
Rorty's Ethical and Political Philosophy. A Reassessment
edited by Sarin Marchetti

Introduction
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Richard Rorty baffled generations of readers, within and without philosophy, and still do. We can hardly find, in the contemporary landscape of the humanities, a thinker who managed to polarize such opposite reactions: whether worshipped or despised, Rorty surely knew how to make people talk about himself, and most importantly of the topics he held most dear. If the consequences of his multiple and stratified provocations have been sometimes calculated, what strikes the reader is the variety of reactions to his work to date: Rorty simply was an intellectual who had plenty to say, which is rather curious for someone whose most pressing concern was that of making us stop (over-)talking about a great very number of issues. Rorty was a systematic thinker indeed, and yet one quite skilled in disguising this feature of his thought by understanding and practicing philosophy in a way that encouraged others to draw connections and perform syntheses between apparently disparate discourses and issues themselves. If one can hardly question that it was indeed individual and collective edification which Rorty was promoting – rather than systematization animated by constructive concerns –, yet such transformative activity of self-questioning and clarification was ever performed through strokes of that peculiar literary genre he humbly contributed to in such orderly if ironic ways¹. The hedgehog that he was, Rorty acted like a fox by carrying out one single task through an impressive number of incursions into very diverse areas and debates: «I am an hedgehog who, despite showering my reader with allusions and dropping lots of names, has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other»².

¹ For an instructive overview of Rorty's conception of, and contribution to, philosophy, see C. Koopman, *Challenging Philosophy: Rorty's Positive Conception of Philosophy as Cultural Criticism*, in A. Gröschner, C. Koopman and M. Sandbothe (eds.), *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy to Cultural Politics*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 75-106.

² R. Rorty, *Philosophy as a Transitional Genre*, in S. Benhabib and N. Fraser (eds.), *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, Boston, MIT Press, 2004, p. 4. The reference is, obviously, to Isaiah Berlin's by-now classical 1953 essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (in Id., *Russian Thinkers*,

The result had been a sophisticated challenge to an entire, entrenched set of assumptions still governing some intellectual endeavors – philosophy included and especially –, according to which the point of a reflective stance on our ordinary practices would be their substantiation and hence promotion from without. By painstakingly reviewing minute, technical debates with no apparent import outside of academic classrooms as well as overall shifts in our cultural history and heritage, Rorty was able to hit on topics of relevance for our self-image as individuals and inquirers alike, where what was at issue was our very contribution to the (specialistic and ordinary) practices we live by and the reasons for its denial. Among these topics are some of the most entrenched ethical and political quests of our time, such as those of our citizenship and identities-constitution in secular and post-ideological societies. To appreciate, and fully savor, his incursions into matters of morals and politics, we should perhaps equally distrust the temptations to reduce them to his idiosyncratic social views or sever them from his earlier and most renowned work in epistemology. As against the former reduction of his philosophy to his biography, we should take notice how, according to Rorty, our investigations move from our histories as well as from what has sedimented in our cultures in the form of reflective tools which can in turn shape and interrogate who we are – philosophy indeed feeds on life, and yet it finds its peculiar way of being influenced by it and respond to it³. As against the latter isolation, although it would be highly improper to consider his earlier epistemological work as the premise of his later moral-political one – as that would suggest the very un-Rortian idea of a theoretical grounding of the practical –, still the anti-foundationalist stance with which he fought the attempt to secure knowledge from contingency we find in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* almost equally applies to his works insisting on the contingency of selfhood and communities, such as *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*⁴.

London, Penguin, 2008, pp. 24-92) in which Berlin sorts a number of thinkers into those who pursue one single big idea and those who chase after a multitude instead.

