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Thus Spake Romano

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Abstract: The author of *America the Philosophical* responds to four sympathetic, but hardly in-the-pocket interpreters of his book. He appreciates Paul Croce's support of a broad conception of philosophy outside philosophy departments, but resists, as needlessly confusing, Croce's rhetorical desire to dub such activity "unphilosophical," à la the "uncola's" twist on Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. He welcomes John Kaag's adding him to a line of "atypical" American thinkers, but demurs at Kaag's willingness to accept the Platonic characterization of Isocrates as a sophist, and to blame Isocrates for the "might makes right" attitudes of his students, Glaucon and Thrasymachus. He applauds Jackie Kegley's vaunting of William James and Josiah Royce as role models for broad-based philosophy, but thinks her rejection of Richard Rorty as such a model stems from an overweighting of an ambiguous, canonical Rorty sentence about the link between individualism and participation in a community. Finally, he basks happily in Mary Rorty's suggestion that America the Philosophical continues, as a fourth wave, the pragmatist vision of philosophy.

Keywords: Rorty, Richard; Isocrates; United States of America; pragmatism; rhetoric; sophistry; argument.

It took me ten years to write *America the Philosophical*.[1] As many know, I've been a journalist for a long time, as well as a philosopher. I served 25 years under the masthead—if not the mast—as Literary Critic of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I'm now in my sixteenth year as Critic-at-Large of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. I wrote a good deal about philosophy over the decades for publications such as the *Village Voice*, the *Nation*, and *Lingua Franca*. I therefore wrote this book for a mass audience as well as for those "in" philosophy, as we quaintly put it. I wanted *America the Philosophical* to fall into a tradition of cultural history and criticism that addresses American intellectual life. I wanted it to be a sharp rebuke to a long chorus line of books dissing the quality of intellectual activity in America, books such as Richard Hofstadter's classic *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, and more recent efforts by less illustrious thinkers such as magazine writer Charles Pierce (not that other guy) in his *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free*.

Did I aim to outrage people in the philosophy profession? Well, at least some of them. The initial reaction to my book's title by many in the profession was, "Oh, great, *America the Philosophical*! A book about us! A book celebrating us!" Then, when the book ended up on the cover of the Sunday *New York Times Book Review*, driving academic philosophers to actually read it, they figured out that the book claims America is a great philosophical culture not because of you people, but in spite of you people.

I've thus run into a lot of, shall we say, provocative responses from colleagues at American Philosophical Association meetings. Truth be told, I've been coming

[1] Carlin Romano, *America the Philosophical*, New York, NY: Knopf, 2012.

to APA now for almost 40 years, since I was a student. I love APA—at least some of it. It's good to hear what people think about what I think.

I'm truly very grateful to everybody for taking the time. We're all so busy with our own work that anytime colleagues put an effort into looking at someone else's work, especially that of a contemporary, it's a real gift. I thank Paul Croce, John Kaag, Jackie Kegley and Mary Rorty for being willing to ponder *America the Philosophical*, to participate in our APA Pacific symposium, and to provide a polished version of their papers to *Existenz*. All express solidarity with multiple aspects of my book, which I appreciate. Here, in the interests of brevity, and in responding to my four commentators individually, I acknowledge the areas of agreement just briefly, or when necessary for context. For the most part, I focus on issues that challenge my positions in the book, or seem to call for a special response.

Reply to my Critics

Paul Croce

Given Paul Croce's enthusiastic support for the attention I give to thinkers outside professional philosophy, I feel ungracious in strongly resisting his wish to dub philosophical thinking that is not "professional philosophy" as "unphilosophy." But so I must. Although I welcome his use of popular culture to make a point, I believe Croce's attachment to the term unphilosophical to express my point of view—a desire to parallel Holder's popular 7-Up commercial that vaunts the drink as an "uncola" to Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola—is likely to confuse.

Croce sympathizes with my project and doesn't wield unphilosophical as a disparaging adjective. On the contrary, he means it as a description of an unconventional view of philosophy: that philosophy also operates outside departments of philosophy. A first problem with that move, however, is that in my own first section of *America the Philosophical*, I spend many pages invoking "America the Unphilosophical" as a phrase for the standard view of the United States in American intellectual history—the view that it is an unintellectual, non-philosophical culture. Confusion thus looms immediately.

