
net members; of every press briefing at the White House, State Department, and other departments and agencies; even of every political talk show on television. The editors can tune in to CNN and to C-SPAN. When they sit down to edit their reporter's story, they can refer to other versions prepared by rivals at AP, Reuters, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsday*, and other organizations. Drawing upon these sources, editors, with or without the assistance of the reporter, often turn the story into a seemingly comprehensive "take" on the day's subject, a presentation of the collective journalistic wisdom of the day. It may not be the best that journalism could offer, however. "Theoretically," Rosenstiel notes, "more sources of information should make the news more accurate. But in practice, some editors use news accounts—sped to them instantly—that their reporters on-the-

scene know are off the mark."

With the shift in power from the reporter in the field to the editor in the newsroom has come a devaluation of original reporting. Even some reporters now prefer to stay in their information-laden offices. Michael Duffy, a *Time* correspondent who covers the White House, says that he no longer attends the daily White House briefings and usually does not show up even when the president makes himself available to the press. But not being there may have its price. "What happens when you get out of the office," says Michael Barone of *U.S. News & World Report*, "is the serendipitous, the unexpected, the thing that changes your view." Yet the reporter in the field who discovers "the unexpected" may well find it hard to overcome the conventional wisdom developing back in the newsroom—and may not even be consulted.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

A Postmodernist John Dewey?

A Survey of Recent Articles

Richard Rorty is not exactly a household name. But his provocative philosophical and political views, expressed in several books and countless essays, have attracted unusual interest and controversy, both inside and outside the academy. Rorty, a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia, considers himself a "Deweyan pragmatist." He tries to wed pragmatism, à la John Dewey (1859–1952), the eminent American philosopher-activist, with today's Nietzschean "postmodernism." Rorty has been vigorously attacked by critics on both Left and Right. The former—such as Michael Billig in *New Left Review* (Nov. 1993)—object to his insufficiently radical political stance, while the latter—such as Richard John Neuhaus in *First Things* (Dec. 1990)—charge him with undermining the intellectual foundations of democracy.

Rorty takes some comfort from the two-sided nature of the assault. "If there is anything to the idea that the best intellectual position is one

[that] is attacked with equal vigor from the political Right and the political Left, then I am in good shape," he writes in *Common Knowledge* (Winter 1992). But there has been another, perhaps not so easily elided, line of attack on Rorty's positions: that he is far from the Deweyan pragmatist he claims to be.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty rejected "foundational epistemology," which accepts the possibility of finding propositions that faithfully "mirror" or accurately represent the world "as it really is." In proceeding without foundations, he believes that he is being consistent with pragmatism. "All too tersely stated," Gordon D. Marino, a philosopher at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, writes in a profile of Rorty in *Commonweal* (May 6, 1994), "pragmatism is the view that there is no absolute truth. 'Ideas become true just so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience' (William James). Rorty may have an

ironical . . . view of everything else, but he is downright devout about his pragmatism."

Yet while Dewey and his fellow pragmatists, Charles Peirce and William James, "did not believe that inquiry either began from, or culminated in, indubitable axiomatic proof," observes Charles W. Anderson, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in *Polity* (Spring 1991), they did not reject, as Rorty does, the idea that the reality "out there" can be grasped. The pragmatists "were skeptical of metaphysics, but they were rationalists, not romantics," Anderson writes. "Their most distinctive position was not, in fact, their doubt that reason could reflect reality, but their belief in the power of self-correcting, collaborative inquiry. The pragmatists did not claim [as Rorty does] that reason was meaningless, and that 'anything goes' in science, and that philosophy is essentially conversation. Rather, they were convinced that disciplined, systematic, scientific inquiry would pay off. We could get somewhere."

Nowhere, i.e. utopia, may be where Rorty wants to go. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), he advanced a vision of "a just and free society," in which the private behavior of citizens would have no bearing on their public lives. Such "liberal ironists" could be "privatistic, 'irrationalist,' and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged." The private Nietzschean and the public Deweyan would be combined in one and the same person.

Rorty sketches out his thinking in *Raritan* (Spring 1990): "The Romantic intellectual's goal of self-overcoming and self-invention seems to me a good model . . . for an individual human being, but a very bad model for a society. We should not try to find a societal counterpart to the desire for autonomy. Trying to do so leads to Hitler-like and Mao-like fantasies about 'creating a new kind of human being.' . . . The point of a liberal society is not to invent or create anything, but simply to make it as easy as possible for people to achieve their wildly different private ends without hurting each other."

There is a long-standing tradition in social

philosophy that tries to break down the distinction between the private and public spheres, Rorty says. "This is the tradition which, with Plato, sees society as the soul writ large. Most philosophers in this tradition try to isolate some central, ahistorical, noncontingent core . . . within us, and to use [it] as a justification for certain political arrangements, certain social institutions." Michel Foucault, by contrast, argues that every social institution is equally unjustifiable, precisely because no such core exists. Both err in assuming that the public sphere must somehow rest on a connection with the private realm, says Rorty. Whatever a person is in private—be it a mystic or a foot fetishist—he has the same public moral obligations as everybody else, Rorty maintains, even though no "deep philosophical reason" can be given to justify those obligations.

