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Paul A. Roth

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Politics and epistemology: Rorty, MacIntyre, and the ends of philosophy

PAUL A. ROTH

Nothing in my argument suggests, let alone implies, any good grounds for rejecting certain forms of government as necessary and legitimate; what the argument does entail is that the modern state is not such a form of government. . . . Modern systematic politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical or socialist, simply has to be rejected from a standpoint that owes genuine allegiance to the tradition of the virtues; for modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of that tradition.

(Alasdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue*)

On my view, we should be more willing than we are to celebrate bourgeois capitalist society as the best polity actualized so far, while regretting that it is irrelevant to most of the problems of most of the population of the planet.

(Richard Rorty: 'Method, social science, and social hope')

In this paper, I examine how a manifest disagreement between Richard Rorty and Alasdair MacIntyre concerning the history of philosophy is but one of a series of deep and *interrelated* disagreements concerning, in addition, the history of science, the good life for human beings, and, ultimately, the character of and prospects for humankind as well. I shall argue that at the heart of this series of disagreements rests a dispute with regard to the nature of rationality. And this disagreement concerning the norms of rationality, despite its theoretical and practical importance, is one which is, or so I argue, irresolvable.

Moreover, the series of disagreements which I examine in the context of the debate between Rorty and MacIntyre is not peculiar or idiosyncratic to them. Their dispute reflects presumptions common to contemporary analytical philosophy. And while analytical philosophers have not made discussions of human nature one of their characteristic concerns, I indicate that such concerns do play a central role in the controversy which I examine. Differences of opinion concerning the political and social nature of human beings are reflected up and down the philosophical line. My argument is in no way concerned with issues of psychological priority or causality (e.g. whether having certain views disposes one psychologically to accepting other views). What I establish are the logical relations, and the points of philosophical contention, among certain epistemological and political theses.

In Part I, I rehearse Rorty's epistemological views and examine how these views are connected to his views on morality and human nature. In Part II, I begin with MacIntyre's position concerning the virtues and modern moral philosophy and then reconstruct, *ex pede Herculem*, his views on rationality. Part III examines the prospects of reconciling the perspectives discussed in the first two sections.

I: THE GENTLE NIETZSCHEAN¹

A basic epistemological contrast which Rorty urges is that between commensurable (or normal or epistemological) discourse and hermeneutical (or abnormal or edifying) discourse. Simply put, the search for commensurable discourse is the search for a neutral framework in which all meaningful questions may be asked and rational answers provided.² To philosophize in the hermeneutic/edifying mode is consciously to eschew the adoption of any specific method of inquiry. Even more, it is to oppose, as best one can, proposals to adopt a particular model of research. For, as Rorty understands the alternative to traditional epistemology, the issue is *not* how to balance experimentation and constraint, but to do what one can to oppose constraints altogether.

In the interpretation I shall be offering, 'hermeneutics' is not the name for a discipline, nor a method of achieving the sort of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor a program of research. . . . Epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable. Hermeneutics is largely a struggle against this assumption. (Rorty 1979: 315–16)

This hermeneutical approach (together with the Quinean precepts concerning holism and underdetermination which Rorty accepts) engenders, in turn, Rorty's characterization of rationality.

For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology – from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put – and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own. For epistemology, to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible. For epistemology, conversation is routine inquiry. For hermeneutics, inquiry is routine conversation. (1979: 318; my emphasis)

Epistemology, in Rorty's pejorative sense of that term, inhibits conversation by 'freezing' or 'fixing' according to some prescribed routine the direction conversation can take if that conversation is to be deemed rational. The sort of conversation which Rorty believes ought to be encouraged is not to be constrained in advance by any admonitions about what may or may not be challenged or subject to revision. Rorty is prepared, to borrow a phrase which MacIntyre has applied to Feyerabend, to make every person his or her own Galileo.

Rorty's hermeneutical approach recognizes no common standard by which to adjudicate competing claims in various fields; Rorty endorses the view that some rival theories are incommensurable. Yet the multiplicity of competing views is thought to offer an enlarged field of choice and so an increased possibility for stimulation and intellectual growth. 'For edifying discourse is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings' (1979: 360).³ To shirk the stimulation and challenge presented by incommensurable theories is to be intellectually dishonest. The model for a Rortian facing his or her audience is a Nietzsche or a Sartre accusing intellectual slackers of varying degrees of bad faith.

Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described. (1979: 369–70)

Edification, then, seems to require disruption of established modes of thought and evaluation. But why should this be so?

Rorty insists that to countenance intellectual rigidity is dehumanizing. For Rorty, one's choice of method for describing and analysing problems is, at least in part, a *moral* decision, i.e. a matter of how one intends to treat other human beings.

The danger which edifying discourse tries to avert is that some given vocabulary, some way in which people might come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or

should be, normal discourse. The resulting freezing-over of culture would be, in the eyes of edifying philosophers, the dehumanization of human beings. (1979: 377)

Choice of a method is dictated *not* by considerations intrinsic to the subject-matter, for neither people nor other objects in the world have essential natures. The choice is one, rather, 'between being able to predict and control people of a certain sort and being able to sympathize and associate with them, to view them as fellow-citizens' (1982b: 198).⁴

If one believes that the only proper method by which to view other human beings is a method which treats them as objects, and so leaves no space for an account of others as something other than objects, then the sort of dehumanization which Rorty fears has taken place. 'The reason definitional irreducibility acquires this illusionary importance, it seems to me, is that it *is* important to make a *moral* distinction between the brutes and ourselves' (1982b: 201). Rorty's distinction between epistemology and edification – inquiry and conversation – is his recasting of the Sartrean distinction between the self and other, between what is recognizably human and what we find alien (1979: 373). However, the otherness, for Rorty, is not a function of our Cartesian predicament (that is, of being aware of only our own thinking selves), but of our choice of vocabulary for analysing others.