A second problem with applying the term "unphilosophical" to what I regard as philosophical is that it is a part of my mission—one point on which I disagreed with my teacher, Richard Rorty—to recognize the prestige of the word "philosophy" and apply it beyond the boundaries of the professional academic discipline. I refuse to surrender the word and its prestige to academic technicians.

Croce agrees that the kinds of activities I am talking about are philosophical. He writes, "The particular ways of thinking in 'America the Philosophical'—the country, not the book,' are therefore not so much non-philosophical as another way to be philosophical beyond the mainstream discourses of professional philosophy." He further states, "the label 'unphilosophy' describes a way of thinking that some might regard as beneath the standards of professional philosophy, but that Romano shows to be lively philosophical discourse."[2]

Yet, somehow, under the spell of his Geoffrey Holder phrase, he insists on holding on to "unphilosophy." Thus, he offers it as "a way to describe thinking outside of professional philosophy which is, nonetheless, philosophical in character" (*UPL* 8). A way, I would say, but not a helpful way. It leads him later to describe exactly the society I dub "America the Philosophical" as "America the unphilosophical." I would therefore like to accept Croce's tip of the hat to my book's mission without accepting his contrary terminology, however sympathetically offered.

The other notion put forward by Croce that concerns me, amid many thanks to him for his rich expression of, and contextualizing of, how we agree, is that involvement in the marketplace beyond the academy risks commodifying and dumbing down what we understand by philosophy. He writes that "philosophical orientation" that "circulates unabashedly in the market place" necessarily "offers rewards but can also exact a price—a price that cultivation of some precision can help to remedy" (*UPL* 8). He gets more specific later: "If market concerns become paramount, the favor of an audience can itself become the measure of quality; conformity to popular views can overshadow the quest for precision and rigor, and also other important philosophical qualities up to and including beauty, goodness, and even truth" (*UPL* 12). The marketplace, he notes, "may even involve turning theories into commodities." Croce believes the "upsides of rigor" are "often overlooked in marketplace thinking." Toward the end of his paper, Croce refers

[2] Paul Croce, "Carlin Romano, UnPhilosopher of the Philosophical Landscape," *Existenz* 11/1 (Spring 2016) 7-15, here p. 8. [Henceforth cited as *UPL*]

to the "market's potential to divert from philosophical thinking" (*UPL* 15).

I do not share Croce's view that the marketplace automatically militates against rigor or high standards in philosophy. To me, it is a case-by-case matter. Moreover, I believe that when the marketplace of ideas expands beyond a department, a discipline, and even academe itself, standards often become more rigorous, acceptance of premises less certain, and the scrutiny of evidence more exacting. Having operated in both high-quality newspapers and high-quality philosophy departments, I've found greater critical examination of claims and arguments in the former.

John J. Kaag

I take the status of "atypical" philosopher as a compliment. I like the tradition into which Kaag places me—it feels comfortable. I am glad he sees "honesty" and "accuracy" in my portrait of philosophy in America, considering the indignation he says it occasioned among many members of the profession.

At the same time, I can't agree with a number of Kaag's observations about Isocrates. Kaag writes that Isocrates "was a sophist, yes, but a certain kind."[3] I spend three pages of *America the Philosophical* (*AP* 543-5) rejecting that claim. In doing so, I adduce the work of a variety of classicists with expertise in Isocrates' corpus, which includes, as Kaag acknowledges, a pamphlet entitled *Against the Sophists*. To cite just one example of such a judgment, Takis Poulakos and David Depew, in the introduction to their volume of essays, *Isocrates and Civic Education*, sum up the position of John Poulakos in yet another key work, *Sophistical Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*:

> Isocrates is anything but a Sophist. He demands reflection and deliberative choice, not unthinking response. He is far from a nomadic intellectual. He is a sedentary, somewhat conservative citizen of democratic Athens. His conceptual scheme does not revolve around what is powerful (*dunastēs*), as did that of the Sophists whose experience was formed by the rise of tyrants.[4]

Similarly, I also can't agree with Kaag's notion that we can or should evaluate Isocrates by the careers and positions of Glaucon and Thrasymachus—particularly their careers and positions as characterized by Plato in the *Republic*—simply because they studied with Isocrates. For one thing, we know, as the classical scholars cited in my Isocrates chapter assert, that Plato tended to distort anyone even remotely connected to sophists and rhetoricians. More important, though, is a common sense judgment: we cannot legitimately attribute the sins of philosophy students to their teachers. To reply to Kaag's query, Isocrates' moral sensibility is robust, not minimal. Was Husserl responsible for the misdeeds of Heidegger? Hardly. Closer to home, should we hold Harvard Law School's great constitutional liberal, Laurence Tribe, responsible for the positions of Ted Cruz? I rest my case.

