

TO PHILOSOPHIZE OR NOT
TO PHILOSOPHIZE?
RORTY'S CHALLENGE TO FEMINISTS

¿Filosofar o no filosofar? El desafío de Rorty a las feministas

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ABSTRACT

This article takes up Rorty's advice to feminists to abandon philosophizing (and appeals to truth and reality) in favor of using language to create a new logical space for feminist politics. The argument focuses on the rhetorical role of appeals to truth and reality, the role of linguistic innovation in social change, and the feminist critique of Rorty's use of the "prophetic voice" in his discussion of feminist politics.

Keywords: Rorty, feminism, rhetoric, realism, prophecy.

RESUMEN

Este artículo retoma el llamado que hace Rorty a lo(a)s feministas para que abandonen la filosofía (y la apelación a la verdad y a la realidad) a favor de una utilización del lenguaje que cree un nuevo espacio lógico para la política feminista. El argumento se concentra en el papel retórico del llamado a la verdad y a la realidad, el papel de la innovación lingüística en el cambio social, y la crítica feminista del uso que hace Rorty de la "voz profética" en su discusión de las políticas feministas.

Palabras clave: Rorty, feminismo, retórica, realismo, profecía.

I began work on the volume *Feminist Interpretations of Richard Rorty* mostly out of a curious desire to defend him, since it seemed to me that all the feminists I know who had read Rorty were highly critical of him. Not that I agreed with him, but I did think that his positions had, to a large extent, been fundamentally misunderstood. And the more time I invested in reading his works on feminism, then on political theory, then on literature and philosophy, the more I came to see his points, really, even if I still had niggling doubts about where he ended up.

His discussion of feminism and feminist philosophy is connected rather seamlessly with his general position with respect to philosophy –that is, one cannot understand his claims about feminism without understanding his critique of philosophy and his allied

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position with respect to philosophy's "others": rhetoric, poetry, and politics. And while there are many issues that appear on the radar screen when I think about the ways that Rorty has animated feminist philosophical discussions, in this I will focus on the issue that has, perhaps, been the most controversial: the issue of the "prophetic voice". I begin with three stories about feminism, philosophy, and social activism that I gathered during the course of putting together the book.

I was eager to learn what had drawn him to feminist philosophy, especially considering the fact that he had already become the *bête noire* of analytic philosophy by the time he delivered his Tanner Lecture, "Feminism and Pragmatism" at the University of Michigan in 1980. When I asked his wife, Mary Varney Rorty, she told me that it seemed to be an organic development: he was a voracious reader, and he was a social activist who came from a long line of social activists and women we might now think of as proto-feminists:

Richard's mother was an ABD sociologist; his aunt Elizabeth Brandeis Raushenbush was an economics professor; his aunt Esther Raushenbush was president of Sarah Lawrence, his aunt Joan Raushenbush was a powerful political advisor and policy wonk in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations; [...] A great-aunt [...] wrote a two volume work on Wollstonecraft. (Rorty, M.V. 2008)

But his interest in feminism was not necessarily an interest in feminist theory; his preferred authors, to whom he paid great attention, and who figure prominently in his discussion of feminism, were Marilyn Frye, Adrienne Rich, and Catherine MacKinnon. Mary Rorty conjectures that he gravitated toward them because of their ability to use language in a way that Rorty admired:

Looking back now on the course his intellectual development was taking, it is easy to see why he picked who he did. He was not particularly interested in technicians, *per se*, although he spent lots of his professional career mud-wrestling with them. He was increasingly anti-theory. His daddy was a poet. He thought of language as best used to do something –as best used to bring about social change, to eliminate inequalities. He had known and admired Marilyn Frye for years, so she was an easy choice –and she writes like a dream. Frye and Rich were in the '70s (and still, for all I know) staples of intro women's studies courses because they grabbed you by the brain and imagination and rammed you into something you might not have thought about but sure were gonna think about now. [...] [T]hat kind of writing –writing that clears a path for ideas, preferably outrageous ones, to wham into your brain– was Rorty's meat. He aspired to it; he recognized it when he saw it; he absolutely respected it. He was glad of an occasion to acknowledge it. (Rorty, M.V. 2008)

The third anecdote pre-dates these. I had just proposed the volume to Penn State University Press when Rorty came to my institution, Hamilton College, to deliver our Truax lectures in 2003. When asked by students in my seminar on Mind and Body what they should be doing instead of philosophy (their attempts to engage him in discussion of issues he raised in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* fell flat), his answer to them was “art and politics”. When asked by one rather distraught student, who was beginning to fear that she had wasted four years of education by majoring in philosophy, what he thought the value of philosophy was, if there was any, he told the students that philosophers were just people who had read certain books, and those books are different from the books that people in literature departments had read. When I asked him, during that same visit, if there was anything he missed about being in a philosophy department, he told me that he would like to teach a seminar on the work of Robert Brandom, but that the graduate students in his Comparative Literature department would not have enough philosophical background to understand that work.

