Rorty on the Priority of Democracy to Philosophy

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I

Richard Rorty seeks to defend and newly recontextualize social democratic liberalism and pluralism without an appeal to Enlightenment rationalism with its belief in universalistic reason and its concerns in morals, politics and science as well as concerns about *Weltanschaungen* over free and open discussion. If this conception is pushed to its limits it will, it is traditionally claimed, produce the truth, the one right answer to moral questions and scientific questions as well (Rorty 1991). Rorty, like Isaiah Berlin, believes that such Enlightenment rationalism has been discredited by twentieth century thought (Berlin 1991, 207-37). Like the religious world views it sought to replace, Enlightenment rationalism is a bit of mythology. Rorty seeks to defend a social democratic liberalism and the values of the Enlightenment that are, more generally, free from Enlightenment rationalism or any other defense of liberalism seeking philosophical foundations. He seeks, that is, some way of hooking on to the world that will give us an Archimedean point which would yield universal substantive values that give us true foundations or, if not foundations, the true rationale for our social and moral lives. The account he rejects is an account which would attempt to tell us either what the best possible life for human beings would be or what the just society, anywhere and anywhen, must be. Rorty wants liberal social democratic pluralism without such philosophical skyhooks—devices he takes to be through and through illusory. He wants a reflective and enlightened morals and

politics without philosophical foundations, just as he wants science without philosophical foundations.

Rorty's critics think that his sort of liberalism will lead to a debilitating relativism and perhaps even to a nihilism that is, in effect, the antithesis of the Enlightenment. Indeed, it is in some respects more like what Isaiah Berlin called the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment. It yields, if we look at its implications, a new irrationalism or at least a fuzzy lightmindedness that can in no way constitute a viable defense of liberalism. Rorty, to use his own phrase, would like to recontextualize social democratic liberalism and certain key Enlightenment values as well as Enlightenment rationalism. But, the criticism goes, coherent recontextualization cannot be saddled with such an aesthetic lightmindedness.

II

What should be said and thought here? I shall go at this indirectly by first considering how Rorty sees the situation. He thinks the undermining of Enlightenment rationalism will lead us, when thought through properly, to see that the link between truth and justifiability has been broken—at least in regards to values. Enlightenment rationalism and the dominant movements in the religious traditions that preceded it thought that there was some tolerably determinate right way to live, some highest good that we humans have or some determinate rights that all human beings have simply in virtue of being human. They typically thought that members of our species everywhere and in all times and culture have the same rights and that, difficult as it is to ascertain, there is the one highest good. Our task as moral philosophers is to discover that one highest good and clearly articulate it. But if the philosophers were also liberals, they came to think as the liberal tradition developed that human beings would have many different conceptions of moral perfection, of what sort of persons to strive to be, of what sort of life plans to live by, and the like. The liberal idea here was to let many flowers bloom and to have no *authoritative and comprehensive* conception of the good life that

everyone was to march lockstep to. But some of them also believed that there is a highest good (though not a good that the State, the Church, or society should authoritatively prescribe, let alone try to enforce) and that there being human rights was compatible with there being many different life plans and ideals of moral perfection. People agreeing on these human rights and their centrality and didactic authority in moral life could have, and typically should have, very different life conceptions of the good. But liberals also came to believe that if an individual's sense of what was right or wrong to do or how to life her life *in domains relevant to public policy* was not capable of a defense on the basis of beliefs common to her fellow human beings, then these particular beliefs of hers, these life plans and these ideals of perfection, no matter how passionately held, must be abandoned if they have policy implications that would positively harm others. They can in such a circumstance only be rightly held if they have no such policy implications and are taken instead as merely private beliefs. Only when there is a thorough overlapping consensus concerning them within the community can it be otherwise and they can rightly be insisted on and acted on in the public domain and then only when insisting and acting on them would not cause harm to others.

