

A Culture of Egotism: Rorty and Higher Education

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Abstract. This chapter takes a critical look at universities from the perspective of the neo-pragmatist philosophy of education outlined by Richard Rorty. The chapter begins with a discussion of Rorty's view of the ends that educational institutions properly serve in a liberal democracy. It then considers the kind of culture that Rorty takes to be conducive to those ends and the kind that is antithetical to them. Rorty sometimes characterizes the latter as a culture of 'egotism'. After describing the main aspects of such a culture, the chapter uses it as an interpretive key for understanding the 'dark side' of the contemporary university. Our thesis is that within a Rortyan, neo-pragmatist philosophy of higher education, the ends that universities are meant to serve in a liberal democracy are vulnerable to frustration and corruption by a culture of egotism.

1. Introduction

Discourse around Richard Rorty's contribution to philosophy of education has for the most part been cast in *aspirational* terms. Early discussions focused on the goals of liberal education as Rorty articulates them, as socialization and as individuation, as well as Rorty's appropriation of John Dewey's pragmatism and philosophy of education (Nicholson, 1989; Arcilla 1990; Wain 1995; Rosenow 1998). Recent commentary has shifted toward conceptual resources that can be gleaned from Rorty's metaphilosophy, ranging from the idea of philosophy as redescription, the idea of social hope, the practice of cultural politics, and the power of literature and the sentimental imagination, as applied to education (Wain, 2001; Noaparast 2014; Mahon & O'Brien 2018; Oliviero 2019a and 2019b; Schwimmer 2019, Thoilliez 2019, Wortmann 2019). Rorty's writings—what they say explicitly about education and what they imply for a neo-pragmatist philosophy of education—have thus been read mainly as a source of insight (or, by his critics, obfuscation) on what education in liberal democracies might become. The argument between defenders and critics of Rorty on education has been about whether or not Rorty describes liberal educational aspirations correctly, about whether he brings to view the kind of education the denizens of liberal democracies should strive for.

There has been much less discussion of how a neo-pragmatist philosophy of education developed along Rortyan lines might illuminate the wrongs inflicted by contemporary educational institutions in liberal democracies. In other words, discussions of Rorty's philosophy of education have tended to overlook its *diagnostic* as distinct from its aspirational dimension. The two dimensions are of course connected: it is, at least in part, by frustrating the aspirations we properly attach to education that educational institutions do their harm. But how should that harm be described in pragmatist terms? By what mechanisms do contemporary universities in particular frustrate the educational aspirations that neo-pragmatist philosophy enables us to articulate? What kind of culture is responsible for that frustration and how might it be resisted? This chapter will explore these diagnostic questions.

We begin with a brief outline of Rorty's conception of the goals of a liberal education. As already noted, Rorty draws on Dewey's idea of education—as initiation into and renewal of the democratic form of life—but he also gives this idea a distinctive twist by reinterpreting the ends that democracy serves. We then turn to Rorty's diagnosis of a cultural trend that in his view threatens to undermine democracies and frustrate them in realizing their fundamental purposes: what in his later writings Rorty calls 'egotism'. The discussion then moves onto a consideration of egotism as a cultural force shaping (or mis-shaping) contemporary universities. Our thesis is that within a Rortyan, neo-pragmatist philosophy of higher education, the ends that universities are meant to serve in a liberal democracy are vulnerable to frustration and corruption by a culture of egotism. We back up this thesis with a sketch of how egotism actually manifests itself in contemporary universities.

2. Rorty and Education

Rorty follows Dewey in taking education to be a key building block for a healthy, functioning democracy (see Rorty 1982b, 1989b, 1990, 1999). To clarify: democracy, on the pragmatist view that Dewey and Rorty share, is not just a form of governance. It is not just a political regime, characterized by free elections, the rule of law, and so on. Rather, both Dewey and Rorty conceive of democracy as a whole form of life. As a form of life, democracy is something its members must be initiated into, become familiar with, acquire a sense of belonging to and loyalty for, learn to love, and pass on to members of succeeding generations. A healthy and functioning democracy will be one in which its members have successfully acquired the habits of its community, have internalized its norms, formed an allegiance to its institutions, identified with its values, and so forth. This is why, for both Dewey and Rorty, education is a crucial component of democracy. Democratic habits, allegiances, and sentiments are not given at birth: they must be learned and renewed in each generation.

