

An Interview with Richard Rorty

This interview was prepared by:
Mario Wenning, Alex Livingston, and David Rondel.

Richard Rorty stands as one of the most important philosophical figures of recent decades. He is most known for his groundbreaking philosophical work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). In this book, and in subsequent books and essays, Rorty challenges the traditional conceptions of knowledge, truth, and justification by drawing on an impressively vast range of influences both from the Anglo-American and continental traditions. Rorty's has become one of the major voices in contemporary philosophy; he has engaged with many of the day's leading thinkers in countless journal articles and, more recently, the very impressive anthology *Rorty and his Critics* (edited by Robert Brandom, 2001).

On October 3rd and 4th, 2003, Concordia University hosted a special conference to honor the unique contribution to philosophy made by Professor Kai Nielsen. The invited lectures spanned an impressive range of topics from Marxism to the philosophy of religion, from globalization to metaphilosophy; an impressive range that paralleled the broad areas of philosophical interest that Professor Nielsen has contributed to throughout his career. Among the many distinguished speakers was Professor Richard Rorty of Stanford University. Nielsen has been a sympathetic and meticulous commentator of Rorty's, a fact evidenced by Rorty's own words: "Nielsen was one of the few Anglophone readers of my *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* not to treat it as nihilistic and frivolous. Instead he read that book as I would most like it to be read." Many of us were looking forward to a fruitful exchange between them during the conference. Unfortunately, Professor Rorty became ill just before the conference and was unable to attend. He was kind enough to conduct this interview, originally to be conducted in person, through e-mail.

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Dear Prof. Rorty,

Thank you for your willingness to do this interview. As I said before, it means a great deal to both myself and the student journal here at Concordia. I will paste the questions into the main body of this text so that you may answer the questions simply by interspersing responses in this flowing text. That seems to me easier than including an attachment. I hope this is not too great a burden for you. Please feel free to take as much time as you need to respond to these questions; there is little urgency.

Thank you again.
Very Sincerely
David Rondel

Gnosis: There are times where you generally refer your thought as "Postmodern" in nature. At other times, there is the sense, that you reject that sort of characterization; suggesting even further that the term "post-modern" has, through overuse, perhaps, become some sort of buzzword. I was hoping you would be willing to explain, broadly of course, just what you take the "Postmodern" to be and whether or not you think your books and essays are rightfully placed in that tradition?

Richard Rorty: I think "postmodern" has indeed become a buzzword, and that it would be better if we stopped using it. On the other hand, my views are, indeed, examples of what people have in mind when they use this buzzword. It's like being called a "relativist". Neither "relativism" nor "postmodernism" have any clear meaning, but the use of these vague pejoratives does serve to point in the direction of the account of truth and knowledge that philosophers like myself offer.

Gnosis: A very prominent theme in your work has revolved around the incommensurability of the public and private. Accordingly, you have offered original readings of many philosophers, often casting their primary importance into one of the two realms. For example, you have said of Mill, and Rawls that their thought is fundamentally public in significance, whereas Nietzsche and Heidegger say, should be viewed firstly as private, ironic philosophers. In what way would you like your own thought to be approached? Do you see yourself as more importantly a public liberal or a private ironist?

Rorty: I don't think there is something called "Rorty's thought". I haven't had any original ideas. I just pick up ideas from other people and arrange them in pleasing patterns. I am more a public relations man than a thinker. Sometimes the patterns I design are relevant to political matters. Sometimes they are not, and are relevant only to what individuals do with their solitude. I'm certainly a "public liberal", but I don't think anybody would want to call himself a "private ironist". Irony isn't a spiritual path you might pursue. It's just a matter of sitting loose to one's present self and hoping that one's next self will be a bit more interesting.

Gnosis: In your interpretation of works of art you have focused on writers such as Orwell and Nabokov and emphasize the important vision they have to offer. When alluding to the "function" of novels like 1984 or Lolita you value their capability to call attention to the contingency of entrenched forms of discourse. Is it for idiosyncratic reasons that you chose works of literary art or, differently put, what is your relationship to music, fine arts and non-discursive (representational) means of artistic expression in general? Do or should they fulfill similar functions?

Rorty: As Dr. Johnson said when asked a similar question "Ignorance, madam, sheer ignorance". I don't have enough sensitivity to music or the visual arts to say anything useful about them. Certainly these two other areas of culture play the role in many people's lives that literature plays in mine.