From this point of view, to look for commensuration rather than simply continued conversation – to look for a way of making further redescription unnecessary by finding a way of reducing all *possible* descriptions to one – is to attempt escape from humanity. To abandon the notion that philosophy must show all possible discourse naturally converging to a consensus, just as normal inquiry does, would be to abandon the hope of being anything more than merely human. (1979: 377)⁵

Consistent with Rorty's worries concerning dehumanization is his analysis of what is mistaken about the pervasive distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*. This classic distinction with regard to the study of human behaviour distinguishes between those who conceive of such a study as different in kind from natural science, and those who model such a study on the natural sciences. Traditionally, it has been held that the two approaches are mutually exclusive since the methods of verification basic to each are not recognized as legitimate or relevant by the opposing camp. The friends of understanding insist that a hallmark (that is, a necessary condition) of correct explanation of human behaviour is that the action be comprehensible as that of a human being. (This is the basic point of Weber's *Verstehen*. The idea is, when explaining human behaviour, not to re-create a subjective state of mind, but to provide an explanation in which the behaviour described is distinctively and recognizably human.) Those who fancy themselves hard-nosed about such

matters insist that explanations need only meet whatever standards must be met by any good scientific explanation; if the *Verstehen* condition is not necessary for physicists, it is not necessary for social scientists either.

Rorty's view is that *no* methodological conditions are necessary. Whether or not to seek understanding in the Weberian sense is neither mandated nor foreclosed by considerations of some abstract ideal of rational inquiry (1983b: 169–70). What determines the nature of the explanation which one seeks to formulate is simply the antecedent concerns which one brings to the investigation; there is no methodological prerequisite dictating the type of explanation one must seek.

We shall not think either style particularly appropriate or inappropriate to the study of man. For we shall not think that 'the study of man' or 'the human sciences' have a nature, any more than we think that man does. When the notion of knowledge as representation goes, then the notion of inquiry as split into discrete sectors with discrete subject matters goes. The lines between novels, newspaper articles, and sociological research get blurred. The lines between subject matters are drawn by reference to current practical concerns, rather than putative ontological status. (1982b: 203; see also 195)

The choice between methods, in other words, is a *moral* decision, i.e., a *question of how one chooses to view one's fellow human beings, or a question of the purpose for which one is studying them*. The method is a function of the interests of the researcher and *not* of the essences of the objects studied.

To say that something is better 'understood' in one vocabulary than another is always an ellipsis for the claim that a description in the preferred vocabulary is more useful for a certain purpose. If the purpose is prediction, then one will want one sort of vocabulary. If it is evaluation, one may or may not want a different sort of vocabulary. (1982b: 197)

Moral issues – questions concerning how we are to treat others – become, as was the case with epistemological issues, questions of which *vocabulary* we choose to use to discuss others.

What Rorty has done is to extend a Kuhnian-style analysis to cultural and ethical matters; his emphasis on the choice of theoretical vocabulary can be understood as a consequence of this approach. It is clearly a Kuhnian view of historical change which guides Rorty throughout his epistemological meditation. One example is the distinction between edification and inquiry, which is a distinction between those who would write cultural history Whiggishly (as Rorty likes to say) – as a history of moral and social progress – and those who would alert us to the fact that our personal and cultural histories are tales of our own inventing.

Kuhn has taught us that, with a change in scientific paradigms – a scientific revolution – we have not just a change at an abstract level, but a change in the actual vocabulary in which problems are described, a change in the description of the problems which are to be studied and which are candidates for solution, and a change in what counts as a problem-solving technique. Rorty insists that a parallel process occurs in cultural development; his analyses and celebrations of Foucault's work, in particular, are a product of his belief that it is in such work that we find documentation for these cultural paradigm changes (1981: 6).

Foucault thus made concrete and dramatic considerations which had been presented more schematically by Wittgensteinian philosophers of science such as Hanson, Toulmin, Kuhn and Feyerabend. . . . Foucault's histories helped us see the discontinuities, the sudden twists and turns. His notion of an *episteme*, 'the "apparatus" which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may be from what may not be characterised as "scientific"', and his illustrations of how such an apparatus can suddenly be cast aside, helps flesh out Kuhn's notion of 'paradigm.' (1981: 5)

The consequences of this application of Kuhn to culture also parallel the consequences of a Kuhnian analysis of science. The idea of science as progressive, i.e. as progressing towards an even more accurate picture of the physical world, is, for a Kuhnian, part of what one surrenders when one gives up a positivist reading of the history of science. Similarly, the authority of natural science is linked, on a Kuhnian analysis, more to the authority of textbooks and teachers than to a neutral and rational method. Rorty pursues these themes in the social and moral realms, insisting that we face the ethical consequences implicit in cultural paradigm shifts. For, it now appears, our conceptions of ourselves, and of the social and moral communities of which we take ourselves to be a part, are to be viewed as contingent features of our historical period.