It would be wrong, though, to think of education in a democracy to be merely a matter of fitting in. A healthy and functioning democracy, after all, is one in which the individual members can flourish and realize themselves *as* individuals. Persons are rarely able to individuate merely by conforming, so they need an education that will enable them to lead their own lives and make of themselves what they will. *Self-making* is thus a crucial feature of the democratic life-form, but this too has to be learnt. The need for democracies to initiate its members into the habits of a collective way of life, as well as to prepare them for their own projects of self-making, suggests a two-fold function of education which Rorty once formulated as follows:

Education seems to me two quite distinct enterprises: lower education is mostly a matter of socialization, of trying to inculcate a sense of citizenship, and higher education is mostly a matter of individuation, of trying to awaken the individual's imagination in the hope that she will become able to re-create herself (1990, 41).

'Re-create herself' suggests that the individuation that takes place in higher education is mostly a matter of *undoing* the socialization that takes place in lower education. It suggests that, rather than complementing or building upon the achievements of socialization made through school education, individuation through higher education proceeds through the negation of those achievements. This Nietzschean, but decidedly un-Deweyan thought, is the one Rorty means to convey in this passage: that higher education helps to individuate by enabling the individual to rebel against the established order, the order of habits, norms and values into which the individual had been socialized. But the Nietzschean opposition between individuation and socialization not only goes against the original spirit of pragmatism, it is also unnecessary and causes needless trouble for Rorty's overall view. There should be no need to unlearn the habits acquired in the course of being socialized into a *democracy* in order to undertake individuating projects of self-creation. While self-creation may involve some distancing from taken for granted democratic norms and values, it isn't clear why it should largely involve rebelling against these norms and values, or why it should be the distinctive task of higher education to facilitate that distancing. Taken this way, Rorty's Nietzschean view of higher education sits uneasily with his Deweyan view of *all* (not just lower) education.

A parallel can be drawn between the goals of individuation and socialization Rorty distinguished in his 1990 essay on education and the ideals of self-creation and solidarity he distinguished in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989). In the latter, Rorty argued that we ought to be proactive in cultivating both self-creation and solidarity, but as distinct and irreducible ideals that may come into conflict. A liberal democracy, he argued, ought to be able to accommodate whatever *private* projects of self-perfection its members come up with while sustaining *public* commitments to cooperation, active citizenship, and solidarity. The ideals of self-creation and solidarity were thus mapped onto a distinction between private and public values that fundamentally had nothing to do with each other. But while this way of construing the relation between self-creation and solidarity made some sense of the irreducibility of these ideals, and helped to guard against doomed attempts at bringing them to a grand, totalizing synthesis, it failed to show how these two values can work together in the service of liberal democracy. As if realizing this, Rorty would later drop this way of thinking about the central ideals of the democratic life-form, the way that matched them to the private-public distinction (2010, 506-507). Rorty, in our reading of his work, replaces the distinction with a construal of self-creation and solidarity as two irreducible modes of *self-enlargement* (Smith & Llanera, 2019; Llanera 2020).

The idea of self-enlargement can be thought of as Rorty's neo-pragmatist redescription of the Deweyan idea of 'growth'. Growth, according to Dewey, is the general good promoted by democracy (1916). Self-enlargement, for Rorty, is the same good as growth but without any metaphysical connotations. As we just saw, Rorty distinguishes between two irreducible kinds of self-enlargement, both of which are crucial to a flourishing democracy: enlargement of self through projects of self-creation, and enlargement through widening solidarity with others. Self-creation involves self-enlargement in the sense that it expands one's sense of self.