These stories illustrate that Rorty’s own relationship to the philosophical canon, and the discipline of philosophy, is as fraught and full of tensions as it is for most feminist philosophers. On one hand, we find great value in reading “the philosophical canon”, and in learning the particular kinds of thinking skills that philosophy teaches; but we also recognize that the canon is the canon in virtue of certain kinds of exclusions, in virtue of a particular, dominant story about what philosophy really is, and what distinguishes it from other disciplines. This story seems to exclude feminism and feminist theory, with its explicit connection to political ideals, from that canon. More broad-minded philosophers might be willing to entertain the possibility that feminist theory might have a place in the canons of political philosophy and ethics, but even in these cases, the feminist authors included usually constitute a very small sample. The lines drawn between philosophy and non-philosophy often reflect a commitment to a story of philosophy in which philosophers are concerned with rationality, truth, and universalism and the questions that arise from those commitments. But, Rorty insisted, those problems are dead, or pointless: the only place for philosophers now is as a set of people who think that reading a certain canon is valuable. Philosophers are not philosophers in virtue of pursuing a common set of problems, but rather in virtue of owning and reading a common set of books.

But then, where does this leave feminist philosophers? If what it is to be a philosopher is to own and read a certain collection of books –the philosophical canon– then as feminists seek to contest

that canon, they seem to place themselves outside of philosophy. To this, Rorty would say, “yes, and so much the better for feminism”.

Rorty, having given up the problems of epistemology and metaphysics, took up the issue of social change, and as a result saw himself as having left the arena of philosophy. But he did not think that this was something to be mourned, nor that it was something to be regretted. Rather, he claimed that philosophy can do nothing to bring about social change. He believed that only art and politics are capable of bringing about the kind of progressive social change that he cared most about, and his move to departments of humanities and comparative literature were a material expression of this intellectual position. And yet, in spite of this move, he still missed something about philosophy. The tension between valuing philosophy while at the same time seeing the discipline as the product of the exclusion of certain kinds of questions and concerns is, I would argue, a tension that feminist philosophers experience in their own struggles within and against the discipline, and the issue of the philosophical canon is often the site of these struggles. While some feminists deal with this tension by trying to redefine the discipline, some take the Rorty route, leaving the discipline behind or, in some cases, arguing that philosophy is itself, and will continue to be, a support system for an ideology of patriarchy.

In addition to his unusual relationship to the discipline of philosophy, what distinguishes Rorty from the other giants of late twentieth century Anglo-American (analytic) philosophy is his interest in, and serious engagement with, feminist theory. In many ways, Rorty would seem to be a natural ally for feminists. His critique of the metaphor of mind as mirror, presented in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and his insistence that such metaphors have theoretical consequences, carrying significant philosophical content, fits well with feminist discussions of the use of metaphors in the history of philosophy and science.¹ Rorty and feminist historians of philosophy have argued that, rather than being mere ornamentation, metaphors actually encode philosophical assumptions, and that as such they are central to the way that philosophers have come to understand concepts like ‘knowledge’, ‘reality’, and ‘rationality’.

In addition, Rorty’s attack on the premises and assumptions encoded in the metaphor of mind as mirror seems to support, at least implicitly, feminist attempts to critique the assumptions about the mind that go unexamined in contemporary epistemology: the assumption that the identity of knowers is irrelevant, that knowledge is mostly an individualistic affair, and that our best model of knowledge will come out of an examination of the cases in which an individual knower comes to know a simple empirical claim, such

1 See, for instance, Lloyd’s (1993) classic contribution to this literature.

as “I see a tree”.² These assumptions, paired with the privileging of scientific discourse, marginalized realms of knowledge that might be expected to be more accessible to, or even central to, women’s epistemic lives, feminist epistemologists argued. Rorty’s attempt to dismiss the traditional problems of philosophy as being useless seems to support the feminist drive to address “real world” epistemic problems, rather than highly abstract constructions of epistemic situations. Then Rorty explicitly took up the feminist cause, however, and argued that feminists did not really gain anything from philosophical theory, from deconstruction, or from a realist commitment to truth and undistorted representation, many feminist philosophers found themselves thinking that friends like Rorty might be more of a hindrance than a help.

