

Richard Rorty

by Simon Blackburn

He is arguably the most influential philosopher of our time: a radical American who is against war in Iraq - and against truth, reason and science. Yet his radicalism turns out to be oddly disarming

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Postmodernists - the very word is like a knell. According to popular fears, they scoff at everything we hold dear, replacing truth, reason, objectivity, knowledge, and scientific method with fashion, rhetoric, power, subjectivity and relativism - thereby summoning our history and politics, literature and art, indeed western civilisation itself, to its doom. According to these fears, almost all the humanities have answered the diabolical call. And currently leading the danse macabre, in the steps of Nietzsche and Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida, capers the cloven-hooved and triple-horned figure of Richard Rorty.

Rorty, born in 1931 in New York City, is an analytical philosopher, who graduated from the Chicago of Rudolf Carnap in 1949, and has taught at Princeton, as well as the University of Virginia and Stanford. But he left the cautious world of analytical philosophy to go over to the enemy, thereby perfectly fitting the bill as lord of the dance to the subversives. He is also an example of a phenomenon common in France and Germany, but which exported to America better than to England, namely the public intellectual. In his case, it is a family tradition. Rorty, an only child, is the grandson of Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the founders of America's social gospel movement, and both his parents were writers and active Trotskyites. "My parents were part of the anti-Stalinist left which centred on John Dewey," Rorty has said. Despite his own hostility to Marxism, he continues to place himself "wholeheartedly on the left."

His pathbreaking 1979 book "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" brought him to a general audience. A huge outpouring of books and papers, including "Consequences of Pragmatism"; "Contingency, Irony and Solidarity"; "Essays on Heidegger and Others"; "Truth and Progress" and "Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th Century America", has kept him there. He is probably more cited, and especially in departments of literature and cultural studies, than any other Anglo-American philosopher. In these circles, he is a modern master, saluted in Germany, a figure in Paris.

He also spans ages and cultures, and is exhaustingly well-read, even by those literary standards that delight more in a parade of great figures rather than in close attention to one at a time. Rorty cheerfully reels off lists like "Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, and the later Heidegger," in this case saluted equally as friends of those he likes to call "we pragmatists." And since he denies any distinction between philosophy and literature, theory and practice, reason and persuasion, invention and discovery, he manages to move effortlessly in many different fields at once.

You do not have to be very conservative to find him startling. Even Bernard Williams, himself notably keen on Nietzsche, found it necessary to insist that he stands a long way from Rorty, who is a target of his recent book "Truth and Truthfulness". And Rorty certainly says some deeply shocking things. Non-philosophers who dip into his writings may come away intoxicated by the scale, but also astonished by the message. How could anyone, for instance, seriously hold, as Rorty has, that "truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with," or that "no area of culture, and no period of history, gets Reality more right than any other"? Is it really possible to hold that only "old-fashioned metaphysical prigs" talk unblushingly of truth any more?

These sneers sound like those of that familiar figure, the Left Bank nihilist or relativist, who has seen through the pretensions of our intellectual norms. But with Rorty things are slightly different, for he has also seen through this seeing-through. He rejects the labels of relativism or nihilism as one more part of an old dialectical dance which has now gone out of fashion. It is important to understand why he thinks this, and where it ought to leave the rest of us.

To understand Rorty, one could start with Carnap, or as long ago as Plato, or as recently as the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, who died in 1989. But a convenient point is the end of the 18th century, with Kant's riposte to Hume. Hume convinced himself that almost nothing about the world is explained by reason. Instead, there are mechanisms of "natural belief" that - given human nature like ours, giving rise to minds like ours - will cause us to think about the world in the ways we do. But not only does reason not generate our thinking, there is also no standpoint from which reason can reassure us that in thinking as we do, we get things right.

This would not do for Kant. He wanted a guarantee that in thinking as we do, we indeed get things right. But Kant starts by agreeing with Hume that we cannot know the "noumenal" world of things in themselves. This was the boast of rationalists, like Leibniz, whom Kant opposes as much as Hume does. But Kant thinks he can show that the world as we experience it, the "phenomenal" world, must conform to our ways of thinking. So he concludes that the things we think about and perceive "are in all their configurations and alterations nothing but mere appearances, that is, representations in us, of the reality of which we are immediately conscious." The link between thought and the real world is certified only because the world about which we think is "constituted" by our thinking and experience of it.