What on such a conception—a conception Rorty opposes—would save Enlightenment rationalism with its identification of conceptions of justifiability to humanity at larger with truth? Such an identification comes to the belief that free and open discussion, if pursued with diligence, integrity and thoroughness, will produce the one right answer to moral questions. They thought that a moral belief that cannot be justified to the mass of humankind is 'irrational' and thus is not really a product of our moral faculty at all. It is, on such a rationalistic liberal conception, not in reality a genuine moral belief but a prejudice masquerading as a moral belief; it is not, in such a circumstance, a deliverance of conscience but merely of the superego. Genuine moral beliefs—moral truths—must be justifiable to humanity as a whole and not merely to some local embodiment of humanity. We must, that is, avoid ethnocentrism. If on such a conception we cannot so square our putative moral beliefs with those of humanity at large, we must, if we would be rational and reasonable, reject them

as unjustified. Thus, if we believe, for example, that abortion is murder or that euthanasia is taking

in hand that which only God has a right to take in hand and we cannot justified these beliefs to our

fellow humans, then we must not press these beliefs in the public domain; we must recognize that

they cannot in reality be the true deliverances of conscience. We must refuse to take them as having

public authority. Instead, we must take them as merely private beliefs without public authority,

moral or otherwise.

Rorty thinks that nothing like this Enlightenment rationalism is sustainable. We cannot find

a justification for liberal political values, for liberal theories of justice or for human rights rooted in

some ahistorical Archimedean point which would tell us (that is, all humanity) how we ought to live.

Yet liberals—we liberals, as Rorty likes to put it—need "something to distinguish the sort of

individual conscience we respect from the sort we condemn as 'fanatical'" (Rorty 1991). We need

such a rationale, Rorty has it, for explaining how it is we can argue such matters with Condorcet,

Bakunin, Voltaire or Marx but now with Nietzsche or Loyola.

In explaining how he thinks we should go here, Rorty makes a remark that is sure to raise a

lot of hackles. To sort out the kind of moral consciousness we can respect from the kind we regard

as fanatical we must abandon the search for rationalist skyhooks and come to recognize that we can

only appeal to something relatively local and (as Rorty puts it) ethnocentric. What that will be is the

"tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture" (Rorty 1991, 176).

According to this view, Rorty goes on to add,

> [W]hat counts as rational or as fanatical is relative to the group to
> which we think it necessary to justify ourselves—to the body of
> shared belief that determines the reference of the word "we". The
> Kantian identification with a central transcultural and ahistorical self
> is thus replaced by a quasi-Hegelian identification with our own
> community, thought of as a historical product. For pragmatist social
> theory, the question of whether justifiability to the community with
> which we identify entails truth is simple irrelevant (Rorty 1991, 177).

Rorty wants to defend a liberalism—indeed a social democratic liberalism—without *philosophical*

skyhooks or indeed without any skyhooks. He starts his discussion here by noting how and why

some critical theorists and some communitarians have rejected liberalism. For him we can have nothing transcendent or transcendental or even quasi-transcendental whatever, if anything, that means.

Some critical theorists—Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno most preeminently among them—thought that "liberal institutions and culture either should not or could not survive the collapse of the philosophical justification that the Enlightenment provided them" (Rorty 1991, 177). Rorty also notes how they believed that these Enlightenment justifications had been discredited. This is also the view of Martin Heidegger and many communitarians. Among the communitarians it is stated most categorically and with the most persistent perspicuity by Alasdair MacIntyre.

In coming to grips with this critique of liberalism, there are three important theses that Rorty states and examines separately. *First*, there is the empirical prediction and with it the question that no society can survive that sets aside the very idea of an ahistorical moral truth in the way that the pragmatists recommend. Such a society will not have enough social glue to do so. The thesis, to expand a bit, is that as a matter of sociological and historical fact we humans cannot have a moral community in a disenchanted world where different religions are tolerated like so many different cultural artifacts (and widely felt to be just that) and where pragmatism, fallibilism and historicism erode claims to transcendent or transcendental truth. In short, it is their view that "pragmatism was the inevitable outcome of Enlightenment rationalism and that, psychologically and culturally speaking, pragmatism is not a strong enough philosophy to make moral community possible" (Rorty 1991, 177). (Berlin seems, at least, to share this belief. But Dewey does not.)

Second, there is the moral thesis, pushed very hard by MacIntyre and Geuss and which finds echoes in the Frankfurt School as well, that "the sort of human being who is produced by liberal institutions and culture is undesirable" (Rorty 1991, 178). Our liberal societies are, the claim goes, pretty awful places infected by a crass neo-liberal ideology. They are, as MacIntyre puts it, societies

dominated by "the Rich Aesthete, the Manager and the Therapist" (Rorty 1991, 178). This, MacIntyre maintains, "is a *reduction ad absurdum* both of the philosophical views that helped create it and of those now invoked in its defence" (Rorty 1991, 178).

