Richard Rorty: Becoming a Contemporary Political Philosopher

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This article follows Rorty’s imaginative style in trying to articulate two different visions: his own and Hannah Arendt’s on seminal questions. Arendt and Rorty have many common concerns and they share critical approaches toward the notion of truth, the question of using imagination, and the effective tools of literature concerning morality and politics. However, some of the differences between them, are also revised here, since Arendt was not a liberal, optimistic thinker. She had lived rough years, while Rorty was still trying to make his humble point about liberalism and democracy. To him the least complicated open-minded and fallible position as a thinker was to trace his experiences as limited but good enough to claim some defenses about them. In reflecting on these two thinkers, I seek to bring Rorty’s pragmatist, eclectic and most original style to the forefront.

Since Richard Rorty’s death on 7 June 2007, few events have taken place to celebrate his work. I believe this is an injustice because Rorty was one of the greatest American philosophers of the last fifty years, and he did more than anyone else to stir up the debate about the role of philosophy in world affairs and practically anything else that matters to us today. So, I welcome the opportunity from the organizers of this event in Buenos Aires not only to pay tribute to Rorty’s contribution as a political thinker but also to reflect on his legacy.

Rorty was often struck by how few people wrote about his work in positive terms. Of course, this should not be surprising since he took challenging and provocative stands on many philosophical issues, with an emphasis on debunking core philosophical beliefs. Because of his blunt, hard-hitting style, his critics might have only paid attention to half of what they were hearing or reading and unfortunately ignored some of the main points he was making. His papers were so carefully constructed, so beautifully written, that it is amazing his critics failed to see the breadth and depth of his sophisticated arguments.

Except for a few philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas and Richard Bernstein, Rorty’s critics were mostly dismissive of his creativity and critical of
his progressive goals. In the past, I have written how his notion of democracy was clearly inspired by Dewey’s project of politics as an ethics of democracy and how his therapeutic notion of cultural politics greatly resembled Dewey’s. But Rorty developed his own postmetaphysical view of what philosophy and politics could be today by adding important nuances to what he called the pragmatist view.

In this article, I present a positive account of some of Rorty’s contributions to the present debates about politics and culture. In so doing, I will concentrate on the parts where his philosophy and his politics became a larger view of his political goals where creativity and originality were its main features.

I will argue, first, that Rorty fought against the Western philosophical tradition, particularly against Plato’s contribution to the concept of truth as correspondence (with the metaphor of the mirror of nature). He had to do this because of the so-called “authority” of the concept of truth in the Western tradition and because Plato was dismissive about the concept of imagination. Plato even wanted to expel writers such as Homer from the polis. As we will see, Rorty wished to replace this traditional conception of philosophy with the role of literature. Second, I maintain that Rorty was one of the few philosophers who recovered the concept of imagination for philosophy and, especially, for politics. Third, Rorty wrote extensively about the role of social transformation, hope, and change because he was critical of the goals of the academic left, particularly with respect to the way the cultural turn forgot about the role of the welfare state and the goals of equality and redistribution. He wanted to recover the earlier progressive views about these issues that had been lost during the cultural debates over identity and difference. As a progressivist, he shared a great deal with some very admired political thinkers of our times (see, for example, his ongoing defense of some of Habermas’s work, particularly, his postmetaphysical goals).

Fourth, Rorty had a keen understanding of the interrelations among history, action, and contingencies. He insisted that contingencies had a significant effect on the way human affairs develop and are transformed. I argue that Rorty considered debates as actions, and actions as both contingent and historically situated. Thus, he had a contextualist, historical view of action and of agency, which was closer to a sociological approach than to a normative philosophical perspective.

And fifth, while Rorty’s views about the role of literature changed during the many years he wrote about it, he engaged in debate about the kind of antimetaphysical perspective literature could provide in terms of re-imagining social life. Rorty thought that literature and creative re-descriptions taken from novels and poetry occupied a preeminent place in people’s lives, and that through them individuals and communities developed a sense of shared values and goals – in other words, a social imaginary.