

---

## Rorty, Hermeneutics, and the Conversation

By Jack Harden

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty attempted to deconstruct the project of a foundationally and epistemologically based philosophical tradition that, at least to Rorty, seemed outdated and out of touch. He also asserted a new role for the philosopher: not as a professional problem-solver or truth-seeker, but as an informed and astute conversationalist searching out new and different ways to describe oneself and the world. Instead of needing a firm basis for our knowledge and for truth, we should engage in discourse with many others who bring with them different perspectives to hash out what seems to be the best, or at least the most useful, version of the truth, not an objective, unchanging truth.

In doing so, Rorty, using Gadamer and later Heidegger as models, appeals to a hermeneutic, or interpretive, approach, to discovering what our everyday ideals might consist of. Hermeneutics requires inquirers to take account of their own historical and social placement and apply that to an interpretation of the world they might be investigating. Since there is no common over-arching background for one to appeal to, one needs to take different accounts of the same issue to heart, but they in turn can only be filtered through one's own perspective. This entails that for there to be any amount of consensus on any subject, there needs to be some sort of conversation involving differing opinions with the possible result of one opinion being chosen as the best version of that particular story. It is the job of Rorty's edifying philosopher to propose alternative and strange opinions and theories to prod at the status quo, to push the envelope of acceptable doctrine. Philosophy has left its mark on the world and now we must learn from it and move on.

In this paper I will present some criticisms of Rorty's

hermeneutical project in regard his view that we are in the midst of a ‘conversation begun by Plato.’ I will also investigate what this approach might entail for academia. For, as some critics of Rorty argue that his approach won’t work in a broad sense, I would argue that it is not meant to be so broad, but is really (at least in PMN) aimed at professional philosophers and other academics. Finally, I will explore whether Rorty should have explicitly identified himself as one of the edifying philosophers he touts so greatly.

The criticisms Rorty launches in PMN sent the philosophical world reeling. Since that time, much ink has been spilled by many philosophers who felt the need to strike back in the name of whatever theory he may have disparaged or even employed. This includes not only analytics and foundationalists, but also hermeneutical writers. In fact, three essays in the book *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reason* are devoted to criticisms of Rorty’s espousal of the hermeneutic approach concerning philosophical discourse, mostly concerning its sociopolitical applications and repercussions.

Rebecca Comay’s criticism of Rorty’s hermeneutical conversation is mainly concentrated with whom the interlocutors of such a conversation might include and in turn, exclude. She points out that Rorty offers many different illuminations as to who ‘we’ might be, but none of them include *all* of humanity. Most often, varied groups: the bourgeoisie, liberals, intellectuals, Americans, etc., usually in some combination, are those involved with the conversation (Comay 84). For Comay this is a major sticking point. Having such narrow groups for the interlocutors of such a seemingly important discussion appears more ‘monological’ than dialogical, and so cannot really constitute a conversation. Such an orientation cannot accomplish anything for the future but simply “embalms the present.” (Comay 93) It leaves social structures static.

I would argue that Rorty’s appeal is to other academics, not

---

to the whole of humanity. His antiessentialism would not allow for such a position. If he were to claim that all of humanity could easily come to a common understanding through conversation that would entail some foundation for everyone to begin such a conversation upon. Of course, Rorty is not willing to say this. We must start with those with whom we have common ground and work our way outwards, not start with the largest group and attempt to solve those larger problems. And he has read enough to fully understand that in most cases it is intellectuals that shape the general public's worldview. Whether it is Aquinas' nuanced alteration of Christian theology to reconcile Aristotle, or Descartes' change in focus of philosophy to accommodate science, or Newton's explanation of the mechanistic, physical world, or the college professor who sheds light on a new topic, people's views can change, even dramatically, when exposed to the work of intellectuals.

In modern times, most academics are stereotyped, and probably fairly so, as bourgeois liberals, the only ones to whom Rorty is speaking, claims Comay. I think it is his fellow academics that Rorty is encouraging to engage in this conversation, because it is they who influence the masses. They may not do this directly, but nonetheless, it has always been in academia that the fat gets cut from the flesh, and any new discovery has the potential to trickle down to the rest of humanity. Of course, for Rorty, there are different ways of doing this, some better than others. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty argues that the academic, or cultural, left has little to offer the political realm other than criticisms that lead to a less participatory democracy. They are too busy arguing about theory to engage in discussions for positive change. Those involved in the conversation should be actively involved, not involved at a distance.

Another criterion for someone to be a hermeneutical conversationalist is that they be well educated to have a common

ground with others on which to stand, at least in the sense of having read the same materials, whether or not there is agreement about them, in order to have any chance for change in the status quo. Those in the intellectual realm tend to fall into this category, while others may not. And while some might see this as exclusive if not elitist, I would say that it is an example of working within a given system to change that system, which is arguably more practical than starting anew.