So Kant gives us a hideous alternative to Hume's scepticism (with a hideous title: "transcendental idealism"). Moreover, when the Enlightenment's optimistic belief in a fairly universal human nature came under suspicion, things looked even worse. There was not one valid way of connecting the phenomenal and noumenal worlds but rather a procession of differently minded people, each equally entrapped in their different worldviews. Again, it would be fine if there was something called reason, enthroned above the fray and able to judge the competitors. But this is what Hume denied, and few since have been able to put their hand on their heart and challenge his denial. (Hegel thought reason directed the whole show, but nobody believes that any more.)

Instead, we have become uncomfortably aware of a large distance between the truths at which we aim, whether in science or history or law or economics, or any field of interpretive endeavour, and the forces that shape our minds. There seem to be forces at work of which we have little knowledge that generate the categories - socio-economic, cultural, gender-related - in which we work. They mould the practices of our "interpretive community," determining which approaches count as respectable at any given time.

Hence there is no such thing as the given, or the unvarnished truth. There are only what the Harvard philosopher Nelson Goodman called "versions," and the versions current at any place or time are the results of these hidden forces. The truth is not even to be discerned at the end of a tunnel: it is varnish all the way down. Reason is primarily a patriotic badge pinned onto our own ways of carrying on, and one we deny to others who disagree with us (a thought, incidentally, not peculiar to postmodernists).

Can we escape such melancholy meditations? Can we get off the unhappy seesaw of either staying with Hume and losing confidence that we represent the world correctly, or going with Kant and holding that we represent only a world which is in some sense constituted by us? This question sets the scene for Rorty's contribution. For suppose that Hume and Kant commit the same mistake. Suppose there is a way of undercutting the whole problem, of pointing the gun at some concept that each side unwittingly shares.

And there is, indeed, a way. Each side is bothered about our capacity to describe truly, or represent the world. So each shares an ideal of representation. But suppose that this very idea is itself a delusion - suppose the mind is not even in the business of mirroring the world? The idea that the mind is the arena of appearances, so that it is up to the philosopher to undertake the task of telling which appearances rightly represent the world - suppose that is all a mistake? This is Rorty's proposal. We must scrap the idea that thought, and the language in which it is couched, is there to enable us to represent the world. Instead, Rorty takes from Darwin the idea that language is an adaptation and words are tools. Like his other heroes William James and John Dewey, the American pragmatists of the early 20th century, he thinks the essence of language is what we do with it. Thought is about knowing how, not knowing that; or, as Rorty likes to put it, for coping not copying. So he writes: "There is no way in which tools can take one out of touch with reality. No matter whether the tool is a hammer or a gun or a statement, tool-using is part of the interaction of the organism with its environment. To see the employment of words as the use of tools to deal with the environment, rather than as an attempt to represent the intrinsic nature of that environment, is to repudiate the question of whether human minds are in touch with reality... No organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality than any other organism."

This is a typically bravura statement of pragmatism (the last sentence alone is enough to annoy many of us, since some people seem to be much less in touch with reality than others). But the attractive idea is that linguistic tools have their purpose, and so can be retired when that purpose is done, while other projects and other tools rise to supersede them. Rorty calls this a change of vocabularies, echoing Thomas Kuhn's famous description of scientific change in terms of paradigm shifts, and echoing as well Carnap's view that questions about the overall adequacy of any particular conceptual scheme represent choices not discoveries.

Rorty believes he can now walk away from the traditional problems with his head held high. He does not have to accept the labels of relativism or scepticism that the old dialectic forced upon us. Those labels apply if we think that representation is "just us" (relativism), or alternatively that our thoughts tell us nothing of the real nature of what they represent (scepticism). Rorty's idea is that he is free of representation altogether, so he refuses the labels.

