



**Jan Philipp Reemtsma**

**Richard Rorty**

*An obituary*

Richard Rorty can be placed alongside Hume, Montaigne, and Wittgenstein in a tradition of dissident philosophy, writes Jan-Philipp Reemtsma. All wanted to put an end to the traditional philosophical discussion, but have become, in one way or another, part of the occidental philosophical establishment.

Richard Rorty is dead. For those who loved him as a person, and also those who just knew him — I had the good fortune to spend an evening with him in Hamburg — this sentence is an expression of pain alone. But for those who loved him as a theorist, the question is what this sentence means besides. Certainly: one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century has died. What will come after him, will someone take his place? As with other great philosophers and writers, the answer is: of course not. One has to live with such losses; they are forever. But in Rorty's case, questions and answers lead beyond truisms. To explain that, I need to get slightly personal.

I had sequestered myself in a holiday apartment to work on a book about Christoph Martin Wieland's novel *Artistipp und einige seiner Zeitgenossen* [Aristippus and some of his contemporaries]. Along with being many other things, Wieland's novel is an answer to the question: What is enlightenment? He described a moment in the history of Greek classical antiquity — before the ascendancy of Platonic philosophy — when sophism and the Socratic style of sophist philosophy had not yet become an academic subject with its own jargon but were a reasoned argument about how to live a good and righteous life. He wrote the novel with an eye to the philosophy of his day and its ascendancy to an academic subject, complete with its own jargon, among the students of Kant and the followers of Fichte.

A copy of Rorty's *The Mirror of Nature* had been in the bookcase of the holiday apartment for a while. I had been intending to read it some time; now, during the breaks between writing my own book, the opportunity arose. I was fascinated by its intellectual acuity and above all by Rorty's ability to engage with intellectual problems that at the end he would declare were not problems at all. Rorty broke from the philosophical mainstream with a book in which he showed that he could go head to head with anyone in this trade, and that he did so with great intellectual pleasure, and at the same time he made it clear that the problems under discussion would not exist were they not generated and sustained by the milieu of "academic philosophy".

The strange thing was that Wieland had tried to portray roughly the same type of thinker with the eponymous character of his novel — only set in a time before what later became known as "philosophy" had even been established.

He transposed his fundamental critique of academic philosophy to its beginnings, and for that reason I ended the chapter in the book about Wieland's *Aristipp* that dealt with philosophy with the final paragraph from Rorty's *Mirror of Nature*:

The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation.<sup>1</sup>

Rorty was a modernizer of a philosophical tradition that has always accompanied the official one — on and off. Official philosophy has had its great thinkers, but it has also managed without them. If the era was not able to produce a Plato, a Descartes, a Kant, Hegel, or Heidegger, inferiors were able to administer what towards the end of the eighteenth century was established as an academic discipline. The show went on. The other tradition needed individuals who intervened using their own language and tried to throw a spanner in the works of the establishment. Retrospectively, one can recognize that they established their own tradition in the process, though only occasionally took note of one another. I don't believe that any practitioner of this second line genuinely saw themselves as continuing a tradition, since more important to all of them was probably the moment of dissidence with regard to the first tradition.

Who am I talking about when I refer to the "second tradition"? Perhaps it is unfair to call it that, since if I let it begin with the Sophists, for example (and with the sophistic anti-sophist Socrates, who, of course, was not the same person as the mask worn by Plato), then it would be necessary to consider whether philosophy that aims at the whole, at the system, that only really began with Plato, ought not to be assessed as a reaction. Plato deployed his entire intellectual energies against a central thought of the Sophists: that values and norms are not discovered but invented. An equally central thought in Rorty. Descartes reacted to Montaigne, as Stephen Toulmin has demonstrated so well. In Montaigne, distinct pleasure about the fact that we can never be quite sure; in Descartes, doubt as point of departure, as foundation stone of the castle of his philosophy, but buried so deep within that it disappears. Montaigne enjoyed being unable to be sure whether he was playing with his cat or his cat with him, while Descartes, apparently horrified, saw animals as kinds of machines. (Perhaps he just didn't have a cat). The nervousness of Kant's system-formation was his reaction to the intellectual nonchalance of Hume.

The Sophists, Socrates, Aristippus of Cyrene (both the historical person and the fictional figure), the Pyrrhonists, Montaigne — then the aforementioned David Hume, who first formulated the question thus: Which problems arise merely as a result of my belonging to a particular establishment, and disappear when I alter my life? Hume, who, acting consistently, left the establishment and spent his latter years thinking about how to cultivate a Scottish-British culinary culture. Disregarding for a moment those who straddled both philosophy and literature, Diderot and Wieland, for example, we of course have the difficult example of Nietzsche, and in the twentieth century John Dewey, whom Rorty always referred to, and the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* and the works that followed, above all *On Certainty*. All these authors introduced their own vocabulary into the philosophical discourse and in the process changed it. They all wanted to put

an end to the traditional philosophical discussion, but it proved damage resistant: all the aforementioned authors have become, in one way or another, part of the occidental philosophical establishment. That is also what happened to Rorty. But he was not the last revolutionary to be seen by later generations as a reformer.

Anyone lucky enough to have known Rorty personally could quickly notice that this carefree thinker was anything but carefree. As Melanie Klein put it: whoever departs from the paranoid position of the system and knowledge free from doubt, places themselves in a depressive position. Or, less theoretically: whoever has learned to think in a carefree manner must know the world quite well, and whoever knows the world quite well does not live in a carefree manner. Richard Rorty is dead; his books are here; it does exist after all: immortality.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1979.

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Published 2007-08-07  
Original in German  
Translation by Simon Garnett  
Contribution by Mittelweg 36  
First published in *Mittelweg 36* 4/2007 (German version)  
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