

Philosophy and community in Education

A CRITIQUE OF RICHARD RORTY

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All which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned, is to develop their ability to think.

- John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, Chapter 12

Dewey's idealism is supported by Piagetian psychological findings which indicate that all children, not only well-born college students, are "philosophers" intent on organizing their lives into universal patterns of meaning.

- Lawrence Kohlberg

For those interested in moral education the adoption of a universalist perspective is essential. (Kohlberg and Mayer 1972, Reboul 1971, 1991, Wilson, 1993). Universalism involves the acceptance of at least some values which apply to all human beings, and a concept of knowledge which is not limited to consensus or belief. I have discussed elsewhere (Schleifer 1992, Schleifer 1993) examples of the difficulties teachers have in regard to discussing values because of the popularity of relativism. A universalist perspective is particularly important in multiethnic school settings where issues of identity and tolerance are paramount. (Aboud and Doyle 1993, Brief 1993, Schleifer 1993). We have emphasized the importance of philosophical discussions in pluriethnic milieux as a contribution to democracy. A growing consensus among educators is to foster respect for differences **without rejecting a notion of what human beings share together in terms of their similarities and a common human nature.**

In defending universalism, a main representative of the opposition has been Richard Rorty (1979, 1980, 1982, 1988).¹ I have argued elsewhere (Schleifer 1992, Schleifer 1993) that Rorty's defense of relativism in morals is linked to a consensus notion of truth and knowledge. I argued, furthermore, that this relativism parallels the stance Rorty takes against any conception of universal human nature.

The aim of the present paper is to consider Rorty's views about community and philosophy. I shall reject Rorty's restricted notion of "community" as necessarily contrary to universal human nature. In regard to philosophy, I want to similarly reject the narrowness of Rorty's orientation, which restricts philosophy to a kind of "kibitzing". In contrast to Rorty's idiosyncratic stance, I understand philosophy to be an activity which can have something relevant to say about knowledge, and the nature of human beings.

The idea of community and the practice of philosophy are central to the work many of us have been pursuing in education. In the "Philosophy for Children" approach in which I am engaged, an essential ingredient involves the setting-up of communities of inquiry. With this new perspective, we are helping create profound changes in the classroom, in regard to both learning, and the role of teachers. The one main source of inspiration acknowledged by both founders (Lipman and Sharp, 1978, Lipman, Sharp, Oscanyan, 1980, Sharp, 1993) and practitioners (Daniel, 1992, Kennedy, 1995) of PFC is John Dewey. Paradoxically, the writer cited most often by Rorty as inspiration for his views is also Dewey (Rorty, 1979). More specifically, both Rorty and the adherents of PFC make use of Dewey's writings on community. In describing the communities of inquiry of the PFC approach, and more particularly the attempts to create global communities, the reasons for rejecting Rorty's notion of community should emerge. As for Dewey's perspective, I will try to show that it

supports a form of universalism which is associated with PFC's idea of community rather than the truncated "communities" espoused by Rorty's relativism.

The second major opposition involves the conception of philosophy. Central to the major new revolution in education is the reintroduction of philosophy at the earliest ages. The "philosophy" being introduced is, moreover, of a certain nature. I shall attempt to elucidate this conception of philosophy. It should thereby be clear why Rorty's views on philosophy should also be rejected.

Before turning to these issues, however, I must consider a more fundamental objection. Is Rorty not being misrepresented as a "relativist"? Are there, in fact, any "relativists" in existence? In a recent review of John Wilson's new book, Murray Elliott reminds us that we must be cautious about subscribing the position of relativism to anyone (Elliott 1995, p.42):

Moreover, as Richard Rorty has reminded us, relativists are more easily thought to exist than actually identified.

Although Elliott agrees with Wilson that relativism "ultimately undermines reason and renders education impossible" (Wilson, p. 109 cited by Elliott, p.41) Rorty's disclaimer is quoted (approvingly?) by Elliott:

'Relativism' is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other. No one holds this view. Except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good.

Well, then, if no one holds relativist views, then why is there any need to defend universalism? Have we been wasting time, energy and paper criticizing Rorty's relativisms, only to learn that we have been jousting with a "strawman"? To answer these questions, one must return to the text which is quoted and discussed by Richard Bernstein (1983) and then requoted by Elliott.

