

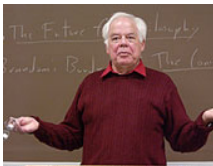


**János Salamon**

## The afternoon of a pragmatist faun

*Richard Rorty (1931–2007)*

In a fundamentally non-philosophical age, Richard Rorty offered a fast and easy solution to a fundamental philosophical question, writes János Salamon. His critique of universalism constituted a liberation but left no alternative to moral ethnocentrism.



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Most of us wouldn't recognize the spirit of the age if it passed us on the street, but that's only because most of us aren't great thinkers. Sometimes, it's the spirit of the age that fails to recognize the great thinker and then has to make a belated fuss catching up with him. This is what happened to Schopenhauer, whose complete life work was ignored by the hopeful, naive, and trusting first half of the nineteenth century. Only after the sobering experience of several failed revolutions was the second half ready to see the realist in the great pessimist.

### Narrow confines

The American philosopher Richard Rorty had a much less dramatic encounter with the spirit of the age: he and it grew up together, so to speak. He was brought up in the 1940s and 1950s in the analytic school — at the time considered, despite its German and British roots, a most American intellectual discipline — only to revolt against his stern masters in the name of a post-philosophical pragmatism, something even more American and more modern.

His first books, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), offered consolation and encouragement to those who perceived that the analytic school, dominating virtually every philosophy department of the country, restricted the range of philosophical dialogue, mistook technique for theoretical understanding, was self-righteous about its own rhetoric (which tended to degenerate into scholasticism), and so contributed to the impoverishment of the spirit of the age, and indeed to the human spirit in general. Even the most prominent representatives of the school (with the exception of W.V.O. Quine, Thomas Nagel, and perhaps Donald Davidson) expressed themselves in a remarkably tortuous and ungraceful prose. This style repelled many readers who were willing to grant that the road leading to truth was often rough and bumpy, yet thought it unnecessary to be reminded of this with every sentence.

By contrast, Rorty's style was effortless, smooth, and spacious without appearing superficial, since he tackled big and profound questions in his effort

to show that there were no big and profound questions for philosophy to tackle. His readers could infer from this that if the road on which he guided them was not rough and bumpy, that was only, perhaps, because it did not lead to truth.

Not to "Truth", anyway, for in Rorty's view this concept is an illusion that, after several millennia of self-deception, should finally be relinquished. His pragmatism allows for a "truth" that is simply the common characteristic of statements such as "snow is white", "*The Afternoon of a Faun* was composed by Debussy", and " $2 \times 2 = 4$ ". The pragmatist does not think that this common feature merits much serious discussion; he doubts that anything "general and useful could be said about what makes these claims true". Suppose, he says, that we have achieved everything we ever hoped to achieve by making assertions. It is impossible then, that "we might still be making *false* assertions, failing to 'correspond' to something", to something with a capital letter.

### Capital letter guarantees

According to the traditional perception, "Truth" can be capitalized because it has some capital-letter guarantee: the Cosmic Order, God, or the Cartesian Mind. Rorty is not worried about the first two of these, since they were sufficiently discredited by the Enlightenment. But he has all the more to say about the Cartesian Mind, this *glassy essence*, the guarantor of modern science, of reliable, objective knowledge.

In his first book, he sets out to dismantle the Cartesian myth. According to this complex epistemological fable, the Mind is a mirror reflecting reality; knowledge is concerned with the accuracy of these reflections; while the strategic task of obtaining this knowledge — of inspecting, polishing, and repairing the mirror — falls to philosophy.

But no one has ever seen Mind, just like no one has ever seen the Cosmic Order or God. If this magic mirror, the mediator-guarantor of ultimate, absolute reality proves to be a mere metaphysical illusion, then philosophy has no more to say about knowledge and truth than common sense does. In this case, reliable, objective knowledge is just a matter of embracing the ways in which we, members of a community, go about justifying our actions to each other; it is just a matter of acknowledging our epistemological quirks and mannerisms.

All this may not be entirely new. Well before Rorty there were others, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein for example, who had done much to loosen the metaphysical coils constricting our lower case minds. While Nietzsche may have done this more forcefully and with more polish than anybody else, no one laid out the pragmatic consequences of this emancipation in greater detail and in a more accessible way than Rorty.

If it turns out that there are no supreme authorities outside and above us, then there is no supreme Truth either in the name of which we could confound, bully, and oppress each other. We can then substitute not only confrontation for conversation, prescription for description, and axioms for shared habits of justification, but also philosophy for democracy, and in general, objectivity for solidarity.

