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Sergio Benvenuto

A Good Use of Philosophical Pleasures: A Conversation with Richard Rorty

A Conversation between Sergio Benvenuto and Richard Rorty

This conversation, held in Rome on June 7, 1997, deals only marginally with psychoanalysis. Yet, as in our previously published interviews with philosophers, it situates Rorty's appreciation of psychoanalysis in its philosophical context.

Sergio BENVENUTO: What is the importance of Freud in our time? Why are you so sympathetic to Freud? Freud tried to build a strong foundation to his theory on the human psyche, he wished to be “a scientist of the soul”. But, even if you reject the need to firmly ground one's beliefs, you seem sympathetic to the Freudian attempt to describe human beings on firm grounds. Why is Freud so important, even today, for you? And what do you think about the strong and widespread criticism against Freud in America now? About the accusations that he lacked any scientific grounds?

Richard RORTY: There's a kind of common sense Freudianism which practically everybody nowadays takes for granted. The newspapers, gossip columnists, everybody talks about human relationships, love, sex, marriage, parents, children and so forth differently than they did before Freud.

B.: Some don't agree with this state of affairs, they think that Freud was wrong and we should change our common sense. They argue that the idea of the Oedipus complex is, if not completely wrong, rather unfounded: it was only Freud's imagination and it was just a fairy tale. But you think that the only important thing is that Freud won in our culture, that his ideas were popular.

RORTY: It's a mistake to ask Freud for scientific evidence or confirmations of psychological generalizations. Psychoanalysis is not a science, and you cannot give or find a scientific method which Freud satisfied, or anything like that. I don't think that matters. In fact, we learn a great deal from figures who offer us distinctions, metaphors, pictures with which to talk about ourselves. Plato didn't have evidence for dividing up the soul in three parts, Aristotle didn't have evidence for making all sorts of distinctions which we still take as perfectly commonsensible. Freud cannot be asked to supply evidence for offering us his suggestions about how to think of ourselves. For philosophers, the most important suggestion he made was: “be suspicious of a desire for purity, be suspicious of people who tell you we have to be rigorously apodictic, or rigorously transcendental, or rigorously ontological. Ask yourself: why are they so worried about purity?”

This is a helpful contribution. When Freud said “the need for a good conscience and the need for physical cleanliness have the same source”, people realize he has a point. His way of bringing sex and bodily functions together with the rest of life, instead of keeping it at a distance, made a great impact on practically all the intellectuals and most of the public in the 20th century. I just can’t see criticisms of Freud—of the kind that are being made by Karl Popper, Frederick Crews, Adolf Grünbaum, and others—as changing anything, Freud is immune to that.

B.: In Italy, there has been a wide debate on Rawls’ theory of Justice. Some of your contributions support Rawls’ point of view—something which is quite surprising for all our hermeneutic philosophers. Can you situate yourself in relation to Rawls?

RORTY: I don’t know why support for Rawls would be surprising to hermeneutic philosophers. I find Rawls almost non-controversial. He’s just summing up social-democratic politics and I can’t see that anything he says is particularly controversial. Some criticize very much the details of Rawls’ exposition. But what’s wrong with his general way of looking at things?

B.: Some people in Europe have more sympathy now towards Communitarian criticism than towards Rawls (the Communitarian movement started as a criticism of Rawls’ arguments). Don’t you think his “A Theory of Justice” can be considered a too abstract model for justice? In Italy (but also in France), because of the impact of historicism, it’s not a question of having an abstract Kantian model of justice. In Continental European history, struggles are important; justice can’t be imposed by philosophers, justice cannot be calculated. Rawls poses a kind of calculative method for determining if a country or state is just enough or not. So, that your approval of Rawlsism is quite shocking for a lot of historicist philosophers. Your insistence on ethnocentrism as unavoidable, and on the merely historical foundation of our political and ethical commitments, leads us to believe that you sympathize with the Communitarians’ approach (Taylor, Sandel, etc.).