The complete text of Rorty's quoted by Bernstein (1983, p.201) includes the passage cited by Elliott which appears above. It continues, however, with the inclusion of the following few lines:

... so the real issue is not between people who think one view is as good as another and people who do not. It is between those who think our culture, or purpose, or intuitions cannot be supported except conversationally, and people who still hope for other sorts of support. (Rorty, 1980, pp.727-728)

It is quite clear that Rorty adopts a form of relativism, despite his disclaimers. This relativism, moreover, is seductive and intriguing as it is couched in "ironic" terms. Ironic or soft or deconstructivist relativism it may be, but there is no doubt that it is a form of relativism. It is as opposed to rationally grounding epistemology or ethics as any of the more traditional or extreme forms of relativisms.

Returning to the article from which the above quotation is taken, it is noteworthy that Rorty himself tells us he is in agreement with much of Feyerabend has said. (Rorty 1980) Except for differences in nuance, Bernstein (1983, 1992) shows that Rorty's "playful relativism" is another form of Feyerabend's extreme relativism, except that the latter reveals it more honestly. Bernstein's analysis of Rorty's thought is probably the most thorough that exists. It is therefore relevant that he tells us that Rorty's article is a "celebration of relativism". If further proof is needed, consider Rorty's basic agreement with Feyerabend in the light of the following quote from *Science and a Free Society*:

Reason is no longer an agency that directs other traditions, it is a tradition in its own right with as much (or as little) claim to the centre of the stage as any other tradition. Being a tradition it is neither good nor bad, it simply is. The same applies to all traditions. ...'Objectively': there is not much to choose between anti-semitism and humanitarianism. But racism will appear vicious to a humanitarian while humanitarianism will appear vapid to a racist. Relativism (in the old and simple sense of Protagoras) gives an adequate account of the situation which thus emerges (pp.8-9).

From all this, it appears not mistaken to treat Rorty's views as representative of the relativist camp. Neither Rorty's nor Feyerabend's views are those of the philosophy undergraduate. They are argued intelligently, cleverly, ironically, and playfully. They can, however, have practical and serious consequences as Bernstein (1983, 1991) and others (Munz, 1993) as have stressed. It is therefore relevant to bear these views in mind

when clarifying a different position. For the PFC perspective which is unequivocally universalist, it remains important to meet the challenges of the Rorty-Feyerabend position.

The Philosophy for Children approach is made up, essentially, of two major ingredients. The first is the content of the program, which involves an entire new curriculum. It is the introduction of philosophy at the very earliest ages along with the training of teachers for this task. The second ingredient, equally essential, concerns the process: it is the establishment of a community of inquiry.

That philosophy is seen as relevant for elementary schools by administrators and parents is linked to the desire to put an emphasis on *thinking*. This quasi-revolution in education began in the 70's. Before that time, philosophy had been pretty well restricted to college and university levels. What accounts for this change? Matthew Lipman, the co-founder (with Ann Margaret Sharp) of the PFC movement offers an explanation. His explanation involves a historical parallel with the birth of western philosophy:

What happened in the sixth century B.C. is that thinking turned around on itself people began to think about thinking, and that momentous event was the birth of philosophy. But what the early Greeks recognized is much the same as what many teachers and administrators are beginning to realize today... Just as the perfection of the thinking process culminates in philosophy, so too is philosophy par excellence, the finest instrument yet devised for the perfection of the thinking process.

Lipman goes on to point out that philosophy grew out of literature (The Iliad for example), and the aphorisms of the 6th century were simple and popularly accessible rather than esoteric. The novelettes developed by Sharp and Lipman (as well as those new ones we are creating today) attempt to preserve this combination of philosophy and literature by trying to be both readable and serious.

Philosophy is to be the kind of serious business which Socrates went about. This means rigour, with beliefs subjected to the tests of logic and experience. It means dealing with the most important issues in life, about things that matter, about excellence, about virtue. Lipman and Sharp emphasize another Socratic trait, namely working hard at philosophy.

Whatever Socrates urges us to do, he shows us how to do. Thinking is work, and it is a kind of work no one can do for anyone else... Nothing about Socrates is so contagious as the calm confidence he exudes, that those to whom he talks are as capable of thinking - and thinking excellently - as he is.

The PFC programme, then, offers philosophy according to the above Socratic guidelines. Rigour, hard work, and important issues are part of the conception of philosophy. Moreover, it is this conception of philosophy which begins to answer the frustration with the traditional school. Both parents and children want education to be imbued with thoughtfulness and reasonableness. The child's claim can be seen as a demand for meaning, the parents' as a demand for rationality. (Lipman et. al., 1980, p.11).

