

RICHARD RORTY

**PHILOSOPHY
AS CULTURAL
POLITICS**

**PHILOSOPHICAL
PAPERS**

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PHILOSOPHY AS CULTURAL POLITICS

This volume presents a selection of the philosophical papers which Richard Rorty has written over the past decade, and complements three previous volumes of his papers: *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, and *Truth and Progress*. Topics discussed include the changing role of philosophy in Western culture over the course of recent centuries, the role of the imagination in intellectual and moral progress, the notion of “moral identity,” the Wittgensteinian claim that the problems of philosophy are linguistic in nature, the irrelevance of cognitive science to philosophy, and the mistaken idea that philosophers should find the “place” of such things as consciousness and moral value in a world of physical particles. The papers form a rich and distinctive collection which will appeal to anyone with a serious interest in philosophy and its relation to culture.

PHILOSOPHY AS CULTURAL POLITICS

Philosophical Papers, Volume 4

RICHARD RORTY



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To Ruby Rorty, Flynn Rorty, and other grandchildren still to come

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Preface

Most of the papers collected in this volume were written between 1996 and 2006. Like my previous writings, they are attempts to weave together Hegel's thesis that philosophy is its time held in thought with a non-representationalist account of language. That account, implicit in the later work of Wittgenstein, has been more carefully worked out in the writings of Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, and Robert Brandom. I argue that Hegelian historicism and a Wittgensteinian "social practice" approach to language complement and reinforce one another.

Dewey agreed with Hegel that philosophers were never going to be able to see things under the aspect of eternity; they should instead try to contribute to humanity's ongoing conversation about what to do with itself. The progress of this conversation has engendered new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation. To suggest further novelties is to intervene in cultural politics. Dewey hoped that philosophy professors would see such intervention as their principal assignment.

In Dewey's work, historicism appears as a corollary of the pragmatist maxim that what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy. "Philosophy," Dewey wrote, "is not in any sense whatever a form of knowledge." It is, instead, "a social hope reduced to a working program of action, a prophecy of the future."¹ From Dewey's point of view, the history of philosophy is best seen as a series of efforts to modify people's sense of who they are, what matters to them, what is most important.

Interventions in cultural politics have sometimes taken the form of proposals for new roles that men and women might play: the ascetic, the prophet, the dispassionate seeker after truth, the good citizen, the aesthete,

¹ John Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), vol. XI, 43.

the revolutionary. Sometimes they have been sketches of an ideal community – the perfected Greek polis, the Christian Church, the republic of letters, the cooperative commonwealth. Sometimes they have been suggestions about how to reconcile seemingly incompatible outlooks – to resolve the conflict between Greek rationalism and Christian faith, or between natural science and the common moral consciousness. These are just a few of the ways in which philosophers, poets, and other intellectuals have made a difference to the way human beings live.

In many of these papers, I urge that we look at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the light of our hopes for cultural change. Philosophers should choose sides in those debates with an eye to the possibility of changing the course of the conversation. They should ask themselves whether taking one side rather than another will make any difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future. If it will not, it may not be worth doing. If it will, they should spell out what that difference amounts to.

The professionalization of philosophy, its transformation into an academic discipline, was a necessary evil. But it has encouraged attempts to make philosophy into an autonomous quasi-science. These attempts should be resisted. The more philosophy interacts with other human activities – not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics as well – the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and thus the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves.

Readers of my previous books will find little new in this volume. It contains no novel ideas or arguments. But I hope that these further efforts to tie James' and Dewey's ideas up with Hegel's and Wittgenstein's may lead a few readers to think of pragmatism in a more favorable light. In an exuberant moment, James compared pragmatism's potential for producing radical cultural change to that of the Protestant Reformation.² I would like to persuade my readers that the analogy is not as absurd as it might seem.

² Letter to Henry James, Jr. of May 4, 1907, in *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. XI, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2003).

Acknowledgments

“Cultural politics and the question of the existence of God” was published in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy Frankenberry (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

“Pragmatism as romantic polytheism” was published in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Duke University Press, 1998).

“Justice as a larger loyalty” was written for the Seventh East–West Philosophy Conference and was first published in *Justice and Democracy: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ron Bontekoe and Marietta Stepaniants (University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

“Honest mistakes” was written for a conference on “The Cold War” organized in 2003 by Louis Menand for the English Institute. Under the title “Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss: Two Men of Honor,” the paper is forthcoming in the *Proceedings of the English Institute*.

