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Marianne Janack (Editor)

**Feminist Interpretations of Richard Rorty**

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**"This is a worthy collection, coming at a point in time when feminist theorists and philosophers more generally are negotiating Rorty's place in the canon."**

Richard Rorty advanced debates about epistemology, philosophy of language, social change, and the role of philosophical critique during the late twentieth century. He shared the political and philosophical views of many feminist theorists, and Rorty's foes were also our foes. He scuffled with those who believed there were grand narratives of Cartesian certainty, of realism and universalism, and of unifying social traditions, and who believed that those narratives and traditions were correct. Rorty claimed a progressive political tradition; so did feminists. Rorty claimed to question the narratives of moral certainty, metaphysical objectivity, and political universality; so did feminist theorists.

But in the early 1990s, when Rorty explicitly affirmed his support for feminists--at a time when, as Nancy Fraser described it, it was noteworthy "that a renowned male philosopher has elected to address the subject of feminism and indeed to make it the subject of a major philosophical address" (47)--feminist philosophers did not univocally welcome his declaration of solidarity. What was the reason for their reluctance? Rorty claimed great things for feminism: he claimed that society would improve because of the feminist movement and--more significant even than that--he claimed that the feminist movement would create "a new and better sort of human being" (38). Wasn't this exactly the sort of positive support that feminist theorists had been hoping for?

Feminists, like pragmatists, were ambivalent about Rorty championing their claims. For one thing, feminist theorists had diverse responses to the many abstract questions that Rorty tried to answer: What is the job of philosophy? What should our relation to the history of philosophy be? Is the point of theoretical discussion to offer critique? Or to generate new ideas and ways of living? Or to effect political action? Rorty thought he had answers to these questions, and he praised feminists as most deserving of admiration when they take on a "prophetic" role. Meanwhile, feminists recognized that the advancement of feminist theory and of feminist politics is premised on making space for plurality and difference, and that alongside visionary, "prophetic" rhetoric, the vast majority of feminist activists were involved in the often tiresome work of deliberate political action in the courts, in their workplaces, and in their homes, as well as in the more visible forums of the media and culture. Thus, feminists felt that Rorty misrepresented their work,

their values, their goals, and their methods. His attention seemed well-intentioned, but the tone was patronizing.

The first half of this edited collection takes us back to Rorty's essays on feminism of twenty years ago and to some reactions from that time. The collection reprints Rorty's 1990 Tanner Lecture, "Feminism and Pragmatism," as well as a 1993 essay published in *Hypatia*, "Feminism, Ideology, and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist View." This section of the collection reprints two replies to the Tanner Lecture--one by Nancy Fraser and one by Sabina Lovibond--and also includes a recent analysis of the Tanner Lecture's rhetoric by John C. Adams.

These essays from the late twentieth century are worth reading (or rereading) from our perspective in the early twenty-first century because they highlight how the subject of debates in philosophy has changed, as well as what has not changed. For instance, although the label "feminist" is still considered derogatory when used on Fox News, the opposition of philosophers to feminism has diminished significantly. It is no longer noteworthy when feminism or women's rights are mentioned in the context of a Tanner Lecture. Philosophy has seen other changes as well. We are no longer debating whether everything is merely deconstructed text, and we have expanded the alternatives to realism and universalism beyond the skepticism and relativism that Rorty adopted (and sometimes, ironically, denied) to include contextualism and many subtle varieties of and alternatives to realism.

One thing that would enhance the historical debate provided by the first five of the collection's ten essays would be an overview of Rorty's oeuvre, beyond his essays explicitly addressing feminism, and an overview of his reception and impact in the last couple of decades. These five essays are preceded by an editor's introduction, which helpfully and thoroughly discusses Rorty's work within the context of the collection's essays but not from a more overarching perspective. Rorty mentored and directly influenced scads of younger philosophers, some of whom have extended his project (Robert Brandom, for example), whereas others have rejected it (Paul Boghossian, for example). While reading the introduction--which is very well written within its scope--I was left wondering how feminist reactions and interpretations compare to not-specifically-feminist interpretations. Such a comprehensive assessment would also have grounded the second set of more contemporary essays, all five of which expand their attention to providing a feminist interpretation of Rorty's work as a whole.

In "Democracy and Interpretation," Georgia Warnke responds to Rorty's debate with Jürgen Habermas over the aim of political criticism, applying her own view of political criticism to the abortion and same-sex marriage controversies. Linda Martín Alcoff's essay, "Rorty's Antirepresentationalism in the Context of Sexual Violence," offers a respectful but trenchant critique of Rorty's neopragmatism from the perspective of both feminism and pragmatism. (I'll return to a discussion of this essay below.)