Our account of our moral worth, and the moral worth of others, is, on Rorty's view, drawn from the communities with which we identify. *But, in stark contrast to the position elaborated by MacIntyre, these communities are not held to have any special historical lineage.*

This vocabulary [which we inherited from the Enlightenment] is built around a distinction between morality and prudence. . . . I want to show how this vocabulary, and in particular this distinction, might be reinterpreted to suit the needs of us postmodernist bourgeois liberals. I hope thereby to suggest how such liberals might convince our society that loyalty to itself is morality enough, and that such loyalty no longer needs an ahistorical backup. I think they should try to clear themselves of charges of irresponsibility by convincing our society that it need be responsible only to its own traditions, and not to the moral law as well. (1983a: 585⁶)

What gives communities moral worth is our part in them, and the part such social bodies necessarily have in constructing our understanding of who and what we are (1983a: 586). Consistent with his Kuhnian/Foucauldian view of culture, Rorty does not have any confidence that a meta-ethical analysis is going to have any positive pay-off. His moral pragmatists 'see certain acts as good ones to perform, under the circumstances, but doubt that there is anything general and useful to say about what makes them all good' (1982: 28).⁷

Rorty is offering a defence, in the epistemological and political spheres, of the sort of pluralistic individualism associated with John Stuart Mill. Mill has convinced Rorty that human beings grow only when forced to think critically and to confront new situations. This explains the importance which Rorty attaches to edification. For just as some philosophers of science, e.g. Popper and Feyerabend, argue that striving to falsify a theory promotes scientific discovery and change, Rorty, following Mill, views continual challenges to norms of justification – which is just another way of describing Rorty's views on edification – as the guide to individual growth and change.

Combining Rorty's views on Foucault and Mill, then, one arrives at the conclusion that revolutionary intellectual change is not only to be expected, but that it is a good thing as well. For it is such change which is deemed requisite to both intellectual and personal growth. What is needed is to unite Rorty's view of what is good for the individual – edifying philosophy or intellectual challenge – and what is good for the group – a shared sense of the value of our social institutions. This union is achieved in the form of contemporary American democracy (1982b: 206).⁸ Some might worry that if the communal basis of humanity runs no deeper than Rorty suggests, i.e. if it is not grounded in some larger historical or philosophical view of human nature, then Rorty's appeal to community will appear too fragile to sustain the body politic. Rorty's reply to those who fret 'that human solidarity goes when God and his doubles go' is just that 'there is no inferential connection between the disappearance of the transcendental subject . . . and the disappearance of human solidarity. Bourgeois liberalism seems to me the best example of this solidarity we have yet achieved, and Deweyan pragmatism the best articulation of it' (1982b: 207).

Rorty himself is optimistic about people's ability to live with that 'ungrounded hope'. However, he also recognizes that his favoured option is not without its risks. He is, in fact, alert to the consequences of applying Kuhn to moral matters, i.e., that it leaves us without a common, enduring ethical vocabulary. The objection is just that Rorty and his heroes such as Nietzsche and Foucault 'achieve their effects at a moral cost which is too much to pay . . . [It] says that the stimulus to the intellectual's private moral imagination . . . is purchased at the price of his separation from his fellow-humans' (1982c: 158). The question just is whether one is to be an optimist or a pessimist with respect to projecting how people will respond when the cultural veil is lifted to reveal their existential predicament.

There are, then, political, personal, and intellectual costs to the trade-off between inquiry and edification. As Rorty makes plain, the benefits of edification are not unalloyed; the risk is that inherent in allowing anyone to live according to their own judgement of what, in light of their experience, they think is best. Rorty admits to simply being unsure how to answer the 'question of whether the notion of "conversation" can substitute for that of "reason"' (1982d: 174). And the issue cuts deep, for it is a question 'about whether we can be pragmatists without betraying Socrates, without falling into irrationalism' (1982d: 169).

For the traditional Platonic or Kantian philosopher, on the other hand, the possibility of *grounding* the European form of life . . . seems the central task of philosophy. He wants to show that sinning against Socrates is sinning against our nature, not just against our community. So he sees the pragmatist as an irrationalist. . . . If the traditional philosopher gets beyond such epithets, however, he raises a question which the pragmatist must face up to: the *practical* question of whether the notion of 'conversation' *can* substitute for that of 'reason'. (1982d: 172")

In short, Rorty presents us with the following exclusive alternatives: either continue to believe in truth as correspondence, glassy essences, etc., or accept the substitution of conversation for a clear-cut account of reasoning. The price of the former is dehumanization. The cost of the latter is that it offers only an 'ungrounded hope' that the will to harmonize diverse interests triumphs over a brute will to power.

II: OUR STATIONS AND THEIR DUTIES

In his provocative attack on contemporary moral theory, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that we have inherited a false dichotomy from the Enlightenment. This, in turn, has undermined our ability to achieve consensus on pressing moral problems. The invidious distinction which infects contemporary thought is a conception of individual and society in opposition. The distinction is false because it presupposes that we can make sense of ourselves apart from whatever intersection of social roles we happen to occupy. It is invidious because it makes morality a matter of individual choice instead of locating ethics in the context of a social existence.

The critical mistake, as MacIntyre sees matters, is that this notion of the individual ignores the social basis which creates whatever sense of self one possesses. A self-society cleavage engenders personal fragmentation, anomie, and moral ennui. Indeed, MacIntyre endorses Rorty's claim that there exists a lack of consensus in many areas of contemporary culture, including (especially?)

philosophy. Rorty states that ‘most contemporary intellectuals live in a culture which is self-consciously without *archai*, without *telos*, without theology, teleology, or ontology’ (1984: 15). MacIntyre echoes this diagnosis. ‘The self is now thought of as lacking any necessary social identity, because the kind of social identity that it once enjoyed is no longer available; the self is now thought of as criterionless, because the kind of *telos* in terms of which it once judged and acted is no longer thought to be credible’ (MacIntyre 1981: 32). But where this lack of *telos* is, for Rorty, a positive occurrence which allows the development of the pluralism advocated by a Mill or a Dewey, for MacIntyre it represents a profound intellectual tragedy. ‘What postmodern bourgeois liberalism exhibits is not moral argument freed from unwarranted philosophical pretensions, but the decay of moral reasoning’ (MacIntyre 1983: 590).