Third, there is the claim that political institutions presuppose some doctrine (presumably a *philosophical* doctrine) about the nature of human beings. This returns us to our starting point. Liberalism, uncritically accepting Enlightenment rationalism, the claim goes, adopted an unrealistic and normatively feckless ahistorical conception of the self, self-deceptively taking it to be an adequate account of the self and its place in the world. But, the thesis continues, an account that would actually support the moral institutions of a society or the world must make clear the self's through and through historicity. We cannot get along in liberal society or any society, if we are going to make sense of the moral life and of our institutions, with an ahistorical conception of the self (Rorty 1991, 178). We must instead have a culturally embedded self. This is a view powerfully developed by the communitarian theorists Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel as well as by MacIntyre and Geuss and historically it is rooted in Hegel's thought and particularly in his criticism of Kant.

<center>III</center>

Rorty devotes most of his discussion to the third thesis. But concerning all three he remarks:

> The first claim is a straightforward empirical, sociological-historical one about the sort of glue that is required to hold a community together. The second is a straightforward moral judgment that the advantages of contemporary liberal democracy are outweighed by the disadvantages, by the ignoble and sordid character of the culture and the individual human beings that it produces. The third claim, however, is the most puzzling and complex. I shall concentrate on this third, most puzzling claim, although toward the end I shall return briefly to the first two (Rorty 1991, 178).

Rorty thinks there are two crucial questions that we should ask in coming to grips with the third thesis. They are:

1. Does liberal democracy need any *philosophical* justification at all?

2. Does the conception of the self articulated by communitarians such as Charles Taylor—a conception which makes the community constitutive of the individual—comport better with liberal democracy than the Enlightenment conception of the self? (This assume, of course, that there is something called *the* Enlightenment conception of the self.)

Rorty, not unsurprisingly, answers the first question in the negative and the second question in the positive. Liberal democracy does not need, and indeed should not seek, in justifying and rationalization its institutions and moral and political commitments, a philosophical foundation any more than it needs a theological one. We can, and indeed *must*, given the intractable pluralism of our societies *and* a belief in the respect for persons, avoid taking any such anti-theological stance. Where religious believers do not try to intervene in the public domain, they should be left to benign neglect or at least unopposed. As much as I admire Lenin, we should not take his religious approach to religion. As long as religion does not go around persecuting people it should be left alone (Nielsen   ).

In the course of explaining and justifying this answer, Rorty draws a useful distinction between a philosophical *articulation* and a philosophical *backdrop* or *foundation*. He thinks that John Dewey and John Rawls give liberal social democracy a philosophical articulation and that this may, at least for certain persons and in certain intellectual climates, be useful and indeed for some it may be very valuable. It may, that is, be a very good thing that there are public intellectuals in a society, including a liberal society, who can perspicuously represent that society to itself: that is, make clear the rationale of its institutions and social practices and show people in that society how things hang together. This may include giving us a picture of human nature or the self which comports better with the institutions and practices of the society than the more traditional *philosophical* conceptions that the society has inherited. John Dewey, Rorty maintains, did this very well for liberal democracy. He found ways of talking about human nature and morality that squared better and were less intellectually problematic than the society's inherited foundationalist and metaphysical or theological articulations. But a philosopher doing what Dewey does does not thereby justify "these

institutions by reference to more fundamental premises or by some theory of human nature. Just the reverse: he or she is putting politics first and tailors a philosophy to suit. Communitarians, by contrast, often speak as though political institutions were no better than their philosophical foundations" (Rorty 1991, 1878). (This is particularly clear in Michael Sandel.) The pragmatists were adept at such philosophical articulations without philosophical foundations as, on Rorty's reading, is John Rawls, particularly in his later writings centering around his "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" (Rawls 1999, 388-414). "Rawls," Rorty claims, "following up on Dewey, shows us how liberal democracy can get along without philosophical presuppositions…. He has thus shown us how we can disregard the third communitarian claim" (Rorty 1991, 179).

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