



Volume 11, No 1, Spring 2016

ISSN 1932-1066

Envisioning a Fourth Wave

Mary V. Rorty
Stanford University
mvr2j@stanford.edu

Abstract: This comment on *America the Philosophical* calls attention to its treatment of Richard Rorty's place in the history of American pragmatism and as a successor to a seldom-discussed Greek philosopher, Isocrates. Carlin Romano's discussion of both the content of contemporary American philosophizing and the range of people he acknowledges as participating in it is itself a valuable contribution to the tradition he describes.

Keywords: Romano, Carlin; Rorty, Richard; Isocrates; American Philosophical Association; Bourne, Randolph; Rawls, John; pragmatism.

It is a pleasure and an honor to be asked to participate in this homage to Carlin Romano's book, *America the Philosophical*.¹ It gave me an occasion to return to a book I enjoyed thoroughly the first time through. Only sorry that Dick did not survive to read it himself.² He's the one who should be here this evening.

As I understand Carlin's project, it is a pretty ambitious one. He paints a picture of American pragmatism, placing Rorty in a tradition—indeed, in some sense as a paradigm of that tradition—an example of what a really American philosopher could look like.

And that project implicates two things: a view of what characterizes being an American—and a vision of what it is to do philosophy. Undaunted, Carlin proceeds to spend six hundred pages doing both. Ambitious? You bet! Controversial? What good is any project that even mentions Rorty unless it is controversial?

I will briefly mention a few things about the book that were of particular interest to me: (1) Attentive details in the Rorty chapter; (2) The discussion of Isocrates; (3) A question of style; and of course, (4) The vexed question: What is philosophy, anyway?

(1) As a Rortyan by marriage, if not by scholarship, I was of course delighted, not only by the chapter on Rorty—which featured one of the family's favorite pictures of Dick with his daughter—but by the placement of that chapter, and the recurrence throughout the rest of the book of the themes adumbrated there. The chapter on Rorty follows a sixty-page genealogy of American pragmatists. Romano places Rorty where he would like to be placed, as heir of and contributor to American pragmatism, not least because of his admiration for John Dewey.

I appreciate Jackie suggesting that I am an expert on Rorty,³ but if there is an expert in the room, it is

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

² Richard Rorty (1931–2007).

³ Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley https://youtu.be/0YCYHdYl8_8 (37:32).

probably Carlin. He has read a lot of Rorty, and a lot about Rorty, and that is very clear in the thirty-page chapter titled "Rorty's Revolution." The book is an interpretation, a view of Rorty and his influence, but by no means a hagiography. In the chapter on Rorty, Romano treats the critics with the same care as the subject. He notices that lots of other scholars of pragmatists and pragmatism refuse to recognize their chosen philosopher or movement in Rorty's descriptions. He notes as well Dick's rather generous inclination to drag into his particular tent of pragmatism many contemporaries who might have had little inclination to enter it voluntarily. He does not ignore the most common criticism of Rorty as a relativist, and does what I consider a nice job of parsing that platitude.

Romano is effusive in his praise of *Mirror*,⁴ and dates Richard's "shooting star" reputation to its publication in 1979. The reception of and reaction to that book certainly set Rorty on a particular course. My own impression at the time was that Richard was himself surprised—perhaps even puzzled—that the book was so controversial. "Perhaps they misunderstand what I was trying to say," he might have thought, "maybe I can say it more clearly." So he kept trying to make himself more clearly understood. When, as Romano notes at the end of that chapter, Dick commented in the Schilpp volume that *Mirror* was out of date (AP 157), maybe what had happened was that in the twenty-eight years since its publication, Rorty thought that he had finally got the message across. But maybe instead, the world had caught up.

(2) My own philosophical preparation had been as a classical scholar. I wrote my Hopkins dissertation on Aristotle's theory of perception. So when I got to Section 5 of Carlin's book, I was delighted. We cannot have too many Greek heroes! There is always room for another. And who was this guy, anyway? It is bad enough that when he was a Chicago undergraduate, Rorty had written a paper on one Greek I had never heard of; now he is being compared to another Greek I had never heard of. I trotted down to our Stanford garage and looked through the eighteen bookshelves of the library that Dick had brought from Virginia. No Isocrates.