RORTY: One should see Rawls’s book as written in response to the civil rights movement in America, which was itself quite a specific historical phenomenon, and which was initiated by a Supreme Court decision. Rawls’s book is being read in America as an account of the considerations which should govern American judges’ interpretations of the American Constitution. I think his book’s abstract Kantian structure isn’t very important. And, since I’m a sort of historicist kind of philosopher myself, I would prefer to forget about the Kantian abstractions in Rawls. But I don’t think that’s why the book is so important. It was taken to be important in America because it summed up American leftist intuitions as they existed after the civil rights movement.

I find the debate between Rawls and the Communitarians rather shallow and not very interesting. The Communitarians cite Rawls as an example of something they call liberal individualism. It’s very hard to make out what they mean by liberal individualism. If all they mean is that everyone has the sets of likes and dislikes and ideals that they have as a result of acculturation into a community, Rawls isn’t going to disagree with them. So, I find the so-called “Liberal versus Communitarian dispute” idle. Rawls’s book is not a great new discovery, it said nothing that was really startling. It just was a rather nice way of packaging a set of moral intuitions.

B.: Do you think the same thing about Rawls’s last book, “Political Liberalism”?

RORTY: Rawls has read both a lot of Kant, and a lot of Marx and Hegel and Dewey; Marx and Hegel are historicists, Kant isn’t. And his new book goes back and forth between a vaguely Deweyian position and a

vaguely Kantian position. It isn't a particularly consistent or well organized book and it doesn't really get us much beyond *A theory of Justice*. It's just responding to criticisms and correcting Kantian abstractions by historical reference, but still trying to sound vaguely Kantian.

In a way, there has been too much written about Rawls.

B.: But you too wrote about Rawls.

RORTY: For some reason Rawls became the center of discussion of social and political philosophy in America. So, anytime any of us had something to say, we tended to do it in the form of a commentary on Rawls. But this is just a peculiar American custom.

B.: In Europe, it became a peculiar custom to have discussions and debates between holists and individualists. You said you don't grasp in which sense Rawls is an individualist. Do you find this topic "individualism versus holism" shallow? Is it not also linked to the political scene, because everyone imagines that the right is individualist and the left is holist?

RORTY: That seems to me a very bad way to divide up left and right. Individualism versus holism in a philosophical sense cannot exclude any political issues. When the right says that we have to respect individuals, what it really means is property. Insofar as they're rightist politicians, what they're interested in is defeating welfare state legislation, and this has nothing to do with individualism versus holism. It's a smoke screen.

About the American background: there's a recent book by Michael Sandel, *Democracy and its Discontents*. Sandel is perhaps the most prominent of the so-called Communitarian critics of Rawls. If you read Sandel, you get the impression that there's been a domination of American thought by something called *liberal individualism*. You would never guess from Sandel's book that the leading American leftist thinker was Dewey, and no one ever says Dewey was an individualist. So, individual liberalism is an imaginary bogey man that has been created in the last twenty years or so. And it's unfortunate that people like Sandel and Taylor use the word *liberal* in the context they do because they're thinking of a refined philosophical theory of the nature of the Self as a Cartesian substance existing prior to culture and so forth. When Republican politicians in the US use the word *liberal*, what they mean is someone who wants to raise taxes on the rich and give the money to the poor. There is no connection between these issues at all, and the use of the word *liberal* in philosophy has no imaginable connection with its use in politics.

B.: What do you think about this European distrust for pragmatism? In Europe, your thought is considered more interesting than that of your inspirers, because there is a general suspicion towards James and Dewey, and a clear preference for Charles Sanders Peirce. In particular, many European philosophers reject the utilitarianist assumption of pragmatism, and they don't accept Mill's elaboration of ethics from an utilitarianist point of view; but the major pragmatist philosophers are bound to a kind of Mill's Utilitarianism.

RORTY: It's right to say that James and Dewey are part of a tradition that goes back to John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism. James dedicated his book *Pragmatism* to Mill's memory and he thought of pragmatism as utilitarianism applied to epistemological questions. I don't think there is anything wrong with Utilitarianism, so I don't think it's a criticism of Pragmatism to say it's utilitarian. I see Utilitarianism not as a positive constructive doctrine, but just as a way of trying to get away from philosophical abstractions and back to concrete political choices.

