

What is Enlightenment?: Richard Rorty and Enlightenment after Certainty

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In “What is Enlightenment” Kant states, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self imposed immaturity” (Kant, 83). Immaturity for Kant signified humanity’s willingness to accept dogmas unquestioningly, to fail to question the suppositions upon which our beliefs are founded. To transcend immaturity is to embrace what, for Kant, is essential to humanity – reason – and its liberating power. Reason penetrates bias, dogma, and prejudice and for the first time shows us the truth – enlightens us. The pursuit of truth, the fact of the matter, has been the project of Western rationalism since Kant’s essay, and this pursuit has framed what we can today call the “project of Enlightenment.” This project is maintained through the continuing belief that through the use of reason to better represent the world as it really is, our beliefs, cultures, social institutions, and lives will themselves become Enlightened; we believe that the rational project of Enlightenment will show us *the* best way to live our lives, both as individuals and as societies. The upshot to this is: arguments and counter-arguments are posed publicly; when reason is the arbiter between them the “unforced force of the better argument” – the truth –wins out, due to its rational strength, and is embraced, necessarily, for its own sake. Enlightenment can, then, be thought of as the engine of progressive social change in favor of the values reason upholds – freedom, equality, right morality, the best life for all. Enlightenment is the hope for a better, for the best, world.

Richard Rorty demands we hang onto this social hope and the Enlightenment values fueling it (often lumped together by him as “liberal values” or simply “liberalism”), but rid ourselves of, what he deems, the unnecessary and unproductive rationalism and truth seeking traditionally accompanying and justifying them. The

question to be answered here is this: can Rorty, if we are to grant him his critique of rationalism and epistemology, convincingly hold onto the project of Enlightenment? Can he convincingly still give us reason to believe that the better argument, the more just social institution or practice, the superior moral picture of how we are to live our lives, will win out? Or, does his Enlightenment hope without rational grounding leave us without the requisite tools for continuing this project and undertaking the kind of critique necessary for doing so? Should we believe, with Rorty, that even if we throw out the notion of an accurate representation of the world, or of truth, that our culture can still feel the force of the better argument and embrace that argument for itself in transformative progress?

I argue that once we shed the desire for certainty and universal truths the Enlightenment project takes the form of finding new descriptive ways of causing shifts in the coherence of our beliefs. The better way of describing what is going on replaces the rationally true argument as the catalyst of the Enlightenment project. While Rorty's critics contest that such a conception of Enlightenment cannot contain the requisite tools for the critique of the existing state of affairs or for deliberating between two contrary arguments, Rorty explains that our preexisting cultural inheritance, itself already containing the progressive values of the Western Enlightenment, is all we need for deliberation in such cases. Finally, Rorty's critique of traditional Enlightenment rationalism actually serves to reinvigorate the Enlightenment project by ridding it of its historic dogmas, thereby opening new possibilities for the future of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment project can, consistently, continue after Rorty.

Before asking Rorty what his picture of a post-rationalistic Enlightenment looks like, it is important to offer a sketch of his epistemology critique in order to frame the issue at hand. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty argues that the

rationalism and quest for certainty emblematic of the Western Enlightenment are nothing more than optional philosophical problems embraced because of the historical contingencies of Western thought. Modern philosophers made what Rorty deems a mistake in picturing the mind and reason as something which “mirrors” nature, making knowledge and truth matters of increasingly less distorted representations of the world as it actually is. Rorty maintains there are no such facts “out there” to be found; truth is not given by the world for us to represent more or less accurately. Rather, such a scheme/content dichotomy breaks down when Rorty explains that all knowledge, all claims we make about the world, are parts in a specific language game or vocabulary we historically and culturally inherit. All we can really know is how competing claims about things fit together within this vocabulary in holistic coherence.

For Rorty this means, “...nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and...there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence” (Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature¹, 178). Since our claims can be evaluated only through our cultural vocabulary, whether they are deemed correct or incorrect, whether they are embraced or rejected, can be judged only by how well they relate to and fit within the way we currently speak about things. There is no special faculty called reason allowing us to better uncover and represent the truth; there is no fact of the matter, way the world “is”, to be uncovered. Thus, contrary to the tradition of Enlightenment rationalism, “Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist or be out there...Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own...cannot” (Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity², 5). Accepting that knowledge and truth are nothing but

¹ Hereafter “PMN”.