Yet Rorty takes it that cultural paradigm shifts are, for those of us who must make our moral way in the world, a *fait accompli*. How then can this fact constitute MacIntyre’s problem? For surely there is nothing to be gained by writing the mere remembrance of virtues past; there is no undoing what a paradigm shift has done. The Aristotelian vocabulary of the virtues and of the good life for human beings is, if Rorty is correct, of as little use to us as the vocabulary of Aristotelian physics.

MacIntyre’s diagnosis of the causes of fragmentation makes no appeal to changing cultural paradigms. Rather, the problem is that philosophy is suffering from the same problem of bureaucratization (due to academic structuring) and so fragmentation (by being required to be specialists in something just called ‘philosophy’) as afflicts modern society generally (1982: 133). The problem with philosophy, then, is of a piece with the problem MacIntyre discerns with contemporary value theory. The history of philosophy is often narrated as if it stood aloof from other changes taking place in the society of the time. But a socially disembodied history of philosophy will appear disconnected from the form of life which gave it its point. The problem then arises of how to reconnect some such socially disembodied account to the life which we now find ourselves living and with those problems we now are attempting to cope.

There is no writing a history of philosophy for MacIntyre in abstraction from a general intellectual and social history of the time. In MacIntyre’s terms, one might say that philosophizing, like the virtues, is linked to certain practices, and when abstracted from those practices (which are, in turn, just various forms of human activity) it is of course going to seem pointless and obscure. What would we make of talk of ‘mate in three’ or of castling if no one any longer played chess?

The crux of the conflict between MacIntyre and Rorty can be found in the basic goal which MacIntyre sets for his inquiry. *For the goal is not just an account of the virtues, but an account which will permit rational agreement to be reached in moral debate*; such agreement presupposes general agreement about the ends of life, and this is what a theory of the virtues is to provide.

The Aristotelian tradition, MacIntyre insists, had it right when it formulated a moral vocabulary adapted to the forms of a human social life. 'For according to that tradition to be a man is to fill a set of roles each of which has its own point and purpose: member of a family, citizen soldier, philosopher, servant of God. It is only when man is thought of as an individual prior to and apart from all roles that "man" ceases to be a functional concept' (1981: 56, 32). Restoration of a usable moral vocabulary, in turn, requires that we once again reach a consensus as to the practices relevant to promoting social well-being, and to the qualities of character which, in turn, are conducive to the success of such practices (1981: 204-5).

But we can now see clearly that, if the account of the virtues which I have defended can be sustained, it is the isolation and self-absorption of 'the great man' which thrust upon him the burden of being his own self-sufficient moral authority. For if the conception of a good has to be expounded in terms of such actions as those of a practice, of the narrative unity of a human life and of a moral tradition, then goods, and with them the only grounds for the authority of laws and virtues, can only be discovered by entering into those relationships which constitute communities whose central bond is a shared vision of and understanding of goods. To cut oneself off from shared activity in which one has to learn obediently as an apprentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside of oneself. (1987: 240)

These various qualities of character which promote the ability to carry out the various social practices and roles are what the virtues are; and the virtues, in turn, are the basis (necessary though not sufficient) for having a uniform standard for applying moral terms.

Indeed, what MacIntyre offers in *After Virtue* is a *meta-ethical* theory; MacIntyre is very explicitly concerned with what is logically necessary for the cogent use of a certain vocabulary. He wants to make this language available to people *despite* substantive differences in their thought. 'It is the aim of this book to make that thought [moral concepts] available to radicals, liberals and conservatives alike' [1981: 4]. And *unlike* Rorty MacIntyre insists, in the (logically) strongest terms, that his position is committed to the *commensurability* of contemporary moral language and the moral discourse of the past. 'I cannot of course deny, indeed my thesis entails, that the language and the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed' (1981: 5). MacIntyre has little to say concerning a normative account of the virtues. He is, in short, doing just the sort of the-conditions-of-the-possibility-of discourse which Rorty takes to be the primary failing of traditional philosophizing (Rorty 1982b: 195).

MacIntyre, then, has set himself the task of restoring *objectivity* to moral debate. Restoration of such objectivity is explicitly linked by him to establishing, first, the autonomy of the social situation of which we are a part and to which we owe our identity, and, second, the historical (and so supra-individual) character of the language used in moral debate. Making the individual the measure of things moral is a mistake akin, on this analysis, to the type of error castigated by Wittgenstein in his attacks on private language and by Quine in his attacks on the idea idea. No form of discourse which has a public use and which was learned in the social realm could possibly originate in or take its primacy and fundamental significance from some purely internal set of experiences. The objectivity of moral discourse, however, is not Kantian; it is an objectivity which is historically circumscribed.

MacIntyre astutely recognizes that his meta-ethics is tied to a larger philosophical enterprise. 'My negative and positive evaluations of particular arguments do indeed *presuppose* a systematic, although here unstated, account of rationality' (1981: 242). But what sort of account is presupposed? It is clear that the Kuhnian/Foucauldian account of history will *not* do, for such accounts bring in their train the conclusion that the vocabularies of past theories are not or will not be appropriate to a changed social milieu. What is needed, it seems, is an intellectual history which does *not* recognize cultural paradigm shifts but, instead, establishes the commensurability of issues over time. For a Kuhnian like Rorty, paradigm shifts involve changed standards of evaluation, and so the account of what is rational is confined to one or another social context. MacIntyre, however, needs standards (a common vocabulary) shared by us and, for example, Plato and Aristotle. It must be an account which establishes that there is, in effect, a continuing cultural dialogue, that the vocabulary of ancient ethicists is not as irrelevant to our moral concerns as their views on spontaneous generation are to our biology.