Feminists make a mistake, Rorty argues, when they try to use the universalist and realist language characteristic of claims on behalf of women that appeal to the idea of universal human rights, or when they try to phrase their arguments in terms of a critique of ideological distortion. Rorty argues that pragmatism is a more promising alliance for feminists than are universalist or realist positions, because pragmatism can recognize the idea of moral progress as evolutionary without assuming that such progress is best explained as an approach toward a less distorted or truer picture of the world. Rorty urges feminists to give up these appeals to realism and universalism in favor of a pragmatist, prophetic feminism that eschews traditional philosophical theorizing and embraces instead a strategy of linguistic innovation. According to Rorty, feminists need linguistic innovation and new visions to offer as alternatives to the present state of affairs, in comparison with which these new visions can offer more hope and better alternatives. We see in this move Rorty’s debt to Kuhn’s analysis of scientific revolutions: just as a scientific theory or paradigm cannot be overthrown in the absence of a new one to take its place, so social “paradigms” cannot be overthrown in the absence of new social visions. Feminists should not tie themselves to the old paradigm by playing by its rules of argumentation and evidence, but should take on the challenge of providing a new paradigm, even at the risk of sounding crazy or having their appeals fall on deaf ears. Only by offering a new vision that could replace the old model of patriarchy – a function fulfilled by prophecy, not by philosophy – can feminists make progress.

Rorty’s emphasis on the value and importance of a “linguistic community” in which such appeals can find listeners and uptake sits uneasily with his valorization of prophecy, however, according to Nancy Fraser. Fraser argues that the model of prophecy and the

2 Code (1993) refers to this model as the “S knows that p” model of knowledge.

prophetic voice seems to assume that strong and visionary individuals, rather than linguistic communities, are the primary motors of change. Fraser's response to Rorty's Tanner Lecture argues that Rorty's understanding of the dynamics of political communities tends to encourage an individualistic vision of the role of feminist redescription. Fraser argues that Rorty's model of the strong poet or aesthete, found in his non-feminist political writings, is transformed in his Tanner Lecture into the model of the feminist prophet, and she sees this as a major and welcome shift in his work. Yet, the band of feminist separatists "huddled together spinning a web of words as a charm to keep from going crazy", which Fraser claims is what Rorty's feminist prophets amount to, is an inappropriate model for collectivist and political social change. She suggests the model of consciousness-raising as a better model. The model of consciousness-raising allows us to see the ways in which semantic authority is constructed by communities, rather than resulting from an individual's vision that catches fire and takes on followers.

One might see in this a related trend in feminist epistemology and science studies, in which feminists have argued that it is communities, rather than individuals, that are the primary subjects of knowledge.³ In this respect, Fraser's argument can be read as encouraging Rorty to adopt feminist analyses of justification and knowledge practices. Fraser argues that the feminist strategy of establishing a "counterpublic sphere" –that is, a public, but explicitly feminist sphere, including economic, social, and cultural institutions and informal networks– is more in line with feminist political ideals, and more consistent with Rorty's emphasis on "linguistic communities" than the separatist movement that Rorty thinks is the crucible of feminist vision.

Fraser does agree with Rorty that feminist appeals to moral realism and universalism are misguided, however, and that linguistic innovation is essential to the project of creating new moral identities in which feminists are engaged. She agrees that the characterization of feminist moral progress as a process of discovering moral truths that were always there for the finding, but merely ignored, is incorrect, and she, like Rorty, aligns herself with the American pragmatist movement in this respect. Yet, her analysis of linguistic innovation departs from Rorty's, since she sees linguistic innovation as taking place *through* political struggle and solidarity-building, rather than seeing linguistic innovation as the engine that drives such struggle. The issue between Fraser and Rorty, then, is not the relative value of realist or universalist appeals –on this they agree– but rather, the politics of linguistic innovation. The question to which they give

3 See, for instance, Nelson (1990) and Longino (1990).

different answers is: how does linguistic innovation work to create and sustain political change?