Robert Burch is also worried about who Rorty includes in the conversation. Like Comay, he finds Rorty's 'we' to be unacceptable and could never hope to be all encompassing enough to really get down to humanity's troubles.

The improper and unauthorized discourses of those who, for reasons of race, occupation, gender, economic circumstances, cultic practices, and so on, live on the fringes or outside the range of language games which serve to define Rorty's 'we,' can have a genuine and efficacious place in the 'conversation of mankind' only when (as a minimal condition) what is said in their discourses becomes consonant with the canonical discourse of Rorty; that is to say they are significant participants only insofar as their discourses conform to the modish standards of polite liberal talk, taken to be the discourse of humanity (or at least of that segment of humanity which is thought cultured enough to really count). (Burch 102)

I certainly do not disagree that all people should have a role in the discourse, but argue that Rorty's stance is not that of an outright cultural or intellectual elitist, but rather that he has noticed that more often than not, change happens from the top down. Unfortunately, that means that white, bourgeois, English-speaking males are the ones making most of the decisions. What Rorty was attempting to do in PMN was give a wake-up call to his fellow

---

Western, bourgeois intellectuals to look around at the rest of humanity and not be stuck in the rut of foundational theories for knowledge, morality, etc. which *rarely* include people on the fringe. It is not that others do not count; it is just that they are not currently in positions of great influence (although things have changed a little since 1979). It is the job of the edifying philosopher to bring these other views to light, but only after the groundwork has been set. Further, it is through this conversation that edifying philosophy can make the ‘we’ an ever-expanding circle through appropriating and engaging with new and diverse thought from different backgrounds and disciplines. We must go with what we have in hopes of altering from the inside.

While Comay and Burch want to pause the conversation for some retooling and repopulating, Jeff Mitscherling wants to keep it going. However, he is concerned that Rorty’s version of hermeneutics might make the mistake of omitting the historical problems of philosophy.

It strikes me that, contra Rorty, the problems of modern philosophy are in fact *partners* in the dialogue – or at least they *ought* to be. To the dialogue that philosophical hermeneutics regards as essential to the event of understanding necessarily belong different points of view, different perspectives and approaches. In this sense the ‘traditional problems of modern philosophy’ possess a thoroughly legitimate claim to membership in the ‘conversation of the West.’ (Mitscherling 129)

For Mitscherling, it is not who is involved with the conversation but what gets left out that Rorty gets wrong. The problems of Descartes, Kant and Locke should continue to be conversational fodder.

I agree with Mitscherling that we should not abandon the

reading of modern philosophical texts. And Rorty would not really want us to either. Rorty would be fine with us reading Kant, Descartes, etc. if only to further our education to become more informed interlocutors with the caveat that we don't take up their causes, but use their works to help further the possibilities of our own redescription, our new and varied outlooks on ourselves and the world. An 'abnormal' philosopher can still read the classical tomes of philosophy but should consider them more to be history or literature rather than a truth-seeking document. One should be educated, if not indoctrinated, in the normal discourse of the day in order to show where there is difference.

[E]ducation – even the education of the revolutionary or the prophet – needs to begin with acculturation and conformity merely to provide a cautionary complement to the “existentialist” claim that normal participation in normal discourse is merely one project, one way of being in the world. The caution amounts to saying that abnormal and “existential” discourse is always parasitic upon normal discourse, that the possibility of hermeneutics is always parasitic upon the possibility (and perhaps on the actuality) of epistemology, and that edification always employs materials provided by the culture of the day. (PMN 365-366)

Other criticisms of Rorty's hermeneutical agenda touch on the practicality of his approach, his misappropriations of Gadamer and Heidegger, the ability to translate from the 'other's' language into one's own, and, of course, whether or not Foundationalism and epistemology have actually been debunked. We can see that by suggesting that philosophy fall into a conversation, he got his wish. More research has been attempted in these areas because of the publishing of PMN than might have been done otherwise, and academia and culture in general might just be heading in the direction Rorty's critics are trying to block. Throughout, I have

---

touched upon what I feel the goal of Rorty's hermeneutics is, stemming from PMN. Rorty's goal is to incite other philosophers to rediscover the standard texts and begin to talk about them in new ways, but for some, this attitude devalues the rigor of philosophical thought and promotes casual intellectual pursuits. For Rorty, we don't have to take up the old problematic, but we can still find useful bits to promote conversation and hopefully lead to a better consensus of knowledge, morality, etc. This has to begin in the universities and governmental assemblies, but it should make its way down to secondary schools and council meetings, finally reaching the primary schools and social engagements, all the while filtering its way through the streets, pubs and coffeehouses.

Rorty's hermeneutics should be seen as an attempt to create a new space for people to feel comfortable in their own sense of history and culture and be able to compare and contrast such feelings to the status quo. Of course this is easier at the top level where there is a more common background for edifying philosophers to work against. But eventually it could work its way down and even become the status quo, when other edifying philosophers should come along with new alternatives to hermeneutics to keep the ball rolling. (That is not to say that Rorty or I would be comfortable saying that there is directionality to it.)