One self-creates by enlarging one's repertoire of experiences and encountering a variety of human beings, real or imaginary. The more imaginative resources the self-creator has, the greater her chances of weaving an idiosyncratic life project. Solidarity is the mutual commitment that ties a community of individuals with shared beliefs, needs, desires, and moral concerns. Democratic solidarity, in Rorty's conception, is an ever-widening set of such commitments, an ever-widening set of loyalties. It is a form of solidarity that takes as its goal the promotion of happiness or flourishing of ever-widening circles of people, people who are free to pursue their own projects of self-creation. Self-creation and solidarity, so described, are edifying ideals of self-enlargement. These ideals help us grow into better versions of ourselves as we participate in the life of a healthy, functioning democracy.

Where does education, and specifically higher education, fit into this picture? Universities contribute to the flourishing of democracy by enabling growth or self-enlargement not just by way of individuating projects of self-creation, but also by way of expanding our solidarity with fellow learners. Rorty rejects the view that it is primarily by *instruction* that institutions of higher education promote self-creation and solidarity. Rather, they do it by serving as sources of *inspiration*, by eliciting feelings, passions, and affinities for academic subjects and activities. In Rorty's view, self-enlargement, through self-creation or solidarity, has an indispensable romantic component (1989; 1998/2007; Llanera 2016). A university education, when functioning in a way that contributes to the flourishing of democracy, will thus be one in which the *love* of learning—doing experiments, reading books, engaging in conversation, learning from the experiences of people unlike ourselves, discovering the life of other communities, and so on—finds full and inclusive expression. Going to university, understood as a place where projects of self-creation and unknown solidarities beckon, is more like entering a romance than steeling oneself for success in a particular occupation.

If this is not the experience that people actually find themselves having at university, it may be because the university is not functioning in a way that promotes the ends of democracy—understood as the two basic forms of growth or self-enlargement—but is serving some other purpose. It may be because the culture that pervades the university is hostile to democracy and threatens to undermine the ends that democratic educational institutions are supposed to serve. Rorty offers us a way of interpreting how such a culture works, and he has a particular name for it: egotism.

3. Egotism

Although elements of Rorty's idea of egotism can be traced to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), it is only much later, in the essays "Redemption from Egotism" (2001/2010) and "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" (2004/2010) that Rorty actually uses the expression. In the former piece, Rorty criticizes the state of smug self-satisfaction that can arise when thinking is ensconced within closed systems of knowledge and interpretation. He invites readers to resist the reassuring universalism such systems can entrench, and to adopt instead a more self-questioning, open and other-oriented stance. In "Philosophy as a

Transitional Genre”, Rorty sketches a philosophical history in which Western thought strives to save itself from various self-limitations. It moves from religion to philosophy to literature in this quest, eventually overcoming self-limitation in the form of a literary culture, a culture where normative commitments are grounded not with certainty and finality in God or Nature, but in open, imaginative, and ever-widening relations with other human beings. A literary culture is oriented by the ideals of self-creation and solidarity, which come to be seen as more worthy forms of self-enlargement than those obtained through religious revelation or philosophical Truth. The latter is characterized by responsiveness to something given, by finality and closure; the former by openness, romance, and creativity. While a literary culture shares with the cultures of religion and philosophy an aspiration to overcome self-limitation, only a literary culture does so by releasing us from the temptations of ‘egotism’.

Egotists, in the Rortyan sense, are self-centered not so much in being selfish, but in being self-satisfied. They find no reason or motivation to question their set of beliefs, since they regard themselves as being in possession of the Truth. To illustrate, Rorty classifies some kinds of religious believers and some philosophers as egotists:

Egotists who are inclined to philosophize hope to short-circuit the need to find out what is on the mind of other people. They would like to go straight to the way things are (to the will of God, or the moral law, or the nature of human beings) without passing through other people’s self-descriptions. Religion and philosophy have often served as shields for fanaticism and intolerance because they suggest that this sort of short-circuiting has been accomplished (2001/2010, 395).

