

Remarks at MOMA

Richard Rorty
October 27, 2000

One issue that is raised by Peter Eisenman's writings, and especially by his exchanges with Jacques Derrida, is that of the relation of philosophy to the rest of culture. I am more suspicious of attempts to use philosophical ideas outside of philosophy than Eisenman is. In particular, I am not sure that the criticism of what Derrida has called "the metaphysics of presence" has much relevance to the work of architects, painters and poets. The first paper I ever wrote on Derrida's work and influence was read to an audience of literary theorists and was called "Now that we have deconstructed metaphysics, do we have to deconstruct literature too?" That title expressed my skepticism about the attempt to turn what seemed to me a specifically philosophical movement, a commentary on specifically philosophical texts, into something larger and more pervasive. As I see it, the attempt to make philosophy useful to the arts is OK if philosophy is used as a source of inspiration but dubious if it is used as a source of instruction.

I can clarify what I mean by using philosophy as a source of inspiration by a couple of examples. Consider the relation of Yeats' later poems to the quasi-philosophical system found in his book *A VISION*. That system was, or so the story goes, dictated to Yeats' wife by spirits. When Yeats asked his wife to ask the spirits why they were taking all this trouble, what they were there for, they replied that they had come to give Yeats metaphors for poetry. Among the results of the spirits' beneficence were the gyres and the phases of the moon which pop up here and there in Yeats' poems. Readers of these poems, however, typically do not bother to read *A VISION*. The poems stand on their own feet, and so do the metaphors they cultivate. You do not have to take the system seriously to be bowled over by the poems. To write intelligently about the poems, you need not worry about the truth claims of the system. You need not regard it as a source of instruction, nor need you even worry about whether or not Yeats himself regarded it as such.

My second example is the relation of Botticelli's *Primavera* and his *Birth of Venus* to the neo-Platonism which was popular among the intellectuals of Botticelli's Florence. Iconographers have done a lot of decoding of these paintings, using the writings of Marsilio Ficino and others. Botticelli was, they have shown, inspired by those writings. But you do not have to take neo-Platonism seriously as a set of propositions about how things really are in order to be bowled over by the paintings, nor to write intelligently about them. You do not have to ask what propositions Botticelli held to be true, nor whether they in fact are true. It is enough to be tipped off to the causal influences which Ficino and others exerted on his imagination.

What did matter for Botticelli was an intellectual ambience that freed him up to paint scenes from pagan mythology—the ambience we call Renaissance humanism. What mattered for Yeats was the ambience we call literary modernism—one in which the poets were freed up to do various things they had not been able to get away with previously. These liberating spiritual climates did not have philosophical foundations, nor were they applications of philosophical ideas. They affected philosophy as much as they affected the arts. They did not have a source in any particular area of culture. They were not the working out of a dialectic.

One way to tell the difference between a work of art being inspired by a religious or philosophical view and its being an application of that view by asking yourself: do I need to know about the view in order to appreciate the work? This is not a very good test, however: appreciation is a matter of degree, so

the more you know about all the circumstances surrounding the creation of the work, the better you can appreciate it. A slightly less crude test is: do I have to believe in the view in order to take an interest in the work? Is the work the sort of thing that only a follower of Ficino, or only a convinced reader of A VISION, or only a pious Hindu, or only a devout Mormon, or only a passionate Heideggerian, can really get into it?

If the answer to this latter question is “yes”, we may begin to have doubts about the value of the work in question. In the case of works which seem inseparable from certain religious beliefs, we start taking about pious kitsch. In the case of works that seem inseparable from a philosophical credo, we may find ourselves saying that a given cultural province has become over-theorized. If you don’t much like Rothko or Pollock you may grumble that these are paintings that only people who have read too much Clement Greenberg can love. If you found most of the “deconstructive” readings of literary texts which were fashionable in the 1970’s and the 1980’s contrived and pointless, you are likely to say that they only look good to people who have read too much Derrida. If you don’t like Eisenman’s houses, you may say the same.

But one should not say any of these things, for they are all false. In fact, lots of people who are enthusiastic about Rothko and Pollock find Greenberg a bit silly. There were, I should imagine, lots of Florentines who loved the Primavera but thought Ficino pointless, and indeed remained unclear about how the differences between Renaissance humanism and decadent scholasticism. You can like Barbara Johnson’s reading of Melville or Eisenman’s houses a lot even if you find philosophy, up to and including Derrida, a great bore. The work of art may respond to needs quite different from those which were satisfied by the philosopher who inspired the work, even in cases where the artist thinks of himself or herself as applying the philosopher’s principles. In the case of religious kitsch, on the other hand, you are very unlikely to hang a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on your wall if you do not actually believe that he died for our sins. Important works of art take on a life of their own independent of their inspiration, even if that inspiration is regarded by the artist as instruction.

