

A Talent for Bricolage

An Interview with Richard Rorty

Early Life

Int: Let's begin with your childhood. Were you a Trotskyite yourself, or was it just something your parents imposed on you?

Rorty: I was just brought up a Trotskyite, the way people are brought up Methodists or Jews or something like that. It was just the faith of the household.

Int: Was it the same with Dewey?

Rorty: Not really. I mean, Dewey didn't loom as large. My parents weren't particularly interested in philosophy, and I don't think they'd read much Dewey.

Int: And Sidney Hook?

Rorty: My father and Sidney Hook had left the Communist Party at the same time. And that served as a bond between them. He was a family friend whom I went to see when I decided to go into philosophy. I saw Sidney when I was seventeen or eighteen. He told me: "So, you want to be a philosopher. Publish early and often." You know, a few tips of that general sort and then I saw him over the years and he knew that I disagreed with him about the Vietnam War. That caused a certain edginess. But toward the end of his life, the edginess had disappeared, and we were on reasonably good terms.

Int: Were you isolated by your political beliefs?

Rorty: No, because there was a large enough community, the so-called *Partisan Review* crowd, that shared all the views of my parents. The only isolation was that their anti-communism was unpopular in the period, roughly '45 to '60—well, '45 to '56—before the invasion of Hungary. I was always viewed as slightly fanatic in my anti-communism in that period, which was thanks to my upbringing.

Int: Why did you leave so early for college ?

Rorty: I didn't like my High School, and it was a way of getting away from it. Chicago in those days would accept you before you'd finished High School.

Int: What did you dislike about your High School?

Rorty: It just wasn't a very good school, and I didn't have any friends, and I wasn't learning very much--the usual stumbles.

Int: What led you to major in philosophy?

Rorty: Lack of any better ideas. I might equally well have gone into English or History, but I had been more fascinated by my philosophy course than by anything else. It was like choosing a major without anything much in mind. Occasionally, I've regretted not being a historian, but by now, I think it doesn't really make much difference, because after you get tenure, you can do what you want anyways.

Int: How attracted to Aristotelianism were you as a college student?

Rorty: I didn't find Aristotle particularly attractive. It was just that Aristotle was sort of the sacred text that we had to read over and over again. Both in the college and in the philosophy department, the influence of Mckeeon was sufficiently great to keep Aristotle at the forefront of everybody's consciousness. It became something one had to become familiar with.

Int: Were you drawn to Aristotle's foundationalism?

Rorty: Yeah, a natural taste for philosophical foundations common to Plato and Aristotle—I certainly had it then.

Int: When did this taste begin to dissolve?

Rorty: Twenty or thereabouts; I was just leaving Chicago.

Int: Do you think it is still important to read philosophers like Aristotle and Plato?

Rorty: Important for somebody. I mean, it would be a great pity if people ever stopped reading them, but I don't think it's necessary that everybody read them.

Int: So you don't think that Plato should be required reading?

Rorty: No, I think it would probably be a good idea if everybody had to read Plato in their senior year of High School or their first year of college; they'd be better informed about where their ideas were coming from.

Int: Had you become a staunch pragmatist by the time you reached Yale?

Rorty: No, I think I was more confused than that. I don't think I had any very definite outlook.

Int: And when you were teaching at Wellesley?

Rorty: I was reading Peirce all the time, so I must have begun some sort of move toward pragmatism.

Int: And yet, you've said that Peirce is overrated.

Rorty: That was what I eventually concluded—I went on to James and Dewey—but Peirce was a fashionable figure because he was a logician, so he looked liked the most respectable pragmatist.

Int: Was logic particularly dominant at Wellesley?

Rorty: No, it's just that there was a big emphasis on logic in the philosophical profession as a whole because of Quine's influence.

Int: How did it feel to go from Wellesley (where you could teach Heidegger) to the heavily analytic world of Princeton?

Rorty: I taught Heidegger at Wellesley just out of curiosity. At Princeton, I was hired specifically to teach Greek philosophy, so I did that for a while, until I got tenure and until they got somebody else to teach Greek philosophy. I was teaching mostly analytic philosophy, because it was stuff I needed to learn. It was what everyone was talking about, and I didn't have time for Heidegger until I'd gone through quite a lot of analytic stuff.

Int: Why Greek philosophy?

Rorty: It wasn't a big, tremendous interest. I had learned Greek at Chicago simply because it was the fashionable thing to do. Princeton hired me because there weren't many Ph.D.'s

who both knew analytic philosophy and knew Greek. My dissertation was a third on Aristotle, a third on Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz and a third on Carnap and Goodman. I think the man who hired me was attracted by the combination of Aristotle with some reference to the original text with Carnap.