In order to have the continuity of moral vocabulary, and so the continuing rational dialogue which MacIntyre hopes to restore between us and our forebears, a continuity of tradition must be re-established. We may not wish to avail ourselves of previous solutions, but what is needed is an appreciation of the fact (and MacIntyre takes it to be a fact) that the notion of the (morally) good life for a human being unites the moral conversation of the west. Indeed, it is in view of this shared search for the *telos* of the morally good life, and the ongoing additions to and refinements of what constitutes that good, that the ethical vocabulary we have inherited can and should relate to the problems of life which we face. Rationality generally, and rational moral dialogue in particular, is constituted by – has as a necessary condition of its intelligibility – an orientation to the achievement of a certain end for humanity. This end is not the contingent product of our most recent cultural gyrations, but represents a goal we share with all those who are or were a part of what is called western culture. Different moral theories are united, then, by their attempt to solve a common problem, or a related set of problems.

In fact, it is precisely the assumption that our cultural condition does represent a paradigm shift away from the moral concerns of our western forebears which MacIntyre chooses to challenge. For central to the ethical theory which MacIntyre proposes is an account of narrative explanation, and basic to that view of explanation, in turn, is a *rejection* of the Kuhnian/Foucauldian historiography on which Rorty's analysis depends.

MacIntyre's stress on the continuity of vocabulary and traditions in the moral realm (among others) is clearly inconsistent with the sort of history of moral theory which Rorty assumes. MacIntyre recognizes that his account of the history of ethics needs to be profoundly anti-Kuhnian in so far as 'if we follow Kuhn's arguments through we shall, it seems, be compelled to conclude that in such types of theory choice we do indeed lack any neutral and independent criterion by means of which we could evaluate the contending claims' (1984: 41). MacIntyre targets the conclusion that there is no such criterion. 'This entailment I wish to challenge' (*ibid.*). MacIntyre's counterclaim is that there is not only a continuity of concerns that unites moral theories, but also that we are able *rationally* to determine that one theory is better than another.

Only within a community with shared beliefs about goods and shared dispositions educated in accordance with those beliefs, both rooted in shared practices, can practical reason-giving be an ordered, teachable activity with standards of success and failure. Such a community is rational only if the moral theory articulated in its institutionalized reason-giving is the best theory to emerge so far in its history. The best theory so far is that which transcends the limitations of the previous best theory by providing the best explanation of that previous theory's failures and incoherences (as judged by the standards of that previous theory) and showing how to escape them.

The succession of such institutionalized theories in the life of a community constitutes a rational tradition whose successive specifications of human good points forward to a never finally specifiable human *telos*. To be rational is to participate in social life informed by a rational tradition. (1983: 591)

Moral theories are successive (though not necessarily progressively more successful) attempts to solve a group of related empirical problems, i.e. problems whose solution issues in concrete actions of one sort or another. Given their success, or lack of it, relative to providing solutions to the shared problems, the different theories may be adjudged better or worse. The form of the challenge MacIntyre mounts depends, then, on describing how a *succession* of moral theories is united by a common, albeit incomplete, *telos* for human beings.

What MacIntyre has done, in effect, is to shape to his purposes Imre Lakatos's response to Kuhn's history of science. Indeed, MacIntyre's intellectual history of the west is to Rorty's just as Imre Lakatos's history of science is to Kuhn's. Like

MacIntyre, Lakatos was concerned to establish, against Kuhn, the continuity of scientific traditions. And when confronted with the incontestable differences of the various scientific theories which have been put forward over the centuries, Lakatos's strategy was just the strategy MacIntyre has adapted to the case of moral theory. That is, Lakatos acknowledges that Kuhn has caught important facts concerning the sociology and psychology of science (just as MacIntyre concedes that Rorty has correctly perceived that contemporary intellectual life is fragmented). But, Lakatos argues, Kuhn has missed the shared problems which do unite successive theories (Lakatos 1970: 179–80). While I shall not belabour the details of the sort of historical reconstruction which Lakatos offers, it is worth noting that Lakatos claims that research programmes – scientific theories which aim at solving problems – make sense only when seen in the context of a *series* of such programmes orientated to a related set of facts or problems (1970: 116–22). Such research programmes can be either progressive or degenerate. New theories need not improve on previous ones. Thus, extending this account to MacIntyre, one can say that, for MacIntyre, moral theory has been, since the Enlightenment at least, a series of degenerating research programmes.

