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THE CURIOUS ENLIGHTENMENT OF
PROFESSOR RORTY

ABSTRACT: *Richard Rorty has devised a highly distinctive strategy for resisting what Michel Foucault once denounced as "the blackmail of the Enlightenment," according to which one is forced to take a stand either for or against it. Rorty distinguishes between the liberal political values of the Enlightenment, which he embraces "unflinchingly," and its universal philosophical claims about truth, reason and nature, which he completely renounces. Rorty argues that Enlightenment values are not sustained by "Enlightenment" metaphysics, and can therefore survive the loss of faith in those metaphysics. But Rorty implausibly believes that the scope and limits of his ironism can be restricted to realist metaphysics; he fails to qualify his views on the relationship of theory to practice in several decisive ways; and his "ethnocentric" defense of Enlightenment anti-ethnocentrism is plagued by paradoxes and other problems.*

> "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."
> —MARTIN LUTHER, Speech at the Diet of Worms,
> 18 April 1521

Scholars today are sharply divided on whether the so-called Enlightenment project has failed and, if so, what implications this will have for those societies that regard many of their core practices and institutions as linked to, or even dependent upon, "Enlightenment" values and beliefs. If ours really is "an age distinguished by the collapse of the Enlightenment project on a world-historical scale" (Gray 1995, 1), as many

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now believe, then does this necessarily entail the collapse of liberalism, thought by many to be inextricably linked to the universalist meta-physics often taken to be definitive of the Enlightenment?[1] If we really have entered a "post-Enlightenment" age, then how disturbed should we be by this epochal change?

According to Richard Rorty, the answer to this last question is: not at all. The "Enlightenment project," he claims, has been only a partial failure, and the part that has failed we are better off without. As a philo-sophical project, he believes that the Enlightenment has failed compre-hensively, and that this is an entirely good thing. As a political project, however, Rorty believes that it is alive and well, and that this is also a good thing.

The political values that Rorty associates with the Enlightenment are, basically, liberal. He uses "liberalism" and "Enlightenment" more or less interchangeably (as do many of those, such as John Gray, whose reading of Enlightenment philosophers seems confined to Kant), and he frequently refers to "Enlightenment liberalism"—a view, he claims, that favors the maximization of individual freedom and decency and the minimization of cruelty, humiliation, and suffering. Rorty is unqualified in his endorsement of this political Enlightenment. The fears of those who believe that it is unsustainable in the absence of universally true, or realist philosophical foundations are, he argues, completely misplaced. All that is needed to sustain such commitments—all that *can* sustain them—are shared historical narratives or traditions about the way in which the practices and institutions of our "enlightened" civilization have made it more free and tolerant than other societies. In other words, we can kick the philosophical ladder from under the Enlighten-ment without fear of falling into political disaster as a consequence, since our political commitments are philosophically free-floating (Rorty 1989: 194).[2] Indeed, Rorty agrees with Joseph Schumpeter's claim that to "realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian" (Schumpeter 1943, 243).

In the first part of this paper, I outline Rorty's distinctive views on the Enlightenment and the relationship between its philosophy and its politics. In the second part, I present three criticisms of his posi-tion. First, I question whether Rorty's belief that it is both possible and desirable to confine irony to the private sphere—thereby immu-nizing from chronic doubt our unflinching commitment to liberal political values—is really plausible. Second, I argue that, while Rorty

is right to assert that most people do not have—or need—a philosophical justification to sustain their commitment to particular values, this assertion is plausible only if qualified in two ways that he explicitly rejects. Finally, Rorty's denials that he is a value relativist are shown to be false, since he also denies that the ethnocentric criterion that he prefers to the universalism of the Enlightenment is rationally justifiable. Similarly, in the process of denying not only the truth of Enlightenment philosophy but of truth itself, Rorty denies himself any reasons for preferring the ethnocentric criterion he propounds over the Enlightenment metaphysics he rejects.