But what I admired most about that section of Carlin's book was not just the excellent reading list it provided of books on and by a Greek thinker I had not

known about, but the use he made of this figure. His charting of the territory occupied at a historical moment by rhetoric, oratory, argument, reasoning, persuasion, sophistry and philosophy sensitized this reader to the emotional impact of the connotations of the words we choose—as well as deepening my understanding of at least one thing that Romano himself was doing in his book. If rational persuasion is one plausible understanding of what might be called "philosophy," it is at home with, it is bordered by, other varieties of persuasion, and the borders are not always as clearly agreed upon as it might seem. For example, here at this conference, "propaganda" features as an important topic for public discourse, and can easily be seen as occupying some space in the Isocratean landscape.

We like to think that rational persuasion is the philosopher's turf, and ours alone. The various shades of public intellectual instanced in Carlin's book suggest a wider range of application than the professionalized discipline. In titling his book *America the Philosophical*, Carlin may have had several objectives in mind: paying homage to the lively intellectual life of the country, and also, by an imaginative re-expansion of the range of things to which the term "philosophy" can be usefully and to varying degrees appropriately applied, to counter any tendency to think of it as an isolated, hyper professionalized, and irrelevant enterprise.

Insofar as that is one of its intentions, or, if not, at least one of its effects, it is an optimistic book—optimistic and positive about philosophy under some description, as well as optimistic about America, under some description. The America about which Carlin is optimistic is not a consistent America, an America that does everything right, or rationally. It is not an America that can live up to Rawlcean notions of justice as fairness; and Part Six of the book, discussing John Rawls' "magnificent failure" is an illuminating contribution to the literature on that subject. But it is an America that offers, through its many, many, varied forums and outlets, lots of opportunity for public discourse, and lots of encouragement for people from many disciplines to become public intellectuals.

I cannot resist a comment about that optimism. Carlin, I am glad you wrote the book when you did. I love ending with Obama as Philosopher in Chief, and wish Richard had lived to see that. Like most of my generation I have become used to thinking that the golden age lies in the past; but I am not used to thinking of that golden age as lying as recently as four years in our past! I appreciate, Carlin, that you claim to be as

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1979.

optimistic today as you were when you wrote this book.

(3) Style. If one searches for Carlin on the internet—which of course we all did—among the thousands of hits on his name, there is a lot of discussion of the style in which the book is written—and a lot of ambivalence about it. During an interview with Jim Fleming, Romano explains that it is "a book in which people discover figures they never met before, and in a concrete way that makes them interested."⁵ Certainly it includes anecdotes and impressions and analyses, even of thinkers I had looked at before, that I found interesting or provocative or illuminating, or controversial—or just good clean fun. Some called it "capacious," some called it "audacious," one called it "sprawling." Jonathan Réé, a British philosopher who is also a friend of the family, described the book and its author in a way that I found very sympathetic. He describes Carlin as a "voracious reviewer, a tenacious reporter, and an enthusiastic interviewer,"⁶ and he says of *America the Philosophical* that "it is a likable book—but some people are going to hate it." I count myself among those who really liked it. And come on, Carlin—if nobody really hated it, you were not doing it right. At some point when people were laying the number of their *Social Sciences Citation Index* citations out on the table and measuring them, Rorty not only proudly pointed to his rather large number—he gleefully added "and most of them negative." Good job, Carlin!

(4) And so—what is philosophy, anyway? Just as my Dewey, or James, or Socrates is the real Dewey, or James, or Socrates—so philosophy is what I say it is; what I include on the accepted reading list. Carlin has a pretty long list. As synonyms for philosophers to be included, try: Thinkers. Intellectuals. Serious thinkers and thinking. Civilized discourse. Public deliberation. Engagement with the problems of the day. Rational persuasion. Attainment of intersubjective agreement. Public intellectuals.

