophers should accept a social democratic welfare state, a state which limits its economic activities to redistributing money from the rich to the poor. They have to stop thinking, as the old left did, that state ownership of the means of production and central planning are going to make life better for everyone. According to Rorty, what we need are concrete, piecemeal economic proposals, rather than turgid pages full of words and phrases like "logocentrism," "subaltern peoples," and "phallogocentrism." Rorty sums up his main objections to the cultural left as follows:

. . . they have given up on the idea of democratic politics, of mobilizing moral outrage in defense of the weak, of drawing upon a moral vocabulary common to the well educated and the badly educated, to those who get paid for analyzing symbols and those who get paid for pouring concrete or dishing up cheeseburgers.³⁸

Rorty cautions, however, that philosophers, constituting as they do a rather marginal discipline, should not expect to have much influence on political events. This belief raises for Rorty another objection to the cultural left: that it vastly overestimates the practical impact of philosophical ideas. Worse, while deluding themselves that they are political revolutionaries, cultural leftists waste their time questioning each other concerning whether they are expressing their critiques in language that truly overcomes oppressive metaphors; that is, they let their efforts degenerate into a quasi-religious concern for doctrinal purity. About the highest praise Rorty gives to the cultural left is that it has elevated the tone of discourse among educated people, such that it is now unacceptable to humiliate, or otherwise slight, women, blacks, gays, and non-Europeans. "The adoption of attitudes which the Right sneers at as 'politically correct' has made America a far more civilized society than it was thirty years ago."³⁹

³⁷ Rorty, "The Intellectuals at the end of Socialism," *The Yale Review* 80 (April 1992), 3.

³⁸ Rorty, "Intellectuals in Politics," *Dissent* (Autumn 1991), 489.

³⁹ Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 81.

Rorty raises some valid points regarding the cultural left, but he does not shine so brilliantly when it comes to the economic advice he proffers. No doubt, one can make a decent case that, to some extent at least, the expansion of the state's economic influence that occurred in the twentieth century has served the public interest. While governments have not yet rid us of the business cycle, they have become better equipped to avoid deep depressions, knowing to increase the money supply during financial and economic crises. The social safety net that has been built automatically triggers increases in government spending to counter recessions, significantly minimizing as well the risks to which people are exposed from unemployment, work injury, sickness, and old age. That said, one could also make a decent case that the growth of government has now reached the point of decreasing returns to scale by distorting work and investment incentives, nourishing dependency, stifling productivity, reducing economic growth, and raising unemployment.

Numerous studies reveal a negative relationship between government spending as a percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and economic performance, once spending goes beyond a certain level.⁴⁰ What is more, small-government economies (Australia, Japan, Switzerland, Britain, and the United States) show similar, if not better, performance than do big-government economies (Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden) across a series of indicators, such as growth rates, capital formation, volatility of economic cycles, unemployment, life expectancy, infant mortality, and school enrollment. Big-government countries, however, perform better in terms of equality, with the share of income going to the poorest 40 percent of the population at 24.1 percent, relative to 20.8 percent in small-government nations.⁴¹ Now it is certainly true that Rorty could use the data to defend big governments by pointing out how their income distribution better ac-

⁴⁰ Robert Barro, "Economic Growth in a Cross-Section of Countries," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (May 1991), 407-443; Edgar Peden and Michael Bradley, "Government Size, Productivity, and Economic Growth: The Post-War Experience," *Public Choice*, Vol. 69 (1989), 153-173; Stefan Folster and Magnus Henrekson, "Growth effects of government expenditure and taxation in rich countries," *European Economic Review*, Vol. 45 (2001), 1501-1520.

⁴¹ Vito Tanzi and Ludger Schuknecht, "Reconsidering the Fiscal Role of Government: The International Perspective," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 87 (May 1997), 164-68.

cords with Rawls's difference principle. Even so, the status of the bottom 40 percent is not significantly improved with big government, while society as a whole is paying the price with lower incomes. Before parting with a higher standard of living, those who lose out in this redistribution could rightfully demand a better justification from Rorty than the rhetorical ploy of pointing to Rawls's authority.

6. Conclusion

In the face of historicist streams of thought that have undermined the traditional Enlightenment moorings of liberal democracy, Richard Rorty has chosen not to rebuild those moorings with a more convincing form of reason. Instead, he has put his weight behind a form of historicism that ignores the permanent aspects of human experience. And he has advanced a postmodern defense of Western political institutions based on mere rhetorical assertions rather than an appeal to truth and evidence. Accordingly, he claims that our views of the world are framed by ultimately contingent paradigms, and that the philosopher's role is to sell a vision that he believes is useful to the community within which he happens to operate. The vision that Rorty attempts to sell to the liberal democratic communities of the West involves a combination of unrestricted self-creation, the support of egalitarian political movements, and redistributionist economics.

However, the rhetorical turn that Rorty advocates is fraught with danger, potentially freeing parties driven by narrow interests to disfigure both political discourse and practice. His own foray into the practical political arena betrays the danger of a rhetoric unleashed from objective restraints, as he indulges in a morally righteous partisanship, instead of the neutral and conciliatory tack more fitting to the philosophic participant in politics. Moderate skepticism, cautiously appealing as it does to proof, scientific evidence, and the lessons of history, represents a superior alternative of dealing with the lack of objective ground that Rorty correctly espies in philosophy. The appeal to scientific evidence, in turn, points to a partially fixed human nature, suggesting that Rorty goes too far in his advocacy of self-creation. He fails to realize that genetic factors, while not making self-creation impossible, nevertheless constrain the task of constructing a self and that this task

The danger of rhetoric unleashed from objective restraints can be seen in Rorty's own political practice.

is more profitably carried out by recognizing our natural limitations. Also marring Rorty's endorsement of self-creation is the exaggerated hope he places on the citizens of liberal democracies to hearken to the harsh demands of crafting a worthy self. And inasmuch as scientific analyses of human nature are increasingly suggesting humans are fundamentally self-interested, Rorty's redistributionist agenda looks more and more questionable, as economic studies also suggest.

Perhaps if he were not so determined to read his moral hopes into the human condition, perhaps if he were to take more seriously the project of knowing ourselves, instead of allowing himself to be dazzled by the political changes of the last two centuries and to fall for a historicism that fails to acknowledge the enduring elements of human affairs—perhaps, then, Rorty might have proposed a more realistic vision of liberal democracy.