MacIntyre rings certain changes on Lakatos's account by insisting, in keeping with the general view which he (MacIntyre) promotes, that the continuity of research programmes (in natural science as in moral theory) can be established by simply locating the account in a sufficiently comprehensive historical narrative (1984: 43–4).¹⁰

Particular small-scale theories come to us for the most part embedded in larger bodies of theory; and such larger bodies of theory are in turn embedded in still more comprehensive schemes of belief. It is these schemes of belief which provide the framework of continuity through time within which the transition from one incommensurable body of theory to its rival is made; and there has to be such a framework, for without the conceptual resources which it affords we could not understand the two bodies of theory as rivals which provide alternative and incompatible accounts of *one and the same subject-matter* and which offer us rival and incompatible means of achieving *one and the same set of theoretical goals*. . . . And it is this shared higher order vocabulary, this stock of senses and references provided at the level of *Weltanschauung*, which makes it possible for the adherents of rival incommensurable bodies of theory to recognize themselves as moving towards what can be specified at that level as the same goals. (1984: 42–3)

Theories *appear* incommensurable only because of the truncated cultural context in which the Kuhnian historian has located them; seen in an appropriately broadened perspective, scientific theories can be made mutually intelligible and are rationally comparable. And just as the notion of an intelligible narrative, i.e. a story-line which connects the whole of an individual's life by appeal to its place in

objective social circumstances, was central to MacIntyre's reconstruction of moral theory (see especially ch. 15 of *After Virtue*), this notion proves central to MacIntyre's reconstruction of science. 'What emerges then, perhaps surprisingly, is that the history of natural science is in a certain way sovereign over the natural sciences. . . . There is an ineliminable historical reference backwards from each scientific standpoint to its incommensurable predecessor' (1984: 44).

MacIntyre's account of the narrative involved here has, as a major philosophical complication, the requirement that it be a 'true' explanation of how one theory succeeds another (1984: 43). It is, in fact, on this issue of truth that MacIntyre distinguishes his account from that offered by Lakatos (1982: 136). MacIntyre is committed to there being an intelligible narrative, the historical tale told in a way which is guided by a concern for truth (although MacIntyre is unclear just how this notion of 'historical truth' is recognized).

We are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please. In life, as both Aristotle and Engels note, we are always under certain constraints. We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. . . . In *La Nausée*, Sartre makes Antoine Roquentin argue not just what Mink argues, that narrative is very different from life, but that to present human life in the form of a narrative is always to falsify it. There are not and there cannot be any true stories. . . . Clearly if Sartre/Roquentin is right . . . my central contention must be mistaken. (1981: 199)

The roles one is given to play in life's drama are scripted prior to one's arrival on the scene; however, if we are good enough actors or actresses, there remains some room for improvisation. The social determination of place does not serve to make human beings into mere robots, repeating what they have been programmed to do. Individuality is what is added in this space between the roles bequeathed to one and the nuances and shadings one brings to them (1981: 200–1). To deny that the story of our lives aspires 'to truth' (1981: 207) would be to accede to a Rortyesque position that narratives are just the product of the form imposed by our own individual or cultural constraints. But it is this which MacIntyre is intent upon denying.

In stark contrast to Rorty, then, MacIntyre develops an ethical vision at the centre of which is not the celebration of pluralism and individualism, but of the community. If Rorty is, to borrow Conor Cruise O'Brien's memorable phrase, a gentle Nietzschean, i.e. someone who stresses Nietzsche's critique of morals and not the fascist implications inherent in the notion of an *Übermensch*, then MacIntyre serves as a compelling reminder that Rorty's ungrounded social hope rests on a deep optimism concerning human nature. Moreover, as MacIntyre makes perfectly clear in his eloquent concluding remarks in *After Virtue*, contemporary historical experience does not encourage the sort of optimism on which Rorty relies.

Rorty enters his own moving appeal for discussion which recognizes and endorses 'unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity' (Rorty 1982b: 208). There is a *moral* duty for philosophers to further the (disjoint and discontinuous) conversation of western culture. MacIntyre fears rather that unless a continuity is recognized, our moral life becomes a mere mask for a continual contest of wills. Thrasymachus will be proved right because we have blinded ourselves to our common *telos*. Given social life as a constant struggle of the will to power, the Nietzschean vision ceases to be liberating and becomes, instead, a rationalization licensing the war of all against all.

III: DUALISM, ANYONE?

Although both Rorty and MacIntyre are apt to locate the issues which divide them within a sweeping panorama of intellectual history, the intellectual antecedents of the debate are a legacy of the nineteenth century. For still echoing in Rorty's call for a tolerance of pluralism is Mill's ringing declaration that the

only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily *or* mental and spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest. (Mill 1978: 12)¹¹

MacIntyre's historical antecedents may be perceived not in the usual opponents of Mill, e.g. James Stephen or Lord Devlin, but in that eloquent critic of individualism F. C. Bradley. For Bradley, like MacIntyre, saw the ethical problems of his time as rooted in a pernicious individualism:

we must say that a man's life with its moral duties is in the main filled up by his station in that system of wholes which the state is, and that this, partly by its laws and institutions, and still more by its spirit, gives him the life which he does live and ought to live.

In short, man is a social being; he is real only because he is social, and can realize himself only because it is as social that he realizes himself. The mere individual is a delusion of theory; and the attempt to realize it in practice is the starvation and mutilation of human nature, with total sterility or the production of monstrosities. (Bradley 1970: 174)¹²

This sort of debate, moreover, is replayed in disputes between, on the one hand, those who understand people as the products of external, objective forces, for example, Marxists, and, on the other hand, those such as Freud who emphasize how it is experience filtered through the psycho-dynamics of each individual's consciousness which shapes that individual's outlook.

The sort of history to which one subscribes is central to these conflicting conceptions of the status of the individual. For if the history advocated by Rorty is correct, then there is a great plasticity to our understanding of nature and of culture; acceding to pluralism would be, on this account, just a recognition of the human condition. There would be no higher law, either natural or moral, to hold people in its thrall. MacIntyre, in common with Marx, wants to write history in terms of objective forces acting on individuals (albeit without Marx's commitment to historicism). The sort of plasticity which Rorty finds in intellectual history depends on there being Kuhnian discontinuities; MacIntyre insists that apparent discontinuities are only a symptom of an inadequate historical narrative.