“Grandeur, profundity, and finitude” is a revised version of the first of two Smythies Lectures given at Balliol College, Oxford, in 2004. An earlier version was read at a UNESCO conference in Benin and published as “Universalist Grandeur, Romantic Depth, Pragmatist Cunning” in *Diogenes*, no. 202.

“Philosophy as a transitional genre” is a shortened and revised version of an essay published under the same title in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (MIT Press, 2004).

“Pragmatism and romanticism” was the third of three Page-Barbour Lectures given at the University of Virginia in 2005. It has not been published previously.

“Analytic and conversational philosophy” is a revised version of a paper published, under the same title, in *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Carlos Prado (Humanties Press, 2003).

“A pragmatist view of contemporary analytic philosophy” was published, under the same title, in *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought*, ed. William Egginton and Mike Sandbothe (State University of New York Press, 2004).

“Naturalism and quietism” has not been published previously.

“Wittgenstein and the linguistic turn” was written in response to an invitation from the Kirchberg Wittgenstein Symposium. It has not been published previously.

“Holism and historicism” is a revised and shortened version of the second of two Smythies Lectures at Oxford; an earlier version was published in *Kant im Streit der Fakultäten*, ed. Volker Gerhardt (De Gruyter, 2005).

“Kant vs. Dewey: the current situation of moral philosophy” was published under the title “Trapped between Kant and Dewey: The Current Situation of Moral Philosophy,” in *New Essays on the History of Autonomy: A Collection Honoring J. B. Schneewind*, ed. Natalie Brender and Larry Krasnoff (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

I am very grateful to the institutions mentioned above for their invitations to give lectures or to contribute to symposia. These invitations led me to write on various topics I should otherwise not have discussed. I also appreciate the willingness of the publishers I have listed to let me include previously published papers in this volume.

I also want to thank Gideon Lewis-Kraus, my former research assistant at Stanford, for indispensable assistance in preparing this volume for publication. He gave me excellent advice about which papers to include, which to omit, and which to revise. He also did most of the work of seeing it through the press.

*Religion and Morality from a Pragmatist
Point of View*

Cultural politics and the question of the existence of God

CULTURAL POLITICS

The term “cultural politics” covers, among other things, arguments about what words to use. When we say that Frenchmen should stop referring to Germans as “Boches,” or that white people should stop referring to black people as “niggers,” we are practicing cultural politics. For our socio-political goals – increasing the degree of tolerance that certain groups of people have for one another – will be promoted by abandoning these linguistic practices.

Cultural politics is not confined to debates about hate speech. It includes projects for getting rid of whole topics of discourse. It is often said, for example, that we should stop using the concepts of “race” and “caste,” stop dividing the human community up by genealogical descent. The idea is to lessen the chances that the question “who are his or her ancestors?” will be asked. Many people urge that words like “noble blood,” “mixed blood,” “outcaste,” “intermarriage,” “untouchable,” and the like should be dropped from the language. For, they argue, this would be a better world if the suitability of people as spouses or employees or public officials were judged entirely on the basis of their behavior, rather than partially by reference to their ancestry.

This line of thinking is sometimes countered by saying “but there really *are* inherited differences – ancestry *does* matter.” The rejoinder is: there certainly are inheritable physical characteristics, but these do not, in themselves, correlate with any characteristics that could provide a good reason for breaking up a planned marriage, or voting for or against a candidate. We may need the notion of genetic transmission for medical purposes, but not for any other purposes. So instead of talking about different races, let us just talk about different genes.

In the case of “race,” as in that of “noble blood,” the question “is there such a thing?” and the question “should we talk about such a thing?” seem

pretty well interchangeable. That is why we tend to classify discussion of whether to stop talking about different races as “political” rather than “scientific” or “philosophical.” But there are other cases in which it seems odd to identify questions about what exists with questions about what it is desirable to discuss.

The question of whether to talk about neutrons, for example, seems a strictly scientific question. That is why people who regret that physicists ever investigated radioactivity, or speculated about the possibility of splitting the atom, are accused of confusing science with politics. It seems natural to separate the political question of whether it was a good thing for humanity that scientists began to think about the possibility of atomic fission from scientific questions about the existence and properties of elementary particles.

I have sketched this contrast between the case of races and that of neutrons because it raises the question I want to discuss: how do we tell when, if ever, an issue about what exists should be discussed without reference to our sociopolitical goals? How should we split up culture into areas to which cultural politics is relevant and areas which should be kept free of it? When is it appropriate to say “we had *better* talk about them, because they *exist*” and when is that remark not to the point?

