
RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

*Philosophy Is What
Philosophers Do*

"What Are Philosophers For?" by Richard Rorty, in *The Center Magazine* (Sept.-Oct. 1983), Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, P.O. Box 4068, Santa Barbara, Cal. 93103.

Few contemporary philosophers grapple with political and social issues in the way that Plato, John Locke, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau did. Where, one might ask, have all the sages gone?

"Only a Philistine would ask such a question," asserts Rorty, a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia. The purpose of philosophy is not to solve social problems, he argues, but simply to produce philosophy, however that might be defined. The leading philosophers of the 20th century have followed radically different paths. Germany's Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was concerned with the individual's "spiritual heroism," and cared little for politics. American John Dewey (1859-1952) was primarily a "theorist of social change." Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) pioneered in analytic philosophy.

Most British and American university philosophers today work in Russell's analytic tradition. They are easy targets for critics, Rorty writes, because they are preoccupied with abstract problems couched in technical jargon whose solutions are interesting only to other philosophers. Theirs is an arcane world. But that is no argument against it, Rorty maintains. The discipline still attracts first-rate minds and sustains vigorous debate—a sure sign of health. Its critics forget that an equally recondite scholasticism in 13th-century Europe (whose practitioners included St. Thomas Aquinas) revived Greek and Roman classical thought and shaped the intellectual course of the Renaissance.

Rorty adds that it is unreasonable to expect philosophers to possess the wisdom necessary to cure social ills. The truly great mind needed for that comes along "about once in a century." Nor do philosophers have any special grip on the kind of humanistic knowledge that can be usefully applied to public affairs. Historians, classicists, and literary specialists have as much to say as philosophers.

Rorty's advice to today's philosophers is simple: Ignore demands for "relevance" and continue to scrutinize whatever you find interesting.

*Martin Luther's
Legacy*

"The Enduring Relevance of Martin Luther 500 Years After His Birth" by Jaroslav Pelikan, in *The New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 18, 1983), 229 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

On November 10, 1983, Christians of all denominations marked the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth. Even the Communist government of his native East Germany spent millions to refurbish the surviving churches and monasteries of his day.