"De-Philosophizing" the Enlightenment

One view of the relationship between the political values attributed to the Enlightenment and its philosophical foundations holds that the status of the foundations is directly relevant to the strength of our commitment to the values. Gray is a leading contemporary proponent of this view. "We live today," he writes with apocalyptic relish, "amid the dim ruins of the Enlightenment project." Since liberal cultures "depend on the Enlightenment project, and its illusions, for their very identity," we are bound to see it as "unreasonable to expect the institutions and practices of liberal society to survive unaltered the cultural mutation encompassed in abandoning the Enlightenment project" (Gray 1995, 155).

   Against Gray one might argue that recognizing the groundless contingency of one's values in no way affects the degree of one's commitment to them. On this side of the fence Rorty (1989, 45–47) places Isaiah Berlin,[3] Schumpeter, John Rawls, Michael Oakeshott, and John Dewey, all of whom, he claims, "helped to undermine the idea of a transhistorical 'absolute validity' set of concepts which would serve as 'philosophical foundations' of liberalism"—in the belief that this undermining would strengthen, rather than weaken, liberal institutions (ibid., 57). Berlin et al.'s view of "Enlightenment rationalism" as antithetical to "Enlightenment liberalism" provides a basis—upon which Rorty himself seeks to build—for constructing what he calls "a mature (de-scientized, de-philosophized) Enlightenment liberalism" (ibid., 57).

   According to Rorty (1989, 46), the philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment is merely one particular narrative that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as part of a "deep metaphysical

need"—inherited from Christianity—to "have human projects underwritten by a nonhuman authority" (ibid., 52) such as God or nature or reason. In fact, he argues, Enlightenment values do not depend on such authorities. The persistent belief that the liberal values of the Enlightenment ought to draw their justification from universal philosophical foundations is just a cultural habit that we can, and should, kick.

Rorty (1991, 33) concedes that this lingering philosophical vocabulary of the Enlightenment, based on metaphysical notions of truth, reason, and nature, is "a powerful piece of rhetoric" that was instrumentally necessary to the original establishment of liberal democratic societies. However, he asserts that the Enlightenment's search for objective truth has since "gone sour" and now does more harm than good. Rorty (1989, 44) therefore calls on us to disengage liberal politics from Enlightenment philosophy, jettisoning the latter and retaining the former. The value of "the Enlightenment" for Rorty (1991, 34) is "just the value of some of the institutions and practices which [it has] created. . . . I have sought to distinguish these institutions and practices from the philosophical justifications for them provided by partisans of objectivity, and to suggest an alternative justification."

Although the liberal discourse of tolerance, civility, respect, and decency is Rorty's preferred *political* vocabulary, for ethnocentric reasons, the Enlightenment language of reason, nature, and science is part of a universal philosophical vocabulary that he claims should be dispensed with altogether. He writes that the Enlightenment's philosophical assumptions about human nature, rationality, the world, epistemology, and history do not have the status of "truths," as the *philosophes* imagined them to have. Rather, they are part of a contingent, Western, modernist vocabulary that is no closer to corresponding with the true nature of reality than any other particular vocabulary. This is not because Rorty knows for certain that the Enlightenment is wrong. Rather, it is because he believes that *no* such vocabulary can be said to be "true" in this sense, including his own, which he admits does not "correspond to the nature of things" any more than other vocabularies do (Rorty 1991, 23).

Rorty believes that an impenetrable wall should be erected between Enlightenment philosophy and liberal politics comparable to that which the *philosophes* sought to build between politics and religion. He commends Thomas Jefferson for helping to "make respectable the idea that politics can be separated from beliefs about matters of ultimate importance—that shared beliefs among citizens on such matters are not essential to a democratic society" (Rorty 1990, 279). If philosophy and

politics really were linked, then Gray would indeed be right in claiming that the liberal political values of the Enlightenment are doomed by the collapse of the philosophical project on which they are supposedly grounded. Rorty's composure in the face of such a collapse arises from the fact that he believes that a Jeffersonian separation between our public political world and our private philosophical beliefs both can and should be upheld.

Unfortunately, Rorty (1989, 87) claims, the dominant public culture of the West is, like its dominant intellectual culture, "still metaphysical." Enlightened liberal societies should, he thinks, finally admit to themselves that their cherished values are just part of one particular form of life among others with no more claim to be "true" philosophically than any other.[4] For Rorty, the ideal citizen is someone who is sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that his or her fundamental beliefs refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. The Enlightenment values that unite us should no longer be thought of as anchored to any universal philosophical substrate, such as nature or truth. Rather, a philosophically post-Enlightenment culture "would regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison with other attempts at social organization" (Rorty 1989, 53).