It should have emerged by now why Rorty's conception of philosophy is to be rejected. With Derrida, he now represents a kind of anti-philosophy which can be paralleled with the Dadaist anti-art movement (Thomas 1987). As within art, only artists could turn upon their subject, so within philosophy it takes a Rorty, who has made his reputation within the establishment as a traditional philosopher. Having written articles about genuine (philosophical) problems, and having used traditional philosophical tools (reason, justification, etc.), he can now take the "ironic" stand that philosophy is nothing more than "kibitzing". (Rorty 1979, p.393)

Rorty stresses that there is no such thing as 'philosophical method' which might enable professional philosophers to have "interesting views about, say, the respectability of psychoanalysis, the legitimacy of certain dubious laws, the resolution of moral dilemmas" and so forth. We are left with the activity of "useful kibitzing" (p.393). So much for method. As for content, Rorty tells us that philosophy can know nothing about knowledge. To pretend otherwise is to make us "cultural overseers" (p. 317).

In defending his view, Rorty makes use of John Dewey as a source. I return to Dewey below. Two other major mentors are Michel Foucault and Thomas Kuhn. An extended discussion of Foucault and Kuhn is beyond the scope of this paper. I should mention, however, that several critics have recently attacked not only Rorty's borrowings from the Foucault-Kuhn theses, but the theses themselves. In regard to Kuhn, the historian Munz (1993) is worth quoting:

Two decades ago we were treated by Kuhn to a history of science which was supposed to prove that changes in science are due to paradigm shifts. Kuhn's own history of science certainly bore out this contention; except that Kuhn completely forgot that he had, in the first instance, composed his history of science in order to bear out this particular contention. Whatever the merits of this contention, it cannot be proved by looking at the so-called objective history of science. And now Rorty has done something even worse. Kuhn is a scientist who used historical knowledge to prove that all knowledge is dependent on more or less arbitrarily established paradigms, thus assuming for his proof that historical knowledge, unlike scientific knowledge, is not dependent on paradigms. Rorty goes one better. He is a philosopher who claims to know nothing about knowledge but uses historical knowledge to make good the claim that those philosophers who thought they knew something about knowledge were wrong, thus assuming for his proof that historical knowledge, unlike all other knowledge, can be had for the asking. How, one must ask, can one use knowledge to prove that one knows nothing about knowledge?

In regard to Foucault I quote Nussbaum's recent book on the Sceptics, Stoics and Epicureans (1994, p.5):

What is distinctive about the contribution of the philosophers is that they assert that philosophy, and not anything else, is the art we require, an art that deals in valid and sound arguments, an art that is committed to the truth. These philosophers claim that the pursuit of logical validity, intellectual coherence, and truth delivers freedom from the tyranny of custom and convention creating a community of beings who can take charge of their own life story and their own thought. It is questionable whether Foucault can even admit such a community of freedom given his view that knowledge and argument are themselves tools of power.

I add one more quotation from Munz (1993, p.354):

There is indeed something to be known about knowledge, just as there is something to be known about equality and wealth. There are many different opinions held by different people... and all people interested in knowledge must pay attention to these opinions and weigh them and evaluate them.

Weighing and evaluating, along with reasoning, thinking, judging, etc., are part of what philosophy was, and is. For Socrates as for PFC, Rorty's playful notion of philosophy as "kibitzing" has little to do with the activity we love.

Philosophy, then, is the core of the new curriculum. Although done with very young children, and introduced to teachers often lacking a background in "formal" philosophy, it is, nevertheless, modelled after Socrates' kind of philosophy as outlined above. The three factors of hard work, important issues, and rigour were all mentioned. There is, however, a fourth Socratic component which involves method. As Lipman puts it:

Socrates engages people in conversation ... to engage in dialogue is to explore possibilities, to discover alternatives, to recognize other perspectives, and to establish a community of inquiry. (xiv)

According to Lipman (following Socrates) if individuals are to be encouraged to think for themselves, then there is no better way for them to begin than by conversing with one another in a spirit of reasonableness (ibid.).

