

“Democracy and philosophy” is a text of lecture that Richard Rorty gave in April 2004 in the Center of Cultural Studies in Teheran and in August 2006 edited for Anniversary issue of K&K. The lecture was presented in the series of lectures of Western intellectuals organized in Tehran by Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo. Besides Rorty, the previous speakers were Jürgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky, Ágnes Heller, Timothy Garton Ash, Michael Ignatieff, Adam Michnik, Paul Ricoeur and many others. Ramin Jahanbegloo was arrested on March 30, 2006 by Iranian police and held in custody despite international outcry. After five terrible months of crude investigation he was released from custody in August 2006. This happened after under duress he admitted that he cooperated with Western diplomats plotting a sort of “velvet revolution” that was supposed to overthrow the current regime in Iran and replace it with a Western-type democracy.

# Democracy and philosophy

**Richard Rorty**

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**P**hilosophy is a ladder that Western political thinking climbed up, and then shoved aside. Starting in the seventeenth century, philosophy played an important role in clearing the way for the establishment of democratic institutions in the West. It did so by secularizing political thinking—substituting questions about how human beings could lead happier lives for questions about how God’s will might be done. Philosophers suggested that people should just put religious revelation to one side, at least for political purposes, and act as if human beings were on their own—free to shape their own laws

and their own institutions to suit their felt needs, free to make a fresh start.

In the eighteenth century, during the European Enlightenment, differences between political institutions, and movements of political opinion, reflected different philosophical views. Those sympathetic to the old regime were less likely to be materialistic atheists than were the people who wanted revolutionary social change. But now that Enlightenment values are pretty much taken for granted throughout the West, this is no longer the case. Nowadays politics leads the way, and philosophy tags along behind. One first

decides on a political outlook and then, if one has a taste for that sort of thing, looks for philosophical backup. But such a taste is optional, and rather uncommon. Most Western intellectuals know little about philosophy, and care still less. In their eyes, thinking that political proposals reflect philosophical convictions is like thinking that the tail wags the dog.

I shall be developing this theme of the irrelevance of philosophy to democracy in my remarks. Most of what I shall say will be about the situation in my own country, but I think that most of it applies equally well to the European democracies. In those countries, as in the US, the word “democracy” has gradually come to have two distinct meanings. In its narrower, minimalist, meaning it refers to a system of government in which power is in the hands of freely elected officials. I shall call democracy in this sense “constitutionalism”. In its wider sense, it refers to a social ideal, that of equality of opportunity. In this second sense, a democracy is a society in which all children have the same chances in life, and in which nobody suffers from being born poor, or being the descendant of slaves, or being female, or being homosexual. I shall call democracy in this sense “egalitarianism”.

Suppose that, at the time of the US presidential election of 2004, you had asked voters who were whole-heartedly in favor of re-electing President Bush whether they believed in democracy. They would have been astonished by the question, and have replied that of course they did. But all they would have meant by this is that they believe in constitutional government. Because of this belief, they were prepared to accept the outcome of the election,

whatever it turned out to be. If Kerry had won, they would be angry and disgusted. But they would not have dreamt of trying to prevent his taking office by going out into the streets. They would have been utterly horrified by the suggestion that the generals in the Pentagon should mount a military coup in order to keep Bush in the White House.

The voters who in 2004 regarded Bush as the worst American president of modern times, and who desperately hoped for Kerry’s success were also constitutionalists. When Kerry lost, they were sick at heart. But they did not dream of fomenting a revolution. Left-wing Democrats are as committed to preserving the US Constitution as are right-wing Republicans.

But if, instead of asking these two groups whether they believe in democracy, you had asked them what they mean by the term “democracy”, you might have gotten different replies. The Bush voters will usually be content to define democracy simply as government by freely elected officials. But many of the Kerry voters—and especially the intellectuals—will say that America—despite centuries of free elections and the gradual expansion of the franchise to include all adult citizens—is not yet a full-fledged democracy. Their point is that although it obviously is a democracy in the constitutional sense, it is not yet a democracy in the egalitarian sense. For equality of opportunity has not yet been attained. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening rather than narrowing. Power is becoming more concentrated in the hands of the few.