While Rorty believes that both the public realm of political values and the private realm of philosophy should be historicized and nominalized, eschewing universal metaphysical assumptions about their supposed "truth," he argues that the resulting "irony" should be restricted to the private realm. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989, 73), he specifies three conditions that define an "ironist": "She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary that she currently uses . . . she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts . . . [and] she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others." The effect of irony, he thinks, is to destabilize our beliefs, inducing a chronic state of flux and experimentation, so that individuals would "never quite [be] able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies" (ibid., 73–74). Rorty labels such a state "metastable," and associates it with doubt, detachment, and lack of commitment.

Rorty is insistent that our commitment to shared "Enlightenment" political values would be unsustainable if ironized, and that this is unde-

sirable. While we should see them, like our private beliefs, as "contingent through and through," we should not feel "any particular doubts about the contingencies they happen to be" (Rorty 1989, 87). The light-hearted, light-minded, ironic detachment characteristic of our private, post-Enlightenment worlds should coexist with a robust, if historicized, public commitment to "the Enlightenment" as a political project, free of ironic doubt and characterized as much by the "spirit of gravity" as our attitude towards philosophy, religion and other "matters of ultimate importance" would be characterized by the "spirit of lightness." This point is often overlooked—or at least obscured—by Rorty's critics. For example, Gray attacks what he believes is Rorty's call for a comprehensive "ironization" of our civilization. "The recurring theme in Rorty's work," he writes, "is that liberal cultures whose relationship with their most central and fundamental practices is ironic will be better . . . than liberal cultures which seek 'foundations' for themselves in 'universal principles.' . . . Irony is the negation of the spirit of seriousness, a playful engagement in world-making" (Gray 1995, 4).[5] Yet, for Rorty, the element of doubt that he associates with irony should have no place in our historicized public culture, which should remain unflinchingly committed to *our* Enlightenment political values. In this way, public solidarity and commitment can be combined with private irony, doubt, and detachment. Rorty (1989, 88, emphasis added) is unambiguous on this point.

> But even if I am right in thinking that a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is nominalist and historicist is both possible and desirable, I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is ironist. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. *Irony seems inherently a private matter.* On my definition, an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself.

Rorty categorically rejects the view that one cannot "combine [political] commitment with a sense of the contingency of . . . [one's] own commitment" (ibid., 61). Although our common convictions are based on "nothing more profound than the historical facts" rather than metaphysical beliefs about nature, reason, or truth (ibid., 84), he argues that "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing

deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (ibid., 189). This is be-
cause intellectual life is, for Rorty, independent of political life. What
happens in our minds has little or no bearing on what we do politically.
Our shared, first-order, affirmed political commitments are not sustained
by reflective, second-order, philosophical assumptions and arguments.
The very idea that they are, or should be, Rorty professes to find "ludi-
crous" (ibid., 86).

Even if this is the case, what reasons do we have for remaining un-
flinchingly loyal to the particular political values of "the Enlightenment"?
For Rorty, the cement that holds Western societies together and binds
them to liberalism is ethnic, not philosophical. The inculcation of values is
a social and cultural process, not a conscious rational process; values are
supported by a shared, nonrational sense of ethnic solidarity that binds in-
dividuals together in a common commitment to a particular way of life.[6]
Good socialization, particularly in the form of shared narratives and com-
mon vocabularies and experiences, sustains our commitments. Rorty
(1989, 208) interprets his own "anti-anti-ethnocentrism" as a "protest
against the persistence of Enlightenment rhetoric." The political values of
the Enlightenment will persist as the "final vocabulary" of our common
public world even if Enlightenment philosophy does not.

Rorty's arguments about the Enlightenment are really an elaboration
of Hans Blumenberg's claim that "the 'historicist' criticism of the opti-
mism of the Enlightenment, criticism which began with the Romantics'
turn back to the Middle Ages, undermines self-foundation but not self-
assertion" (Rorty 1991, 33n16).[7] The ethnic self-assertion of Western lib-
eral democracies is benign, according to Rorty, because it is detached
from metaphysical assumptions that would allow us to assert that our
form of life is *intrinsically* superior to or truer than any other. But if, as
Rorty claims, "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth
dying for among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by
nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance," then it cannot
be assumed that even such self-aware societies will refrain from asserting
themselves against others.