Int: Were you already somewhat disaffected with analytic philosophy?

Rorty: No. On the contrary, I assumed that it was the wave of the future and that my job was to find out all about it so that I could get in on it.

Int: When did your views begin to change?

Rorty: Maybe half-way through my twenty years at Princeton or something like that.

Int: What led to this shift?

Rorty: Nothing in particular, just I was getting bored with the stuff I was writing about. I wanted to teach something different. I don't remember anything more clearly.

Int: Did it have anything to do with your depression?

Rorty: I was clinically depressed, but that was much later. That was '68 or '69...Oh wait, that would be about right. Oh yeah, maybe you're right. I don't know; I never correlated the two.

Int: Could you comment on the APA nomination scandal?

Rorty: There was a revolt by the non-analytic philosophers against the so-called "analytic establishment," and I was thought to have used my powers as President presiding over the meeting unfairly on the side of the anti-analytic people.

Int: Did you actually do anything unfair?

Rorty: I don't think so. Again, it's a little hard to remember, but I remember an extremely turbulent meeting that I was trying desperately to maintain control over from the chair. I guess the crucial issue was would I throw out the vote and call for a new vote, or something like that...or, no, would I suspend the vote. It was one of those complicated parliamentary things

where it was in the President's discretion to say we have to go over the credentials of the voters again, or something like that. And I refused to give the ruling that would have favored the analysts. But it seemed the right thing to do at the time.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature

Int: Do you have any idea why *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was so widely read?

Rorty: I still don't understand it. One of the referees for Princeton Press answered the standard question on the form they send him, "Will this be of interest outside its own field?" by saying, "Absolutely not. It's strictly a book for philosophy professors." That seemed right to me, so I never did understand it. I think many more people read it outside the field than ever read it inside the field; maybe because it was sort of a follow-up to Kuhn. Many people outside of philosophy were impressed by Kuhn, and my book was sort of more along the Kuhnian line.

Int: Your more recent work is less concerned with the specifics of analytic theory. Does that indicate a change in your views or just a shift in your interests?

Rorty: A little of both, I suppose. Mainly a change of interest. I don't know; maybe there isn't any change in views. Maybe it's just an interest in seeing philosophy in a longer-term, historical perspective.

Int: You also seem to have shifted your interests from Quine to Davidson.

Rorty: No, I just think Davidson went way beyond Quine. I think Quine had certain ideas in germ which only came to fruition in Davidson.

Int: And Dewey seems to have superceded them all.

Rorty: I think it's because Quine and Sellars are philosophy professors and nothing more, whereas Dewey was a larger figure than just a philosophy professor, more suitable for hero worship.

Int: In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, you attacked Putnam's early philosophy. What do you think of his more recent work?

Rorty: I think our views are practically indistinguishable, but he doesn't. He thinks I'm a relativist and he isn't. And I think: if I'm a relativist, then he's one too.

Int: Why do you think Putnam sees you as a relativist?

Rorty: Beats me. I wrote an article about it, but that was as far as I got.

Int: Do you still believe that epistemology should be replaced by hermeneutics?

Rorty: No, I think it was an unfortunate phrase. I wish I'd never mentioned hermeneutics. The last chapter of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* isn't very good. I think I just should have said: we ought to be able to think of something more interesting to do than keep the epistemology industry going.

Int: Your next book, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, was largely composed of essays on other philosophers. What accounts for the particular selection?

Rorty: Just accident. I was asked to give a Dewey lecture; I was asked to give a lecture on this and that. It's just a collection of occasional pieces which were written in response to particular demands. There wasn't any particular coherence to it.

Int: And why did you devote so much space to comments on other philosophers?

Rorty: It's what I know how to do.

Consequences of Pragmatism

Int: In the introduction to *Consequences*, you contend that when the secret police break down the door, there will be nothing to tell them of the form "There is something within you which you are betraying." Why do you think that this comment aroused so much controversy?

Rorty: I don't know. Maybe it was just a particularly vivid formulation of anti-foundationalism or something like that. I suppose it had a certain shock value as a way of suggesting that universalistic Kantian ethics wouldn't work. Moral philosophy in the Anglophone world is still basically Kantian in inspiration, so if you make anti-Kantian remarks, it shocks.

Int: Do you think that your objectors have misinterpreted the secret police example?

Rorty: No, I don't think they're misinterpreting it.

Int: Is moral philosophy becoming less Kantian?

