



**Béla Egged**

## "We anti-foundationalists"

*A response to Richard Rorty's article "Democracy and philosophy"*

In Richard Rorty's article "Democracy and philosophy", based on a lecture given to students in Iran, he argued that moral insight is "not a product of rational reflection but a matter of imagining a better future, and observing the results of attempts to bring that future into existence." For Béla Egged, this constitutes cultural and historical relativism and an abdication of critical rationality.

I am writing these lines as I prepare to go back to Canada after six wonderful and productive weeks in Bratislava. During this time I experienced the excitement of discussing political and philosophical questions with my colleagues at the Bratislava School of International Liberal Arts. These discussions had the seriousness and intensity that reminded me of my years as graduate student and, later, a young professor of philosophy. Also, I experienced, once again, the challenge of convincing a group of sceptical young students of the importance of studying philosophy. It was not always easy to show them that Plato's *Republic* can still teach us important lessons about politics, ethics, education, and philosophy. Our discussions among colleagues also centred on the question of what we can retain from the philosophical tradition having abandoned Platonic absolutism. In the process of finding alternatives to it, we felt that objectivity and critical rationality should not be abdicated.

Coincidentally, the anniversary issue of *Kritika & Kontext* came out during my visit. I was pleased to find among the articles one by Richard Rorty. I must confess that my first reaction to the article was fairly negative. Here I was, trying to inspire in my students the passion that I have for philosophy and, more specifically, for one of the greatest texts of that discipline; and there was Rorty, "developing this theme of the irrelevance of philosophy to democracy". Hearing my reservations, the editor of the journal explained that the article was originally presented as a lecture to a student audience in Iran. With that in mind, I went back to the article for a closer look, trying to find the "subtext". I asked myself what Rorty was trying to say to these Iranian students. Two things immediately came to mind. One was having read somewhere that the Ayatollah Khomeini had a highly favourable opinion of Plato's writings; and the other was the *Republic's* critique of tradition in the name of reason. Should not a famous philosopher, talking to students who hunger for the tools for a critical understanding of their tradition, encourage them to take up philosophical thinking instead of discouraging them from it? Should a critic of Plato, such as Rorty, not invite a serious philosophical discussion about what can and what cannot be salvaged from the works of that philosophical giant?

Was Rorty trying to teach by example? With his critique of the values of his own society, was he trying to show his audience the importance of a critical attitude towards theirs? Unfortunately, even if that is what he was trying to do,

I neither agreed with his critique of American politics, nor with his critique of the Western philosophical tradition. By placing his emphasis on the economic preferences and military posturing of the "political Right", he says little by way of analysis about the forces that drive its social conservatism. It could be argued that one of the reasons for the religious Right's gain in American politics is that neither "liberals" nor "leftists" can offer an adequate moral (philosophical) alternative to religious fundamentalism.

Furthermore, I cannot agree with Rorty that "Enlightenment values are pretty much taken for granted throughout the West". Has Rorty never taken a look at Fox News? Has he not followed the debates about same-sex marriage, abortion, and "intelligent design"? These debates raise fundamental philosophical questions, and often it is the conservatives who seem to be on the philosophical high ground. One can agree with Rorty that the Western Enlightenment has lost some of its cutting edge. And one can even attribute it to the fact that its advocates have "shoved philosophy aside". But I, for one, cannot share Rorty's rejoicing over this fact. In my view, it is precisely because the Left has abdicated its historic role of posing new questions and reformulating old ones that its ability to contribute to current fundamental debates has suffered.

Rorty's main problem in this article is that he is operating with a narrow conception of "historicism" and of "anti-foundationalism". One can agree with him about the importance of history, and the important role it plays in the determination of "common moral consciousness", without going along with Rorty's radical cultural and historical relativism. What, for example, justifies Rorty's claim that, "for countries that have not undergone [the European Enlightenment's] secularization [...] the history of Western philosophy is not a particularly profitable area of study"? Is he saying that these countries should wait for secularization before they can study philosophy profitably? Is he saying that the history of Western philosophy has nothing important to say about the process of secularization elsewhere? Or, is he saying that secularization is not a desired outcome for these countries? All these claims, if he made them, would be highly problematic. Apart from the first one, which I take to be untenable, they would require, not disdain towards, but an interest in the history of Western philosophy. I cannot accept the view that the works of Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, or even Habermas, are only of slight relevance to students in Iran, or in any country gripped with the problem of reconciling traditional religious beliefs with the constraints imposed on them by modernity. But I doubt that any intelligent member of Rorty's Iranian audience would have taken his disparaging remarks about Western philosophy seriously. Like our own students, they also probably have their heroes and villains among its practitioners.

As I was discussing Plato with my Slovak students, I had the uncanny feeling that their resistance or, worse, indifference might have been motivated by a reading of Rorty's article in *Kritika & Kontext*. This, in turn, obliged me to clarify my disagreement with Rorty's conception of philosophy. I had to explain that even though I have long admired Rorty's work, and have always shared his mistrust of essentialism in philosophy, I could not agree with the way he conceived of "anti-foundationalism". Throughout Rorty's article, one finds criticisms of "philosophical foundations". His view seems to be that one looks in vain for secure and permanent foundations for one's beliefs, be it about "democracy" or, more generally, about morality. This, I think, is a very useful attitude to take in philosophy. However, it does not follow from this that human beings do not attempt to put the "jigsaw puzzle" of their lives into some

kind of rational order. Nor does it follow that philosophers cannot play a useful role in that process. Their role can be critical, showing that these attempts can only be relative and provisional. They can do this by pointing to the way this has been done in the past, with its failures and successes. But they can also help in the historically specific construction of their own "plane of immanence". In other words, they can show how human beings, in their own specific circumstances, could create for themselves a more or less liveable view of the world. After all, was this not what Plato attempted to teach with his "Idea of the Good", Spinoza with his "God", Kant with his "Ideal of Reason"? And is this not the direction in which a number of contemporary "anti-foundationalist" philosophers are pointing?

It seems to me, therefore, that Rorty goes too far with his own anti-foundationalism. He denies that we can, or should, provide our moral, political, and social views, even provisionally, with coherent foundations. It is my view that philosophy can make an important contribution to this task. Of course, Rorty is right in saying that there are "new things under the sun". But they are new precisely in relation to what we know already, and to what we do not know yet.

As I said at the beginning, my departure from Bratislava is imminent. Had I written these lines even a few days earlier, I am sure I would have had the opportunity to discuss it with my colleagues, and could have benefited from their comments. As it is, I can only hope that, if he reads it, Richard Rorty will accept my comments in the spirit of friendship in which they are offered. I also hope that those students of mine who have learned important lessons from having read Rorty's article will read mine with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of what it is to be "anti-foundationalist".

25 Feb. 2007

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Published 2007-08-07  
Original in English  
Contribution by Kritika & Kontext  
First published in *Kritika & Kontext* 34 (2007)  
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