If it weren't for James, there never would have been anything called Pragmatism. James politely said that Peirce was the founder of Pragmatism because of a few paragraphs that Peirce had written thirty years earlier. Peirce had practically forgotten about these paragraphs. He was a brilliant idiosyncratic eccentric genius who wrote about sixty volumes worth of papers, most of which, thank God, haven't been published. There's very little connection between one of his papers and another, and very little connection even between individual sections of a single paper. Peirce simply couldn't continue a single train of thought very long. And he's a thinker whom people are always going to find intriguing because he throws out dozens and dozens of interesting suggestions all the time, but they don't add up to anything, and there isn't a coherent Peircian thought that you can get your hands on. So, if it worked for James's tribute, people would think of Peirce the way they think of Schopenhauer, as one of those funny 19th century figures who are not quite in the mainstream of philosophy but off by themselves somewhere. James and Dewey are very important figures in the history of philosophy, and Peirce isn't.

B.: Why are Europeans so impressed by Peirce's theory of sign, or semiotics, and think of him as a predecessor of Saussure and structuralism?

RORTY: Ian Hacking, a Canadian philosopher, said that Peirce and Frege jointly suggested to philosophers that, instead of talking about consciousness and experience, they should talk about science or about language; and you can give the two men equal credit for having changed the subject to language. But Frege became associated with logical positivism through Russell and Carnap and, if you wanted to talk about language but you didn't want to be associated with the logical positivist program, Peirce looked like an alternative hero. In fact, Peirce said there ought to be a science of signs, but it's very hard to say he founded a science of signs because his actual writings on semiotics are so weird. It's very hard to make any sense of what he was doing.

Peirce made a few useful distinctions which people have picked up and taken over, the same way Frege made a few useful distinctions, but it's hard to think of either of them as more than suggestive, whereas James and Dewey were more than suggestive. Just as Mill was a figure who had a very large coherent vision of the entire range of philosophical topics, so did James and Dewey. You can't say the same for Peirce and Frege.

B.: Coming back to the foundation of ethics. You don't believe that Utilitarianism is an attempt to found ethics on something stable, yet in the last years some philosophers have often attempted to found ethics on something. For example, Apel and Habermas attempted to found a universal ethics on the principle of dialogue. What do you think about these modern attempts to found ethics not on metaphysical grounds but, rather, on somewhat inter-subjective grounds?

RORTY: There's no need to found ethics on anything and the Habermas-Apel attempt to use language or communication in place of consciousness or experience is just going to produce the same kind of sterility that Kantian moral philosophy eventually produced. The point on which I've always differed from Habermas and Apel was about whether the notion of universal validity adds anything to ethical discussion. And what was common to Mill and Dewey was their saying: "let's just forget about universal validity, let's take moral and political problems one at a time and examine the consequences of alternative ways of solving the problems". The principles might come in handy as kind of heuristic reminders of what we have been doing, or what we might do, but there's no sense in which principles ground anything. So, it's a mistake to think of Mill's Utilitarianism as a rival to Kant or to Habermas, as an alternative attempt to give one great fundamental principle. That was Bentham's idea, but Mill was much more sophisticated than Bentham, and he didn't think he had a principle which would help you make any concrete choices or resolve any ethical dilemmas. The reason abstract foundational principles in ethics look so bad was given by Sartre in

Existentialism is an Humanism: they never helped anyone who actually had a difficult problem, and all they could possibly do is just serve to abbreviate a set of moral intuitions.

B.: But Mill had a very strong idea of the scientific method. When I was a student in Social Sciences in an Italian University, we were taught that the only way of being a good social scientist was following Mill's inductive method. Even in his political and ethical thought, didn't Mill need method?