I like Eisenman’s houses and Derrida’s philosophy, but I have trouble seeing the former as an application of the latter—more trouble than either Eisenman or Derrida do. I think of Derrida as an important philosopher, one to whom I am very grateful. He has inspired me to write stuff I should not otherwise have written. But I do not think of myself as applying his ideas. I would be hard pressed to list any beliefs whose truth I learned from Derrida’s books. I have found him a liberating influence, but not a source of premises from which interesting conclusions can be inferred. So when I read the exchanges between Derrida and Eisenman I am often baffled. I just don’t get the connection.

On my reading of him, Derrida is part of a swelling chorus of philosophers who have contributed to a movement of intellectual liberation, a movement of which American pragmatism was one manifestation. This movement is a shift away from the idea that there is something to which human beings are responsible—something like God, or Reality, or Truth. It is a movement toward increasing self-reliance on the part of our species, toward the idea that we are responsible only to one another, and not to anything that is neither a human being nor a creation of human beings. Nietzsche’s and James’ assaults on the correspondence theory of truth contributed to this movement. So did Dewey’s insistence that politics is not a matter of acting on principle but of social experimentation. So did Heidegger’s account of what he called “the onto-theological tradition” as an attempt to find something big and non-human to which human beings might attach themselves, the being of beings. So do Derrida’s redescription of this tradition as “the metaphysics of presence”, and his polemics against the idea of escaping from temporality and contingency by finding something that will stay forever fixed..

I think of this movement as it appears within philosophy as a repudiation of representationalism. What binds Derrida to the American pragmatists, and both to and Nietzsche, is the idea that thought and language are not attempts to get in touch with reality, but attempts to find more imaginative ways of describing reality. What binds Derrida to Wittgenstein is the idea that linguistic meaning is not a referential relation between words and the world but a relation between the uses of some words and the uses of other words. What binds both Derrida and Wittgenstein to such contemporary analytic philosophers as

Davidson and Brandom is that the latter have developed a way of talking about language that defines reference in terms of the acceptability of inferences, and makes this acceptability a matter of changing social practice.

Philosophical anti-representationalism is one of many forms that this sense of increasing self-reliance has taken in recent times. Two of the others are democratic politics and the increasing autonomy of the arts. Democratic politics, understood as Dewey understood it, is a matter of identifying truth with what free exchange of opinions arrives at, rather than as conformity with the nature of things. The increasing autonomy of the artist is a matter of ceasing to treat art as an attempt to represent perfection, and indeed of abandoning the very idea of perfection. Just as democratic politics says that the decisions of a free and informed citizenry about what to do cannot be immoral, so the idea that the artist is autonomous says that what the painters, writers and architects of the day should not be held up to a norm that existed prior to the inspection of their productions. Rather, the artists should be encouraged to create the taste by which they will be judged. Just as democratic politics has as its aim to produce as free, and therefore as diverse, forms of human life as possible, so the idea of the autonomy of art looks forward to an ever-expanding diversity of artistic productions.

The idea that philosophy can produce truths which lesser areas of culture can then proceed to deduce consequences, or can produce ideas which can then be applied, is hard to reconcile with that of the autonomy of art. But that bad idea came naturally to the metaphysicians of presence, since metaphysics purports to offer the ultimate context in which everything, including art, was to be seen. For anti-representationalist philosophers, on the other hand, the idea of such a context is as dubious as that of moral or artistic perfection. These philosophers are not anti-philosophical, and are not interested in bringing philosophy to an end. But they are interested in getting the educated public to give up on the idea that there is an all-encompassing discipline whose products can be assumed to be relevant to the rest of culture.

