On the Passing of Richard Rorty and the Future of American Philosophy

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The passing of Richard Rorty is an event to mark in the annals of American philosophy – the passing of a spirit-guide to some, and of a dark shadow to others, but certainly that of an original, iconoclastic thinker who brought classical American pragmatism back into the contemporary philosophical conversation, and who got philosophers telling stories of achieving a long-loved dream of democracy. I outline a twelve-point agenda for productive future philosophical wrangles with Rorty, highlighting his metaphysical nominalism, anti-religious ironism, and “Western bourgeois liberal democracy.”

If we adopt Dewey’s image of the philosopher’s task ... we have to drop both the Marxist distinction between science and ideology and the distinction, deployed by both Russell and Husserl, between the a priori and the a posteriori. More generally, we have to drop all attempts to make philosophy as autonomous an activity as it was thought to be before philosophers began taking time seriously. Dewey, but not Russell, can adopt Locke’s suggestion that role of the philosopher is that of an under-laborer, clearing away the rubbish of the past in order to make room for the constructions of the future. But Dewey would have admitted, I think, that the philosopher is occasionally able to fuse this janitorial role with the role of prophet. Such a combination is found in Bacon and Descartes, both of whom combined the attempt to clear away Aristotelian rubbish with visions of a utopian future. Similarly, the effort of Dewey to get philosophy out from under Kant, of Habermas to untangle it from what he calls “the philosophy of consciousness,” and of Derrida to liberate it from what he calls “the metaphysics of presence” are intertwined with prophecies of the fully democratic society whose coming such extrication will hasten.


It is hard to believe that Richard Rorty is gone. One of the world’s best-known philosophical gadflies and democratic visionaries of the post-Vietnam War era, Rorty was a broadly educated, creative, iconoclastic thinker who shed a bright light on the value of many almost forgotten contributions of the classical American pragmatists. Rorty died bravely on 7 June 2007, writing and watching the sky for really large birds until the very end. In his last weeks, Rorty is said to have sighted a California condor: a huge, broad-winged, high-flying bird that
was almost extinct, before the efforts of a handful of visionaries brought it back from the brink, and with it, hard-to-imagine impacts on the future of its niche in Earth’s ecosystem, as well as on the lives of those who watch condors as spirit-guides and as omens for discerning our human future. How fitting!

To his many friends and his many opponents in American philosophy, Rorty was such a broad-winged, high-flying bird, one who either made the world more welcoming to the kind of philosophy we felt the need to do, or cast a shadow over the efforts of those of us who saw the world differently. Having wrestled with his philosophical writings for many years, I have often thought of Rorty as my opponent – someone whose accounts of works by Dewey, James, and Wittgenstein that I know well and care about were wildly unreliable, and whose influential views about many philosophical issues on which I, his junior, also work cast a large shadow over these fields that sometimes made it hard for me to find daylight. And yet, I am mindful of how liberating many of his philosophical writings have been to many gifted American philosophers, and how empowering his presence often was to many of our colleagues in Eastern Europe and Latin America who could fund conferences and publish their work because he agreed to come. Therefore, I decided to read Rorty again during the summer after his death, as I was revising my own book on pragmatism and social hope for publication. To my surprise, I learned a lot.

When I challenged Rorty at a professional conference on “public sociology” in San Francisco during the summer of 2004 to use his fame as a platform for launching active, collaborative efforts of “public philosophy,” he grumbled, “No one listens to me, anyway.” How odd that he would think that, when I have heard his work discussed in Germany, Poland, Italy, and China, as well as throughout the United States. When I reminded him that Achieving Our Country (1998) had been a non-fiction best-seller, widely read by other educated readers as well as philosophers, he replied that maybe he had tended to separate his philosophical voice too much from his voice as a citizen. I had to smile.

One of the great things about Rorty’s philosophical writing was that it was so close to and honest about his life, not only in poignant autobiographical essays like “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” and in works on politics and culture like Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), Achieving Our Country (1998), Philosophy and Social Hope (1999), and Philosophy as Cultural Politics (2007), but also in late-life dialogues with other international philosophers, including The Future of Religion (2005) with the Italian hermeneuticist philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, and What’s the Use of Truth (2007), with the French analytic philosopher, Pascal Engel. Even the work that first made him famous, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979), was really a manifesto about why Rorty felt the need to part ways with analytic philosophy in order to write something better: “Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind,” as he entitled the last chapter.

Conversation was Rorty’s “thing,” the best thing we language-using beings could do, in his view – the best way to end cruelty and the best way to