RORTY: I admit, I'm being too charitable, Mill was a little obsessed with method, certainly in his book *System of Logic* and perhaps also in *Utilitarianism*. Compared to Bentham, he was pretty free and easy, but compared to Dewey he was still somewhat too abstract and somewhat too interested in method. Dewey criticized Utilitarianism on the grounds that talking about pleasure and pain is just itself too abstract to give us any terminology to decide on anything, and that is a legitimate criticism. But what Mill and Dewey have in common is just historicizing and concretizing moral discussion, and giving up the sort of Platonic hope that, if you rise to a sufficiently abstract level, your moral thought will be clarified.

B.: But when you stress the point "to avoid cruelty", could not someone give an Utilitarianist description of your sentence? Are not the criteria to avoid cruelty the same as the Utilitarianist criteria to diminish pain?

RORTY: You could, but it wouldn't add anything. Saying that pragmatists and utilitarians want to minimize cruelty is like saying Hegel wanted to maximize freedom, it's true but it doesn't convey much.

B.: Yes, also because Hegel didn't like freedom very much, he appreciated life in a barracks-state such as Prussia was.

RORTY: That's true.

B.: You said that the moral sense is essentially the same throughout all epochs: any difference concerns those we accept as our "equals" in rights. Do you think that the rise of ecological thought, which aims to extend to animals and to some natural beings certain rights heretofore only granted to human beings, represents a real change in our Western ethical pattern? For example, what is your opinion of books like *The Principle of Responsibility* by Hans Jonas? What about the enlargement of ethics to other beings, other than human beings?

RORTY: I unfortunately have not read Jonas' book. But this is a suggestion that can only be made by people with a great deal of security and wealth. If you're dependent on hunting in order to find food for your family, and if you're surrounded by animals that carry some virus fatal to human beings, even though it's harmless to them, it doesn't make much sense.

Expanding ethical concern beyond human beings mixes up two questions: the prudential question—don't we have to be ecologically minded in order to survive as a species? And the philosophical question—are animals moral subjects? And the present focus on ecology is a confusing mixture of these two questions. On the one hand, there are people saying "unless we do something fast, we'll run out of oxygen, or there'll be too much ozone," or stuff like that, which is probably true. And, on the other hand, people saying, in what seems to me a very abstract and artificial way, that we must stop being anthropomorphic, anthropocentric, and think in larger terms and so on. But we are never going to stop being anthropocentric.

B.: Anyway, do you feel that there are some political issues in international policy that are interesting to philosophers? For example, the matter of civil rights for women, for example in Islamic countries? Or even, maybe, the issue about some practices of sexual mutilation of women? In France, there was a lot of debate on whether Islamic girls should be allowed to go to school wearing a hijab or not.

Don't you think that some arguments from the new Communitarian movement against Rawls—that we have to respect traditions and cultural differences—have a value? Is it not difficult for a liberal universalistic approach to attempt to erase in fact all cultural specificity in the name of some universal liberal principles? Today ethnic studies claim a certain cultural relativism against the liberal universalism which is killing all differences. Because all women have the right to pleasure, we cannot tolerate, for example, the clitoridean excision. Don't you think that it is a really philosophical issue now, this clash between universalism and cultural relativism?

RORTY: It's a dramatic and difficult issue. On various concrete issues, I don't see that philosophy is of much use. I've read books and articles by people like Will Kymlicka, Joseph Raz, and Avishai Margalit on cultural identity, and I really don't think they add much to what we already knew with common sense. Everybody knows that tradition and cultural identity are important, everybody knows that when a group moves to a different country it has problems about cultural identity, this has been happening in the United States for ever. I can't see that the rough and ready practical compromises which we make, which all countries that have immigrant groups have always made, are being made more intelligently as a result of philosophical commentary.

B.: Don't you think that some political and ethical clashes have an implicit philosophy? That a kind of implicit philosophy haunts a lot of public discussion in the West? A Catholic philosophical view of the world in Italian public debate is very important. Don't you think that a philosopher might unveil philosophical presuppositions in what we consider concrete, commonsense political debate? that our political life is full of philosophical biases and that, maybe, the philosophers should say something to clarify all this?

