Rorty’s Moral Philosophy for Liberal Democratic Culture

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Richard Rorty’s moral writings offer a cogent summary of the moral content of contemporary liberal democratic culture. Rorty insists on a divide between our public and private lives, yet he claims that moral progress (a seemingly public affair) is primarily driven by the imagination of great poetry and philosophy (which Rorty claims are private projects). A pressing tension thus emerges between private imagination and public moral justification, which is also very real in contemporary liberal democratic culture itself. I sketch a way out of this problem, which fits well with the pragmatism he shares with William James and John Dewey.

One question immediately provoked by my title concerns the status of Richard Rorty’s moral vision as specifically philosophical. Critics will wonder whether Richard Rorty really has a philosophical account of moral thought and practice. It is of course true that Rorty has not engaged with moral philosophy in the systematic manner common amongst leading contemporary moral philosophers. Even in those areas to which Rorty has devoted consistent systematic attention, such as philosophy of language and metaphilosophy, he has always been hesitant to apply the label of “philosophy” to whatever it is he sees himself as doing.

Rorty has, however, written a number of pieces which indicate the kind of moral philosophical vision we might expect of ourselves if our liberal democratic culture can ever figure out a way to take seriously the pragmatist experimentalism and meliorism that he, following William James and John Dewey, urges us to. And yet nowhere do these occasional pieces get summed up into an overall account of neopragmatist ethics. So, Rorty’s varied writings on this subject are often taken as isolated contributions, rather than as contributing to a philosophical account of moral practice which Rorty is trying to pitch to contemporary intellectual culture.

Taken as individual and occasional pieces, Rorty’s writings on moral philosophy seem to consist mostly in negative claims intended to debunk the typical aspirations of leading contemporary moral philosophers. Though this debunking and quasi-positivist way of reading Rorty can definitely be sustained by a certain view of his writings, a stronger and more nuanced reading of Rorty
emerges if we try to piece together a creative and post-positivist urge in his writings on the kind of moral philosophy he finds appropriate for a liberal democratic culture like ours. The obvious advantage of this stronger reading is that it gives us a more interesting Rorty to confront. It also has the added benefit of explaining why Rorty exercises such enormous influence in contemporary intellectual circles. Rorty the quasi-positivist gadfly can at best be seen as an old-fashioned kind of hanger-on taking a few last gasps of Viennese air just before the final asphyxiation of hard-core logical analysis in American philosophy departments. But Rorty the neo-pragmatist critic can more usefully be engaged as a creative thinker whose command ranges over a wide variety of texts and disciplines, and whose vision for what democratic culture might do next is taken seriously as an alternative to currently fashionable moods. It is this latter Rorty, the neo-pragmatist freewheeling interdisciplinarian, who we professional philosophers find disconcerting just as our colleagues in literature departments find him exciting. It is this latter Rorty who comes as close as any other contemporary philosopher to expressing the moral philosophical content underlying much of our contemporary liberal democratic culture.

To get at this widely-embraced moral content of our liberal democratic culture, I will begin by describing Rorty’s view as he stated it in the book in which he set the intellectual trajectory from which he would never stray. I am referring to the book that I take, and that I think Rorty himself also took, to be of greatest ongoing importance of all his works: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). I will then describe the same view as stated a few years later in a series of lectures in which Rorty offered a revised conception of his pragmatism: “Hope in Place of Knowledge” (1994). Along the way, I will point to a crucial tension in these texts between the view that imagination drives moral progress and the view that the quintessential liberal split between public and private is the last word on democratic politics. I will then explore the same tension as it appears in three of Rorty’s most recent essays, all of which have been recently republished in Rorty’s latest collection of philosophical papers, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*: “Universalist Grandeur, Romantic Depth, Pragmatist Cunning” (2004a), “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” (2004b), and “Trapped Between Kant and Dewey” (2004c). I suggest that these three essays demonstrate a real tension in Rorty’s thought, such that his view of liberal morality must undergo substantial shifts if it is to avoid incoherence. Fortunately, I briefly conclude, Rorty has a way out of these problems by making a few adjustments which, although rather significant, would fit quite nicely with the centermost themes of the pragmatisms of James and Dewey from whom Rorty has drawn his primary inspiration.

1. The Value of Rorty’s Philosophical Cultural Criticism

Before explicating Rorty’s moral philosophy and contrasting it to Dewey’s and James’s views, I would like to address a preliminary concern left hanging by my