Gnosis: One of your anthropological hopes, if one can characterize it like that, envisions a society in which the poet, or a form of world disclosing interpretative discourse in general, plays a central role as opposed to the predominance of meta-philosophical justificatory discourse we experience in contemporary philosophy. Some of your sympathies seem to derive from the romantic conviction that the aesthetic realm provides post-metaphysical means of overcoming modern forms of disenchantment and moral nihilism. How do you see the prospects for such a switch and how would you characterize your relation to romanticism?

Rorty: I think the romantics were the first to suggest that imagination, rather than argument, was the principal means by which humanity makes progress. Imagination is what gives us new

topics to talk about--topics like "democracy", "gravity" and "curved space-time". It enlarges the bounds of conversation and inquiry. It is a mistake to speak of "the aesthetic realm" as if that were a corral to which the imagination is confined. The imagination permeates all areas of culture, and keeps them moving. I don't believe there are such things as "modern forms of disenchantment and moral nihilism"--these seem to me bugbears invented by traditionalists. But if they existed, then it would be up to the imagination to overcome them.

Gnosis: In light of the unilateralist developments in US foreign policy you have joined Habermas and Derrida in calling for a unified and stronger European engagement on the world stage. How would such an engagement look concretely for example with regard to the current discussion about potential international engagement in Iraq?

Rorty: Europe could rally around the principle that even the US--the guardian of freedom, the nation that has done much to keep civilization going--does not get to wage war without UN consent. Granted that the UN is broken-backed, the answer is to strengthen it rather than to turn its responsibilities over to the American government (which, at the moment, means turning them over to a little gang of enthusiasts in the Pentagon). The rest of the world will, quite properly, refuse to rescue the US from the quagmire into which Bush has plunged it. It's anybody's guess whether the US will stay in and try to carry through on its promises to build a democratic nation in Iraq, or back out and leave the country in chaos. We don't really have enough money to afford to do the former, but it would be a disaster if we did the latter.

Gnosis: Since the occasion of this interview is a conference in honor of Kai Nielsen, it seems fitting to ask you at least one question about just what is at stake between you and Nielsen. In your critique of Kai Nielsen's After the Demise the Tradition you say something to the effect that both you and Nielsen hope for the same sort of society but disagree about the extent to which 'theory' can be helpful in bringing about this society. Do you see it as Nielsen's (or Habermas') burden to show that theory can be generally helpful in bringing about this ideal society, or should it

be up to those like yourself who are dubious about the role of theory in social/political discourse to show that theory really is not helpful in this way? Whose burden is this? And Why?

Rorty: Theory can do no harm. I only question whether it can do as much good as Nielsen and Habermas think. They sometimes speak as if we should not criticize practices and institutions unless we wield a theory that shows what is wrong with them. I think that the most effective criticism of traditions and institutions is to say "We don't have to do it that way. Here is an alternative. Let's try doing it this way." Theories are useful only to the extent that they move people to see the present set-up as one alternative among many, and thus are inspired to dream up new options.

Gnosis: With the deaths of Quine and Davidson, your retirement, and the general age of demographic of neo-pragmatists such as Putnam and Habermas, it appears as though one generation of thinkers is handing the pragmatist torch on to a younger generation. Among this generation of younger pragmatists such as Brandom and McDowell we have seen a return to a more Sellarsian philosophy of mind orientation of pragmatism and a move away from other traditional strains of pragmatism, namely the moral and political. What significance do you attribute to these present trends in pragmatism and what do you forecast as the next major developments in pragmatist thought?

Rorty: Brandom seems to me the most original and imaginative philosopher of our day. The influence of his work may be such as to cause us to drop "pragmatism" as our buzzword and start using "Hegelianism". For Brandom thinks of himself as, so to speak, an Hegelian first and a pragmatist second. If his work becomes as influential as I think it may, Deweyan pragmatism may come to be seen as a primitive version of neo-Hegelianism, and Brandom's social-practice account of rationality as a more sophisticated one--one that takes the "linguistic turn" into account.

Gnosis: You recently retired from your position at Stanford University. May we ask how you feel after almost half a century of teaching across the country and what you intend to do next?

Rorty: My lectures have been sounding like scratched records

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lately--no new ideas. So I'm glad to now be doing only occasional teaching. I'll be spending most of my time writing up the old ideas in slightly different ways--hoping to come up with gimmicks that will be more persuasive than those I have used in the past.

Gnosis: With decades as a professional academic under your belt, do you have any words of advice for young philosophers looking to start academic careers?

Rorty: Yes. Do whatever you have to do to get tenure. Take seriously what influential people in the profession are currently taking seriously. Read the books they are discussing, and take up the problems they think important. But as soon as you get tenure, go off on a retreat. Search your soul. Ask yourself whether you are writing about topics you really care about, and whether you may not want to start reading different sorts of books, and branching out in new directions.