Finally, although I share some of Kaag's perceptions about the challenges of writing philosophy for a trade publisher, I part company with a few of his assumptions. He says *America the Philosophical* was "not written for academic philosophers" (*NBT* 26). Well, yes, I wrote it for them too. I think Kaag really means that it was not written in a style, and with a professional apparatus, likely to please them. With that, I agree.

Given the decision to allocate my attention among so many thinkers, the book, of course, does not contain substantial embedded discussions of official philosophers such as Josiah Royce or Charles Peirce. But I differ when Kaag writes that I am "not explaining how classical American philosophy—in all of its various forms—fits with the broader historical canon" (*NBT* 26). Not explaining at great length? That I concede. But I do argue that American pragmatist philosophy fits well within a broad historical philosophy canon reshaped to admit the importance of Isocrates' alternate conception of philosophy. Indeed, in arguing that, I seek to live up to what I characterized in *America the Philosophical* as a Rortyan goal: that the modern philosopher invent a "remapping of culture," an "imaginative revision of the way we think about both the history of philosophy and American culture, one that might rock some of our clichés in the history of ideas" (*AP* 21).

Jacquelyn Ann Kegley

Jacquelyn Kegley rightly notes the resonances between George Fletcher, the contemporary legal thinker whose book on loyalty I praise in *America the Philosophical*, and the important thinker she has helped to revive, Josiah

[3] John J. Kaag, "On Not Being A (Typical) Philosopher," *Existenz* 11/1 (Spring 2016) 23-26, here p. 24. [Henceforth cited as *NBT*]

[4] David Depew and Takis Poulakos, "Introduction," in *Isocrates and Civic Education*, eds. Takis Poulakos and David Depew, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press 2004, pp. 1-18, here p. 9.

Royce, who wrote the classic book on that virtue. It's one of many ways in which Kegley and I value the same approaches and missions in philosophy.

By comparison, our differences, I think, are largely matters of nuance, interpretation, and tone. She wonders about my gathering together so many diverse thinkers without any "clear connection discernible amongst them, or any distinct criteria that makes the work of them philosophical."[5] Her concern stems, I'd say, from the philosopher's frequent desire for necessary and sufficient conditions in articulating a concept such as "philosophy" or "philosopher." Other readers have expressed the same concern about *America the Philosophical*. In responding to such questions as, "Why is this thinker included and not that one?" or "What are the criteria for inclusion and exclusion?", I reply in both Wittgensteinian and journalistic mode.

The Wittgensteinian response is the familiar family-resemblance rejection of precise criteria for all concepts, his notion that a blurred concept is still a concept. From a practical point of view, however, my view of philosophy is not absurdly blurry. I think philosophy behooves or implies the making of assertions or the questioning of them. It calls for the gathering and presentation of evidence. It assumes sustained attention, agreement to listen to counterclaims, counterevidence and counterexamples, and the openness to possibly changed facts and circumstances that we identify with pragmatic tentativeness in arriving at beliefs. But the exact degree to which those putative criteria must be met itself remains open. I submit to Kegley that a large number of the 125 or so thinkers I discuss or reference in *America the Philosophical* exhibit those practices in greater or lesser form.

My journalistic response is to point out that it hardly follows from the inclusion of some thinkers that other thinkers left out don't meet my criteria to be philosophical. Journalists and philosophers often argue and inform through example, and the choice of one example—or lead, or story, or anecdote—does not imply that other examples would not be equally appropriate or effective. On the hustings of my book tour, when audience members raised other thinkers and asked, "Doesn't X belong in *America the Philosophical*?", my response was often, "Yes, I take X to be further confirmation of my argument." In addition, my aim was not to toss card-carrying figures such as Saul Kripke or Scott Soames out of philosophy, but to allow other figures in.