² Hereafter “CIS”

the way we speak and how that speech fits together coherently, it no longer makes sense to talk about finding non-cultural, non-affected, human independent truths. Rather, "...only sentences can be true...human beings make truths by making languages in which to phrase sentences" (CIS, 9). Truth is *made*, not found. Attempting, as Enlightenment rationalism has, to ground all beliefs with universal rational justifications is incoherent. What is "True" or "Right" is nothing but a matter of social practice (PMN, 178).

By critiquing the foundations upon which the Enlightenment has traditionally rested Rorty appears to take away the ground on which it stands. When there is no truth about the world to be uncovered, and no rational faculty with which to do so, it is hard to imagine what a project of Enlightenment can consist of. No longer can we believe that reason points out the error of a particular belief, practice, or institution, nor can we believe that one argument is necessarily better than another because it better portrays the truth of the matter unaffected by irrational biases and contingencies. From the traditional view, Rorty undercuts the ability of the Enlightenment project to separate the truth claims which must be endorsed from those which must be rejected. After Rorty's critique of rationalism and epistemology how can the notion of Enlightenment's notions of deliberation between competing claims or progress be coherent?

Rorty answers this question by explaining that even if the languages through which we describe the world, and the beliefs which hang together in those languages, are contingent the Enlightenment project itself – the project of progressively reforming culture in accord with the better argument – need not be threatened. Rather, the project of Enlightenment takes up the creation of new metaphors and ways of describing ourselves which serve to challenge and transform the vocabulary through which we frame the world. Rorty explains, "[M]y utopia," one embodying the progressive changes the Enlightenment project seeks, "...would

be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away ‘prejudice’ or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved...[not] by inquiry but by imagination” (CIS, xvi). We do not lose with rationalism the ability or the desire to affect change or to shape the world towards a vision of one we imagine to be better than the present. The foundation and motivation of the Enlightenment survive, even if its traditional foundations do not.

In order to maintain this project, Rorty contends we must simply, ‘...substitute Freedom for Truth as the goal of thinking and of social progress” (CIS, xiii). Ultimately Rorty believes the two accomplish the same thing: when we embrace freedom as the goal toward which progress shall be aligned we, at the same time, embrace the ideal of working always toward a world which is greater than our own. This post-rationalistic Enlightenment, “...would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process – an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth” (CIS, xiii). Whereas truth was the end of rational inquiry, freedom is the end toward which a creative Enlightenment aims. These differing ends mean little for Rorty, since both projects propel culture toward a perpetual self-improvement.

All that is lost in this change of method is a set of philosophical pseudo-problems. Enlightenment hope does not fall by the wayside when we come to see ourselves as creators of a better world rather than finders of one. The Enlightenment project continues; we simply come to realize that we need not see it as anything more than finding better ways of adapting ourselves and of evolving our culture to fit with the utopian visions we create. Our emphasis shifts from the question “What is our nature?” to the question “What can we make of ourselves?” (“Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality”, 169). Whereas, within a

rationalistic vocabulary, Enlightenment sought out the more rational argument, Enlightenment now looks for the best way of explaining what is going on and what we should do about it (“Feminism and Pragmatism”, 206). We consider ourselves more enlightened when we find, “...new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking” (PMN, 360). Thus, the current state of affairs – our “normal” institutions and “normal” discourses – is evaluated. When this state of affairs no longer fits with the ways we speak about the utopia we desire, we create “abnormal discourse” to disrupt the status quo and spark reform – to drastically alter what our beliefs are, how we talk about them, and how they cohere. Improvement through creation replaces reason as the catalyst of the Enlightenment. Although shifting its orientation away from finding more rational ways of representing the world gives Enlightenment a new face, the project, and the hope it embodies, persist.