Two essays--"Drawing Battle Lines and Choosing Bedfellows: Rorty, Relativism, and Feminist Strategy," by Sharyn Clough, and "Richard Rorty, Feminism, and the Annoyances of Pragmatism," by Stephen R. Yarbrough--complement each other by exploring different angles on how Rorty's philosophy of language drives his understanding of feminist political rhetoric. Clough demonstrates how Rorty built a philosophy of language and language use on Donald Davidson's semantic account of meaning, and that this underlying account (plus Rorty's imprecise and sometimes sly rhetorical emphasis) creates the appearance of relativism. Because relativism would be in tension with Rorty's avowed support for progressive politics, many have accused Rorty of self-contradiction, if not outright incoherence. This tension has an analogue for feminists whose claims sound not only inclusive but also relativist: relativism is untenable for feminists, since feminist political critique requires a definite location from which to criticize sexist beliefs and practices. Clough argues that Rorty is not really a relativist, though the way he has naturalized truth and objectivity makes him appear so. In his essay, Yarbrough traces the rhetoric of Rorty's Tanner Lecture through its pragmatist heritage, to Davidson and ultimately to G. H. Mead.

The final essay in the collection, Alessandra Tanesini's "Naturalism and Normativity," examines Rorty's metaphysics and postulates that Rorty's arguments would be stronger and less contradictory if he had imagined a way of naturalizing normativity. She shows that because Rorty cannot find value and meaning

in the physical world, but only internal to human minds, he frequently engaged in a dance with relativism and even nihilism. Around the time of Rorty's death, Karen Barad developed an account of science and nature that naturalizes normativity, and Tanesini speculates that access to such an account would have resolved the tension in Rorty's metaphysics.

Linda Martín Alcoff's essay "Antirepresentationalism and Sexual Violence" deserves further examination because it develops excellent insights as to why Rorty, in spite of having written only two essays that explicitly engage with feminism, is a figure ripe for feminist interpretations and, therefore, inclusion in this series. Most of the essays in the collection take Rorty's position in the canon for granted; they assume that Rorty's eligibility for feminist interpretation speaks for itself. Moreover, they tend to be critical or, at best, qualifiedly defensive of Rorty. It is easy to forget that Rorty was a prominent figure at century's end because his ideas did line up well, for the most part, with the ideas expressed by feminist theorists. It is because we feminists had reason to adore him--mostly--that we so strongly deplored his missteps.

Alcoff's essay begins by reminding us what was so attractive about Rorty's thought, including his antifoundationalism, his contextualist approach to moral reasoning, and his defense of everyday, pre-philosophical knowledge-making practices. But also, Alcoff points to a mistake that Rorty makes in his essay on "Feminism and Pragmatism" as well as elsewhere. Namely, he looks at misuses of realist and universalist claims and concludes that the problem is with realism, universalism, and representationalist epistemology, not with flaws in the particular claims. As a result, he was consistently prone to over-reaction.

To his credit, Rorty was a political liberal who actively advocated against racism, sexism, and other forms of political injustice, and his support of feminists as "prophets" indicates a vision, common among pragmatists, of the possibility of moral and political progress. But his antirepresentationalist epistemology, Alcoff argues, denied that there can be more or less accurate (or more or less truthful) descriptions of human experience and of moral goods. Alcoff uses the case of sexual violence to show how essential it is, when talking about particular cases of injustice rather than injustice as an abstract category, to see that there certainly are more or less accurate descriptions of what has happened when someone is violated or harmed. Rorty developed apt arguments against ahistorical realist discourse, but Alcoff shows that his rejection of representational descriptions goes too far in that he denied the grounds on which we describe our mutual experience. Thus the valuable work achieved by feminists has been to make the language used to describe sexual violence a more accurate representation of human experience.

This is a worthy collection, coming at a point in time when feminist theorists and philosophers more generally are negotiating Rorty's place in the canon. He was certainly one of the preeminent philosophers and public intellectuals in his time--but we must ask how influential he will continue to be. This is a question on which the contributors to this volume seem uncertain. More often than not, Rorty is damned with faint praise. As Clough writes, "While he sometimes chose to emphasize different aspects of the struggle [than feminists], and the importance of his choices might not always be obvious, his work should not be interpreted as fighting against us" (170). Perhaps that is the most that a liberal ironist can hope for. Rorty was both adored and reviled, and often both at once by the same people. Whatever their reactions, then and now, feminists should not ignore the attention Rorty paid to feminism, discount its sincerity, or dismiss its contemporary relevance.

**Evelyn Brister** is an associate professor of philosophy at Rochester Institute of Technology. She writes on feminist epistemology, pragmatism, and values in science. Most recently, she has published articles on scientists as advocates and on land management priorities in response to climate change.