Egotism arms individuals with the certainty that makes them resistant to different views, believing that their understanding, expressed using what Rorty calls their ‘final vocabulary’, is fully informed. Rorty argues that a person’s final vocabulary pertains to the language used by persons to articulate and justify their life world (1989, 73). To clarify, *final* does not mean that these vocabularies are inflexible. Rorty’s ironist—a person who puts in doubt her inherited vocabularies and traditions—has a final vocabulary too. We should understand finality here in the sense that the language-user is at risk of becoming argumentatively feeble without it: “If doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only hapless passivity or a resort to force” (Rorty 1989, 73). The final vocabulary of a liberal for Rorty is creative and open to transformation, since “a turn of phrase in a conversation or a novel or a poem—a new way of putting things, a novel metaphor or simile—can make all the difference to the way we look at a whole range of phenomena” (Rorty 2001/2010, 391). The final vocabulary of egotists is closed to new ideas, conversation, and the possibility of being persuaded out of their existing mindsets. The egotist thrives in what Rorty describes as knowingness: “a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm” (1998, 126).

Egotism also has a social aspect. It is encouraged in communities that inculcate the notion that their social identity is of a fundamentally higher rank or superior status compared to other groups in society, a view that justifies the harmful sense of ‘us *over* them’. Rorty thinks that such tribalism can manifest itself as much amongst the intellectual elites of analytic philosophy as amongst the members of a fundamentalist religion. Both take pride in their perceived superiority over other groups, and both are highly resistant to persuasion out of their collective self-view. Insofar as they do that, both show signs of egotism (Rorty 1982a, 2003/2010; Smith and Llanera 2019). A rigid sense of exclusivity and privileged status are the defining features of egotist communities. They habituate their members to feel an unquestioning self-assurance, to be comfortable with themselves and at their best only amongst their own kin, those whom they perceive to be their equals. Egotist cultures, in short, are close-minded and ethnocentric in a vicious way, that is, in a way that makes them unable to learn from or respect others. They are the antithesis of the tolerant, cosmopolitan culture of a liberal democracy (Rorty 1986/1991, 204). Liberal democracies must be on guard to identify and challenge these egotist communities. They must be nurtured by a culture that is resistant to the false appeals of egotism at the individual and collective level.

Egotism, then, is the enemy of the ideal of Rortyan self-enlargement. Self-enlargement, understood as Rorty's neo-pragmatist twist on the Deweyan notion of growth, is the end served by democracy. Democracy, as a form of life, has an ethos that has to be learned and has institutions that embody that ethos. It is the primary task of the educational institutions of a democracy to embody and to enable the learning of self-enlargement. Although Rorty himself distinguished between the socializing function of lower education and the individuating function of higher education, we argued earlier that it makes more sense for a pragmatist to view self-enlargement as the goal of all education, lower and higher, and to view all education as having both socializing and individuating aspects. We should think of the socialization that goes on in higher education as having to do with the higher learning of democratic solidarity, and the individuation as having to do with the higher learning of self-creation. Both forms of learning, however, are imperiled by a culture of egotism. It is to the culture of egotism that afflicts contemporary institutions of higher learning that we now turn.

4. Egotism in universities

How do universities manifest or nurture egotism? First, by building knowingness into their self-justification and self-presentation. An obvious way of doing this would be for a university to base its teaching and research on some religious or metaphysical dogma. A university that sought to inculcate a fixed set of beliefs in its students, or that conducted scholarship solely for the sake of vindicating a particular doctrine or faith, would have an egotist orientation in Rorty's sense. It does not follow from this either that religious universities must be egotist or that liberal secular ones must be free from egotism: a Catholic university, say, might provide its students with a lively sense of human possibility and of the rich variety of human self-descriptions; while a secular liberal university might be fundamentalist in its commitment to norms of Truth and Progress, leaving its students with a

minimal sense of other ideals and the contingencies of the things they do value. There are secular as well as religious forms of knowingness, secular and religious ‘final vocabularies’ that a university can present as beyond question and seek to entrench in its teaching and research.