The "Enlightenment" Ethnos

Philosophes such as Diderot (1992, 25, emphasis added) believed that
"*everything* must be examined, *everything* investigated, without hesita-
tion or exception," as he put it in the *Encyclopédie*.[8] Rorty, by contrast,

expects us to apply this critical standard selectively: endlessly examining, questioning, and investigating only *some* things—thereby rejecting a basic value of the Enlightenment to which he wants us to be unflinchingly committed. Yet, beyond the observation that he simply "cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization" (Rorty 1989, 87), Rorty offers no argument for his belief that irony is compatible with "unflinchingly" strong political commitments.

Nor does Rorty give us much reason for thinking that irony would not eventually seep from our private beliefs into our political commitments. He simply affirms that containment is not only desirable and possible but also likely, that the two worlds of the public and the private are hermetically sealed realms. Yet how likely is it that most individuals both can and would compartmentalize their lives so that they were half-ironic, -detached, and -skeptical, and half-implacable, -unquestioning, and -committed? What, precisely, would prevent ironic doubt and skepticism from stopping at the frontiers of our private beliefs without straying into the domain of political values? It seems highly implausible that individuals would continually ask questions and raise doubts about their beliefs about what is, but never stop to wonder why they should remain committed to their beliefs about what ought to be. Even if somebody were persuaded by Rorty's claim that it is politically and sociologically undesirable for irony to infect her public commitments, the most that this argument could do, by itself, is lead her to act *as if* she were committed to such values, which is a commitment not to those values per se but simply to the social utility of having values to which she is strongly committed. This alone is insufficient to stop rational, self-reflective individuals from engaging in ironic questioning about their values, any more than valuing the social utility of religion (as most *philosophes* did) is a sufficient reason for someone to believe in the existence of God. The most that Rorty's position can do—assuming that he is right about the undesirability of public irony—is to defend a kind of Elizabethan settlement of outward conformity and inward skepticism that would be most unlikely to result in the kind of unflinching commitment to liberal political values that he claims is desirable.

Conversely, if Rorty's claim about the deleterious public effect of irony is true, then why does he not apply this argument to the private realm of beliefs as well? Surely irony would undermine private mo-

tives for action just as much as public irony would undermine one's commitment to particular values.

Rorty's claim that most people's values are not the outcome of, or in any way dependent upon, philosophical reflection, and are not normally based on cogent and well-developed reasons is neither self-evidently wrong nor implausible. It is far from controversial to believe that, for most people most of the time, what they value is a matter of what Rorty (1989, 74) calls "common sense," the attitude of "those who un-self-consciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies." I do not take issue with the claim that values are unconsciously internalized from one's social and cultural environment and are thereafter taken for granted as self-evident by most people. As such, no conscious reasons are required for either their adoption or their maintenance. Such values are, for most people at least, matters of habit that, as Ronald Beiner (1997, 89) writes, are "a function not of reflective consciousness but of our very being as shaped by life in society."[9] These values are entrenched in our personalities by forces that are quite distinct from the reasoning to which philosophers appeal in their arguments. Rorty is undoubtedly correct that what happens at the level of theory is inconsequential for those whose commitments are not supported by theoretical reasons—that is to say, for most people.

However, qualified ironists such as Rorty are wrong to claim that people's values do not depend on beliefs, and that when these beliefs change their values will necessarily remain unaffected. Most values involve at least some factual presuppositions. For example, if a person values marital fidelity because of her belief in a God who commands that monogamy is the only morally acceptable relationship between a husband and wife, then the absence of a belief in God will leave that person without a reason for her commitment to that value. While it is possible that some people will find other reasons for adhering to it, many will not. Of those who do not, some will continue to accept the value of marital fidelity out of unconscious habit, but others will not. And even when they do, habits wear off over time. In other words, a change in one's religious beliefs can—and very often does—affect the values one holds. This can be seen in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, for whom blood transfusions are prohibited on penalty of the loss of eter-

nal life, even if it does prolong life on earth. This commitment is based on a belief in the truth of a divine command found in a sacred text.[10] If this belief changed, then so too would the commitment, unless a substitute reason presented itself.