The establishment of these communities of inquiry in the classroom is as important in teacher-training as familiarity with the curriculum materials. It has become standard, furthermore, in our ongoing supervision of teachers and parents involved with PFC to provide communities of inquiry for them as well. This model is described elsewhere (Schleifer, Lebus, Daniel et Caron, 1990, 1995). Essentially we provide for the discussion of pedagogical issues in one time-slot, and for a discussion of the philosophical issues in a second time period. At Montclair State University, there is a similar high-level series of communities of inquiry in which university professors and educators regularly participate. There, too, we are involved in discussing the exact episodes which, in another context, we would be discussing with teachers-in-training, or with children. The extension of these communities of inquiry to an international or global level has been deliberate. On the one hand, interest in PFC has extended to over 40 countries, and the materials are translated into 20 languages. Furthermore, there is a self-conscious effort on the part of Lipman and Sharp to use their approach for peace education and

education towards non-violence. They believe, clearly, that “communities” are not restricted to small groups. On the contrary, the community can and should be enlarged so as, in principle, to include all human beings (Sharp, 1993, Lipman 1995).

Because of the increasing importance of the community of inquiry - not only in the classroom but at wider levels - Lipman (1991) and others (Kennedy 1995, Marx 1995, Daniel and Schleifer 1996) have continued to suggest guidelines. As a process, (Lipman 1991, pp.241-243) has recently characterized five of its stages. Stage one is the communal reading of the text; stage two is the construction of the agenda, that is, the identification of questions which the reading of the text has raised and a cooperative decision about where to begin the discussion; stage three is the solidification of the community, which includes the articulation of positions and counterpositions, the definition of the terms under discussion, and the search for criteria by which to make sound judgments about the subject; stage four is using exercises and discussion plans, based on the ideas in the text; and stage five is encouraging further responses, which may be in the form of creative writing, dramatization, art, or some other modality. Participation in these various stages, from the communal reading of the text, to the communal dialog radically changes the role of the student and teacher. Both are involved in a collaboration structure (Kennedy 1995, p.164) or in a form of cooperation quite different from the model of “cooperative learning” (Daniel et Schleifer, 1996).

In a recent article Lipman (1995) provides more insight into the two terms which make up a community of inquiry. About “inquiry”:

When we underscore the word “inquiry” in “community of inquiry” we emphasize the investigative role of such communities. This is the role that leads them to deliberate with regard to concepts, evidence, jurisdictions, reasons, definitions etc.

In regard to “community”:

When we underscore “community” in “community of inquiry” we stress the social, affective, and creative aspects of the process. Social, because the community’s members recognize their interdependence, and at the same time acknowledge each other’s distinctive points of view and perspectives. Affective, because participants in such communities care for each other and for the procedures of inquiry. And creative, because such communities encourage participants to think for themselves - independently, imaginatively, and with originality.



Carolyn Gilles, Sophomore, ‘Rose’, Drypoint Print

as outlined above. To accept Rorty would certainly call into question the possibility of establishing global or international communities.

Where does the support of John Dewey lie? Matthew Lipman claims Dewey as one of his primary inspirations along with Pierce, Royce, James and Mead, (Lipman in fact had Dewey as a teacher). Richard

It should be clear why Rorty’s alternative view is incompatible with the PFC perspective on community. For Rorty, there are only “speech communities” with all claims to knowledge limited to the consensus of a circle of people (Rorty, 1979, pp.175, 186, 187, 210, 226, 319, 320, 333, 357, 358, 361, 368, 372). Rorty invokes Foucault, as mentioned above in support of what has been called “radical relativism” (Munz, 1993, p.348). Rorty tells us (p.322) that whatever people believe and practice in any one circle is valid inside that circle and cannot be measured by the standards of another circle. To accept Rorty’s position is ipso facto to deny the legitimacy of the communities of inquiry

Rorty cites the exact group of pragmatists as having awakened him from his smug contentment with “analytic” philosophy (Rorty, 1979).

One must perhaps first accept that there are many strands in Dewey (as in Freud or Piaget) so that different thinkers, with opposing positions, can both claim support from the same mentor. If this is so, then the best strategy would be to trace the most important features of Dewey (and the pragmatists in general). One recent attempt to list these features was by the president of the American Philosophical Association, Richard Bernstein (1988). Among the features highlighted are anti-foundationalism, and the importance of chance and contingency. The anti-foundationalist facet was a plea against a Cartesian “quest for certainty” (Pierce and Dewey). The second facet running through the pragmatist tradition is the awareness and sensitivity to radical contingency and chance that mark the universe, our lives, our inquiries. Pierce talked against the doctrine of necessity; Dewey referred to the “precariousness of existence”. Both these strands do help justify Rorty’s portrayal of himself as a “Deweyan pragmatism”.