A similar nuance of "inside" and "outside," I think, explains Kegley's concern that the title I give to one section of the book, "The Rising Outsiders," about African Americans, women, Native Americans, and gays, suggests "that they are somehow newcomers to philosophy" (*TSP* 17). She is more correct when she sees me as holding that people from all four groups were always a part of American philosophy, but largely unrecognized by the subject's professional guild. Kegley raises further issues of inclusion and exclusion that are more explained by exigency and practicality than necessary and sufficient conditions. Kegley wonders about my exclusion of Mexican-American and Latin American philosophers, completely missing in action in *America the Philosophical*, as are Asian-American philosophers. In my introduction, I announced that "in a longer book, I might easily have added sections on the growth of Latino philosophy, Asian American philosophy, and other areas worthy of attention" (*AP* 21). Since *America the Philosophical* appeared, I've published a long article entitled "Dao Rising: Chinese Philosophy Lifts Off in America."[6] Should I do another edition of *America the Philosophical*, such material would rightly find a place in the "Rising Outsiders" section.

I regret that Kegley finds my discussion of women philosophers "less satisfactory" than other parts of the book, but I think that's because she sometimes senses disparagement when none is meant. She takes my emphasis at one point on the persuasive storytelling of Jane Addams to suggest that Addams didn't engage in "very effective argumentation" outside of narrative. I didn't mean to imply that. I specifically included a mention of the University of Illinois Press' republication of Addams' argumentative books to protect against such a thought. I quoted Robert Westbrook's telling comment, "It is difficult to say whether Dewey influenced Jane Addams or Jane Addams influenced Dewey" (*AP* 358). Of course, they influenced each other. Finally, I referred to the "supposed paucity of her theoretical texts" (*AP* 358), hoping that the word "supposed" indicated my rejection of the judgment.

[5] Jacquelyn Ann Kegley, "Do Not Block Inquiry: Philosophy in America—The Tradition of Socrates and Peirce," *Existenz* 11/1 (Spring 2016) 16-22, here p. 17. [Henceforth cited as *TSP*]

[6] Carlin Romano, "Dao Rising: Chinese Philosophy Lifts Off in America," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (9/23/2013), http://www.chronicle.com/article/Dao-Rising-Chinese-Philosophy/141693.

Kegley and I have no quarrel about the quality of Jane Addams as philosopher.

It is true, however, as Kegley notes, that I sometimes cite thinkers in *America the Philosophical* for one weakness or another. I make no apology for that—the book is a work of cultural criticism as well as reportage and argument. I much appreciate Martha Nussbaum, for instance, and admire her industry, clarity, argumentative ability and compassion, but point to her writerly style as an explanation of her limited influence as a public intellectual outside academe.

It is also important to recognize that in a book that examines or comments on some 125 figures, one cannot expound a particular thinker's philosophical views with any degree of completeness—many appear, rather, as examples whose philosophies are simply betokened as greater attention is directed to their lives. I sought in *America the Philosophical* to humanize some of the paradigmatic philosophers in the book to underscore that they were no more merely argument machines than thinkers not automatically accepted as philosophers. That, I hope, might explain to Kegley my choice to highlight Arendt's relationship to Heidegger while still, in my discussion of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's *Why Arendt Matters*, outlining the power of her ideas. Arendt struggled to reconcile her romantic and sexual feelings with her less emotive beliefs—so, I imagine, did the founder of *Playboy* magazine, Hugh Hefner.

The largest divide between Kegley and myself, however, comes in regard to Richard Rorty. Kegley considers him "an inadequate pragmatist model" (*TSP* 19) because she sees him putting his emphasis on the "individual and private" rather than inquiry and "public debate." Kegley comes to that conclusion, I believe, because she puts too much weight on a sentence in the introduction to Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that has misled others as well. In it, Rorty writes that we must be "content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable."[7]

Kegley reads Rorty as claiming that in regard to individualist self-creation and human solidarity, never the twain shall meet. I view that interpretation as hard to square with the way those two things go together in the life of many an intellectual, including Rorty's life. Rorty, I submit, was making in that sentence a logical and, in regard to some personalities, a psychological point about incommensurability, not an ontological one about the ability of the two inclinations to go together in an actual human life. Rorty, for instance, certainly isolated himself with books for significant periods of his life, as do all bookish people, self-creating his iconoclastic intellectual personality. But I'd bet he would agree with Kegley's pragmatist point that "the individual alone tends to not be self-critical and thus does not change or refine views unless confronted by others with differing ideas" (*TSP* 19). Indeed, Rorty—unlike, for instance, Robert Nozick— consistently replied to other philosophers at length over the years in places such as Rorty's volume in *The Library of Living Philosophers* and *Rorty and His Critics*. He mixed the demands of self-creation and human solidarity, as many philosophers, artists and intellectuals do. It is simply untrue of Rorty as an individual that, as Kegley claims, he "argued to keep the private, individual domain of life separate from any public engagement of an individual" (*TSP* 20).