These left-wing Democrats will remind you of the likely fate of the children of badly educated Americans, both black

and white, raised in a home in which the full-time labor of both mother and father brings in only about \$40,000 a year. This sounds like a lot of money, but in America children of parents at that income level are deprived of many advantages, will probably be unable to go to college, and will be unlikely to get a good job. For Americans who think of themselves as on the political left, these inequalities are outrageous. They demonstrate that even though America has a democratically elected government, it still does not have a democratic society.

Ever since Walt Whitman wrote his essay "Democratic Vistas" in the middle of the nineteenth century, a substantial sector of educated public opinion in the US has used "democracy" to mean "social egalitarianism" rather than simply "representative government". Using the term in this way became common in the Progressive Era and still more common under the New Deal. That usage permitted the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, the feminist movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movement to portray themselves as successive attempts to "realize the promise of American democracy".

So far I have said nothing about the relation of religion to American democracy. But for an understanding of the ongoing contest between constitutionalist and egalitarian understandings of democracy it is important to realize that Americans on the political left tend to be less religiously committed and religiously active than people on the political right. The leftists who are religious believers do not try very hard to bring their religious convictions and their political preferences

together. They treat religion as a private matter, endorse the Jeffersonian tradition of religious tolerance, and are emphatic in their preference for the strict separation of church and state.

On the political right, however, religious and political convictions are often interwoven. The hard-core Bush voters are not only considerably more likely to go to church than the hard-core Kerry voters, but are considerably more likely to sympathize with Bush's insistence on the need to elect officials who take God seriously. They often describe the United States of America as a nation especially blessed by the Christian God. They like to say that theirs is "a Christian country", and not to realize that this phrase is offensive to their Jewish and Muslim fellow citizens. They tend to see America's emergence as the only superpower left standing not just as an accident of history, but as evidence of divine favor.

Because of this different stance toward religious belief, one might be tempted to think of the opposition between the political right and the political left as reflecting a difference between those who think of democracy as built upon religious foundations and those who think of it as built upon philosophical foundations. But, as I have already suggested, that would be misleading. Except for a few professors of theology and philosophy, neither rightist nor leftist American intellectuals think of democracy in the sense of constitutionalism as having either sort of foundation.

If asked to justify their preference for constitutional government both sides would be more likely to appeal to historical experience rather than to either religious or philosophical principles. Both would

be likely to endorse Winston Churchill's much-quoted remark that "Democracy is the worst form of government imaginable, except for all the others that have been tried so far." Both agree that a free press, a free judiciary, and free elections are the best safeguard against the abuse of governmental power characteristic of the old European monarchies, and of fascist and communist regimes.

The arguments between leftists and rightists about the need for egalitarian social legislation are also matters neither of opposing religious beliefs nor of opposing philosophical principles. The disagreement between those who think of a commitment to democracy as a commitment to an egalitarian society and those who have no use for the welfare state and for government regulations designed to ensure equality of opportunity is not fought out on either philosophical or religious grounds. Even the most fanatic fundamentalists do not try to argue that the Christian Scriptures provide reasons why the American government should not redistribute wealth by using taxpayers' money to send the children of the poor to college. Their leftist opponents do not claim that the need to use taxpayer's money for this purpose is somehow dictated by what Kant called 'the tribunal of pure reason'.

Typically the arguments between the two camps are much more pragmatic. The right claims that imposing high taxes in order to benefit the poor will lead to "big government", rule by bureaucrats, and a sluggish economy. The left concedes that there is a danger of over-bureaucratization and of over-centralized government. But, they argue, these dangers are outweighed

by the need to make up for the injustices built into a capitalist economy—a system that can throw thousands of people out of work overnight and make it impossible for them to feed, much less educate, their children. The right argues that the left is too much inclined to imposing its own tastes on society as a whole. The left replies that what the right calls a "matter of taste" is really a matter of justice.

