William M. Curtis


Against a backdrop of debates about liberalism that grow increasingly stale, where many folks are unable to shake the intuitive appeal of liberalism but have become uncomfortable with its theoretical and political failures, William M. Curtis’s _Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue_ is a valuable contribution. His use of Richard Rorty’s work to develop a post-foundational liberalism that is up to the philosophical and political challenges of the 21st century is not just a welcome addition to the Rorty literature, but also and even more so a welcome addition to the liberalism literature, which can only benefit from the sort of honest self-appraisal that looking at liberalism through a Rortyan lens can provide. This honest self-appraisal produces a pragmatic virtue liberalism that rejects the pretension of “thinness” that _modus vivendi_ and political liberalisms fail to live up to and instead embraces an “ethically thick, historically contingent” liberal way of life (21).

Curtis’s introduction, “Defending California: Richard Rorty’s Virtue Liberalism,” does what all (good) introductions should do: it motivates and situates the project of the book, provides a thorough overview of contemporary debates among liberals, heads off obvious objections that could forestall or derail the project, and outlines his methodology by highlighting three ways in which _Defending Rorty_ itself takes up a Rortyan methodology. First, it extends Rorty’s intellectual project by providing “fruitful redescriptions of Rorty’s work” as proposing a “liberal virtue ethics” (4). Second, it “relate[s] Rorty’s thought to the work of other important thinkers” (5). And third, it makes the anti-authoritarian move of turning to literary intellectuals (rather than philosophers) as the liberal vanguard, since they offer “historically contingent but nevertheless edifying and useful visions of ‘how things hang together’” (6). Chapters 1 and 2 take up the first task of redescribing Rorty as a virtue liberal;
Chapters 3 through 5 take up the second, dialectical task of developing and defending this redescriptive project; Chapter 6 uses the literary example of Aldous Huxley’s *Island* to accomplish the third task of illustrating Rorty’s vision of a pragmatic, virtue liberal utopia.

In Chapter 1, “Rorty’s Pragmatism: The Critique of Philosophy as Authoritarian,” Curtis aims to accomplish two tasks. The first is to explain Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism, which is itself composed of two moves: the therapeutic and critical project of defending fallibilism, and the utopian and constructive project of envisioning a liberal utopia. The latter, Curtis suggests, underwrites and motivates the former project; it is Rorty’s liberalism that prompts his (philosophical) anti-authoritarianism. The second task is to respond, on Rorty’s behalf, to “the most representative and serious critiques” of his brand of pragmatism (54), such as those forwarded by Thomas Nagel, Hilary Putnam, Gary Gutting, Jeffrey Stout, and “fellow travelers.” In Chapter 2, “Rorty’s Pragmatic Virtue Liberalism,” Curtis attempts to give shape to Rorty’s unique brand of liberalism, one that represents a “new ethical approach” that recommends a “literary spirit” over metaphysical principles or justifications (82). Curtis’s focus in this chapter is to elaborate on five “key concepts” that he identifies as integral to Rorty’s liberal project: cruelty, ironism, the public-private divide, political liberalism, and a post-Philosophical, literary culture. Each of the sections that elaborates a key concept provides a valuable and original reading of Rorty’s use of it, though they are sometimes too dense and too quick. Though entire chapters and books could (and perhaps should) be dedicated to each of these key concepts, Curtis does an admirable job of highlighting their importance for Rorty’s political vision.

Chapter 3, “Critics: From Left and Right,” marks the shift from Curtis’s redescriptive project to his dialectical project, where the vision outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 is brought into dialogue with a selection of Rorty’s critics. In this chapter, Curtis outlines and defends Rorty’s virtue liberalism against critics from (as the title suggests) both the Left (Richard J. Bernstein and Nancy Fraser) and the Right (Jean Bethke Elshtain). Leftists are surprised by Rorty’s claim that “we should stick with American liberalism” despite its “metaphysical baselessness” (135), whereas Rightists worry that Rorty’s views regarding the contingency of our values lead to “nihilism and cultural decline” (156). Curtis shows that Rorty can evade both worries because “his virtue liberalism is neither complacent nor irresponsible” (164). Chapter 4, “Rorty versus Taylor: Ontology, Pluralism, and Authoritarianism,” provides an overview of the Rorty-Taylor debate, with a particular focus on “whether we need transcendent sources of normativity to adequately explain and motivate ethical life” (166), and particularly, to help us deal with issues of (ethical) pluralism. Unsurprisingly, Curtis sides with Rorty,