Sabina Lovibond argues that feminist linguistic innovation cannot –and should not– disengage itself from discourses of realism and universalism. Lovibond argues that Rorty’s image of linguistic innovation sunders ties with truth-talk and reality unnecessarily, with the result that such innovation can be little more than a game or a struggle for power. By disconnecting linguistic innovation from the urge to “get things right”, we fail to see the ways that the introduction of new terms, like ‘sexual harrasment’, is taken by a given community to constitute a *correction* of present practice, rather than a mere innovation.

Lovibond argues against Rorty that recognition of the intuitive nature of the appearance/reality distinction need not represent a hankering for a God’s eye view, or a position outside of history. It need not, that is, invoke ideas of objectivity that are underwritten by a metaphysics of the world as it is in and of itself, accessible only from “outside” of history or human perspectives.

In addition Lovibond argues that the linguistic naturalism that Rorty advocates does not demand that we abandon the appearance/reality distinction. Rather, as Lovibond argues, a thoroughgoing naturalism about linguistic practice would seem to *require* such recognition, since, she argues, what it is to try to describe –or re-describe– objects or states of affairs is to try to say what the world is like regardless of whether others believe the world to be like that or not. That is, implicit in every description is an appeal to the difference between the way the world is and the way that we and others might think it is –this is not an invocation of metaphysical realism, Lovibond argues, just the way that our language works. Lovibond is eager to connect this not to a metaphysics of truth, but to a return of such terms as ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ to the humble realm of everyday speech. The very act of assertion, Lovibond claims, must be understood as an invocation of absolute truth, yet, she argues, that invocation need not constitute a retreat to an extreme form of Platonism. The concept of absolute truth, and the related distinction between the real as opposed to the merely apparent are, in essence, just part of what it is to make an assertion, a conclusion that we can arrive at simply by examining our linguistic practices.

In essence, Lovibond’s charge against Rorty is that he remains a philosopher, unwilling to take up the “humble” standpoint of a user of language, from which the appearance/reality distinction is not metaphysical, but is rather just part of what it is to make an assertion. And from the humble perspective of the everyday user of a language, linguistic innovation is not merely a struggle for logical space; it is an attempt to get things right, to introduce terms

and concepts that more aptly capture the way things are, and to get others to see that this is a better description because it moves us closer to a true account of the world. By insisting on looking at linguistic behavior “from the side”, as an anthropologist might observe a foreign culture, trying to track its rules of use without committing herself to those rules, Rorty cannot see the naturalistic grounding of truth claims in the appearance/reality distinction as anything other than Platonism run amok. By characterizing linguistic innovation from this side-on perspective, Rorty takes up the position of the consummate philosopher, seeking objectivity and detachment from the practices of assertion that mark the “humble” perspective of the user of those assertions.

In addition to taking issue with Rorty’s critique of realism and the appearance/reality distinction, Lovibond also criticizes Rorty’s failure to see that universalism and the project of legitimation go hand in hand for feminism. Rorty thinks that this universalism must take the form of an appeal to a transcendent law giver, and as such it ought to be abandoned. Lovibond disagrees; she argues that we may instead understand universalism as recognition of the Kantian demand of universality in our political lives. We can recognize universalism as an attempt to impose constraints on our own and others’ exercises of power by recognizing, and imposing upon ourselves, a moral ideal of egalitarianism. Lovibond argues that feminism is importantly understood both as a species of universalism, and as part of the secular modernist project, because it seeks legitimation of its demands not in a transcendent law giver, but in a fully secular moral order. Rorty characterizes feminism as a kind of “political lobby”, Lovibond argues, which means that he misses the fact that its goals are expressed not as mere preferences, but as morally coercive grounds for changing patriarchal social arrangements. In a similar vein, Lovibond takes issue with Rorty’s attempt to identify feminist politics with the project of inventing a new identity for women as women. Like Fraser, Lovibond argues that Rorty’s characterization of the feminist project is insufficiently attentive to the goal of changing political structures and political life, but unlike Fraser, Lovibond argues that a universalist politics, grounded in a discourse of human rights, is the appropriate justification for this project. Moreover, Lovibond argues, there are no resources in Rorty’s pragmatism to distinguish between the moral identity of women offered by conservative anti-feminists, and that offered by feminists. The model of prophecy and the feminist as prophet is objectionable, according to Fraser, because of its individualistic commitments; Lovibond objects that Rorty has missed the way that prophecy depends upon realism, and the appearance/reality distinction to constitute itself.