Dogmatism and closed-mindedness are obvious manifestations of knowingness, but it is not by overtly nurturing these qualities that most contemporary universities, whether religious or secular, typically show their knowingness. After all, few modern universities present themselves as transmitters or defenders of dogma. On the contrary, most pride themselves on their promotion of ‘critical thinking’ and the dogma-breaking innovations of their research. But the knowingness to which the modern university is prone is not so much a presumptuousness about the content of educated belief, as a presumptuousness *about future possibilities*. The egotism of the contemporary university in regard to its teaching has in part to do with its presentation to its students of a future which is fundamentally *given*. At best, a university education is presented as enabling *adaptation*. This might be done by way of teaching skills that on the face it appear as instruments of individuation, such as critical thinking or creativity, but the underlying rationale is the instrumental value of such skills for adapting to environments that are given and unquestioned. This knowingness about the future, its presentation to students as something to adapt to rather than to create or build for themselves (in ever-widening bonds of solidarity), is one mark of the egotism of the contemporary university.

We see this attitude most crassly on display in claims made on behalf of universities to ‘future-proof’ their students. Such claims rest on the questionable assumption that the designers of university curricula already know what the future will be, the future boiled down to its essentials, namely what the job market holds and the skills required to survive and prosper in it. In certain parts of the world (for example, at the time of writing, in Australia), universities now follow their paymasters in government in presenting themselves as if their *only* legitimate educational purpose were to make their students ‘job-ready’. Furthermore, to question this—even on the grounds that no one really knows what jobs graduating students will need to be ready for—is to risk accusations of betrayal, of putting some nebulous ideal of education before the ‘real needs’ of students.

Yet it is in the very presumption to know what the ‘real needs’ of their students are, to have a hold on the future against which their students will be ‘proofed’—that is, *protected*—that universities reveal their knowingness and their egotism. This is to put in Rortyan terms an insight formulated by Hannah Arendt, who drew attention to the folly of educators who presume that the future is theirs to bestow to the educated (1977). The problem of knowingness she adverted to was not just an epistemic problem about the grounds of beliefs about the future, but an insidious displacement of the ownership of that future. The fundamental problem is a moral-political one: it is to hide the fact that the future is for the next generation to make, and precisely because of this, not for the current generation of educators to pronounce upon. The egotistic knowingness of the current generation serves to rob the next generation of the “chance of undertaking something new, something foreseen by no one” (Arendt 1977, 196). The primary responsibility of the educator, including the

university teacher, is to ensure that “the future remains in the hands of her students,” as Raimond Gaita put it in his commentary on Arendt (Gaita 2000, 43). A university fails in this responsibility by teaching only what it (the university) takes its students to need. In doing so it displays a covert, insidious form of egotism.

While egotism is partly about putting the self before others and lacking interest in others’ points of view, it more fundamentally involves self-satisfaction and a diminished capacity for surprise. The knowingness of the egotist, we saw, “prevents shudders of awe” and makes the egotist “immune to romantic enthusiasm”. For Rorty, the primary role of higher education is to inspire enthusiasm, to elicit a love of learning in one or more of its many modes. Bringing these thoughts together, an egotist culture is fatal to higher education, in the Rortyan view, because the effect of such a culture is to deaden the very capacities that higher learning is supposed to bring to life. The crucial capacities at stake are affective at least as much as they are cognitive: capacities for surprise, for awe, for romantic enthusiasm, for inspiration from the unknown and the unfamiliar. To be rendered immune to romantic enthusiasm, by way of immersion in a culture of egotism, is *de facto* to be excluded from the main transformative possibilities of higher education.