Such arguments proceed not by appeals to universally valid moral obligations but by appeals to historical experience—the experience of over-regulation and over-taxation on the one hand and the experience of poverty and humiliation on the other. The rightists accuse the leftists of being sentimental fools—bleeding-heart liberals—who do not understand the need to keep government small so that individual freedom can flourish. The leftists accuse the rightists of heartlessness—of being unable or unwilling to imagine themselves in the situation of a parent who cannot make enough money to clothe his daughter as well as her schoolmates are clothed. Such polemical exchanges are pursued at a pragmatic level, and no theological or philosophical sophistication is required to conduct them. Nor would such sophistication do much to strengthen either side.

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**S**o far I have been talking about the form that contemporary American political disagreements take, and emphasizing the irrelevance of philosophy to such disputes. I have been arguing that neither the agreement between left and right on the wisdom of retaining constitu-

tional government nor the disagreement between them about what laws to pass has much to do with either religious conviction or philosophical opinion. You can be a very intelligent and useful participant in political discussion in contemporary democratic societies such as the US even though you have no interest whatever in either religion or philosophy.

Despite this fact, one still occasionally comes across debates among philosophers about whether democracy has “philosophical foundations”, and about what these might be. I do not regard these debates as very useful. To understand why they are still conducted, it helps to remember the point I made at the outset: that when the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century broke out, the quarrel between religion and philosophy had an importance it now lacks. For those revolutions were not able to appeal to the past. They could not point to the successes enjoyed by democratic and secularist regimes. For few such regimes had ever existed, and those that had had not always fared well. So their only recourse was to justify themselves by reference to principle, philosophical principle. Reason, they

said, had revealed the existence of universal human rights, so a revolution was required to put society on a rational basis.

“Reason” in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was supposed to be what the anti-clericalists had to compensate for their lack of what the clergy called “faith”. For the revolutionaries of those times were necessarily anti-clerical. One of their chief complaints was the assistance that the clergy had rendered to feudal and monarchical institutions. Diderot, for example, famously looked forward to seeing the last king strangled with the entrails of the last priest. In that period, the work of secularist philosophers such as Spinoza and Kant was very important in creating an intellectual climate conducive to revolutionary political activity. Kant argued that even the words of Christ must be evaluated by reference to the dictates of universally shared human reason. For Enlightenment thinkers such as Jefferson, it was important to argue that reason is a sufficient basis for moral and political deliberation, and that revelation is unnecessary.

The author of both the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and of the American Declaration of Independence, Jeffer-



*foto: J. Bartoš*

son was a typical leftist intellectual of his time. He read a lot of philosophy and took it very seriously indeed. He wrote in the Declaration that “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. As a good Enlightenment rationalist, he agreed with Kant that reason was the source of such truths, and that reason was sufficient to provide moral and political guidance.

Many contemporary Western intellectuals (among them Juergen Habermas, the most influential and distinguished living philosopher) think that there was something importantly right about Enlightenment rationalism. Habermas believes that philosophical reflection can indeed provide moral and political guidance, for it can disclose principles that have what he calls “universal validity”. Foundationalist philosophers like Habermas see philosophy as playing the same role in culture that Kant and Jefferson assigned to it. Simply taking thought will reveal what Habermas calls “presuppositions of rational communication”, and thereby provide criteria which can guide moral and political choice.

Many leftist intellectuals in America and in the West generally, would agree that democracy has such a foundation. They too think that certain central moral and political truths are, if not exactly self-evident, nonetheless transcultural and ahistorical—the product of human reason as such, not simply of a certain sequence of historical events. They are annoyed and disturbed by the writings of anti-foundationalist philosophers like myself who ar-

gue that there is no such thing as “human reason”.

We anti-foundationalists, however, regard Enlightenment rationalism as an unfortunate attempt to beat religion at religion’s own game—the game of pretending that there is something above and beyond human history that can sit in judgment on that history. We argue that although some cultures are better than others, there are no transcultural criteria of “betterness” that we can appeal to when we say that modern democratic societies are better than feudal societies, or that egalitarian societies are better than racist or sexist ones. We are sure that rule by officials freely elected by literate and well-educated voters is better than rule by priests and kings, but we would not try to demonstrate the truth of this claim to a proponent of theocracy or of monarchy. We suspect that if the study of history cannot convince such a proponent of the falsity of his views, nothing else can do so.