MacIntyre, alert to the central role played by his account of the nature of history *vis-à-vis* his opposition to the Kuhnian tale told by Rorty, admits that the 'crucial question is: can the requisite kind of history actually be written?' (1984: 47). But the problem is worse than this. That is, even having written such a history, a critical problem remains. For such a Whiggish history is itself no proof that we are not, once again, rewriting the past just in the light of our current concerns. In other words, the problem is what guarantees that a particular narrative is true?

MacIntyre offers the following argument *against* the sort of relativistic analysis endorsed by Rorty. The argument is one often (and sometimes effectively) deployed against relativism. The claim is that any attempt to assert a general relativistic conclusion must be self-defeating. For, if relativism is true, then any argument to the conclusion that it is true is contingent on currently accepted standards. Since standards may change, as relativism allows, there is no certainty attaching to the conclusion. If the relativist attempts to claim that his or her argument, anyway, is subject to no such contingency, then a non-relativistic claim has been made, and so the relativist is being inconsistent. Applied to Rorty, MacIntyre suggests that Rorty's call for us to accept his account of the history of philosophy is precisely just such an instance of relativism attempting to transcend the limitations of its own position.

At perhaps its most fundamental level I can state the disagreement between Rorty and myself in the following way. His dismissal of 'objective' or 'rational' standards emerges from the writing of genealogical history. . . . But at once the question arises of whether he has written a history that is in fact true; and to investigate that question, so I should want to argue, is to discover that the practice of writing true history requires implicit or explicit references to standards of objectivity and rationality of just the kind that the initial genealogical history was designed to discredit. Indeed when Rorty invites us to assent to the version of the history of philosophy which he has presented both in his book and in his paper he is surely not merely trying to elicit our agreement in the light of presently *socially accepted*

standards of work within philosophy and history. For he is – as philosophers characteristically are – himself engaged in advancing a philosophical theory about the nature of such standards. And this theory he presumably takes to be true, in the same sense as that in which realists understand that predicate. If not, then I am unclear just what he is claiming. (1982: 138)

Yet, for his part, MacIntyre establishes, at best, not that narratives *must* be true, but only that a narrative structure is how we understand our own lives. MacIntyre's protest against, for example, Louis Mink's suggestion that all structure is imposed by us on a story (Mink 1970),¹³ turns on his intuition that there just is a natural structure provided, e.g. by the birth and death of any single individual. But such raw data about an individual, as MacIntyre himself admits, do *not* constitute a story. The story of MacIntyre's influence on philosophy will not end with his death; nor does such a narrative begin with his birth. We are concerned with what, if anything, makes a story-line true; the 'natural' facts which MacIntyre cites against Mink hardly establish this point, or even that such facts provide any necessary bound to the story one might want to tell about an individual.

The deep problem facing MacIntyre emerges when one examines his claim with regard to how to understand the 'question of to what genre the life of Thomas Becket belongs' (1987: 198). MacIntyre maintains that this is 'a question which has to be asked and answered before we can decide how it [Becket's biography] is to be written' (*ibid.*). That is, an author must know in advance what he or she will think of the subject by the time they have done writing, for example, their history. But MacIntyre offers no reason why this must be so. It is, for example, a common enough experience to find oneself led to conclusions which one did not expect or anticipate when one began writing.

In addition, MacIntyre, after briefly considering different genres in which Becket's life has been cast, asserts that 'it clearly makes sense to ask who is right, if anyone' (*ibid.*). Why? The only answer MacIntyre provides is that the question of the correctness of a genre 'is the same question as: What type of account of their history will be both true and intelligible?' (*ibid.*). But as we have learned from discussions by Quine and others concerning the underdetermination of theories, it is always possible to construct more than one intelligible account. MacIntyre's suggestion to the contrary is contradicted by his own example. For the case of the contrasting genres of the life of Becket is just a case of such underdetermination. And while he asserts that the 'true genre of the life is neither hagiography nor saga, but tragedy' (*ibid.*), he gives his readers no hint as to how *that* conclusion was reached. If casting Becket's life in some other genre make it *unintelligible*, then that is what MacIntyre needs to show. But he never suggests, much less shows, that alternative construals of Becket's life lack intelligibility.¹⁴ (And just what is it, anyway, that allows us to say whether or not another's life

story is intelligible? If I find the actions of a Shiite terrorist unintelligible but the Ayatollah does not, who is at fault here? Might not a story of someone's life be narrated so as to constitute a mystery to some but not to others?)

MacIntyre's own examples argue for the underdetermination of narrative unity; his recitation of certain natural facts about people (birth, death, etc.) does not refute Mink's suggestion that it is the story-teller's interest which gives structure to the life in question. (As I noted above, if our concern with a person's life is its influence on us, neither birth nor death might prove relevant to that story.) MacIntyre's case against Sartre, Rorty *et al.* depends on just one narrative being true, and just one being intelligible. But the evidence is against MacIntyre with regard to the latter point, and we have no hint, with respect to the former, by what mark the truth of a narrative makes itself known. Thus, while MacIntyre argues that Rorty can assert the general correctness of his (Rorty's) perspective only at the cost of inconsistency, Rorty can claim that any history which MacIntyre produces is just a Whiggish rewriting of the past.

The proper perspective to take on this aspect of the controversy, I suggest, is to see it as an aspect of the pseudo-debate concerning whether or not standards of rationality are universal. I have elsewhere termed this debate the *Rationalitätstreit* (Roth 1987, especially Chapter 9). The opposing parties in this debate are the *a priorists*, who hold to the 'epistemological unity of mankind', and the *impositionists*, who hold that we regularly impose our own standards upon those whose belief systems we are studying or translating. What is at stake in this debate is whether, and on what conditions, another individual or culture can be characterized as irrational. The debate has its origins in the 'unity of method thesis' and the attendant notion of scientific rationality. However, to the extent that, following Rawls and Habermas, one claims some set of norms as rational, this debate becomes part of social and political philosophy as well.