Not everyone on his list is an academic philosopher, though some are. Not every academic he interviews and admires is in our discipline; a wide variety of what I think of as his public intellectuals are academics in other disciplines—and Carlin has a very wide

disciplinary reach. Fairly importantly, at this moment in history, he treats as in some sense philosophers people who—imagine this!—are not academics at all. Many of us have, or are working toward, our union card—a PhD earned in an established academic philosophy department; but Romano's book suggests that that is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to earn a place as a participant in philosophy as Rorty might have envisioned it. Talking across disciplines and cultures, rather than narrowly within them, is valorized and exemplified, in this book and in the Karl Jaspers Society that sponsored this panel on it.

A Word about Context: The American Philosophical Association

This is an interesting panel to have at an APA meeting, and I congratulate the organizers for their prescience. Romano's book is pretty hard on the elite philosopher's club of which he is a dues-paying member. The book is indeed a few years old. Have things changed much?

Changing our world by changing our language—expanding (or narrowing) what the words we use denote or connote—is a nicely pragmatic, and indeed, Rortyan, way to approach social change: Transformation of our vocabulary through re-description changes our world as lived. But changing practices can also change our world, and there are signs that there are some very energetic top-down efforts to change the organizational culture of the APA.

Have things changed much in this bastion of elite privilege since you wrote the book, Carlin? At the moment all three divisions may have female presidents, and there is certainly a lot of Asian philosophy on this program. I went to the business meeting at the Eastern Division APA a few months ago, and the only other tourist/auditor there was a colleague who thought things were changing; she accused the APA of waging war on poor beleaguered white males, who were being driven out of the association for the sake of women and minorities. I understand that the divisions do various counts of those things so there is probably qualitative evidence on one side or another. What I noticed in my informal count of the gender distribution in the list of program participants, or a headcount at the reception, that the percentages are still pretty much the same as those Carlin cited. And there is a discouraging continuity in the content, as well; every time I come to the APA—and I have been coming to the APA at least once a year for about five decades now—I am stunned

⁵ Radio transcript, *To The Best of Our Knowledge*, March 2, 2014, www.ttbook.org/book/transcript/americaphilosophical (last accessed 5-24-2016).

⁶ Jonathan Réé, "Review of Carlin Romano's 'America the Philosophical,'" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 20, 2012.

at how many papers have exactly the same titles, albeit different authors, as they did when I first started coming. But there are signs that the organizational culture, along with the times, is undergoing some change.

Before I close, I would like to add one name to the genealogy between Isocrates and Rorty that Carlin is drawing—one of the few people who is not in the bibliography, although he is in the index: Randolph Bourne. Born in 1886 and dying in 1918, he was a progressive left intellectual and early pragmatist. He did not produce a systematic theory or magnum opus, but he did write passionate, critical, thoughtful essays on many of the subjects treated in Carlin's book. I was recently introduced to him through a discussion group of the Stanford Comparative Literature department. Last quarter, Bourne was the subject. I was struck by how many of the problems he sees and writes about—the attitudes of the undergraduates, the invidious effect on universities of corporations, insufficient attention to the poor—are the same problems that beset us today. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

One of Carlin's reviewers sees the book as following in a revered pragmatist tradition:

Emerson's *Divinity School Address* represents a "first wave"...a "spiritual declaration of independence." John Dewey's call for "a recovery of philosophy" away from abstract considerations to "problems of men" constitutes a "second wave." Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, emphasizing the need for philosophy to engage the contemporary intellectual landscape in conversation, represents a "third wave."

Romano's book, admonishing the hyper-professionalism and its formalism, while celebrating the proliferation of philosophical activity within the interstices of American culture, stands as a tsunami-like "fourth wave"—a contemporary example of what Rorty envisioned as "philosophy and the conversation of mankind."¹⁷

Let's keep the conversation going!

¹⁷ David W. Rodick, "Review: America the Philosophical," *The Pluralist* 8/2 (Summer 2013), 128-30, here p. 128.