However, once again the solution looks worse than the problem: language is not there to represent how things stand - what an absurd idea. It is as if Rorty has inferred from there being no innocent eye that there is no eye at all. We protest that surely a wiring diagram represents how things stand inside our electric bell, that our fuel gauge represents the amount of petrol left in the tank, and that our physics or history tells how things stand physically or historically. Rorty only shakes his head and sighs. He thinks the protest shows a naïve attachment to the old vocabulary which he wants us to abandon. And the way to get people

to change vocabularies is not by argument but by persuasion. He has many techniques of persuasion, but two stand out.

The first is to persuade us that the Kantian ambition must be flawed if it requires standing outside our own skins, on a point free from all theory or preconceptions. Hume was right to see that this was an absurd ambition. The second diagnosis is much more interesting. It associates the idea of representation with the idea of a world that demands to be talked of one way or another. Rorty often presents his opponents as supposing that there is "one privileged discourse" or a preferred vocabulary, the vocabulary of the Book of Nature. His enemy is the idea that "the final vocabulary of physics will somehow be Nature's own," or that there is a vocabulary that is "already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it."

Rorty rejects this triumphalism, and he compares his rejection to the realisation that it is not God who provides moral laws. The human race attained one stage of maturity when it realised there was no alien, external giver of laws, as God was supposed to be. Similarly, it attains a further stage of maturity when it realises that the world is silent about how it is to be described. Rorty's most profound idea is that there is no such "alien authority." His hostility to the notion of "representation" is that for him it goes along with the idea of an objective reality - which has replaced God in peoples' minds - as constituting this authority.

These two arguments give Rorty his chance to upset the concept of truth. The question "Is it true?" is, he claims, no more verifiable than "Is he saved?" In the secular west we have lost interest in the last question. We have got bored with the theological vocabulary. It is time we got bored with the first, the vocabulary of accurate representation or truth. We must learn to think that any reaction to the causal flux is as reasonable as any other, although some may stand us in better stead. Words are tools, and beliefs are habits of action: pick up any you like, and the Darwinian jungle, not reason, will determine which comes out on top. And just as evolution has no direction, neither does thought or science or any other field of human cognition.

This is puzzling stuff, but a useful example of its application comes from literary criticism, which Rorty considers a paradigm intellectual endeavour. According to Rorty, there is never one right reading of a text. There are only the different meanings that different readers find bubbling up as they read it. In older times, a grandee of literary criticism, a Trilling or a Leavis, could assert a hard-won right to determine how a text was to be read. They could proclaim truth and real authority for their reading. But now there is only a plurality of voices vying to establish their own view as the view that is to be preferred by fellow interpreters. The notion of discovery is then not one of uncovering something that was there already, but something more like invention, such as discovering a new way to play King Lear. It is what Rorty calls inventing a new vocabulary. In the apres-truth literary world, the aim of voicing opinion is not to arrive at the truth, but to bring the others to your opinion, thereby gaining their solidarity with you. There is no difference between inventing something new and discovering what was there anyway.

This sounds a bit like abolishing the distinction between wishful thinking and accuracy, and that's fine by Rorty. Writing of feminist accounts of the difference between men and women, he says: "The question of whether these differences were there (huddled together deep down within the entity...), or are only there in the entity after the feminist has finished reshaping the entity into a social construct nearer her heart's desire, seems to me of no interest."

You can make it up as you go along: discourse is a social activity, with a largely social purpose. If a Trilling or a Leavis looks down his nose and proclaims reason and truth for his own interpretations, it is just one more power move in the democratic

conversation. It is what conservatives say when they see Lear played a new way; it is not an exercise of authority, but an exercise of conservatism. If we agree with the conservatives, well and good, but if we do not agree, well and good too. Or, at least, well and good unless our innovations fail to gain an audience, and it turns out that we do not cope very well as a result.

The best way to understand Rorty is simply to see him as generalising this view of literary criticism across the board. In science or history, law or psychology, politics or ethics the same model applies. There is the community of interpreters, and the aim of getting them to be of one mind. There is invention and innovation. But just as a text allows for multiple readings, so does the world. Truth, and reason as the anointed method of sifting it, disappear. No wonder serious scientists and historians, priding themselves on their accuracy, are outraged. But before we turn to their complaint, there is one more element to notice.