Rorty: Not much. I mean, there are people... I guess a few recent books: Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity*, Annette Baier's *Moral Prejudices*...yeah, occasionally. It's hard to keep moral philosophy as an academic subdiscipline going if you're a pragmatist. The name of the game in moral philosophy is finding principles and then finding counter-examples to the other guy's principles. Pragmatists aren't very big on principles. There isn't much to do in moral philosophy if you're a pragmatist.

Int: Is that why pragmatism has met with such vehement opposition?

Rorty: Not the main reason. It might have had something to do with it.

Int: I'm curious about your essay "The World Well Lost." You say there that we can't be sure whether or not there are multiple conceptual schemes. But later, in your response to Lyotard, you say explicitly that the very idea of conceptual schemes is an incoherent one. Does this indicate a change in your views?

Rorty: Well, that's just something I stole from Davidson. "The World Well Lost" was sort of a preview of something that Davidson was later to say in "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." I had picked it up from talking to Davidson and reading his manuscripts and so on.

Int: Do you disagree with any of Davidson's views?

Rorty: I can't think of anything we really disagree about that

doesn't seem to me a verbal issue, but Davidson may have a different view of the matter. Well, one thing is that he keeps saying truth is an absolutely central concept, and I can't see what makes it central or basic. I take Davidson to be saying that truth, belief, meaning, intention, rationality, cognitivity—all these notions are parts of a seamless web, and that seems to me a useful point to make, that you can't have any of these notions without all the others. It's just that he then wants to say, "And truth is in the middle." I can't see why you have to have a middle.

Int: Putnam has also criticized you for deemphasizing truth.

Rorty: Putnam keeps saying that you have to have what he calls "substantive truth." I take Davidson to be saying: there's not much pointing in saying truth is substantive. I don't think Davidson has any better idea than I do what Putnam means by that. Nonetheless, he somehow attaches a weight to the notion that I can't seem to attach to it.

Int: You argue in *Consequences* that Cavell gives undue credit to early analytic philosophers like Russell and Price. Do you think that these philosophers should still be taught?

Rorty: No. Well, people who are interested in them should teach them, but I don't think that anybody should feel that they're more important than James Mill or Christian Wolf or other eminent historical figures. Put it this way: I think you have to read Frege and Russell in order to understand the *Philosophical Investigations*. And you have to read Russell and Carnap in order to understand what's important about Quine and Davidson. These are people who are reacting to a quite determinate set of philosophical positions, and you don't get the point unless you know what they're reacting to. Part of the reason you read Leibniz and Hume is to figure out what Kant was going on about.

Int: Hubert Dreyfus has disagreed with the portrait of Heidegger that you paint in *Consequences of Pragmatism*.

Rorty: Bert and I have argued for years about the relevance of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to the early Heidegger. I have no

use for Husserl, and I've never found the importance in Merleau-Ponty that Charles Taylor and Bert Dreyfus do. I tend to read *Being and Time* as if phenomenology either didn't exist or wasn't important, whereas Bert thinks it does exist and is important. Bert finds the particular list of *existential* in *Being and Time* fascinating, and I don't. I don't know why, but they strike me as interesting but arbitrary and not particularly memorable.

Int: Was Heidegger offering the *existential* as a pragmatist might, or did he view them as the Ultimate Phenomenological Truth?

Rorty: I think at the time he was advancing them as the Ultimate Phenomenological Truth, but I think it's nice that he never refers to them again.

Contingency, Irony and Solidarity

Int: In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, you extoll the "strong poet." Do you think that a person should be considered deficient or bad, if he or she were not a strong poet?

Rorty: Yeah, I think that of the various potentialities that human beings might hope to fulfill, such a person fulfills only some and leaves others unfulfilled. I think it comes to saying: Ideally, people ought to be both imaginative and nice. Some people are nice without being imaginative. Some people are imaginative without being nice. One out of two isn't bad, but it would be nice to have both.

Int: Are there any private virtues other than imagination?

Rorty: No. That's just because I'm extending the term 'imaginative' to mean every project of self-creation, every sense of duty to oneself.

Int: How do think that the university can encourage imagination?

Rorty: I think that liberal education holds out examples of people who have done something startling and original and thus inspires people to think, "Gee, maybe I could do some-

thing startling and original too.” But it isn’t that one department rather than another is in charge of this activity. Philosophy departments hold out the examples of people like Hegel and Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, and art departments hold out the examples of people like Da Vinci and Cezanne.

Int: Do you have any suggestions about teaching style?

Rorty: Teaching is largely a matter of some kind of rapport established between the teacher and the student. This is purely accidental and unpredictable and unplannable. You can have an utterly dry teaching style and yet something in what you’re saying and the way you’re saying it will turn certain students on. I think the nice thing about our education system is that you get to see a lot of different teachers doing their thing about a lot of different figures. Sooner or later, something might grab you.