There are as well many nonreligious examples of the connection between values and beliefs. For example, the belief in natural human sociability was virtually universal among the French *philosophes*. Unlike Hobbes, they believed that, when left to their own devices, people will naturally tend to fraternize and cooperate, usually to their mutual benefit. This belief led most of them to value individual freedom, religious tolerance and diversity, and a limited constitutional state of the sort they imagined existed in eighteenth-century England. Had they shared the outlook of many of their opponents—that human beings are naturally antisocial and prone to war—it is very unlikely that they would have favored liberal values, which may not have been practically sustainable on the basis of such pessimistic assumptions about human nature. Similarly, many of the values held by Nazis and neo-Nazis are directly linked to beliefs about the inherent superiority of some races over others. Such values would be unlikely to survive the complete collapse of such beliefs. That is why anti-Nazis think it important to debunk racial theories. While it may be unrealistic to expect most people (let alone everyone) to be self-reflective about their basic values on a day-to-day basis, this can change under extreme conditions, when normally settled beliefs are challenged. Virtually everyone can in principle, and most occasionally do in practice, reflect on their values and deliberately change them as a result of reasons, evidence, and arguments about their factual beliefs.

Rorty (1989, 182) denies all of this on the grounds that it is not "psychologically possible to give up on political liberalism on the basis of a philosophical view about the nature of man or truth or history. Such views are ways of rounding out and becoming self-conscious about one's moral identity, not justifications of that identity or weapons which might destroy it." Unfortunately, he does not explain precisely what it is about our psychology that makes it impossible for philosophical arguments and theories to affect our values. Nor does he offer any evidence to substantiate what is, basically, an empirical claim about human nature that may or may not be true. The psychological determinism that his position seems to imply sits very uncomfortably with the skepticism that he frequently expresses towards just such essentializing claims (e.g., Rorty 1998, 169).[11] If Rorty is right

about this impenetrable psychological barrier between values and be-
liefs, then he could never convince his own readers of his position by
rational argumentation unless they already accepted his views. Yet in
an interview he is reported as saying that "I'm going to spend the
next 12 months writing replies to critics. . . . I have a desk piled high
with essays by fellow philosophers and various other people saying
what's wrong with my stuff, and I am solemnly ploughing through
them and writing replies" (Rorty 1998b, 17). One is bound to wonder
why Rorty is bothering to engage his critics if it is not psychologi-
cally possible to persuade those who do not already agree with his
own value preferences. He persists in writing books, lecturing, and
presenting arguments that at least *appear* to have the intention of con-
vincing his audience to accept his claims for good reasons.

Rorty's account of the irrelevance of theory to practice, although *ba-
sically* sound (as sociology), is too simplistic (cf. Taylor 1985, 107).[12]
While it may well be true that theory rarely, if ever, has a direct influ-
ence on practice—and certainly it has much less impact than most the-
orists like to think—it often has a much greater influence indirectly, on
the ethos through which values are conveyed to most people. Although
the acquisition and maintenance of such values is more a matter of so-
cialization than philosophical reasoning, practices of socialization and
acculturation are themselves more susceptible to the influence of theory
than the values of most people are directly. While the arguments of
philosophers, theorists, and intellectuals usually go completely unno-
ticed and unheeded by the overwhelming majority of people (no bad
thing, in most cases), they may still influence the ethos—and the insti-
tutions and practices that sustain it—that shape the actual attitudes and
practices of most people. The gulf between intellectuals and non-intel-
lectuals, although vast and probably growing, is not infinite. A weak and
indirect link exists, mediated by institutions, ideas, and language that in-
fluence the values of non-intellectuals and that are themselves at least
partly influenced by the thoughts and theories of intellectuals.

Rorty's Self-Refuting Relativism

Rorty vigorously denies that he is a value relativist. He argues that in
repudiating Enlightenment philosophy he is not thereby repudiating *all*
criteria for preferring some values over others. What he rejects are the
particular reasons that have traditionally been offered by the mainstream

"Platonic and Kantian" philosophical traditions of the West as "ground-ing" our preferences.