In his essay, “Hope, Truth and Rhetoric: Prophecy and Pragmatism in Service of Feminism’s Cause” (forthcoming in the volume), Adams offers a defense of Rorty’s use of the prophetic voice as a way of understanding language that has yet to find its hearers, and as, in some ways, consistent with Lovibond’s claim that what it is to make assertions is to invoke “truth absolute”. Adams emphasizes the fact that prophets are generally rhetorical failures in their own time; their imagined audience is a future audience, and their rhetorical effectiveness can only be measured in some later time, when their claims about the truth are taken up as grounds for action. Adams argues that both feminism and philosophy itself should be understood as rhetorical exercises. While the prophetic voice might be the rhetorically ineffective voice during its time, it is most effective in keeping hope alive, and in projecting an image of the future that can serve as a ground for organizing. But Adams also argues, *contra* Lovibond, that the idea of truths that are true regardless of whether others take them to be so can only be made viable and judged, in retrospect, to have always been true, in virtue of rhetorical interventions. The truth does not speak for itself, he contends, and even philosophers have need of rhetoric.

Adams argues that rhetoric is a key cultural practice that enables both social change and the constitution and continued re-invigoration of communities that share a set of political ideals. He thus elaborates on the way that rhetoric supports and enables the kind of explicitly political solidarity to which both Fraser and Lovibond refer, and which they argue is insufficiently represented in Rorty’s vision of the prophetic feminist. But, like Rorty, Adams argues for the blurring of the distinction between philosophy and other kinds of cultural practices and literatures. In so doing, Adams argues that philosophy traditionally conceived has tried to separate itself from the practices of persuasion, and has sought to mask its own rhetorical effectiveness. Thus, feminist philosophers who hew to the traditional distinction between philosophy and rhetoric are guilty of a certain kind of dishonesty, failing to recognize the ways in which constructions of truth are sometimes stand-ins for rhetorical effectiveness.

What I came to see is that Rorty’s attempt to undermine the distinction between ‘representational’ discourses (the sciences, philosophy, metaethics) and ‘non-representational’ discourses (e.g. fiction, poetry, rhetoric) exemplified in his valorization of ‘prophecy’ over philosophy is in part motivated by a distrust of appeals to truth –not by a skepticism about truth. While it is clear that some part of this seems to be strategic –he thinks that appeals to truth aren’t rhetorically ineffective– this stand seems to have given way, in his later works, to worries about the invocation of ‘truth’.

In Nietzschean style, Rorty's late works show a philosopher who seems to see lurking in appeals to truth a hankering after a divine grounding for our claims – a hankering that Rorty diagnoses as an unhealthy theological urge. He worries that in the attempt to resuscitate 'truth' we are smuggling in a hankering after 'Truth' and with it a desire to be accountable to something outside the human realm; something 'super' natural – whether it is god or the brute givenness of reality.

In feminist attempts to ground political claims in realism, Rorty thinks that we are in danger of returning to our religious impulses, and that this, above all, is the urge we need to resist. Political life and the discourses that it gives rise to and, in turn, feeds off of, is best conducted in secular terms. This, I think, is Rorty's ultimate message to feminists. And if we take feminist philosophy to be yet another aspect of philosophy traditionally conceived, we would be better getting over that. Yet, if philosophy is defined by its canon, then it is equally difficult for feminists to locate ourselves in the discipline since the feminist philosophical canon overlaps with, but is not identical with, the traditional canon.

The turn to MacKinnon, Frye, and Rich might have been a matter of chance and omnivorous reading habits, but in so doing, Rorty points out this important tension at the heart of the issue of feminist philosophy: what is it that one is doing when one takes oneself to be doing feminist philosophy, or teaching feminist philosophy? If, as Rorty seems to imply, one could just replace the term 'philosophy' with the word 'politics' in the phrase 'feminist philosophy' why does that make many feminist philosophers squirm?

The answer is, I think, that insofar as we take philosophy to be something other than politics by another name – where politics is understood as the realm of the exercise of power – we find it difficult to give up the term 'feminist philosophy' in favor of simply calling what we're doing 'feminist politics'; yet, insofar as persuasion remains an important part of feminist philosophy – or of philosophy in general – then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that feminist philosophy and philosophy in general are not instances of the exercise of power, since persuasion is itself a type of power. We might want to say that as philosophers we are committed to a particular model of appropriate grounds for persuasion, and to this, Rorty asks: and what would those grounds be? This seems to be where he leaves us – with another rhetorical question.

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