Abandoning foundationalism and the craving of absolutes was accompanied, however, by two other strands, which are not considered by Rorty, nor are they helpful to his perspective. For Pierce, Dewey and the other pragmatists, their alternative to foundationalism was to elaborate a thoroughgoing fallibilism. This perspective was precisely seen as an alternative to skepticism or relativism. Philosophy is interpretive, tentative, always subject to correction. Furthermore, this fallibilism was connected to another vital strand for the pragmatists, namely, the social character of the self, and the need to nurture a critical community of inquirers. Royce sought to extend the ideas to a universal community of inquirers, Pierce believed in the long-run convergence of inquiry; Dewey, following Royce and Pierce, explored the idea of community for understanding the moral idea of democracy community.

The community of inquiry of PFC is seen as following the above strands, namely fallibilism, and the critical community. If Rorty is correct in citing Dewey and the other pragmatists for their anti-foundationalism, and hesitation about certainty, Lipman and Sharp are clearly correct in seeing these same authors as their source of inspiration in regard to the idea of community and fallibilism.

As we stated at the outset, PFC is seen as representing profound educational reform. Much of what is new and valuable can, moreover, be linked to Dewey’s views. Jackson and Simpson’s (1995) article trace many of Dewey’s notions about the role and responsibility of the teacher. Among these are: “being a member of the community”, “being a learner”, “understanding that the student is also a teacher”, “researcher”, “intellectual leader”, and “partner and guide”. These phrases resonate harmoniously with the educational approach of PFC. Two authors have written recently on the close relationship between Dewey’s vision, and the foundations of PFC (Daniel, 1992, Kennedy, 1995). Over and above the community of inquiry, already discussed above, they trace the profound influence of Dewey on both pedagogy and the role of the teacher. One in fact (Kennedy, 1995) sees the PFC pedagogical framework and method as “operationalizing the Deweyan notion of reconstruction” (p.164). Both, moreover, recall Dewey’s call for a “shifting of the centre of gravity ... a change, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus” (Dewey, 1943, p.34), and link this prophesy to the present educational reform which PFC represents. The essential point both in Dewey and in PFC is seen in the quote at the beginning of the paper.

In regard to the issues of universalism vs. relativism mentioned at the beginning of the paper, Dewey’s perspective is also of interest. Although Rorty as mentioned invokes Dewey on the side of the relativists, several recent critiques have called Rorty’s interpretations into question. Putnum (1982), Macintyre (1985) and Bernstein (1983) have all defended arguments against relativism. Sharp (1987, 1993) has synthesized these debates in the context of the community of inquiry. She argues, with Putnum, Macintyre and Bernstein in support, that communities of inquiry are not condemned to relativism and endless self-correction, that some progress can be made, and that the concepts of truth and justification cannot be reduced to the conceptual scheme of the tradition. Putnum argues, against Rorty, that the very fact that we can agree that some thinking in the past has been wrongheaded, presupposes that reason can serve as a regulative ideal. Of particular note, here, is Macintyre’s idea of necessary courage, where one lets the truth emerge even if it forces one to reconstruct one’s own cherished beliefs. Sharp used Macintyre’s notion in regard to the community of inquiry where dialogical thinking and speaking may take courage. The “truth” which one lets emerge for both Macintyre and Sharp, is John Dewey’s sense of truth; namely, “warranted belief”.

Dewey can then be plausibly taken to support universalism against Rorty as evidenced by the arguments above. This evidence stands as corroboration for the findings about Dewey and community discussed above. Lipman and Sharp cite these sources in Dewey; following their hints and suggestions I have returned to reading his texts, as well as those of Royce and Pierce which I had not previously read.

Not surprisingly, at least to Lipman and Sharp, who led me to expect this, Royce and Pierce talk openly and clearly about a universal or global community, and of their hope for the human race. Perhaps more surprisingly, although not for Kohlberg (see quote above), I found evidence even in Dewey of a commitment to the same kind of global, or universal perspective which PFC is now attempting to foster. He talked of the Great Community (Dewey, 1943, p.11, p.14), and to its role in “breaking down barriers of class, race, and national territory” (Dewey, 1916, p.87). He also insisted on the participation of the individual in the “social consciousness of the race” (Dewey, 1896, p.84). He even spells out a more general theory of education which addresses fundamental questions on the nature of man (Dewey, 1929, 1930). Although his own specific educational experiments were limited to the American dimension, Lipman and Sharp, it would seem, have done justice to his vision, by extending the community world-wide.

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