RORTY: No, I don't. The debates between Catholics and non-Catholics about abortion haven't been eliminated by what philosophers have said about utility, human personality, or anything else. The issues about abortion are as plain to anybody who's never studied philosophy as to any philosopher. I've read a few articles by philosophers about the abortion controversy, and they always seem to me just merely clever. The Catholic philosopher is very clever at showing why abortion shouldn't be legal, and the non-Catholic philosophers are very clever at showing why it should be legal. If I were a politician, I wouldn't bother reading them.

B.: What is philosophy good for, if the philosopher hasn't anything to say to his citizens? What does the philosopher have to say?

RORTY: It's a mistake to think of philosophers as a core of experts whom you can turn to for light on a subject. Philosophers are not like economists—maybe you can turn to economists for advice.

B.: Don't you overvalue economists? Truman dreamt to meet a one-armed economist, so that he couldn't add just after having said something, "...but on the other hand"... Figure out philosophers' considerations, in so far as philosophers have a hundred hands.

RORTY: ...But consider literary critics, who write reviews of novels, poems and plays and so on. Nobody thinks of them as a body of experts to whom you turn. Philosophers are much more like literary critics than like economists. If they have a cultural function, it's to comment on what's going on, on the changes taking place, and, just as there are great critics, great novelists, great poets, there are occasionally great philosophers, who write a book that captures people's imagination: Habermas, Rawls, Derrida, Vattimo, Heidegger, Foucault, etc. When someone writes a book that captures the imagination, it doesn't make much difference whether you call it philosophy, or intellectual history, or cultural criticism, or whatever.

So, it's important for culture to have people who have read the classics of the history of philosophy, and who can make it their business to comment on contemporaries like Rawls, Habermas, Derrida, and so on. But it's a mistake to ask: "what should philosophers be doing? What are they good for?" and so on. It's like asking: what are intellectuals good for? The culture would be stupid if there weren't any intellectuals. But you can't divide the intellectuals up and say: here are the experts in this, here are the experts in that, and here are the experts in something else; you shouldn't try to ask: "what are the philosophers experts in?"

B.: Could we say that there is a specific pleasure for philosophy, as there is a pleasure for literature (as Roland Barthes pointed out), a pleasure for art, a pleasure for scientific research, etc.?

RORTY: No. There are various pleasures in philosophy. There's the kind of pleasure that lawyers get from winning arguments. Analytic philosophers are very much like lawyers, they build cases, and when they win their case they feel good; that's a pleasure. And there's another kind of pleasure you have from telling historical stories, stories of the kind Foucault, Heidegger, Vattimo and so on did: new, original ways of connecting all the great figures.

And there's also the kind of pleasure you get from throwing yourself into the interpretation of somebody. There are people who spend their lives interpreting Kant, there are even people who spend their lives interpreting Rawls. You get a certain kind of pleasure out of working your way deeply into the thought of your hero. And there are all kinds of pleasures associated with that, that some philosophy professors have. But I don't think that philosophy is anything precise and absolute, that you can say "there's a distinctive philosophical position".

B.: I have the feeling that even common people have a strange "biological need" for good arguments. Even when they believe strongly in something arbitrarily, they need reasons for their "odd" beliefs. Maybe you're right, *pleasure* is not the right word—but don't you think that this need for arguments is very close to a biological need of human beings?

RORTY: Some people have such a need, but one shouldn't confuse two different needs. There's a need to have an argument, to justify one's position to other people. There's also a need to feel oneself *letzbegründet*, as Apel says, firmly based, grounded in something ultimate, in touch with the real thing, with the authority of the church, or the categoricity of Kantian ethics, or something like that. That seems to me a distinct need, that's a need for security rather than a need to justify oneself. And philosophers often run the two together. Our need to justify ourselves to other people is a matter of our responsibilities to our fellow human beings. Our need to feel this kind of security that comes with: "I have a *letzbegründet*, I have a foundation, I have reason, or right, on my side". That's a not altogether healthy private obsession.