But, “What can we make of ourselves” appears to be a question without a determinate end toward which it guides us. Rationalism guides the Enlightenment toward such an end – truth – which itself contains certain values and criteria toward which the Enlightenment progresses. This poses a problem for the Rortyan continuation of the Enlightenment: if we have no determinate idea of where we should be going, how are we to determine what “What we can make of ourselves” should look like? Habermas identifies this problem in his critiques of other critics of the Enlightenment who wish to move beyond the notions of rationalism and truth. Sketching his argument problematizes the Enlightenment in a way which, if he is to be convincing, Rorty must answer.

In Habermas’s terms, Rorty’s critique of reason leaves no deliberative faculty with which we can work through and evaluate competing claims. Habermas asks, “...once all predicates concerning validity are devalued, once it is [contingency] and not validity claims that is expressed in value appraisals – by what

criterion shall critique still be able to propose discriminations” (Habermas, 125)? If the better argument is to be compelling, as the Enlightenment demands, Habermas sees that this relies upon the ability to examine the existing state of affairs and judge it to be either correct or flawed, and to deliberate over the validity of proposals and counter-proposals for reform. This is only possible, he claims, if there is a faculty or criteria compelling us, necessarily, to see the force of the better argument. Thus, if we follow Rorty and his critique of rational truth we are left without the requisite tools for discriminating between what deserves to be esteemed and what deserves to be rejected (Habermas, 125). When Rorty jettisons noncontingent truth he also rids us of the critical tools necessary for the Enlightenment project as well – the ability to rationally deliberate about competing claims, and the normative force of reason which shows us the necessity of doing so.

Rorty’s conception of Enlightenment as the creation of new ways of speaking, for Habermas, yields nothing but merely historically or merely culturally grounded claims. Such claims lack the normative force of truth, without which there is nothing making one claim inherently worthy of endorsement and another of rejection in deliberation between the two; the choice is relative. As Habermas sees it, this leaves us with a problem: whereas Enlightenment rationalism clearly tells us “argument X is to be endorsed,” or, “state of affairs Y is contrary to reason and must be altered,” Rorty leaves us with no feeling of compulsion one way or the other. Since the judgment has no necessary criteria, we can choose whichever side we wish without need of justification (relativism) or we can choose neither (quietism or conservatism). Habermas wishes us to see, then, that when, “...thinking can no longer operate in the element of truth...contradiction and criticism lose their meaning. To contradict, to negate, now has only the sense of ‘wanting to be different’” (Habermas, 124). Rortyan Enlightenment is merely relative change for change’s sake; it has

forsaken the tools required for our cultural choices or progress to contain any *progressive* value.

In sum, Rorty's "uninhibited skepticism regarding reason" causes all deliberation to slip into groundlessness and, in doing so, destroys the force behind the Enlightenment. We have no way of telling what the better argument is, no reason to believe we are making (or can make, or should care about making) the correct choice (Habermas, 129). Rorty leaves us with nothing but possibility, itself value neutral and containing no inherent value. Without a rational evaluative hierarchy to instruct our deliberation the "unforced force of the better argument" cannot be felt; or worse, the notion of a better argument itself becomes something incoherent. Through Habermas we see that the Enlightenment project requires a criterion of judgment. When we rid ourselves of the idea of rational grounding for our beliefs and judgments we risk losing the ability to make correct judgments or identify rightness at all. In losing these we lose the Enlightenment project as well.

Rorty summarizes the charges against him by explaining: "Abandoning a standpoint which is, if not transcendental, at least 'universalistic,' seems to Habermas to betray the social hopes which have been central to liberal politics...because it drops the notions which have been used to justify various reforms which have marked the history of the Western democracies since the Enlightenment...[And] Habermas thinks that if we drop the idea of 'the better argument' as opposed to 'the argument which convinces a given audience at a given time,' we shall have only a 'context dependent sort of social criticism'" ("Habermas and Lyotard on Post-Modernity", 165).

These charges, however, are met by Rorty with a simple "Not so" to the former, and an emphatic "Exactly!" to the latter.