These questions are important for debates about what roles religion should play in contemporary society. Many people think that we should just stop talking about God. They think this for much the same reasons that they believe talk of race and caste to be a bad thing. Lucretius’ *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* has been quoted for two millennia in order to remind us that religious conviction can easily be used to excuse cruelty. Marx’s claim that religion is the opiate of the people sums up the suspicion, widespread since the Enlightenment, that ecclesiastical institutions are among the principal obstacles to the formation of a global cooperative commonwealth. Many people agree with Marx that we should try to create a world in which human beings devote all their energies to increasing human happiness in this world, rather than taking time off to think about the possibility of life after death.

To say that talk about God should be dropped because it impedes the search for human happiness is to take a pragmatic attitude toward religion that many religious believers find offensive and that some theologians think beside the point. The point, they would insist, is that God *exists*, or perhaps that human beings really *do* have immortal souls. Granted that the existence of God or of an immortal soul is controversial, that controversy should be explicitly about what exists, not about whether religious belief

conduces to human happiness. First things first: ontology precedes cultural politics.

WILLIAM JAMES' VIEW OF RELIGION

I want to argue that cultural politics should replace ontology, and also that whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics. Before turning to the defense of these theses, however, I want to underline the importance of such issues for philosophers who, like myself, are sympathetic to William James' pragmatism. James agreed with John Stuart Mill that the right thing to do, and a fortiori the right belief to acquire, is always the one that will do most for human happiness. So he advocated a utilitarian ethics of belief. James often comes close to saying that *all* questions, including questions about what exists, boil down to questions about what will help create a better world.

James' willingness to say this sort of thing has made him subject to accusations of intellectual perversity. For his view seems to suggest that, when notions like "race-mixing" and "atomic fission" are brought into the conversation, it is apposite to exclaim: "Let's not talk about that sort of thing! It's too dangerous! Let's not go there!" James seems to countenance doing what Peirce forbade: blocking the road of inquiry, refusing to find out what the world is really like because doing so might have harmful effects on human beings.

To give a concrete example, many people have argued that psychologists should not try to find out whether inheritable physical features are correlated with intelligence, simply because of the social harm that a positive answer to this question might produce. James' view of truth seems to suggest that these people are making a good point. People who are suspicious of pragmatism, on the other hand, argue that preventing scientists from doing experiments to find out whether intelligence is genetically transmissible, or to find out whether a neutron bomb is feasible, is to sin against truth. On their view, we should separate practical questions about whether eugenics or racial discrimination should be practiced, from the straightforwardly empirical question about whether Europeans are, on average, stupider than Asiatics – just as we divide the question of whether we *can* build a neutron bomb from the question of whether we *should*.

James was criticized not only for blocking the road of inquiry, and thus for being too restrictive, but also for being too permissive. That criticism was most frequently directed at "The Will to Believe," an essay which he

said should have been titled "The Right to Believe." There he argued that one had a right to believe in the existence of God if that belief contributed to one's happiness, for no reason other than that very contribution.

I think that the best way for those of us who find James' pragmatism sympathetic to restate his position is to say that questions about what is too permissive and what is too restrictive are themselves questions of cultural politics. For example, the question of whether religious believers should be asked for evidence of the truth of their belief, and condemned as uneducated or irrational if they are unable to produce sufficient evidence, is a question about what sort of role we want religion to play in our society. It is on all fours with the question raised by the Inquisition: should scientists be allowed cavalierly to disregard scripture when they formulate hypotheses about the motions of heavenly bodies?

The question of whether we should, for the sake of preserving ancient traditions, allow parents to perpetuate a caste system by dictating choices of marriage partners to their children, is the same sort of question. Such questions arise whenever new social practices are beginning to compete with old ones – when, for example, the New Science of seventeenth-century Europe began to compete with the Christian churches for control of the universities, or when a traditional African culture is exposed to European ways.

The question of whether scientists should have been allowed to find out whether the atom could be split, or should be allowed to investigate the correlation of intelligence with skin color, is not a question that can be answered simply by saying "do not block the road of inquiry!" or "seek the truth, though the heavens fall!" Neither is the question of whether France and Germany are right to criminalize Holocaust-denial. There is much to be said on both sides. The argument for letting scientists investigate whatever they please is that the more ability to predict we can get, the better off we shall be in the long run. The argument for blocking them off from certain topics is that the short-run dangers are so great as to outweigh the chances of long-term benefit. There are no grand philosophical principles that can help us solve such problems of risk-management.