The philosopher should be more concerned with voraciously reading books, watching movies, going to the opera, and engaging others in dialogue than with searching for a transcendental truth. So the philosopher should not only be a philosopher, but a historian, scientist, poet, literary critic, sociologist, all in one. She should look at all the angles in order to bring them to the conversation table. So this education should not only include Kant, Russell, and Davidson, but also Chinua Achebe, Eldridge Cleaver, Dee Brown, Nikki Giovanni, Howard Zinn and Ken Loach.

This brings us to Rorty's role as an edifying philosopher.

Reading Chapters VI and VII, I couldn't help but wonder if Rorty may have invented the role of the edifying philosopher simply for his own ambitions within academia. It reminds me of the character Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* who proposes the theory of the 'extraordinary man' and tries to prove himself to be one. The edifying philosopher sounds awfully similar to Rorty himself: a highly educated individual with a fresh alternative to the status quo of a discipline. Rorty purposefully, although not explicitly, offered himself as an example of the role of this new breed of thinker.

Rorty's take on philosophy in general, but contemporary philosophy in particular, was revolutionary. He caused uproar, and allowed those who might read such a treatise to view the role and goals of the discipline of philosophy in a whole new light. In doing so he put himself in the same category as Sartre and others whom he saw as "reactive" to the 'normal discourse' of his time. (PMN 377)

He has also shown us through his own example that it helps to be well educated on the subject you are opposing. He is obviously well versed in the canon of philosophical problems and their authors, and he displays this in a way that allows us to use the information we get through our education to practically serve our purpose. For Rorty, there is no *proper* use for an author or text. It's all up for interpretation and subsequently, discussion and debate. What's important is to use your own interpretation because it's all you have. So for his critics, such as Steve Bouma-Prediger, to exclaim that he hasn't used Gadamer or Quine or Dewey's theories correctly, I think, is missing the point. "Rorty selectively appropriates Gadamer's thought for his own neo-pragmatist aims and concerns, thereby disguising some important differences between them." (Bouma-Prediger, 313) But Rorty does not feel that there *is* a truly correct way to use a text but rather a more commensurable way. And even then, as an edifying philosopher, he

---

does not want to necessarily find commensurability, but leave that up to us—the subsequent interpreters and interlocutors. “[P]eople will still read Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. What roles these men will play in our descendants’ conversation, no one knows.” (PMN 394)

Rorty’s hermeneutics may not match up exactly with Gadamer’s. It might seem that he is only inviting postmodern bourgeois liberals to participate in the conversation, and it might seem exclusionary to remove foundationalist philosophy from the topics of discussion, but that is up to the individual interpreters of Rorty’s theories in addition to the interpreters of those interpreters. Rorty would see these as arbitrary and unnecessary arguments and that we should get on to discussing how to make the world better. Not via discovering the facts about the world, but by discovering what is at stake for us all daily and what might be the more prudent course of action to provide everyone with what they need.

It is our job as potential abnormal philosophers to question the status quo and assert new, viable, and even revolutionary alternatives to the subjects of normal discourse. Social change comes from revolutionary thinkers such as Newton, Darwin, Einstein, Kuhn, Joyce, Orwell, Marx, Derrida, and even Rorty. But we must also examine the ideas of non-white and non-male thinkers such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Frantz Fanon as well as Susan B. Anthony, Mother Theresa, and Simone de Beauvoir. Rorty implies however that if, like him, you are a white male, you should start with the former rather than the latter, gradually appropriating and understanding more and more expressions of thought and experience. And we must keep the door open to all of these edifying philosophers so that their theories are freely disbursed in order to keep the world, academia in particular, on its toes and ready to incorporate or reject the next set of radical ideas.

[T]he dangers to abnormal discourse do not come from science or naturalistic philosophy. They come from the

scarcity of food and from the secret police. Given leisure and libraries, the conversation which Plato began will not end in self-objectification – not because aspects of the world, or of human beings, escape being objects of scientific inquiry, but simply because free and leisured conversation generates abnormal discourse as the sparks fly upwards. (PMN 389)

*Works Cited*

- Bouma-Prediger, Steve. "Rorty's Pragmatism and Gadamer's Hermeneutics." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57.2 (1989): 313-324.
- Burch, Robert. "Conloquium Interruptum: Stopping to Think." *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*. Ed. Evan Simpson. Edmonton: Academic, 1987. 99-119.
- Comay, Rebecca. "Interrupting the Conversation: Notes on Rorty." *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*. Ed. Evan Simpson. Edmonton: Academic, 1987. 83-98.
- Dostoevsky, Feodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Ed. George Gibian. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989.
- Mitscherling, Jeff. "Resuming the Conversation." *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*. Ed. Evan Simpson. Edmonton: Academic, 1987. 121-134.
- Rorty, Richard. *Achieving Our Country*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979.