B.: Maybe these philosophers, and also a lot of other persons, are proposing an ethics that we should believe only in statements based on scientific evidence, or on something corroborated by experiments. Do you think that this kind of hyper-rational life, where we believe only in something confirmed by scientific experiments, is possible?

RORTY: I don't think it's possible because, for one thing, the language we use isn't confirmed by evidence. Individual propositions in the language are confirmed by evidence, but, as Ian Hacking puts it, what *truth-candidates* (sentences whose truth or falsity one is called upon to decide) you have are much more important than which candidate you decide is true. Hacking and Foucault make the point that it's your range of conceptual possibilities that really makes the difference. If somebody suggests a new range of conceptual possibilities the way Newton did, the way Hegel did, the way Freud did, to ask "do they have evidence?" is the wrong question. The right question is: "is this vocabulary a better tool than the one we are being asked to set aside?" And that's a matter of judgement.

B.: Who judges what is the best vocabulary? History alone? Was Hegel right, when he said that only the historical winner matters?

RORTY: Yes, pretty much. Kuhn said that for the Copernican revolution to take hold of Europe it took a hundred years. Because everything—theology, politics, and so on—had to change, even the image of what it was to be a scientist had to change. There were endless reverberating changes throughout culture. Agreeing with Copernicus wasn't a matter of sticking with the evidence, it was a matter of saying: "if you go with Copernicus, then are you willing to do all this other stuff". Popper, Carnap and all the positivists, all the people influenced by the positivist movement, believe that natural science is somehow a paradigm of human life, or that there's this thing called the Scientific Method, which is paradigmatic of rationality.

B.: Was it not also Mill's point of view?

RORTY: Yes. And Mill was wrong. Mill's *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty* are great books, but his *System of Logic* isn't worth reading, but that's OK, lots of great philosophers write stupid books.

B.: You quote a lot of Thomas Kuhn and not Feyerabend. In Italy Feyerabend had great success. Do you quote Kuhn rather than Feyerabend because you think Kuhn's description of scientific development is better than the comparable others?

RORTY: Kuhn is just more sensible. Feyerabend is too willing to say things simply to shock. I used to admire them equally in the 1960s, when Feyerabend was still writing his early papers. After he published *Against Method* and the later books, it seemed to me he had become like Peirce, somebody unable to think anything through, and just sort of tossing things off in fireworks. So, I prefer Kuhn just because Kuhn puts in the necessary qualifications, he makes appropriate concessions to his critics, he's just more sensible.

B.: But there is a major criticism against Kuhn: that in his reconstruction of science we lack something very important, the idea that science gets ever and ever closer to the real. And also, of course, the usual accusation of being relativist—this is also a very common accusation against you. Don't you think that there is a very strong need for human beings to be assured that they are close—or closer than others—to the real, that they are not completely deceived about what it is? Not in the sense of the mirror of nature, but to be closer to the Kantian thing-in-itself.

RORTY: Yes, there is a very strong need. There's also a very strong need to believe that if they're good they'll go to heaven if they die. But that isn't true.

B.: Is it an illusion this need to be close to the real? And what's not an illusion—for a human being, not for a philosopher?

RORTY: In Kuhn's terms, being satisfied with having solved problems you couldn't previously solve, and not asking yourself the further question: "am I closer to the real?" James started Pragmatism off by saying: "always ask what difference it would make to practice what your answer to the theoretical question would be". And, this is a perfect case: if I say: "yes I am closer to the real", or "no I'm not closer to the real", it doesn't make the slightest difference. All I'm doing is patting myself on the back if I say "I'm closer to the real". It's just paying myself an empty compliment.

B.: Others think that it is just this difference—which is empty for you—between facts or objects on the one side, and the real on the other, that is the secret of so much contemporary art. Don't you acknowledge that for a painter like Cézanne it was very important to be closer to what he felt as the real?

RORTY: No, I think it was important for him to paint the pictures that he painted. If he phrased it to himself: "this is how things really look", then, again, I think he was just paying himself an empty compliment. I don't think he needed to worry whether they looked that way to him, or whether they *really* looked that way. I simply have no intuitions in favor of the Lakatos-Popper view of this convergence to reality business. The only convergence to reality seems to me the last gasp of metaphysics.