³ This of course holds for the kind of philosophy Rorty is interested in recovering and promoting, *and not* for the one(s) he is resisting. Two such rehearsals of this clash belonging to different phases of his arc of thought are R. Rorty, *Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture*, in Id., *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 60-71; and Id., *Pragmatism and Romanticism*, in Id., *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 105-119. For an overall, mature synthesis of fifty years of pondering over this divide, see R. Rorty, *Philosophy as Poetry*, Charlottesville & London, University of Virginia Press, 2016.

⁴ See R. Rorty, *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, in «Revue Internationale de Philosophie», 57 (1999), no. 207, pp. 7-20. The intertwining between epistemic and ethical considerations is clearly stated in Rorty's triptych *Truth without Correspondence*

The present *Symposium* aims at challenging some received views about the meaning and legacy of Rorty's ethical and political philosophy, as well as at furthering new interpretations and reworkings of his writings on such topics. In particular, by showing how Rorty's philosophy is corrosive and yet fertile, skeptical and yet effective, the essays that follow question the opportunity of revamping the perhaps exhausted label of a post-philosopher – which was quite a popular option in the 1980s, also thanks to a number of statements by Rorty himself expressing his dissatisfaction with a significant portion of the philosophical community and sympathy for the then-blooming «post-modernist» program in the humanities at large – also showing the measure in which Rorty's writings, far from being those of a philosopher's philosopher – whom, again and curiously enough, apparently tried hard to insulate himself from the best part of such community – can be relevant and effective for the leading of lives inspired and challenged by post-foundational concerns.

The two contributions by Voparil and Chin critically reviews some of the key features and passages of, respectively, Rorty's ethical and political thought. Voparil engages in a forceful articulation of the many themes at the heart of Rorty's moral vision, showing the breadth of ethical concerns animating his intellectual biography and pointing to some recurring themes appreciable throughout. In so doing, Voparil spots a *leitmotif* equally informing Rorty's earliest work on metaphilosophy and his later writings on cultural politics, which has to do with a conception of ethical thinking as the responsibility, and care for the relationships we are ever able to establish and re-wave with our fellow human beings. Chin, on the other hand, reconstructs the progression of Rorty's political ideas through some selected dialogues with figures across the Analytic-Continental divide, representing important sources of inspiration and challenge for his thought and exemplifying his own distinctive strategy of selective reading of past and present thinkers alike. These dialogues, Chin claims, revolved around issues of philosophical methodology which affected the way both the liberals and the genealogists understood political critique and engagement.

Donatelli and Marchetti, on the other hand, focus on two different yet related claims by Rorty about the opportunity and consequences of telling apart the public from the private sphere. Donatelli discusses the opportunity and feasibility of Rorty's suggestion to supplementing the democratic tradition of Mill and Dewey by taking into consideration and

to Reality, A World without Substances and Essences, and Ethics without Principles (in Id., *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London, Penguin, 1999, pp. 24-90), as well as in the lectures going under the collective name of *Anti-Authoritarianism in Epistemology and Ethics* given in 1996 at the Universidad de Girona.

seize the new forms of suffering featuring our contemporary societies. By showing how Rorty, but not the «democratic romantics» he mentions among his sources, relegated the project of self-cultivation to the private sphere at pains of imposing models of the good life onto others, Donatelli claims that Rorty is indeed revising in significant ways the liberal tradition he claimed to be furthering. Finally, Marchetti interrogates the limits of Rorty's contingentist re-descriptive project by assessing its potential dangerousness. If, as Rorty himself realized, the activity of ethical re-description pursued by the ironist might indeed get in the way of our delicate practices of self-constitution by not taking them seriously and at face value, we should perhaps understand such ironic stance as an admonition to keep such identities from staling rather than as a scorn for their formation.

Richard Rorty is an author and figure which can hardly be confined to any particular school of thought – let alone a single interpretation – as his concerns were simply too refined and eclectic. If, Hilary Putnam sensibly said, «any philosophy that can be put in a nutshell belongs in one», Rorty's was surely ill-suited for the description. The essays that follow pay homage to this great mind of our times by going back to some of Rorty's most provocative and thoughtful ideas.

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