This is the political dimension. Although he was brought up in a far-left family (the family home in northwest New Jersey was even used as a safe haven for Trotskyites fleeing Stalinist assassins), Rorty has journeyed from there to a fairly relaxed liberalism. He thinks there are no recipes or principles for the just society, but a variety of ways of tinkering, pragmatically, with what we have got. Plato is famously taken to have associated knowledge and truth with a kind of elitism. Those who had got in touch with reality were thereby entitled to authority, to which those who had not ought to submit. In religious times, those who are in touch with the word of God deserve authority over those who are not. In scientific times, those who are in touch with the workings of nature deserve authority over the rest of us. Rorty cuts off these oligarchic tendencies at the root. Since there is no such thing as being in superior touch with reality, nobody can make the claim to authority on those grounds. Even the Left-Bank sneer is a claim to authority, the superiority of having seen through something which holds the vulgar captive. But there is to be no sneering in the apres-truth salons.

Rorty supposes that these venues, where the conversation of mankind goes forward, can only flourish under conditions of freedom. So, in practice, his preferred politics gives us a fairly standard liberal democracy. The state guarantees the freedoms within which different conceptions of how we ought to live can be voiced and debated. But Rorty is, of course, firmly against any attempt to find a foundation for his liberalism. He opposes the tradition which descends from Locke or Kant to recent writers such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, which seeks to prove that a democratic and liberal state is the only rational mode of social organisation. For such writers, someone who chose to live in an illiberal or undemocratic state would be trampling on his own reason. It is irrational to sell yourself into the mental servitude that a theocratic state demands. But for Rorty, this Enlightenment attitude with its talk of irrationality is useless. The right pragmatist observation is that theocratic states seem not to work very well, by comparison with liberal democracies - it is theocracies who lose refugees to us, and not vice versa. We can cope, and theocracies cannot. So, oddly, given his reputation as a fearsome radical, Rorty turns out not to be much use to anyone who fears that the US is on the way to becoming a world tyrant. Economic and military domination is, after all, extremely useful for those doing the dominating. It is even more useful if you can shelve the literature of classical liberalism, and discount the humanity of the dominated.

Rorty encapsulates a great deal of contemporary self-consciousness. He is a landmark. If you follow out the themes I have mentioned you may end up nearer to Rorty than you expected. So can we avoid joining the postmodern dance?

A century ago, GE Moore responded to scepticism by holding up his hand and claiming that any argument which claimed he did not know that he had a hand must be much less secure than his certainty that he did. Wittgenstein similarly thought that philosophy needed a constant diet of reminders of everyday life. Indeed, this attention to the everyday is probably the single most significant difference between "analytic" and "continental" philosophy. You may come to rather different views about truth and objectivity if your favourite example of an inquiry is "what time is it?" or "how do we get to Marble Arch?" as opposed to "is humanism a myth?" or "was Nietzsche a fascist?" Analytical philosophers start by thinking about the first pair,

and only get to the second pair, if at all, at the end of the day. So we might want to start by reinstating the everyday idea that with language and symbolism we represent how things stand.

Consider maps. Does a landscape tell us how it is to be mapped? In one sense, clearly not. Your purposes may dictate that you map on any of many scales, depicting topography, population, rainfall, geology, or many other things. Here you can choose whatever turns out useful. You can stress what you like and be as vague or precise as you like. Sometimes a brief sketch will do, and sometimes only an admiralty chart. Pragmatism and Darwin and multiple perspectives are all in order. There is no competition between a geological map and a rainfall map.

But in another sense the landscape indeed dictates something. It dictates how it is to be mapped, given a set of conventions determining the meanings of the signs and shapes on the map, and the meanings of their presence or absence. That is why, once a set of conventions has been put in place, a map can be correct or incorrect, or in other words, how it can represent the landscape as it is, or represent the landscape as it is not. It can show cliffs where there are none, and fail to show cliffs where they lurk. These platitudes should be distinguished from the ludicrous idea that the only true map would map the landscape as such, somehow embodying a "final vocabulary" or "nature's own vocabulary" dictating how it is to be mapped, as if human selections and purposes had nothing to do with it.