> The reason relativism is talked about so much among Platonic and Kant-ian philosophers is that they think being relativistic about philosophical theories—attempts to "ground" first-level theories—leads to being rela-tivistic about first-level theories themselves. If anyone really believed that the worth of a theory depends upon the worth of its philosophical grounding, then indeed they would be dubious about physics, or democ-racy, until relativism in respect to philosophical theories has been over-come. Fortunately, almost nobody believes anything of the sort. (Rorty 1982, 168.)[13]

Rorty does not regard himself as any more of a value relativist than the eighteenth-century *philosophes* were, and he claims to be just as un-flinchingly committed to liberal values as they were. He merely differs from them in replacing their philosophical reasons with "solidaristic" ones. While they were committed to Enlightenment values for what they thought were compelling philosophical reasons, according to Rorty (1989, 185) most of us are committed to such values as a conse-quence of our common socialization, which "goes all the way down." There are no metaphysical foundations or transcendental entities upon which they rely that make them more compelling than other values we might hold. Thus, Rorty concludes, the "social glue holding together the ideal liberal society . . . consists in little more than a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that that goal re-quires, besides peace and wealth, the standard 'bourgeois freedoms'" (ibid., 84). The question is not (as some mistakenly think): can we re-main committed to particular values in the absence of reasons? It is, rather: are Rorty's reasons better than those of the liberal Enlighten-ment? According to Enlightenment liberals—whom he labels the "par-tisans of objectivity"—we should be committed to liberal political val-ues because they are objective and universal. According to Rorty—a self-styled "partisan of solidarity"—we should be committed to such values simply *because they are ours*. Such commitments are matters of "we-consciousness," which provides a historically and culturally contin-gent basis (rather than a universal foundation) for our value preferences. This, according to Rorty, is not only good enough to sustain our com-mitment to particular values, but is all that really can sustain them.

Yet this is still a form of value relativism. The Enlightenment values

that Rorty favors are relative to a particular time and place. (Specifically, the "rich North Atlantic democracies" of the postwar West [Rorty 1983, 585]). Although he offers a criterion for preferring some values over others, he does not offer any reasons why we should prefer his criterion—ethnocentricity—to the universalist metaphysical criteria of the Enlightenment. This is because he does not believe that any such reasons could justify the criterion he prefers to someone who did not already share his *ethnos*. According to his "ethnocentric" form of relativism, "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—*ours*—uses in one or another area of inquiry" (Rorty 1991, 23). No answer can therefore be given to the question "why prefer Enlightenment values?" to someone for whom the answer is not already self-evident. When challenged to offer noncircular reasons for his preferred ethnocentric criterion, Rorty frankly concedes that there are none:

> Such justification is not by reference to a criterion, but by reference to various detailed practical advantages. It is circular only in that the terms of praise used to describe liberal societies will be drawn from the vocabulary of the liberal societies themselves. . . . So the pragmatist admits that he has no ahistorical standpoint from which to endorse the habits of modern democracies he wishes to praise. . . . We pragmatists should grasp the ethnocentric horn of this dilemma. We should say that we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no non-circular justification for doing so. We must insist that the fact that nothing is immune from criticism does not mean that we have a duty to justify everything. We Western liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and that this means that there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously. (Ibid., 29.)

The particular value-content of "the Enlightenment" is, however, consistent with some justifications and not others, just as particular values are consistent with some beliefs and not others. One justification of liberal values that is *not* consistent with them is the ethnocentric one on which Rorty's whole defense of liberal values relies. While most of the *philosophes* shared Montesquieu's appreciation of the "infinite diversity of laws and mores" (Montesquieu 1989, xliii), a principled rejection of ethnocentrism—understood as the privileging of one's own community or *ethnos* simply *because* it is one's own—was a basic *political* value of

the Enlightenment, and arguably of the liberalism Rorty wants to de-
fend. Yet Rorty's justification for our commitment to "Enlightenment
values"—that they are *ours*—is itself a repudiation of this value. He
wants us to affirm anti-ethnocentric Enlightenment values for ethno-
centric Counter-Enlightenment reasons.