B.: Is it just a matter of problem-solving for you? A problem-solving that we mistake as the search for truth. But the American Constitution allows everybody to aim to one's own happiness. Don't you think that it's something absolutely unsolvable, this search for happiness? Wittgenstein's last sentences in the "Tractatus" were that happiness is not something in the world, but rather a frame of the world, and that the world of the happy man is not the same as that of the unhappy man. Don't you think that maybe the philosopher is a metaphysician by nature, because he looks to unsolvable problems, the mystics? Happiness, the real, art—all this was "mystics" for Wittgenstein. What do you think of mysticism in Wittgenstein's sense?

RORTY: If I were as unhappy as Wittgenstein and unable to have any relationship with other human beings, I'd be a mystic too. In fact, for people of that sort, mysticism is all they've got and good luck to them. But it shouldn't be recommended generally. If people want to be mystics, fine. But I don't think philosophers have a need to take mysticism seriously as a possibility open to all human beings, as opposed to the special needs of people like Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, et al.

B.: You know that many European philosophers distrust, generally, the American philosophy, even your own philosophy, because they say—it's a commonplace—that Americans lack the tragic sense, they always just want to solve problems. What do you think about this accusation against Americans of not having a tragic sense? And conversely many Americans criticize Derrida and Foucault, for example, because they seem tragic thinkers. I would guess that you agree with these American criticisms.

RORTY: Actually, I think Derrida is a great comic thinker. I can't take the tragic stuff in Derrida seriously.

B.: But Foucault is tragic, in spite of his later recommendations on the use of pleasures and on the care of the Self. He died tragically anyway.

RORTY: Foucault is different from Derrida. One of Foucault's biographers said that the secret of Foucault was that he never really believed in the possibility of human happiness at all. I think that is true, he really didn't. That's tough. But again, it's not an attitude on which anyone ought to pride themselves. It's also a very French attitude.

B.: Is it an ethnic feature in philosophy?

RORTY: No. That's just European snobbery. There's an old European tradition of saying: "the Americans are young, immature, childish, they can't appreciate the depth of human experience, blah, blah". I think this is ridiculous. Anybody who has read Emerson, Melville, ought to know better than that. I don't think Americans and Europeans, or American and European intellectuals, differ in any interesting respect.

B.: Just a question of a writing style?

RORTY: Maybe. They differ a lot more from the French. Both the Germans and the Americans differ more from the French than they differ from each other. There's a distinctively French style in philosophy, which both the Germans and the Americans find weird.

B.: The real difference is perhaps between the Romance language intellectuals on one hand and the Anglo-Saxonic-Germanic intellectuals on the other.

RORTY: Yes. The French are special, they aimed at a certain distinction.

B.: But only in these last thirty years, because earlier they were celebrated because of their *clarté*.

RORTY: Before that. There's a tradition that goes back to Baudelaire in French literature, that these people like Sartre managed to pick up on. There's a French literary tradition that they pride themselves on, and why shouldn't they? But it does not indicate greater depth, it's just one more literary tradition.

B.: It's quite shocking that this French thinking style is so successful also in some prestigious American campuses now. Why is it so seductive for some Americans?

RORTY: I don't know the answer. I don't like this style.

B.: You too are seduced, a little bit, by this French style. You praise Derrida.

RORTY: Well, a little bit. But, the intellectual left in America became a Foucauldian left, and it would have been much better had it become a Habermasian left.

B.: Why did it become a Foucauldian left?

RORTY: I don't know. But the result of its becoming a Foucauldian left is that we have a left that takes no interest in national politics. It's all concerned with the state of its soul, and the impossibility of human happiness, and deep stuff like that.

B.: A seduction of tragedy.

RORTY: Yeah. Everybody wants to have a more tragic sense of life than everybody else, it's very nice for them, but it doesn't do leftist politics any good. Whereas a Habermasian left at least keeps you attuned to what laws are being passed, what policies are being adopted and so forth.