Maps may be made in many different ways, but they do not place all authority about what they mean in the reader. A maverick may decide to interpret the Ordnance Survey map of Cambridge as the blueprint of the Great Pyramid. He might have fun doing so, clambering in and out of burial chambers clutching a picture of the Great Ouse. But he is ignoring something that the rest of us have learned: the cartographic conventions, and the stability of the expectations and interests of mapmakers and mapreaders. Apart from anything else, these explain the production of the map in the first place. And those of us who have learned the conventions and know how to use them have acquired a technique or skill - mapreading - that others may lack. Our hillwalking project goes better as a result.

That much cannot be denied by the pragmatist, but now Rorty will declaim the mantra of coping not copying, trying to drive a wedge between pragmatic success, which he admits and likes, from representation, which he does not. All we have pointed out, he may say, is the success of the walker.

But at this point the unconverted ought to complain, loudly, that the opposition between coping and copying totters and falls. The map enables us to cope, indeed, but we also know why. It enables us to cope precisely because it represents the landscape correctly. It enables us to anticipate what we shall find. Similarly, if Rorty is to catch a plane, he will look up the time of departure in a timetable. That enables him to cope better. But it does so just because the times written in the timetable represent the intended times of departure. It is not a miracle that the timetable helps Rorty cope. It would indeed be a miracle if there were no stable way of reading the figures on the page. But there is, and timetables beat tea leaves and crystal balls as a result. Science too offers us its own explanation of why it works, and there is none better. It works because it identifies the powers of things and the physical forces that make stuff happen. That enables us to harness those forces and adjust them, and make different stuff happen. That is how we cope.

If this disarms one part of Rorty's thought, we can similarly undermine the idea that in talking of truth and representation we are vainly attempting to stand outside our own skins, measuring a correspondence between what we say and how the world is. A map can bear hallmarks of curiosity, accuracy, care and labour in the making. These are not hidden or mythical virtues, but

ones on display. Great makers of maps and charts are revered because they displayed those virtues more than other people. Certainly, no map gives us the whole truth. But many maps give us some truths, and some more than others.

This brings up a problem in Rorty's own alternative to talk of truth. What exactly goes on in the apres-truth salons where the conversation of mankind murmurs on? The problem is that it seems integral to the self-conception of mapmakers and timetable producers, as well as scientists, historians, and perhaps even literary critics, that there is a kind of success that goes beyond common agreement, or finding something that works. We do not make a map by sitting and talking it through until we are all agreed, but by measuring and checking. There is such a thing as getting it right, and agreement with others is a very imperfect signal of having got things right, being neither necessary nor sufficient. So, if they are denied this concept of a target or goal to their activities, what do the apres-truth mapmakers, historians and scientists actually do? Do they any longer make measurements, burrow in archives, or build laboratories? The dilemma is that if they don't, then they have stopped being surveyors, historians and scientists altogether; like a child who draws what he calls maps but without checking what he does against any features of the landscape. But if the cartographers measure, the historians consult archives, and the scientists do experiments, then they need some concept of discovery to make what they are doing intelligible. They are uncovering how things stand, uncovering the truth.

Faced with such criticism, Rorty becomes evasive. He grudgingly admits what he calls a "cautionary" use of the idea of truth, as when we announce what we believe, but admit that we may be wrong. But he glosses this in terms of being unable to convince future audiences of our interpretations. However, that won't do, unless the future audience is itself curious and competent. It is of no interest whether we can convince incurious or incompetent audiences to share our views. So Rorty also allows himself to talk in terms of intellectual virtues of curiosity, open-mindedness, diligence, modesty, and so on, and he even allows the idea of some audiences being better informed than others. But how can these virtues survive if they are stripped of all connection with the idea of an earned authority or of getting something right? It is not the slavish remnant of a religious worldview to admit that the person who has gone and looked is more of an authority than one who has not. It is not just convention which dictates that years of surveying, or years in the archive or laboratory give you a better title to be listened to on your subject than years spent ignoring the issue.

Piece by piece, then, it looks as if the traditional building blocks of western thought - representation, truth, objectivity, knowledge - can and must survive Rorty's battering. We may have to find another way to dismount from the Hume-Kant seesaw. Meanwhile, there are morals to be drawn.