### Ethnocentric narcissism

According to Rorty, "truth" has the same meaning in every culture (it expresses a sense of approbation and commendation), but not necessarily the same reference (different cultures and ethnic groups may refer to different things when they approve and commend something). In other words, when, as members of a culture or ethnic group, we call something true, we simply make a compliment to — or, as it were, curtsy before — one of our beliefs or convictions which we think so well justified that, for the moment, we don't see any need for further justification.

It is unclear, however, why we would be also inclined, in this new, gallant, pragmatic world order, to curtsy before the beliefs and convictions of other cultures and ethnic groups. For such largesse seems to require precisely that overarching, cross-cultural horizon of objective, universal, and self-evident truths (concerning man's rights, dignity, and freedom) that Rorty's pragmatic sanction expunges. The trouble is that the Mind, which has been scrapped as a metaphysical illusion, had been a reflecting glassy essence not only of scientific, but of *moral* truths as well.

Formerly, one would be considered enlightened if, as a member of a tribe or ethnic group or culture, one was fully committed to universal Truth and Reason posited beyond one's convictions, opinions, superstitions, and myths. But if it turns out that this universal rationality is just one of the myths of a particular ethnic group (the enlightened, white, European tribe), then the best we can do is stay within the bosom of our own tribe or ethnic group and commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its convictions, opinions, beliefs, and superstitions. Indeed, then, following Rorty's advice, we can't do any better than become *ethnocentric*.

There was a time when man — a member of the European, enlightened tribe — taking possession of his new freedom, dignity, and rights, celebrated in the name of mankind the ultimate fulfilment of capital-letter Man's potentials. The tribal leaders (the *philosophes*) were touched by the greatness of their own achievement almost as much as analytic philosophers later by their high-tech rhetoric. But even after Man had been unmasked as a capital-letter illusion, there was still reason for what a latter day *philosophe*, Jean-François Lyotard, called "secondary narcissism". If we can no longer celebrate ourselves in the name of mankind, then at least, as ethnocentric narcissists, we can love uncritically our tribal convictions, while accepting uncritically the epistemological quirks and mannerisms of other tribes.

In this new, pragmatic world order, which substitutes objectivity for solidarity, the idea of seriously criticizing our own tribal customs is just as bizarre as criticizing those of others. On what ground would we do it? Of course, the lack of objective criteria should not prevent us from politely but firmly refusing the company of communities whose habits of justification offend our distinctive tribal sensibilities. If, for example, the possibility of a new Holocaust emerged, the liberal community could say to the neo-Nazi community, "We don't do things like that", to which the neo-Nazi community would reply, "Well, *we* do". Curtsy, anyone?

### **A smile and a shrug**

Amongst themselves, philosophers refer to big and profound questions as "metaphysical problems". According to Kant, there are basically three of these: God, freedom, and immortality. Rorty asks us to relax, to drop these questions with a smile and a shrug, and change the subject. He might as well ask us not

to think of a green elephant. The harder we try not to think of it, the deeper the animal will burrow into our thoughts.

There is, of course, an important difference between metaphysics and a green elephant. Although neither can be dropped on command, the latter will drop from our thoughts of its own accord if no one asks us to thrust it out from there. For the thought of a green elephant is interesting at best, but not important. Metaphysical questions, on the other hand, may or may not be interesting but, at any rate, are important.

Philosophy cannot be dropped. It cannot be replaced by democracy because there is nothing democratic about the operation of our minds: not all of our thoughts have the same voting rights, not all of them are equally deep and important. We have elite thoughts that, by the way, are not profound in themselves but only become so when we pile great heaps of more common, more urgent thoughts on top of them.

If great thinkers are never unconscious of their fateful encounter with the spirit of their age, that's probably because for them the most important questions are also the most urgent. The vacuum — which Nietzsche referred to as "European nihilism" — left behind by the death of God (and his capital-letter alternatives) calls for some urgent thinking. Rorty was much more keenly aware of this than the neo-scholastic masters of his youth. His popularity reached far beyond the ivy-covered walls of academia, thanks not so much to his gossamer style as to his pragmatic message. In a fundamentally non-philosophical age, it offered a fast and easy solution to a fundamental philosophical question, a question that only those people fail to bear in the back of their minds who have no such thing.

With Rorty's death, the pragmatic trivialization of nihilism is likely to lose momentum or even come to a halt. But this programme didn't start with him. In one of Nietzsche's parables, a madman runs through the marketplace screaming in desperate search of God, provoking much laughter among those gathered around him. Did he lose his way like a child? Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Or emigrated? To them, these are the most urgent questions. By contrast, the madman asks: How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?

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