Rorty states, “The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me ludicrous. What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes” (CIS, 86). These hopes and vocabularies binding us together are not optional choices, but are the fundamental, inescapable foundations of who and what a culture understands itself to be. Because of this, we must take seriously the claim that in a Rortyan post-rationalistic Enlightenment all our claims would be context dependent. Contrary to Habermas’s claims, this does not damn Rorty, but, rather, supports his contention that the Western Enlightenment project is capable of being carried on without rational grounding. This is so because, culturally, in all our deliberations over, and creation of, metaphors and new descriptions we are always, already, Western Enlightenment liberals. The very values propelling the Enlightenment – freedom, equality, free opportunity, justice and fairness, the belief that cruelty is the worst thing we can do – are the values that constitute our cultural vocabulary. Any project of describing the world is filtered through, and is parasitic of, the values we carry with us at all times as the very way we speak about the world. As such, Habermas’s charge that belief in the worth of liberal Enlightenment values and the institutions they endorse is lost with rationalism is not plausible. To think so would be to think that when we lose the philosophical justifications for our beliefs our conception of who and what we are, our all encompassing worldview, crumbles on the spot, leaving us all in nihilism. This is hyperbolic. Rorty tells us that by virtue of our already being Western Enlightenment liberals all of our future descriptions of the world will, in fact must, be a continuation of “the conversation of the West” (PMN, 394). Continuing the conversation of the West is continuing the conversation of the Enlightenment itself.

This inherited conversation is comprised of what Rorty calls our “we intentions,” or in other words, “the sort of things ‘we do’

and the ‘sort of things we don’t do’” (CIS, 59). “What we do” is indebted to the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment (if not in its justifications, then in its values themselves) and this debt is foundational to our conceptions of what is right or wrong, what is to be valued or devalued, approved or rejected (“Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality”, 173). So, even while we no longer see it as productive to worry about the philosophical justification for approving one thing over another, that decision is, in fact, filtered through a vocabulary containing the values and morals beliefs the Enlightenment has always used to judge such decisions. We cannot help but judge the world through our Western Enlightenment “we intentions”. Our “we intentions” themselves are all the evaluative criteria needed for engaging in the kind of critique or value appraisal necessary for the Enlightenment project. The only difference is the question changes from “What is the rational justification for this claim?” to “How well does this claim or description cohere with the way we Western Enlightenment liberals talk about the world?”

Rorty’s continuation of the Enlightenment through redescription and metaphor is neither groundless nor aporetic. Rather, it is constituted from a deep commitment to the inherited values of the Enlightenment constituting our sense of who we are and what we do. The Enlightenment itself represents such an integral part of our cultural self-understanding and way of life that throwing it out is not something we are willing to do, and likely could not, practically, do even if we so chose. The Enlightenment project itself is constitutive of “the sort of things we do.” The only significant change we find after Rorty is that we come to recognize our culture, “...is what it is, has the morality that it has, speaks the language that it does,” and that it does so, “not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke the way they did” (CIS, 61).

If we are willing to follow Rorty here we are still owed an explanation as to how the Enlightenment project is to work. The traditional Enlightenment gave us a clear process of public deliberation between competing rational claims through which its project was actualized; we need to know that Rorty can give us a similar account of the Enlightenment project at work. Rorty explains that instead of utilizing reason to critique existing norms and beliefs or to evaluate competing claims, we examine our normalized practices (the existing state of affairs), beliefs, and social institutions through the lens of our liberal values – freedom, equality, the minimizing of suffering, and so on. In doing so, instead of asking “Is this rational?” we ask, “Does our use of these words get in the way of our use of other words?” i.e., does this description contradict the vocabulary we liberals endorse (CIS, 9)? When we see that the set of words behind a given practice, belief, or institution – the white race is superior to the black race, for example – clearly contradicts the more basic, fundamental words constituting “who we are and what we do” – freedom, equality, etc. – we are compelled to challenge that description of the world, that normal discourse, in hopes of replacing it with a set of words that coheres within our liberal Enlightenment vocabulary. Such a challenge takes place through the public proposal of new ways of describing and speaking about the contested phenomenon meant to show that “this is not something we do,” or, “this is something we must start doing” – the abolitionists’ radical redescriptions of race, slavery, and the rights of human beings, for example. Such new ways of speaking may take the form of appeals to sentiment, or vivid depictions of what it is like to suffer as one of the oppressed (“Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality”, 179). Rorty explains, “The goal of this sort of manipulation of sentiment is to expand our reference of terms in ‘our kind of people’ and ‘people like us’” (Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality”, 176); it is to create an expanding bond of solidarity and community that

compels us to affect change, to see the force of the more liberal argument against the prevailing illiberal norm or counter argument and endorse it for its own sake as such. Ultimately,

“The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of...new social institutions” (CIS, 9).