My argument, drawing on the work of Davidson and of Quine, is that the issue is a pseudo-issue since, if Davidson is right, any intelligible translation is going to result in imposing a structure which makes sense only by our lights. The question of whether the standards have been imposed by our conventions of translation, or whether epistemological universals have been unearthed, cannot be resolved. If translation is to make sense to us at all, of course it has to have recourse to standards we find intelligible. Failure to find agreement may simply be taken as evidence of bad or inadequate translation.

On the account just sketched, MacIntyre, by virtue of his insistence on the truth of narratives (and, consequently, despite his historicized notion of rational standards) is a type of *a priorist*. Rorty, for his part, qualifies as an 'impositionist'. An impositionist is caught in the same trap which MacIntyre lays for Rorty; an *a priorist* needs a metaphysical argument to make a claim go. Lacking the requisite point of cosmic exile, the *a priorist* claim remains without logical compulsion. *Contra* MacIntyre, I am uncertain even what sort of argument might possibly establish the metaphysical claims regarding narratives on which MacIntyre's position depends. There is, then, no apparent resolution to this argument.

Significantly, central to this dispute are two fundamentally conflicting notions of human nature. For, as I have argued in the first two sections, what Rorty and MacIntyre each fear is a continued process of dehumanization. Rorty believes that the greatest threat of dehumanization arises if we convince ourselves that the *only* rational vocabulary is one in which no relevant distinction can be drawn between our fellow citizens and other pieces of the furniture of the universe. Hence, Rorty directs his philosophical fire against those who maintain that there is just One True Method. MacIntyre, for his part, perceives the central threat to human well-being as arising from a pseudo-ethical theory which rationalizes selfishness and obscures the deep ties which bind us *qua* human beings. Rorty would stem dehumanization by allowing the widest possible space for the individual; MacIntyre's prescription is to stress community.¹⁵

My own, admittedly gloomy, analysis of this debate is that it is not rationally decidable. Each side rests on a particular understanding of human history, and yet neither side is in a position either to establish its own case or definitively to refute its opposition. Yet it does not follow from what I have said that the issue is not worth debating. What I have tried to suggest is that the conflict between Rorty and MacIntyre appears to be a moment in a much more general and continuing debate in western society, a debate which centres on opposed conceptions of human nature, of human development, and of the good for human beings. It is this debate, and its apparent immunity to rational resolution, which continues to haunt both our politics and our epistemology.

University of Missouri-St Louis

NOTES

- 1 I owe this phrase to Conor Cruise O'Brien's thoughtful essay 'The gentle Nietzscheans' (1970).
- 2 A good recent summary statement of Rorty's epistemological views is his essay 'The contingency of language' (1986a).
- 3 Rorty expands on this theme in 'The contingency of selfhood' (1986b) and 'Freud and moral reflection' (1986d; see 9).
- 4 For a more developed view of Rorty's 'politics without foundations' approach see Rorty 1988.
- 5 See also Rorty 1986c.
- 6 In 'The priority of democracy over philosophy', Rorty remarks, 'For pragmatist social theory, the question of whether justifiability to the community with which we identify entails truth is simply irrelevant' (1988: 259).
- 7 Rorty's political position has led some, e.g. Richard Bernstein, to charge him with a type of moral irresponsibility (Bernstein 1987: especially 559–60). Rorty responds, after his fashion, in 'Thugs and theorists'; he correctly diagnoses the difference between himself and Bernstein as centring on the possibility of justification (Rorty 1987a: 569).

- 8 Bernstein charges Rorty with defending, if only unwittingly, the status quo (1987). Rorty, in fact, wavers between terming current institutional arrangements 'experiments' (see, e.g., 1988: 274; and 1986c: 10) and writing as if no better arrangements are imaginable (e.g. 1987a: 567, 568).
- 9 A somewhat more pessimistic view is voiced by Rorty in 'Posties' especially in the last paragraph on p. 12 (1987b).
- 10 MacIntyre has recently expanded and developed this Lakatosian connection. See, e.g., MacIntyre 1987 and especially his rejection of Foucault-style history (p. 397). See also MacIntyre 1988 (80–1, 361–3).
- 11 See Rorty's reference to *On Liberty* in 'Posties' (1987b: 12).
- 12 See also MacIntyre 1988 (179–80). Contrast with Rorty's essay 'The contingency of selfhood' (1986b: 11, 12). A less benign account of Rorty's views is given in Richard Shusterman's paper (1988).
- 13 Discussed in MacIntyre 1981 (197 ff).
- 14 Rorty makes a related point in Rorty 1986d (25 fn.27). I further develop my objections to the notion of historical truth in Roth 1988.
- 15 Serious questions arise here concerning the adequacy of the political vocabulary to which Rorty and MacIntyre each appeal. Rorty acknowledges a worry with regard to whether the institutions and vocabulary of liberalism will do the job. (See especially Rorty 1987a: 575, fn. 4). MacIntyre, whose conception of political vocabularies is inherently conflictual, more straightforwardly acknowledges the role of power in promoting and disturbing the terms available for describing political power. As he remarks, 'All philosophy is political philosophy' (1987: 398). Rorty, despite his claim to forswear justification, puts greater stock than does MacIntyre in what might be achieved by ongoing discussion.

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