Int: Many philosophers have argued that, as a matter of empirical psychology, it is impossible to die for a belief that you hold pragmatically.

Rorty: I hope they’re wrong, but I can’t prove it.

Int: In *Contingency*, you maintain that your political views are not in any way implied by your philosophy of language. What about your theory of the self—could one accept Davidson’s philosophy of language and still believe in a core of the self?

Rorty: I think it might be hard. For all I know, it can be done, but I’ve never tried the experiment. I think that Davidson’s approach to intentionality, meaning, belief, truth and so on goes together with Dennett’s stuff about the intentional stance, and I think, once you see the intentional stance, the attribution of beliefs and desires to organisms or machines as a way of handling the organisms and machines and knowing what they’ll do next, it’s very difficult to think of the self in the way in which what Dennett calls “the picture of the Cartesian theater” requires you to think of the self. I think Dennett has a brilliant chapter in *Consciousness Explained* — Chapter 13 on “The Self as Center of Narrative Gravity” — and I think that view of the self is nicely integrated with the rest of Dennett’s

system and thus *a fortiori* with Davidson's system.

Int: And once we drop the notion of a core-self, must we abandon the ethic of purification as well?

Int: Yeah... No, I shouldn't say that. I guess that all that has to go is a metaphysical backup for an ethic of purification.

Int: Could one hold onto a core of the self in the same way?

Rorty: No. You couldn't have a notion of a core of the self, but you could have a notion of a purer self. You can say with Dennett that a decision about what kind of person to be is a decision about what kind of narrative to make yourself the center of gravity of. One of the narratives that you might have in mind would be the narrative of a process of purification.

Int: Were you ever attracted to an ethic of purification?

Rorty: Yeah, mainly when I was an adolescent. I was attracted by Augustine's *Confessions*, books like Bonaventure's *Itinerary of the Mind to God*, Spinoza's *Tractatus on the Emendation of the Intellect*, various variations on the theme of ascent up the divided line—stories of purification of that sort. I tried to attach them to a religious view, but it didn't seem to work, so I dropped the religious bit and just stuck to the philosophical point.

Int: Were your religious beliefs influenced by your grandfather Walter Rauschenbush?

Rorty: Only in that his socialism was continued by my parents. It was sort of like he was the socialist of the previous generation. Much later, I got around to reading his books and liked them, but I don't know that that was much of an influence.

Int: Why did you turn away from religion? Was it because of the emphasis on humility?

Rorty: Yeah, partially that and partially I just couldn't believe that God had actually been incarnated in one person.

Concluding Remarks

Int: How do you respond to the recent conservative attacks on the academy?

Rorty: I think that the academic left has made sort of an ass of itself and has given easy targets for the conservatives, but basically I think that the conservatives are just either jealous of the soft life that we professors have or else working for the Republicans and trying to undermine the universities the same way they undermined the trade unions. I mean that the universities and colleges are bastions of the left in America, and the closest thing we have to the left is roughly the left wing of the Democratic Party, and if you look at the statistics on what kind of professor votes for what, the humanities and the social science professors always vote overwhelmingly democratic, and obviously the youth that is exposed to courses in social sciences and humanities is going to be gently nudged in a leftward direction. The Republicans are quite aware of this fact, and they would like to stop it from happening. Any club that will beat the universities is going to look good to them. The more the English departments make fools of themselves by being politically correct, the easier a target the Republicans are going to have.

Int: Is that what you meant by "making asses of themselves"?

Rorty: I think that the English departments have made it possible to have a career teaching English without caring much about literature or knowing much about literature but just producing rather trite, formulaic, politicized readings of this or that text. This makes it an easy target. There's a kind of formulaic leftist rhetoric that's been developed in the wake of Foucault, which permits you to exercise a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion on anything from the phonebook to Proust. It's sort of an obviously easy way to write books, articles, and it produces work of very low intellectual quality. And so, this makes this kind of thing an easy target from the outside. It permits people like Roger Kimball and D'Souza to say these people aren't really scholars, which is true. I think that the use

made of Foucault and Derrida in American departments of literature had been, on the whole, unfortunate, but it's not their fault. Nobody's responsible for their followers.

Int: You have criticized Foucault and others for their radical politics.

Rorty: What I object to about them is that they never talk in terms of possible legislation, possible national economic policy, things that might actually be debated between political candidates and you might pass a law about or something like that. It seems to me to be a continuation of the '60s attitude that the system is so hopelessly corrupt that you don't really take part in the day-to-day politics. You rise above it and sneer at it. They don't even try to be solutions. They're radical critiques without radical proposals.