Metaphysics is tied up with the idea of perfection, the idea of a natural terminus to the process of moral or artistic or political experimentation. The three movements that I have been describing as sharing the goal of greater self-reliance for humanity are helping us give up the idea the process of the self-creation of humanity has such a terminus. That is why they all resist the nineteenth-century idea that natural science is the measure of all things, and that science can set goals as opposed to finding means to accomplish ends decided upon by non-scientific means. Natural science, considered pragmatically as the discovery of ways of describing the world which make it more predictable and manageable, does have an imaginable terminus. We can make good sense of the idea of a perfected science of nature, one which does not need improvement because it gives us all the technology we are ever going to have, and also explains why we will not have any more than that—why we will never travel faster than light, for example, or transmute base metals into gold.. But we have no use for the idea of a novel that makes further experimental fiction unnecessary, any more than for that of a building that makes architectural experimentation redundant. Experimentation in the sciences could come to an end because, so to speak, we know it all. Experimentation in politics and the arts cannot, because, unlike natural science, the function of these areas of culture are not known in advance. Art and politics change our purposes rather than simply making us better able to achieve those purposes.

To give up the idea of a natural terminus of inquiry is to exalt the imagination, defined as the faculty that produces new ideas, over reason, defined as the faculty which makes the ideas we already have coherent with one another. That is one of the links between the increasing autonomy of the artist and the pragmatist view of scientific descriptions of reality as ways of achieving human purposes rather than attempts to be faithful to the intrinsic nature of reality. But to exalt the imagination is to make it less and less likely that philosophy is going to be useful either for art or for politics. Philosophy as metaphysics pretended to describe the unchanging context within which the events of political, literary and artistic history took place. Philosophy as the critique of metaphysics—which is what philosophy has largely become in the course of the last two hundred years—is like negative theology. It tells you what you

cannot have and therefore should not want—namely, what Derrida calls “a pure presence beyond the reach of play”. But, as a discipline, it is not in a position to give expert advice about what you should want.

Some people in the philosophy business, of course, have constructed imaginative utopias, fuzzy but uplifting descriptions of what might be better ways of being human. Hegel, Dewey, Heidegger and Derrida, are good examples of such utopianism, just as Foucault, Kierkegaard and Strauss are good examples of dry skepticism about utopian projects. But in a post-metaphysical culture the utopians among the philosophy professors will be read as speaking not in the name of philosophy as a quasi-scientific discipline, one which produces results which can be applied by specialists in various fields, but simply on behalf of their own imaginations. They will be read as we read poems or inspect buildings, for suggestions about what to make of ourselves that have no justification save the promise of avoiding some of the awkward consequences of past suggestions. So read, they are less likely to be taken as sources of instruction, and more likely to be read simply for inspiration.

By way of conclusion, I want to offer a gloss on the passage from William James which supplied the title for this conference. James writes

What really exists is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are dead, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them. But put yourself in the making by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing and, the whole range of possible decompositions coming at once into your possession, you are no longer troubled by the question of which of them is the more absolutely true. Reality falls in passing into conceptual analysis; it mounts in living its own undivided life—it buds and burgeons, changes and creates. Once adopt the movement of this life in any given instance and you know Bergson calls the *devenir* reel, by which the thing evolves and grows. Philosophy should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality—not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results.

There are various things wrong with this passage, such as the old-fashioned metaphysical contrast between what really exists and what does not, and the bad Bergsonian idea that we have a faculty called intuition which can take the place of conceptual thought. But if you read this passage as a meditation on the relation between history and philosophy, it takes on a non-metaphysical meaning, and says something important: namely that the human future will always, with a little luck and a lot of imagination, be so different from the past that it is pointless to look for a set of concepts that will cover both. Bergson was right to think that the metaphysical attempt to see things under the aspect of eternity was a failure, but he should have used “history” rather than “life” or “*duree*” as his description of what defeats that attempt.

Reading James in this way lets one draw the moral: do not think that making the past ideas coherent with one another will ever enable you to find a substitute for imaginative. Do not think that philosophy will ever succeed in its attempt to trump poetry and the arts. Do not look to philosophers for anything different than the sort of inspiration that you get from poets, painters, musicians, and architects. For their ability to find coherence will never be more than a perspicuous archival arrangement of the imaginative products of the past. They will never provide authoritative guidance for the imagination of the present.

John Rajchman describes James as preoccupied with “the problem of novelty”—the problem of how to deal with “things in the making”, how to see and respond to the emergence of things for which we have no preset manner of seeing or responding.” I do not think that there is a solution to this problem, and therefore, as a good verificationist, I do not see it as a problem. The thing to do with novelty is just to be grateful for it, and to create the socio-political conditions which will ensure that there will be a lot more of it. There is a political problem about how to encourage novelty without weakening communal solidarity and social order, but this is a problem to be solved *ambulando*, experimentally, and democratically. All that philosophy can do to help out with this political problem is to keep reminding us of what is likely to happen if the past is allowed to dictate terms to the future.