Perhaps the foremost refutation of Kegley's picture of Rorty as urging almost a solipsistic philosophical life is his late book, *Achieving Our Country* (1998). There, in training his sharp cultural and political eye on the relationship of the modern American Left and American society, he so presciently identified the societal divisions that led to the election of Donald Trump that the *New York Times*, in a "Critic's Notebook," lauded him for the book's almost Nostradamus-like prediction of the 2016 political scene.[8] Indeed, by the end of his career, without leaving conversation, understood in the best sense, behind, Rorty titled Volume 4 of the Cambridge University Press collection of his essays, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. That might be taken as the final formulation of his viewpoint.

Mary V. Rorty

When Mary Rorty writes, "Romano places Rorty where he would like to be placed,"[9] I can say only that her judgment pleases me no end. As does

[7] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press 1989, p. xv.

[8] Jennifer Senior, "Richard Rorty's 1998 Book Suggested Election 2016 Was Coming," *The New York Times* (11/20/2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/books/richard-rortys-1998-book-suggested-election-2016-was-coming.html?_r=0

[9] Mary V. Rorty, "Envisioning a Fourth Wave " *Existenz* 11/1 (Spring 2016) 27-30, here p. 27. [Henceforth cited as *EFW*]

Mary's assessment that my chapter on Dick is not a "hagiography." Although I view the two years I served as his Princeton research assistant as deeply formative of some of my philosophical views and methods, I continued to disagree with him for decades about others, such as the helpfulness of multiple eponymous adjectives piled high on one another in philosophical prose, and the value of Heidegger's work.

I applaud Mary's addressing the notion of rational persuasion and her questioning of whether argument by explicitly articulated reasons is the only kind. Dick's emphasis on the power of art, fiction and film to persuade us, and especially of moral truths, made a huge contribution to a field, philosophy, that ironically ended up—in the age of analytic dominance—with an impoverished notion of argument. I am glad that Mary sees the controversial character of *America the Philosophical*, and even the degree to which some establishment philosophers hate it, as a badge of honor. So do I.

Mary's excitement at discovering Isocrates, of course, makes perfect sense given her own training as a classical scholar. That said, I appreciate her recognition that we should no more accept the status quo of philosophical history in regard to ancient Greece as anywhere else. I didn't adduce all the scholarship by others on Isocrates in that chapter only to entertain. That scholarship, to my mind, requires us to rewrite the way we understand ancient Greek philosophy, to complicate it beyond the standard tale of the Pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It also, as she indicates, forces us to ponder "varieties of persuasion" (*EFW* 28).

Like John Kaag, Mary wonders whether my upbeat assessment of America as a philosophical culture can survive the age of Obama wrenching into the age of Trump. It can. Some who know the title of my book, but not the content, joke with me that Trump's victory demands a bonfire of all copies of the book. The title strikes them as false to the alleged degradation of our public discourse represented by the 2016 election.

On the contrary, I think Trump's challenge to what he deems political correctness, his mainstreaming of fascist, Breitbartian thinking that media elites previously deemed fringe, has managed, in a classic John-Stuart-Millean way, to provoke an avalanche of philosophically sophisticated writing and commentary about issues such as racism, illegality, ethnic prejudice, world order, and civic behavior. The avalanche would be unimaginable if everyone's thought and ideology in the United States rested, so to speak, between one 40-yard-line and the other.

I never intended *America the Philosophical* to suggest that every American speaks and writes clearly, and with sophistication, or that the person at the top especially must—though Obama happily fit the bill. The point was that the range of philosophical expression and activity in America, sometimes triggered by crude formulations and slogans, flourishes as in no other place. "America the Philosophical"—the country and the book—will not only survive the Trump Presidency, but gain vigor from it.

Finally, Mary's suggestion in both the title and the end of her comment, taking off from David Rodick's review in *The Pluralist*, that America the Philosophical represents a "fourth wave" of pragmatism that follows on Emerson's *Divinity School Address*, Dewey's call for a recovery of philosophy, and Rorty's *Mirror of Nature*, well, what can I say? I rush to fetch my surfboard.