Int: Should philosophers offer specific political proposals?

Rorty: I don't think there's any general rule. I mean, some people are good at this; some people aren't. Everybody's supposed to try to be a good citizen, but not philosophy professors any more than nurses or plumbers.

Int: How do you account for your own fame?

Rorty: I'm not sure. I was genuinely puzzled why *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* sold as much as it did. Obviously, I gave people something it turned out they wanted, but I'm not quite sure what it was that they wanted. And I've been truly puzzled about all the translations. My stuff gets translated quite widely. When you find out that *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is being translated into Bulgarian—what do I know about Bulgaria? What do I know about why anybody there finds it interesting? It's a mystery to me.

Int: How would you have liked your books to be received? How, for example, might future philosophers continue your project?

Rorty: I don't see it as a unified project. I've written books over the years, expressing changes in views of this and that, and it's always nice if somebody finds them interesting, but it

doesn't seem to me to represent a trend or to elaborate a project.

Int: Do you think that pragmatism itself might become a trend?

Rorty: In some very large sense of pragmatism, yes. I think that culture might continue to get less and less metaphysical, and I think the influence of Kant on standard political and moral rhetoric might gradually decrease.

Int: And could professional philosophers become pragmatists?

Rorty: No. I think that analytic philosophy departments professionalize themselves precisely by cutting the links between philosophy and history and literature and trying to establish links with psychology, physics, stuff like that, harder disciplines. And I think that the analytic philosophers were correct in thinking that they would only have a really autonomous profession if they drifted away or cut themselves off from history and literature. I think that, just in so far as you professionalize, you have to disagree with Dewey that the problems of philosophy are historically produced, culturally produced, sort of epiphenomena of wider cultural changes. You have to think of philosophy as having a more autonomous problematic than Dewey thought it did. If all the philosophy professors became pragmatists, it's not clear what a philosophy department would look like. The impulse to say we've got a separate discipline which is neither history, nor literature would be much weaker.

Int: Are you saying that philosophy departments should disappear?

Rorty: I think that what's important is that people study the great dead philosophers, and they are sufficiently difficult that even if you folded us into literature departments, you'd still have to have a subdiscipline within literature departments consisting of a certain literary tradition that included Plato and Aristotle and St. Thomas and Leibniz and Kant and a lot of neat stuff like that, so you might as well just have a separate department.

Int: So the importance of philosophy departments is that they teach the great dead philosophers?

Rorty: Not their only importance, but if you ask why there's got to be a relatively autonomous discipline or subdiscipline, I think the ultimate answer is: because somebody's got to read these difficult books, and it takes a lot of time.

Int: Why do you think you have become so notorious?

Rorty: I don't know. Of course, my notoriety is nothing compared to Derrida's, who's really notorious, but Derrida himself is puzzled about why he gets everybody's hackles up, why there's this tremendous fuss about him and why he's seen as a terrible danger to civilization or the university. I'm puzzled too. I don't know why Derrida becomes demonized in this way, and I don't why I become demonized to this much lesser extent.

Int: How did you first become interested in Derrida?

Rorty: There happened to be a reading group at Princeton led by a colleague in English named Jonathan Arac, and he and his friends would sit around reading Derrida (who hadn't been translated). So I just joined the group and began reading.

Int: Derrida seems to play an increasingly important role in your work.

Rorty: Yeah, I guess. I guess what happened was that I began writing for this audience of literary theorists, that grew up in the '70s in literature departments, because they were the people who read the books that I wanted to talk about. That meant I drifted away from the things that my fellow philosophy professors were reading and began dropping different names. I think that I offered the same alternative Stanley Fish did, and I think that Fish and I are basically saying the same thing: you can have the benefits of so-called European post-modern thought without the nonsense. You can have the benefits in plainer language. You can have what's good about them without the jargon and the complexity.

Int: Why do you think that the European post-modernists use jargon?

Int: Because they're great and original minds. Great and original minds typically develop their own jargons.

Int: And yourself—how have you contributed to the ideas that had already been developed by Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger?

Rorty: Not at all. I don't think I have any original ideas. I think that all I do is pick up bits of Derrida and bits of Dewey and put them next to each other and bits of Davidson and bits of Wittgenstein and stuff like that. It's just a talent for bricolage, rather than any originality. If you don't have an original mind, you comment on people who do.

Int: Finally, do think you could tell us your plans for the future?

Rorty: I teach next year, then I'm on sabbatical in '96-'97. then I figure on teaching two years, then retiring if I can afford it. I figure I'll have enough savings to retire in 1999.

Int: Do you have any plans as to what you'll do philosophically in the years ahead.

Rorty: No.