Richard Rorty on Transcendence

Ronald A. Kuipers

Introduction
Throughout most of his work, Richard Rorty sets himself up as an enemy of transcendence. He finds that this notion has, more often than not, been more trouble than it is worth. To be more specific, he thinks the human desire for transcendence has encouraged us to denigrate our humanity and to shirk our responsibility for making the world a better place. In continuity with the tradition of American Pragmatism, Rorty takes up the torch of human self-reliance and thereby urges his fellow humans to embrace life in a world seemingly bereft of any transcendent support.

“Transcendence,” however, proves to be a slippery term, operating in different ways in different philosophical, not to mention theological, discourses. This conceptual slippage can also be found in Rorty’s treatment of transcendence. In spite of his massive suspicion regarding most uses of this word, one can, in fact, still find a remaining positive use of it that he does not simply discard. In this essay I will follow the path of Rorty’s suspicion right up to the point where one may discover the remaining positive use of that term in his work.

As we travel along this path, we will find that, in sympathy with the philosophical defenders of alterity and difference, Rorty rejects the understanding of transcendence in what Wessel Stoker calls “metaphysical identity thinking” in his essay (see above, p. 7). As I explore in the next section (section 2), one finds a primary locus of Rorty’s rejection of transcendence in his critique of epistemological foundationalism. Yet Rorty’s suspicion concerning transcendence also extends into the type of transcendence that the defenders of difference employ, namely, the one that Stoker describes with the phrase “transcendence as alterity” (see above, p. 8). This latter form of suspicion surfaces especially in his dialogue with deconstructionistic philosophy (where he remains critical of the notion of alterity as a form of ethical transcendence), as well as in the
“postmodern” affirmation of political liberalism he makes when discussing the ethics of deconstruction. I explore this suspicion in section 3.

At this point, it becomes important to understand the connection Rorty sees between the use of transcendence in both metaphysical identity thinking as well as in deconstruction’s emphasis on alterity. Notwithstanding the massive difference between these philosophical movements, Rorty nonetheless spies in each of them a similar version of the human tendency to seek shelter in, and give away our power to, something or someone utterly beyond our human condition as we happen to find it. Once we understand the way Rorty connects these two different affirmations of transcendence, we will be in a better position to understand the positive appreciation for transcendence that remains in his work, one that, to use Stoker’s typology, can best be described as a form of “radical immanence” (see above, p. 8).

As we shall see, however, the fit between Rorty’s positive treatment of transcendence and what Stoker calls “radical immanence” is not quite perfect. According to Stoker, radical immanence describes an understanding of transcendence whereby “the absolute is sought no longer outside mundane reality” but instead, “both realities converge, with the absolute emptying itself in mundane reality (kenosis)” (see above, p. 8). Given Rorty’s rejection of “vertical” conceptualizations of transcendence, one would think that he might find this radically “horizontal” understanding of transcendence quite congenial. And indeed, he does endorse Gianni Vattimo’s (not to mention John Dewey’s) kenotic understanding of a transcendence-become-immanent (Rorty 2005: 38-39). At the same time, however, Rorty’s thought is imbued with a sense of temporal expectation, indeed hope, for the coming of a future that has not yet arrived, and insofar as he remains sensitive to the fact that this future has not yet arrived, he retains an appreciation for something that, in his words, “transcends our present condition.”

Rorty’s Rejection of Transcendence in Epistemological Foundationalism

Throughout his work, Rorty remains highly suspicious of the supposed need to establish human knowledge upon a founda-