Rorty makes many strong claims about the history of philosophy,
justification, psychology, the effects of irony on value commitments, and
the relationship between theory and practice. The status of these claims
can be interpreted in two ways, both of which present great problems
for him. On the one hand, he can say that they are true, and preferable
for that reason. If Rorty's claims are to be understood in this way, then
he cannot escape providing reasons for them—including his claims that
"Enlightenment" culture cannot foundationally ground its claims to
truth and normative validity, and that we can abandon epistemology as
a foundational discipline—if we are to have any rational justification for
believing him. If this is how we are to understand Rorty, then he has
singularly failed to redeem the validity of his claims about the errors of
"Enlightenment" (realist) philosophy.

On the other hand, Rorty can deny that his own claims are true.
While his account of the ways that Enlightenment philosophy (and not
only Enlightenment philosophy) is mistaken certainly *appears* to be
consistent with the belief that his account is true, he is quite explicit in
denying this. He writes that, while he thinks that his views "are better
than the realists' [views]," he does not think that his views "correspond
to the nature of things . . . the word 'true' . . . is merely an expression of
commendation" (Rorty 1991, 23). Rorty abandons rational argument
fairly early on in the process and merely ends up preaching to the con-
verted. He gives the reader claims with one hand, only to take them
away with the other by removing their "truth" status, so that he ends
up, in effect, saying something like the following: "I prefer liberal values
and institutions to the alternatives. This is because they are the domi-
nant beliefs of the *ethnos* in which I was raised and with which I iden-
tify. Those who share my background will probably share my prefer-
ences. If not, then there is nothing that I can say to rationally persuade
them to alter their preferences. Nor can I say that my preferences are
closer to an objective truth than theirs are. They are just my prefer-
ences, and I commend them to you as such (and only as such)."

In other words, Rorty admits that there are no reasons for anyone to
agree with him about his value preferences unless they already share his
political perspective. What may be a reason for him cannot be assumed

to be a valid reason for them, in which case further argument is point-less. Such a position is unapologetically non-rational. If that is indeed the case, then the question posed earlier—why does he continue to re-spond to his critics?—begs an answer with even greater urgency.

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In theology, the view that faith needs no justification from reason is usually called fideism. In this view, basic religious beliefs cannot be es-tablished by rational means, but only accepted by an act of faith, and are therefore impervious to rational criticism since, in the words of the eighteenth-century Christian fideist J. G. Hamann (1949, 74), "faith is not the work of reason, and therefore cannot succumb to its attack."

Richard Rorty is a liberal fideist. Like his theological cousins, he es-chews what he believes is the vain search for rational foundations for the liberal values he prescribes in favor of conformity to a particular tradition with which he identifies, but which he says he cannot and should not try to justify. Unlike many skeptics, however, Rorty does not favor relaxing the bow of his commitments and retreating to a posture of ataractic indifference. On the contrary, he favors an unflinching com-mitment to the political principles of an "Enlightenment" civil reli-gion—but one without foundations, theological or otherwise. Philoso-phers have little or nothing to contribute to the promotion of Enlightenment values in Rorty's post-philosophical world. What is needed instead is an Enlightenment Legislator who, as Rousseau (1959, 383) wrote, can "persuade without convincing"—using neither force nor reason. In one sense it is a tall order. In another sense, nothing could be more complacent.

NOTES

1. Few things are more common in the scholarly literature than expressions such as "Enlightenment liberalism" (Arblaster 1984, 195) or comments like "I take liberalism to be essentially an Enlightenment tradition" (Pettit, 1994: 180–81); "liberalism may be said to have received definite expression during the eighteenth century" (Schapiro 1958, 16); and "the history of liberalism in continental Europe and the spread of the Enlightenment must be regarded as aspects of one and the same current of thought and practice" (Gray 1986, 16).

2. Rorty's frequent reference to "throwing away the ladder" is borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1995, 189).

3. Berlin's comment on Schumpeter's claim about our commitments also elicits Rorty's approval. Berlin writes: "To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity" (Berlin 1969, 172).

4. The fact that the causal chain of our values is contingent does not mean that they are untrue. Rorty sometimes seems to confuse the two issues.