To say that James is basically right in his approach to truth and reality is to say that arguments about relative dangers and benefits are the only ones that matter. That is why the statement "we should be talking about it because it's real" is as useless as "we should believe it because it's true." Attributions of reality or truth are, on the view I share with James, compliments we pay to entities or beliefs that have won their spurs, paid their way, proved themselves useful, and therefore been incorporated into

accepted social practices. When these practices are being contested, it is of no use to say that reality or truth is on the side of one of the contestants. For such claims will always be mere table-thumping, not serious contributions to cultural politics.

Another way to put James' point is to say that truth and reality exist for the sake of social practices, rather than vice versa. Like the Sabbath, they are made for man. This is a dark saying, but I think that it can be defended by appealing to the work of a contemporary neo-Hegelian, Robert Brandom, whose writings provide the best weapons for defending my version of James' pragmatism. Brandom is not a utilitarian, and his work follows out the line of thought that leads from Kant to Hegel, rather than the one that leads from Mill to James. But his construal of assertions as the assumption of responsibilities to other members of society, rather than to "the world" or "the truth," brings him into alignment with James.

BRANDON ON THE PRIORITY OF THE SOCIAL

The germ of Brandom's later work can be found in an early article he published on Heidegger. There he treats Heidegger as putting forward a doctrine he calls "the ontological priority of the social." The doctrine of the priority of the social is perhaps not happily thought of as an "ontological" one, but Brandom is using it as a way of explicating the consequences of Heidegger's quasi-pragmatist attempt to make the *Zuhanden* prior to the *Vorhanden*. The priority in question consists in the fact that "all matters of authority or privilege, in particular *epistemic* authority, are matters of social practice, and not objective matters of fact."¹

Brandom enlarges on this claim by remarking that society divides culture up into three areas. In the first of these the individual's authority is supreme (as when she makes sincere first-person reports of feelings or thoughts). In the second, the non-human world is supreme (as when the litmus paper, or the DNA-analysis apparatus, is allowed to determine whether the accused will be freed or punished, or whether a given scientific theory will be accepted or rejected). But there is a third area in which society does not delegate, but retains the right to decide for itself. This last is the arena of cultural politics. Brandom analogizes this situation to the constitutional arrangements of the USA, according to which, as he says, "the judiciary is given the authority and responsibility to interpret the proper region of authority and responsibility of each branch [that is to say,

¹ Robert Brandom, "Heidegger's Categories in *Being and Time*," *The Monist* 66 (1983), 389–90.

of the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary branches of government], itself included.”²

The question at issue between James and his opponents boiled down to this: is there an authority beyond that of society which society should acknowledge – an authority such as God, or Truth, or Reality? Brandom’s account of assertions as assumptions of social responsibilities leaves no room for such an authority, and so he sides with James. Both philosophers can appeal to Occam’s Razor. The authority traditionally attributed to the non-human can be explained sociologically, and such a sociological account has no need to invoke the rather mysterious beings that theological or philosophical treatments of authority require. (Such entities include “the divine will,” “the intrinsic nature of reality, as it is in itself, apart from human needs and interests,” and “the immediately given character of experience.”)

Suppose that one accepts the thesis of the ontological primacy of the social. Then one will think that the question of the existence of God is a question of the advantages and disadvantages of using God-talk over against alternative ways of talking. As with “race,” so with “God.” Instead of taking about races we can, for many purposes, talk about genes. Instead of talking about God the Creator we can (as physicists do) talk about the Big Bang. For other purposes, such as providing foundations for morality, we can talk (as Habermas does) about consensus under ideal communicative conditions rather than about the divine will. When discussing the future of humanity, we can talk (as Marx did) about a secularist social utopia instead of about the Last Judgment. And so on.

Suppose, however, one does not accept the priority of the social, precisely *because* one is a religious believer, and holds that God has authority over human society, as well as over everything else. From Brandom’s point of view, this is like holding that human society is subject to the authority of “reality” or of “experience” or of “truth.” All attempts to name an authority which is superior to that of society are disguised moves in the game of cultural politics. That is what they *must* be, because it is the only game in town. (But in saying that it is the only such game, Brandom is not claiming to have made an empirical discovery, much less to have revealed a “conceptual necessity.” He is, I would claim, articulating a cultural–political stance by pointing to the social advantages of his account of authority.)

Brandom’s view can be made more plausible by considering what people actually have in mind when they say that God has authority over human society. They do not say this unless they think they know what God wants

² Ibid., 389.