Anti-foundationalist philosophy professors like myself do not think that philosophy is as important as Plato and Kant thought it. This is because we do not think that the moral world has a structure that can be discerned by philosophical reflection. We are historicists because we agree with Hegel’s thesis that “philosophy is its time, held in thought”. What Hegel meant, I take it, was that human social practices in general, and political institutions in particular, are the product of concrete historical situations, and that they have to be judged by reference to the needs created by those situations. There is no way to step outside of human history and look at things under the aspect of eternity.

Philosophy, on this view, is ancillary to

historiography. The history of philosophy should be studied in the context of the social situations that created philosophical doctrines and systems, in the same way that we study the history of art and literature. Philosophy is not, and never will be, a science—in the sense of a progressive accumulation of enduring truths.

Most philosophers in the West prior to the time of Hegel were universalist and foundationalist. As Isaiah Berlin has put it, before the end of the eighteenth century Western thinkers viewed human life as the attempt to solve a jigsaw puzzle. Berlin describes what I have as their hope for universal philosophical foundations for culture as follows:

There must be some way of putting the pieces together. The all-wise being, the omniscient being, whether God or an omniscient earthly creature—whichever way you like to conceive of it—is in principle capable of fitting all the pieces together into one coherent pattern. Anyone who does this will know what the world is like: what things are, what they have been, what they will be, what the laws are that govern them, what man is, what the relation of man is to things, and therefore what man needs, what he desires, and how to obtain it. (*Roots of Romanticism*, p. 23)

The idea that the intellectual world, including the moral world, is like a jigsaw puzzle, and that philosophers are the people charged with getting all the pieces to fit together presupposes that history does not really matter: that there has never been anything new under the sun. That assumption was weakened by three events. The first was the spate of democratic revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, especially those in

America and in France. The second was the Romantic Movement in literature and the arts—a movement that suggested that the poet, rather than the philosopher, was the figure who had most to contribute to social progress. The third, which came along a little later, was the general acceptance of Darwin's evolutionary account of the origin of the human species.

One of the effects of these three events was the emergence of anti-foundationalist philosophy—of philosophers who challenge the jigsaw puzzle view of things. The Western philosophical tradition, these philosophers say, was wrong to think that the enduring and stable was preferable to the novel and contingent. Plato, in particular, was wrong to take mathematics as a model for knowledge.

On this view, there is no such thing as human nature, for human beings make themselves up as they go along. They create themselves, as poets create poems. There is no such thing as the nature of the state or the nature of society to be understood—there is only an historical sequence of relatively successful and relatively unsuccessful attempts to achieve some combination of order and justice.

To further illustrate the difference between foundationalists and non-foundationalists, let me return to Jefferson's claim that the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are self-evident. Foundationalists urge that the existence of such rights is a universal truth, one that has nothing in particular to do with Europe rather than Asia or Africa, or with modern history rather than ancient history. The existence of such rights, they say, is like the existence of irrational numbers such as the square root of two—some-

thing that anybody who thinks hard about the topic can be brought to recognize. Such philosophers agree with Kant's claim that "the common moral consciousness" is not an historical product but part of the structure of human rationality. Kant's categorical imperative, dictating that we must not use other human beings as mere means—must not treat them as mere things—is translated into concrete political terms by Jefferson and by the authors of the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights. Such translations simply reformulate moral convictions that should have seemed as self-evidently true in the days of Plato and Alexander as they are now. It is the business of philosophy to remind us of what, somehow, deep in our hearts, we have always known to be true. Plato was, in this sense, right when he said that moral knowledge is a matter of recollection – an a priori matter, not a result of empirical experimentation.

