

*On Rorty's Historicist Philosophy**

1. As much as I agree with Rorty's criticism of the position of Pinker, Wilson, *et al.*—to the effect that no results of empirical science can provide what religious and philosophical theories of human nature were traditionally looked to to provide, i.e., normative guidance in the form of "a vision of the good life or of the good society" (19)—I can't even begin to agree with the position he would presumably put in its place. One reason for this is that what appears from this essay to be his inventory of the relevant possible means for obtaining reliable knowledge is incomplete in mentioning only: (1) "empirical scientific inquiry"; (2) "uninformed common sense"; and (3) "a priori philosophizing" (21). So far as I'm concerned, at any rate, there's at least a fourth additional alternative that could be called "transcendental metaphysics (as including, in its broad sense, "existentialist analysis")." Nothing that Rorty says in criticizing the other alternatives seems to me in the least telling against this further alternative, especially as compared with his own "historicist" position. Another reason why I can't agree with him is that, if what can be learned from empirical science cannot be reasonably substituted for traditional philosophy and religion, the same is true of his own proposed substitution of "what we can only learn from history—the record of past intellectual and social experiments," or, as he also puts it, "historical narrative and utopian speculation" (20, 23). "History" in the sense of an empirical-historical record or narrative of the past is as little able as empirical science to provide normative guidance. And whether or not such "utopian speculation," or "dreaming," as Rorty also calls it, can really provide guidance rather than simply leading us up the garden path depends on whether or not it's, in its own way, valid. But, of course, to establish that it is, even as to provide any norm for learning anything normative from history, is hardly to be distinguished from developing something very like a theory of human nature, or, at the least, a philosophical anthropology.

2. Rorty speaks of the "historicist turn" effected, presumably, by those he calls "historicist philosophers like Ortega" (23, 19). My guess is that he's probably right in interpreting "philosophers like Ortega" as he does: as in no way saying or meaning that humans are "blank slates," but as only doubting or denying that any source—whether religion, philosophy, or science—can

give us anything appropriately called "a theory of human nature," which is to say, a "normative" theory that provides "guidance," that tells us "what to do with ourselves," or "what sort of people we ought to become" (18). But if one asks why "historicist philosophers" hold this, the only answer one gets from Rorty is, simply, "Because they do," because, for them, "there is nothing we essentially are" (19). They simply hold that, although "there are many lessons to be learned from history, there is "no superlesson to be learned from science, or religion, or philosophy" (19). Thus Rorty's own argument against what he calls "[t]he unfortunate idea that philosophy could detect the difference between nature and convention—between what is essential to being a human being and what is merely a product of historical circumstance" is not at all systematic but is entirely historical. He doesn't say that the idea is "false," however clearly he may imply this, but only that it is "unfortunate"; and whether this characterization is by way of giving a reason for its subsequent post-Enlightenment fall into "deserved disrepute," or only another way of describing its fate remains unclear. In any case, that a certain notion has, "in the last two centuries," fallen into "disrepute" in no way establishes that it "deserved" to do so, and yet Rorty gives not the least non-question-begging, or non-self-serving, reason for thinking that it did. So, too, the fact, assuming it is such, that "[t]he idea, shared by Plato and Rousseau, that there is such a thing as *the* good life for man has gradually been replaced by the conviction that there are *many* equally valuable human lives" provides not the least reason for thinking that the conviction replacing the idea is valid (19). In sum: if Rorty ever gives any *systematic* reasons for the things he obviously holds and wants to advance, I've missed them; and his mere descriptions of what may have, in fact, happened in history are as irrelevant to the important systematic question of justification as anything could possibly be.

3. Rorty evidently sets great store by what he calls "the conversations among humanists about alternative self-images and alternative ideals" (23; cf. 22, where he speaks of "the roles previously played by philosophers and other humanists—roles such as critic of culture, moral guide, guardian of rationality, and prophet of the new utopia"). But, so far as I can see, he says nothing to meet the objection, which he himself mentions, that, whereas "scientists have knowledge," "humanists only have opinions" (22). In other

words, his "conversations" are, at most, exchanges of opinions (or—to use one of his own favorite terms—"convictions"), or, if you will, occasions for mutual witnessing, as distinct from anything at all like proper "discourses," or rational arguments. He has good reason, then, for preferring his term "convictions" to "theories" (cf. 21), and the most he can talk about is the "change," or "modification," of our convictions, as distinct from anything like their argumentative validation.

4. Notwithstanding that Rorty's whole way of arguing is merely *descriptive*, he continually makes or implies *normative* judgments that he in no way justifies, since they logically cannot be justified on merely descriptive, historical grounds. Thus, for example, he says that traditional theories of human nature were "very useful" because "they suggested perils to avoid and ideals to serve," and so "marketed helpful moral and political advice," even if "in fancy, disposable, packaging" (18 f.). But, clearly, whether or not such advice was really "useful" or "helpful" depends on whether or not the assertions underlying it, or implied by it, are or are not valid assertions. Or, again, he says that our convictions about what really matters "need not—and should not—take the form of a theory of human nature, or a theory of anything else" (21). But what, one wants to ask, justifies this "should not"? The answer is not made easier by Rorty's odd way of talking about our convictions "taking the form of a theory" and by his caricature of critical validation's being a matter of deducing our convictions from a theory. In point of fact, it's a matter of verifying the assertions that supply the content of our convictions by the procedures appropriate to verifying assertions of that logical kind. And holding that such assertions as are thus verified comprise a proper theory is something rather different from saying anything about the corresponding convictions somehow taking the form of a theory. But be this as it may, if Rorty's point is that our convictions about what really matters not only need not but also should not be critically validated, he says nothing whatever in support of his point. And the same is true of his implication that "cultural evolution," being on a par with "biological evolution," is "equally capable of creating something radically new and better" (23). "Better," clearly, is a normative concept. But where does Rorty ever clearly state and argue for the validity of the norm that he necessarily implies in so applying it? For all he shows to the contrary, the most he can claim, consistently with his own

historicist premises, is that, by his "convictions," or those of some other individual or community, the something that cultural evolution is capable of creating is not only radically new but "better" (cf. 19, where he speaks of "our present conviction that the best sociopolitical setup is one in which individuals are free to live whichever of these [sc. many equally valuable human] lives they choose").

*All page references are to Richard Rorty, "Philosophy-envy," *Dædalus*, 133, 4 (Fall 2004): 18-24.

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