5. For Gray, Rorty's historicization of Enlightenment values—his denial that they are really "true" in a metaphysical sense—must necessarily weaken our commitment to them. "What Christianity and the dwindling cultural legacy of the Enlightenment did," Gray (1995b, 4–5) argues, "was to confer on the most central practices of Western societies the imprimatur of universal authority. . . . Can we reasonably expect Western liberal institutions to survive unchanged a cultural mutation in which their universal claims are abandoned?" The answer that he gives to this question is an emphatic "no." This is because "liberalism must claim special status for itself. . . . For liberalism to become merely one form of life among others would involve as profound a cultural metamorphosis as Christianity's ceasing to make any claim to unique and universal truth. Both would entail a mutation in the identity of the form of life as we have known it in historical practice" (Gray 1995a, 77). Although Gray interprets the failure of the "Enlightenment project" as a disaster for liberalism, he does not see this as a disaster for humanity, since he is opposed to both the liberalism and the universalism of the Enlightenment.

6. For Rorty (1989, 83), Jürgen Habermas is typical of the other point of view on this matter:

> Habermas shares with the Marxists, and with many of those whom he criticizes, the assumption that the real meaning of a philosophical view consists in its political implications, and that the ultimate frame of reference within which to judge a philosophical, as opposed to a merely 'literary' writer, is a political one. For the tradition within which Habermas is working, it is as obvious that political philosophy is central to philosophy as, for the analytic tradition, that philosophy of language is central.

This misrepresents Habermas's position, which he summarized in an interview in terms that sound much closer to Rorty's view than the latter would admit:

> Philosophers are not teachers of the nation. They can sometimes—if only rarely—be useful people. . . . This is what I think philosophers should also do: forget about their professional role and bring what they can do better than others into a common business. But the common business of political discourses among citizens nevertheless stays what it is. It is not a philosophical enterprise. . . . But it is fair to ask: how could anyone focus on moral intuitions and reconstruct them, before having them—and how do we get them? Not from philosophy, and not by reading books. We acquire them just by growing up in a family. This is the experience of

everyone, except perhaps the limit-cases of psychopaths with no moral sensibility whatsoever. (Habermas 1986, 199–202.)

7. On Hans Blumenberg's distinction between self-foundation and self-assertion, see his *The Legitimation of Modernity* (1982).

8. Not all *philosophes* agreed with Diderot. Some, such as Voltaire, thought that a belief in God is essential to morality, at least among the unenlightened masses. He therefore wanted it exempt from critical scrutiny. "I want my attorney, my tailor, my servants, even my wife, to believe in God," he commented, "and I fancy that as a result I shall suffer from less theft and less cuckoldry" (Voltaire 1994, 190). He also wrote paternalistically that "if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him" (Voltaire 1877, 402–3).

9. Beiner (1997, 85) is in basic agreement with Rorty on this question, writing: "At least in principle, traditional ethics can survive the demise of traditional metaphysical worldviews. What is decisive, of course, is whether these ethical traditions continue to be reflected in the actual life and practices of historical societies; and this is something that is entirely independent of the efforts of philosophers and theorists." For Beiner's criticisms of Rorty, see his *Critical Review* article on Rorty (1993). Beiner's Rortyan view of the role of theory is also spelled out in the chapter on "The Limits of Theory" in his *What's the Matter with Liberalism?* (1992).

10. "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well" (Acts 15: 28–29).

11. Rorty writes in *Truth and Progress* that "one important intellectual advance that has been made in our century is the steady decline in interest in this quarrel between Plato and Nietzsche about what we are really like. There is a growing willingness to neglect the question 'What is our nature?' and to substitute the question 'What can we make of ourselves?'" (1998, 169).

12. Charles Taylor argues vigorously for the view that theory plays a vital role in supporting or undermining our practices. He claims that our self-descriptions are constitutive of our practices, and that these self-descriptions can be undercut, bolstered, or transformed by theories. Theory, he writes, "has an important use to define common understandings, and hence to sustain or reform political practices, as well as serving on an individual level to help people orient themselves" (Taylor 1985, 107).

13. Rorty also discusses relativism in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (1991, 23–24, 202).

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