



Richard Rorty

A rejoinder to Béla Egyed

Béla Egyed has charged Richard Rorty of abdicating objectivity and critical rationality in his essay "Democracy and philosophy". In a rejoinder written in March 2007, Rorty writes that being rational has nothing to do with the attempt to reduce moral disagreements to clashes between abstract principles.

Béla Egyed thinks that I should encourage students to "take up philosophical thinking" rather than discouraging them from it. He urges me to "invite a serious philosophical discussion about what can and what cannot be salvaged" from Plato. I find this suggestion puzzling, since I think of my books as examples of philosophical thinking, and as discussing precisely that topic.

Like other critics of Plato, such as Dewey, I have urged that we salvage Socrates' critical attitude toward traditional beliefs while abandoning Plato's hope to achieve certainty by escaping from temporal contingencies and viewing things under the aspect of eternity. If we do the latter, I have argued, we shall view history and imaginative literature, rather than philosophy, as helping us achieve what Egyed calls "a more or less liveable view of the world". Study of historical developments — of what happens when you secularize politics, or give women power, or use the State's monopoly of force to redistribute wealth — take the place of attempts to find guidance from something lying outside history. Reading imaginative literature helps us grasp what the world might be like if people chose to live one way rather than another.

Plato's critics are typically as devoted to what Egyed calls "objectivity and critical rationality" — the virtues Socrates exemplified — as was Plato himself. Egyed, however, seems to think that these virtues will be endangered if we give up on the idea of "philosophical foundations" and substitute it with "lessons to be learnt from history". He suspects that one of the reasons for the newfound power of the religious Right in the US is that liberals "cannot offer an adequate or acceptable moral (philosophical) alternative to religious fundamentalism". He also thinks that "it is the conservatives who seem to be on the philosophical high ground".

I think it would be a mistake for liberals to try to beat conservatives at their own game — to pander to people's desire for an escape from time and chance. I doubt that we can separate the idea of philosophical foundations from such escapism. Religious fundamentalism appeals to our desire for security and certainty, and so does the rationalistic tradition in philosophy — the tradition that binds Plato together with Spinoza and Kant. From the point of view of both Nietzsche and Dewey, this is an ignoble desire, one that we should try to discourage rather than cultivate. To succumb to this desire is not to move to

higher ground. It is to substitute an irresolvable clash of abstractions for a willingness to consider the concrete consequences of alternative policies.

Egyed thinks of "debates about gay marriage, abortion and 'intelligent design' as "raising fundamental philosophical questions". I do not. The question whether marriage should be restricted to heterosexuals, or to members of the same race, is not illuminated by ascending to the level of abstraction at which utilitarianism (if it doesn't hurt anybody, there's nothing wrong with it) confronts natural law theory (homosexuality and miscegenation are unnatural, and therefore bad). It is, however, illuminated by history and literature — the history of communities in which various different stances toward homosexuality and racial difference have been adopted, and biographies and novels portraying the lives and loves of homosexual or mixed-race couples. Nobody knows how to resolve the abstract opposition, but consideration of concrete cases often does change people's minds.

Attempts to discuss abortion in terms of the unanswerable question "when does human life begin?" provide another example of pointless recourse to abstract principle. One's view on abortion will be determined by whether one's sympathy for the foetus is greater or less than that for the reluctant mother. The more one becomes familiar with the concrete details of the life of either, the more likely one is to distribute one's sympathies sensibly. Nothing in Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, or Dewey is likely to help one make up one's mind.

To attach the sort of importance to philosophical foundations that Egyed does requires belief in a source of truth called "Reason". It requires taking seriously the question "What does Reason say?" (Plato's, Spinoza's, and Kant' substitute for "What does God say?") But as I see it, rationality is not a faculty. It is simply the willingness to converse, to use words rather than blows. So when Egyed says that Plato offered a "critique of tradition in the name of reason", I demur. "In the name of reason" seems to me as empty a rhetorical gesture as "in the name of God". I am all for rationality — for Socratic open-mindedness and willingness to hear the other side. But I do not think that being rational has anything to do with the search for foundations, or with the attempt to reduce moral disagreements to clashes between abstract principles.

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