In contrast, anti-foundationalists like myself agree with Hegel that Kant's categorical imperative is an empty abstraction until it is filled up with the sort of concrete detail that only historical experience can provide. We say the same about Jefferson's claim about self-evident human rights. On our view, moral principles are never more than ways of summing up a certain body of experience. To call them "a priori" or "self-evident" is to persist in using Plato's utterly misleading analogy between moral certainty and mathematical certainty. No statements can both have revolutionary political implications and be self-evidently true.

To say that a statement is self-evident is, we anti-foundationalists believe, merely an empty rhetorical gesture. The exist-

ence of the rights that the revolutionaries of the eighteenth century claimed for all human beings had not been evident to most European thinkers in the previous thousand years. That their existence seems self-evident to Americans and Europeans two hundred-odd years after they were first asserted is to be explained by culture-specific indoctrination rather than by a sort of connaturality between the human mind and moral truth.

To make our case, we anti-foundationalists point to unpleasant historical facts such as the following: The words of the Declaration were taken, by the supposedly democratic government of the US, to apply only to people of European origin. The American Founding Fathers applied them only to the immigrants who had come across the Atlantic to escape from the monarchical governments of Europe. The idea that native Americans – the Indian tribes who were the aboriginal inhabitants – had such rights was rarely taken seriously. Recalcitrant Indians were massacred.

Again, it was only a hundred years after the Declaration of Independence that the citizenry of the US began to take women's rights seriously—began to ask themselves whether American females were being given the same opportunities for the pursuit of happiness as were American males. It took almost a hundred years, and an enormously costly and cruel civil war, before black Americans were given the right not to be held as slaves. It took another hundred years before black Americans began to be treated as full-fledged citizens, entitled to all the same opportunities as whites.

These facts of the history of my country



are sometimes cited to show that America is an utterly hypocritical nation, and that it has never taken seriously its own protestations about human rights. But I think that this dismissal of the US is unfair and misleading. One reason it became a much better, fairer, more decent, more generous country in the course of two centuries was that democratic freedoms – in particular freedom of the press and freedom of speech – made it possible for public opinion to force the white males of European ancestry to consider what they had done, and were doing to the Indians, the women, and the blacks.

The role of public opinion in the gradual expansion of the scope of human rights in the Western democracies is, to my mind, the best reason for preferring democracy to other systems of government that one could possibly offer. The history of the US illustrates the way in which a society that concerned itself largely with the happiness of property-owning white males could gradually and peacefully change itself into one in which impoverished black females have become senators, cabinet officers, and judges of the higher courts. Jefferson and Kant would have been bewildered at the changes that have taken place in the Western democracies in the last two hundred years. For they did not think of equal treatment for blacks and whites, or of female suffrage, as deducible from the philosophical principles they enunciated. Their astonishment illustrates the anti-foundationalist point that moral insight is not, like mathematics, a product of rational reflection. It is instead a matter of imagining a better future, and observing the results of attempts to bring that future into existence. Moral knowledge, like sci-

entific knowledge, is mostly the result of making experiments and seeing how they work out. Female suffrage, for example, has worked well. Centralized control of a country's economy, on the other hand, has not.

The history of moral progress since the Enlightenment illustrates the fact that the important thing about democracy is as much a matter of freedom of speech and of the press as about the ability of angry citizens to replace bad elected officials with better elected officials. A country can have democratic elections but make no moral progress if those who are being mistreated have no chance to make their sufferings known. In theory, a country could remain a constitutional democracy even if its government never instituted any measures to increase equality of opportunity. In practice, the freedom to debate political issues and to put forward political candidates will ensure that democracy in the sense of egalitarianism will be a natural consequence of democracy as constitutional government.

The moral of the anti-foundationalist sermon I have been preaching to you is that for countries that have not undergone the secularization that was the most important effect of the European Enlightenment, or that are only now seeing the emergence of constitutional government, the history of Western philosophy is not a particularly profitable area of study. The history of the successes and failures of various social experiments in various countries is much more profitable. If we anti-foundationalists are right, the attempt to place society on a philosophical foundation should be replaced by the attempt to learn from the historical record.