The Enlightenment project of progressively altering society in accord with the better argument continues. The difference is simply that our redescriptions of the world, coupled with our already existing liberal values, serve to accomplish the consciousness raising role, rather than reason. With the ideal of a liberal utopia already inhering to the way we speak about the world, we have every reason to believe the project of progressive redescription will continue, to believe that the Enlightenment project will flourish.

Thus, Rorty contends that the values intrinsic to our liberal culture already contain all the necessary seeds for carrying out the Enlightenment project without the need for true rational grounding. He explains:

“I think that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement...Indeed my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs...the balance between leaving people’s private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word” (CIS, 63).

With our preexisting commitment to, “the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences,” (CIS, 86) all that we must guarantee in order to perpetuate the Enlightenment project is open and free public space

in which we offer and discuss new ways of talking about our institutions, beliefs, and values. Just as Kant exclaimed that, “For this Enlightenment...nothing is required but freedom...” (Kant, 84), Rorty believes if we take care of freedom, we already possess all the requisite tools for the Enlightenment project to take care of itself.

Finally, if we look closely at Rorty we find his demand that we do away with rationalism, certainty, and universal truth actually reinvigorates the Enlightenment project. The project of Enlightenment began under the auspice of overcoming unquestioned dogmas in order to maximize freedom of inquiry and possibility. In this light, when Rorty challenges the epistemological assumptions of our time, which had previously seemed unquestionable and certain, he is, in effect, challenging the “guardianship” of one belief over the whole of culture. What we risk, for Rorty, when we commit ourselves to absolutes and universal principles is the freezing over of culture. “The danger,” he states, “...[is that] some way in which people might come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse” (PMN, 377). Behind the comfort of supposedly timeless truths we allow ourselves to become static and fixed; Enlightenment hope is quieted by counter-Enlightenment dogma wrought on us by rationalism’s quest for certainty. When Enlightenment rationalism is carried out to its logical end it amounts to nothing but the end of the Enlightenment project itself.

We can understand, then, Rorty’s challenge to this freezing over of culture to be in the spirit of the Enlightenment project itself. He explains, “Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun...” (PMN , 370). When he announces the end of rationalism, Rorty actually opens up the boundaries within which the Enlightenment project can flourish.

New possibilities for describing and creating a progressive vision of what we can become emerge when the limitations of the quest for certainty fall away. Rorty's proclamation that we need no longer worry about truth or certainty represents, "...the choice of the infinite striving for truth over 'all of Truth'" (PMN, 377). Rorty does not end the Enlightenment as we know it, or strip away the ground on which it stands. Instead, he breathes new life into it by exposing its traditional dogmas and demanding that we move beyond them in order to revitalize the possibilities envisioned by the Enlightenment project. He creates space for new paths toward cultural progress, for new ways of thinking about creating a more liberal, progressive world.

We see that, while he suffers many charges of relativism and moral ambivalence, Rorty's thought can plausibly align itself with the continuation of the Enlightenment project. This claim is, no doubt, contentious. Indeed, there are important questions left to be answered: How does this vision of the Enlightenment mediate between competing claims posed across cultures or moral vocabularies? Does Enlightenment as the continuation of a Western liberal conversation entrench us in a Western status quo? Does Rorty's commitment to liberal values as the engine of the Enlightenment at the same time bind him to the perpetuation of individualism, self-interest, and capitalism? If so, what affect do these commitments have on the possibility for realizing solidarity? Is an unflinching commitment to liberalism itself uncritical and dogmatic, the last bastion of cultural "guardianship" placing limits over what we can imagine ourselves becoming? These questions must be dealt with; this paper is only a first step toward that end. However, we have seen that if we are willing to consider Rorty in his own terms, to open ourselves to new interpretations of what forms the Enlightenment project may take, rather than demanding all accounts continue with the vocabulary of rationalism, he is able to give a cogent defense of a post-rationalistic Enlightenment

project. Enlightenment hope survives, even if Enlightenment rationalism does not.

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