Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Religion: An Internal and Habermasian Critique

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Rorty was one of the great dissolvers of dualisms, but strangely this iconoclasm ended when it came to liberal democracy. Here he held fast to the most stubborn of dualisms in political thought, a simple dichotomy of the public and the private, and used it, unsuccessfully, to resolve questions concerning the place of religion in modern democratic politics. Yet the philosophical basis of Rorty’s pragmatism both undercuts two common ways of spelling out the relationship between religion and the polity in liberalism and makes his use of the public/private dichotomy impossible. By means of an internal critique, I argue for a Habermasian corrective.

Rorty was one of the great dissolvers of dualisms and dichotomies. He also fought against the lack of historical consciousness that often supports a sense that there are no alternatives to them. Yet strangely this iconoclasm seemed to end when it came to liberal democracy in modern Western societies. Here he held fast to the most stubborn of dualisms in the realm of political thought, the distinction between the public and the private, and used it, unsuccessfully, to resolve the thorny question of the proper scope and limits of the public role of religion in modern democratic politics. I first lay out the implications Rorty takes his pragmatism to have for the political theory of liberal democracy as well as the way it undercuts two common ways of spelling out the relationship between religion and the polity in liberalism. Following this, I detail Rorty’s own alternative to these usual views on religion and the liberal polity, which is a variant of a common ‘secularization’ account that has increasingly come into question in the human and social sciences. Finally, I elaborate a criticism of Rorty’s ‘post-modernist bourgeois liberalism’ that draws on Deweyan and Habermasian critical social theory.

1. Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism

Though Rorty later became disenchanted with the use of the term “postmodernist,” that label has tended to stick. After all, it is part of both the name he originally gave to his own political-philosophical position and the title
of the first paper in which he articulated it (ORT 197–203). According to him, his view is bourgeois because it agrees with the claim that the institutions and practices of “the rich North Atlantic democracies” are only possible under certain historical and economic conditions. It is postmodernist because it rejects any grand historical narrative that (a) purports to be more than a narrative about what a particular community or group of communities has done in the past or might do in the future and (b) claims to “describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat,” or, one should add, Providence. It is liberal because it endorses the institutions and practices of the rich North Atlantic democracies along with the principles and values that “summarize” but do not “justify” or ground them (ORT 198–9).

According to the postmodernist bourgeois liberal, the moral force of these values and principles is exhausted by (1) the overlap existing between the beliefs, desires and feelings of members of those communities; and (2) the distinctiveness of these principles, values, and loyalties with respect to other human communities (ORT 200). Morality is consistently explicated by Rorty in terms of the Sellarsian idea of “we-intentions” (ibid.). To say that an act is immoral is accordingly to say that is not the kind of thing that we do, on some specification of who we are or of which “we” is being invoked, where the specification can be (and usually is) left tacit or determined by context.

Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism takes it that most (or enough) people in the rich North Atlantic democracies do share the ideas, values and ideals that Rawls finds in their public political cultures. For reassurance members of these societies can make invidious comparisons between themselves and other societies (or their own pasts) and note all the ways in which they are better: better, that is, in light of their own current beliefs, values, and ideals (CP xxxvii; TP 22). This is all the justification they are ever going to get. The reason is that according to Rorty’s pragmatist deconstruction of the classical epistemological tradition there is only one kind of justification: coherence of beliefs and persuasion of one’s interlocutors in light of a shared understanding of desiderata. There are, however, many different purposes and many different vocabularies. Which purposes to pursue and which vocabularies to adopt are questions on which there may, but again may not be, agreement. Without agreement on desiderata there is no question of justification, just talking past one another. Once a purpose is shared, or a common vocabulary adopted, then typically shared desiderata for what counts as evidence, what occurrences or reasons would speak decisively in favor of or against what hypotheses or proposals, etc., lie near at hand.

This stance rules out two common liberal strategies for dealing with religion and other forms of deep diversity in fundamental metaphysical and ethical beliefs, or what Rawls has called “comprehensive doctrines.” The following descriptions are offered as ideal-types. They may be combined and modified in various ways in particular liberal theories. The first strategy can be called epistemic liberalism. Here a divide between public and private is drawn in an epistemological way. Only reasons falling on the public side of the line can