This outlook would disarm defenders of the liberal democracy that Rorty favors, contends Richard John Neuhaus in *First Things*. It "can neither provide a public language for the citizens of such a democracy, nor contend intellectually against the enemies of democracy, nor transmit the reasons for democracy to the next generation."

Rorty, writing in *Common Knowledge*, points out that similar criticisms were aimed at John Dewey during the 1930s and '40s. According to Rorty, Dewey shared his view "that there was nothing bigger, more permanent and more reliable, behind our sense of moral obligation to those in pain than a certain contingent historical phenomenon—the gradual spread of the sense that the pain of others matters. . . . This idea, Dewey thought, cannot be shown to be true by science, or religion, or philosophy."

But Rorty's radical private/public dichotomy would have been anathema to Dewey, Kenneth Wain of the University of Malta maintains in *Political Studies* (Sept. 1993). Dewey held as basic to his social philosophy what Rorty attacks: "that the springs of private-fulfillment and human solidarity, are the same." Dewey, Wain writes, rejected "the Romantic view that self-creation is essentially a private matter which has nothing to do with and cannot itself be achieved in solidarity with others." Dewey gave primacy to the community and

expressed hostility toward "strong individuality"; he stressed "the social value of cooperative thought and action against the private and poetic, which he regarded with suspicion." He could not see a side of the individual that was not social. "Rorty's interest in *la mode française* allows

him to present his liberalism in flashy packaging that conventional liberal doctrines typically lack," Ronald Beiner, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, writes in *Critical Review* (Winter 1993), "but this fancy wrapping comes at a price."

Theology to The Rescue

"Newman, God, and the Academy" by Daniel Cere, in *Theological Studies* (Mar. 1994), Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. 02167.

In the modern academy, there is "a strange silence about ultimate questions of good and evil, life and death," observes Cere, a lecturer in religion and theology at Concordia University, Montreal. Theology—the tradition of inquiry into the "God-question," the question of the "supreme good"—has been pushed to the margins of academic debate, replaced by "religious studies," which deals with religious experience only in descriptive and historical terms.

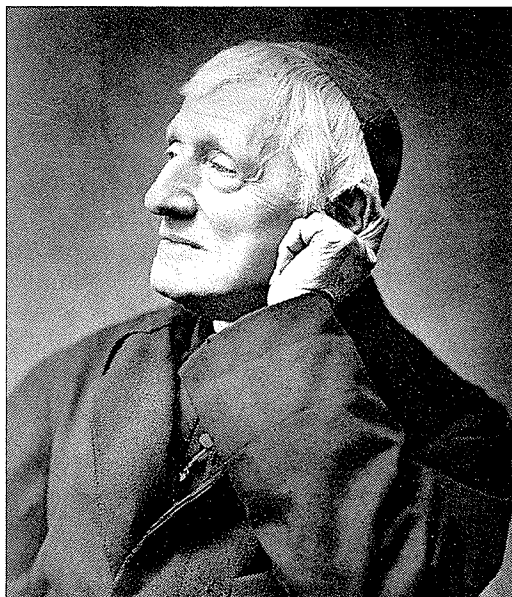
In his controversial 1987 book about higher education, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom blamed the academy's malaise on its blanket repudiation of the Socratic tradition of philosophical inquiry, yet he ignored "the foundational role of the Christian tradition in the development of the university," Cere says. Bloom's own nemesis, Nietzsche, "warned that we cannot expunge 'God' from our grammar and expect that things will go on as before. Athens needs Jerusalem since metaphysical reason cannot stand without a universal ground."

John Henry Newman (1801–90), in his classic defense of liberal education, *The Idea of a University* (1853), presented a more balanced picture, Cere believes: "Newman's bifocal view of the Greek and Judeo-Christian heritage of the academy alerts the reader to the critical role of theology in the emergence of the European university and in the evolution of Western academic discourse."

A Roman Catholic cardinal who, before his conversion, had been a leader of the high-church Oxford Movement in the Church of England,

Newman saw theology not as a sovereign "queen" reigning over the academy but as a legitimate "sister" in the "goodly family of sciences." "I am claiming for Theology nothing singular or special, or which is not partaken by other sciences in their measure," he wrote. Its exclusion—already begun in Newman's day, Cere notes, "on the basis of some narrowly defined and typically indefensible theory of what constitutes a 'scientific' discourse"—left the character of academic discussion deformed. "Attempts to 'slur over' the God question, to deflect attention from it, impose closures on intellectual debate that are without any sufficient warrant," Cere explains.

Theological inquiry, Newman maintained, would respect "the integrity of the distinct theological traditions (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish,



John Henry Cardinal Newman, shown here in 1888