

***A Bridge over Turbulent Waters: A Reply to Justin Cruickshank on Comparing Popper and Rorty***

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Perhaps it's a sign of the times that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when some intellectual giants have been gone for a while, that their thoughts can be comfortably compared without the sneering of their respective partisan disciples. On the other hand, it may be simply the intellectual courage of a few, like Cruickshank, to transcend the partisan politics of the academy and find points of connection, even overlaps in thought and perspective between two seemingly different, if not oppositional, thinkers. Be that as it may, what we have before us is a welcome addition to scholarship, with refined and concise overviews of the main philosophical contributions of Popper and Rorty. Perhaps the passage of time requires some background to writings of writers who at the time did not need it (because it was too obvious to belabor).

In what follows, my intent is to add and amplify, as a postmodern critical rationalist with a Marxist bent, rather than find flaws in the essay. In general, it seems that the comparison may suggest how Popper is more (historically and philosophically) central than Rorty to debates over liberal democracy, but that Rorty provides a welcome improvement on whatever shortcomings are found in Popper.

To begin with, it seems that if we contextualize the writings of Popper and Rorty we could easily understand their respective difference in focus or attitude rather than in substance. Being critical and pragmatic in some sense of these loaded terms, both wished to take their philosophical—read metaphysical and epistemological—conviction to the applied area of the social sciences in general, and to politics in particular, hence Cruickshank's emphasis on liberal democracy as their meeting point. But while Popper is fighting not only the horrors of Soviet totalitarianism as well as German National Socialism (Nazism), that is, European fascism, Rorty's targets are probably more associated with the Cold War in America and whatever capitalist cruelties come to the fore in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their biographies matter, one a Jewish (though converted) refugee to New Zealand of all places and later a British immigrant (who did well, being knighted), and the other a self-described WASPish bourgeois whose only claim for refugee status is having left the dominant and privileged Analytic community.

Why does this matter? It matters because once the historical context is more fully appreciated both the perspective from which they speak and the goal towards which they pursue their philosophical works may make more sense. In other words, neither of them is a disembodied theorist whose epistemological diatribes are limited to the confines of esoteric academics. Instead, they both, under different circumstances, felt part of a public conversation about human rights and the dignity of the human intellect (hence Cruickshank's correct emphasis on their concern with limiting human suffering). Moreover, both Popper and Rorty realized at some point of their academic and professional careers that what they said mattered, and that they were responsible—in

light of their powerful positions—for how they said what they said. Obviously Popper is still dealing with the Logical Positivists and reductionist inductivists of his era while Rorty has taken the “linguistic turn” towards pragmatism and contingency, yet they are both active participants in a world-wide conversation about the horrors of World War II and the ensuing Cold War. Much is at stake, and not simply another invitation to be a keynote speaker at yet another academic conference. Incidentally, one could easily add Jürgen Habermas to this duo so as to solidify our understanding of the cognitive dependency of policy making on epistemological (and linguistic) commitments.

The second issue is that of reform, incremental or not. This is doubly based on a commitment to criticism as well as refusing to adopt a telos, utopian or Hegelian/Marxist which runs through both of them, regardless of the respective critiques both keep on suffering unjustly. If you are critical—think of the philosophical tradition from Socrates to Marx—then you are open to changing your views. If you are open to changing your views, you need criteria according to which your choice can be justified or rationalized, explained beforehand or *post hoc*. The shift to the criteria themselves rather than the very process of critical evaluation is itself problematic, of course, and therefore necessitates for both of them some acceptance of democracy and of pragmatism (more nuanced than commonly appreciated). The liberal part for Popper and Rorty is correctly reassessed by Cruickshank, and needs no repetition. But where they differ in some sense is their different emphasis on the individual. Popper’s methodological individualism (see Joseph Agassi on this) when applied to the social sciences has much to do with fighting the ghosts of totalitarianism on the one hand, and the flaws of Marxism and Freudianism on the other: untestable generalizations (hypotheses) are not simply unscientific, but remain unhelpful and dogmatic—either you agree with me or I try you and find you guilty of counter-revolutionary thought. Rorty seems more congenial to thinking about the individual as a member of a community (of speakers, for example, rather than only in national identity terms), and doesn’t harbor the Popperian hostility to any group-think. He’d allow for collegial conversation at the country (or faculty) club so long as everyone remains polite. As an insider, the powerlessness of the outsider is conceptual and not personal.

But instead of continuing on the psycho-social and all too personal trajectory of this point, let’s return to its policy implication: piecemeal engineering. For Popper this is the best of all evils because it doesn’t include a revolutionary moment that kills innocent citizens as well as it enables corrections when choices are found to be disastrous or to have unintended consequences. The ongoing critical process never rests; its force is in its self-policing, in its vigilance. For Rorty the pragmatism of piecemeal engineering is a bit more *laissez-faire* insofar as his commitment to the contingencies of life prevents him from decidedly choosing (once and for all) one policy over another. Popper sees the Russian Revolution, Rorty sees student protests of the anti-Vietnam War; with different frames of references, they still come to an agreement on the least harmful political and social (and economic) process that would defend democratic and liberal principles.

The third issue that overlaps the two points already made and the brilliance of Cruickshank’s juxtaposition is their distrust of certainty—scientific for Popper and linguistic for Rorty. This easily leads Popper to his concession of human fallibility (even on scientific matters, those that were supposed to be “real” and objective and value-neutral) and Rorty’s notion of contingency. Yes, Popper speaks the language of Heisenberg and Co. while Rorty speaks the language of the Wittgensteinians and Foucauldians of his time, but they are still bridging gaps rather than dividing them with more accuracy. When they sound so differently it’s not limited to their ethnic accents or their academic residences, but to the audience they wish to reach. If Popper gave up on the Continental babble of the Heideggerians, Rorty still wants to catch their attention. If Popper wanted scientists to pay attention to him, Rorty wanted cultural critics to think he’s one of them. So, they remain the products of their academic and professional contexts just as much as their personal ones.

Finally, as Cruickshank correctly argues, their commitment to reducing suffering—more natural for Popper than for Rorty, since the worse that the privileged Rorty saw was the debates over John Rawls’ view on justice—could easily bring them together. This isn’t a stretch of the imagination, but a more profound shift of emphasis that we see coming about in the 21<sup>st</sup> century from the confines of the theoretical to the lived experiences of our fellow humans. If the most we can hope to achieve is yet another brilliant critique of this or that idea or a more precise formulation of an intellectual position, then we have missed what philosophy was always intended to be, namely, a way of life. Popper and Rorty read enough to appreciate this point no matter their personal tastes and preferences in quoting this authority rather than that. Their differences are negligible when the task at hand is to improve the human condition and contribute one’s ideas and proposals to the world. Not an idealized or utopian world, but one that takes humans as they are and hopes to educate them to be more tolerant and charitable. With this in mind, Right and Left, Conservative and Liberal, are useless labels whose sharp ideological edges can start wars rather than prevent them.

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## References

Cruickshank, Justin. “[Anti-Authority: Comparing Popper and Rorty on the Dialogic Development of Beliefs and Practices.](#)” *Social Epistemology*, 2013. DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2013.782589