While no one would say that higher education has lost all its romance, a good case can be made that it is now much harder to find. One reason for this is that feelings of surprise, awe, and love for a subject cannot be measured, and in the ‘audit culture’ that now pervades higher education globally (Shore and Wright 2015; Collini 2017), what cannot be measured for auditable ‘quality assurance’ purposes cannot be allowed to count for much. Universities have become deeply suspicious and disdainful of anything that resists measurement, anything that doesn’t fit into ‘objective’, standardized learning models. A concern with ‘student experience’ persists—and is perhaps greater, or at least more vocalised, than it has ever been—but only insofar as it is visible to an auditor and relevant to university rankings for student satisfaction. Something similar can be said of the ‘romance’ of discovery. As cost-effectiveness and public impact take over as the overriding legitimating principles of research, the idea that research be undertaken in the *chance* of discovery is frowned upon. Research is less about trying out new approaches and more about ensuring that successful, predictable, on-trend outcomes are within reach.

In short, the instrumentalization and commodification of higher learning and research, evidenced in many empirical studies (Connell 2019), reflect a managerial ‘knowingness’ that has little room for romantic sentiment. But the problem of egotism here is not just that the pursuit of measurable and quantifiable proxies for learning and research displaces the love of learning and scholarship. The very language used to identify, describe and justify the core activities that take place in universities makes them *unlovable*. One would be hard pressed to find campus administrators describing the university today as a place of wonder and imagination and Socratic leisure. It would be more precise to think of higher education as an elite and rigorous program, one that prepares those who are lucky and talented enough to afford such an education to enter the ‘real’ world from a position of advantage (as if university life were not real enough). The corporate-bureaucratic final vocabulary of the

contemporary university may be mocked for its absurdity (Collini 2012), but as a means of de-erotizing the activities of learning, teaching and research, it is supremely effective.

The same forces that drive the de-erotization of the university also have a narrowing and enclosing effect on the sense of community. In the Rortyan terms we have been elaborating in this chapter, they make the academic community more egotistic. The markers of egotism among academics can be explained from two perspectives. From a disciplinary perspective, academics today are increasingly driven toward specialisation. Niche expertise, after all, is appealing; in some areas, being the best at one or two narrow topics bears the sign of genius and originality. So long as one has the support of the relevant experts, one's success in the field is more or less set. Sadly, the triumphs that accompany this focused conception of excellence comes at the expense of broader learning and the possibilities of interdisciplinary work. In a world obsessed with specialisation, a more wholistic and pluralist approach to research and teaching—an approach more in line with the experimental character of pragmatist philosophy—is regarded as unnecessary for academic success. From a career perspective, there exists an overriding preoccupation with rank and status, a defensive attitude with respect to the achievements of one's own academic tribe. At its worst, this preoccupation enables the tendency to demean the achievements of other academics, and discourages interest or curiosity about anything outside the scope of the tribe's interests. In an 'industry' as competitive as academia, rebelling against this tribal system is a big risk. Some cope by acquiescing to the experience of alienation, no matter how demeaning. Others learn to enjoy the game of rank and status, further entrenching disciplinary tribalism. The self-satisfaction bred the culture of egotism in contemporary universities is as much about the boosted egos of tribes as it is of individuals.

5. Conclusion

Our contribution shows how a Rortyan perspective can illuminate both the grandeur and misery of contemporary university life. The grandeur consists in the potential of universities to contribute to a genuinely democratic culture, a culture of self-enlargement. Understood properly, self-enlargement is not about individuation at the expense of socialization, as Rorty occasionally made it seem in his early writings on higher education, but about growing by way of self-creation and democratic solidarity. At its best, a university education serves these two ideals, or these two aspects of the ideal of self-enlargement. But in reality, contemporary universities are shaped by a countervailing force: a culture of egotism. This culture not only imperils the ideals of self-creation and democratic solidarity, but it substitutes misplaced ideals of objectivity and accounted excellence. Much of the misery of the contemporary university, its 'dark side', can be understood as a consequence of this culture. Those who, like Rorty, see universities as serving the ends of democracy, will want to resist it.

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