One moral is that we should beware of the level of abstraction at which many postmodernists, including Rorty, tend to operate. We have to drag them back to the everyday. Rorty has described his position as a kind of resigned, ironic liberalism. But it requires a staggering lack of irony to mount the barricade and proclaim the destruction of Truth, Reason, and Objectivity when you used maps, timetables, and announcements to get to the barricade in the first place. It is like using e-mails, faxes and mobile phones to spread the message that western technology is merely a colonial conspiracy of no value.

A related moral is that we should beware of too much theory. Just like issues in mapmaking, issues in history and science, and perhaps even in literary criticism, come with their own avenues of approach, a better or worse position from which to come to a verdict. Highly abstract theory should not be allowed to undermine or distort that, any more than Hume's problem of induction was ever allowed to undermine or change the progress of empirical science. This moral was understood by Hume, and it is actually better understood by one of Rorty's allies, the literary critic Stanley Fish, than by Rorty himself. Rorty thinks that pragmatism makes a difference. We really do have to dance a different way, and there is going to be something liberating and democratic and hopeful about the apres-truth world. Fish, than whom the garde gets no more avant, has seen through this

as well: lo and behold, the apres-truth salon looks just like the old surveying school or library or laboratory. There are curious and competent investigators, and they measure and explore and experiment and listen to each other and not to the vulgar, just as they do at present. The jig is up, the pragmatist wheel turns full circle, and everything remains as it was before.

A final moral may be this. In Britain and the US theories of knowledge and truth have seldom been seen as politically relevant. But this is changing. The US has seen a conservative furore against postmodernism as something that has sapped the ideological resolve of the west, and my being asked to write this article in a non-specialist journal is part of this rise in awareness. But when the political temperature rises, each side needs a self-image that preserves confidence and authority. People want to shake off relativism, scepticism, and even philosophies like that of Rorty's which sound similar, even when they take themselves to have got beyond those labels.

A pointed illustration comes from one of Rorty's essays, on George Orwell's 1984. Here Rorty finds it hard to understand what Orwell was on about, since the whole nightmare in that book concerns the loss of truth and the loss of right reason and, for Rorty, these count as no loss at all. Because he could control everybody's thoughts, Big Brother was very good at social solidarity, so what was Winston afraid of? The fact that he finds this question difficult exposes Rorty more than Orwell. Most of us understand Winston's nightmare all too well, especially when we think of the Downing Street propaganda machine, or Donald Rumsfeld, John Ashcroft, and the state of the American press.

In the US, the religious tendency, which answers the quest for authority so conveniently, is much better entrenched than it is in Britain. But since religion cannot form part of public reasoning in the US - because of the separation of church and state - the need for authority amongst liberal intellectuals is sublimated by turning to Kant. For Kant, the Enlightenment really was the voice of reason, and liberal democracy is the uniquely rational social arrangement. The US is replete with ideological mandarins spelling out just what this means.

This suggests why Rorty, like pragmatism, is such a quintessentially American phenomenon. My theory is that the philosophical pendulum swings more violently there than here. When voices are loud, you have to shout. In a culture of born-again conviction, it becomes tempting to undermine the whole ambition to take exclusive possession of the truth. Continental philosophers have often tormented themselves with a choice between Marx and the Pope, and so Americans like Rorty, who are disenchanted by the convictions around them, are tempted to a universal rejection of the central notion that conviction depends on - the notion of truth itself.

This may be why to British ears it can all sound a bit bombastic and overdone. But it is worth remembering that in political and moral philosophy many of us sympathise with Rorty to a surprising degree. We are, after all, a pragmatic nation, and we buried the authority of God a long time ago and do not seem to miss it too much. But we feel little need to become extremists. Why would we want to choose between Marx and the Pope when we have the Church of England to relax in? So we remain shocked when Rorty denies that science and history represent how things stand. On the other hand, when it comes to ideology, politics, and ethics we are less bothered. We do not feel the need to fight ideology with ideology, unless we count a relaxed pragmatism as itself an ideology. We are comfortable so long as we are coping. We are happy when things work and, by and large, we are pretty sure why they work better in London or Edinburgh than in Islamabad or Delhi, and perhaps even than they do in Washington.

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