

**Rhetorical Pragmatism and Histories of New Media:  
Rorty on Dreyfus on Kierkegaard on the Internet\***

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On the Internet, people "are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price." This judgment was actually rendered by Søren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth-century about another new media, the penny press. But a recent interpreter of Kierkegaard, Hubert Dreyfus, asks that we consider these views expressed about the earlier mass media as immediately relevant to the contemporary dangers of today's new media. At the University of Copenhagen in August 1998, Dreyfus read a paper entitled "Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age." A longtime friend and professional interlocutor, Richard Rorty presented a brief response to that paper, and it is the unpublished text of those comments, part of the born digital files of the Rorty Papers, that will be the main focus of my remarks today.

Rorty had known Dreyfus since the late 1950s when he was at Wellesley and Dreyfus at Harvard. Rorty later claimed that he owed his acquaintance with European philosophy almost entirely to Dreyfus, and through many years their ongoing discussion and participation in

colloquia helped fill the yawning gap between European and Anglophone philosophy. Rorty nostalgically described one of their joint ventures: "Starting in 1980, Dreyfus . . . staged a series of summer institutes [at UC Berkeley], sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. These brought Husserlians together with Searleans, Heideggerians together with Davisonians, Foucauldians together with bourgeois liberals. Some of the most fruitful teaching I have ever done, and some of the most instructive intellectual encounters I have ever had, were at these institutes." Teaching evaluations in the Rorty Papers support his memories, at least from the students point of view: With other instructors (Dreyfus, John Searle) receiving 3.7 and below on a scale with 4.0 as the highest score, the person summarizing the student evaluations felt it necessary to explain Rorty's average of 4.03: Rorty received more A+'s than A-'s and was routinely praised for his ability to make very difficult material clear.

It is that ability, to make difficult thinking clear, his ability to translate one piece of language into another usefully, profitably, pragmatically, that was one of Rorty's greatest rhetorical strengths. Redescription was a trope that Rorty again and again used, a philosophical

strategy that played an important role in his rhetorical pragmatism as he applied it in his exposition and commentary on a wide range of cultural and philosophical topics, including the topic of new media as attacked by his friend Hubert Dreyfus. Dreyfus is the author of such influential books as: *What Computers Can't Do* (1972), a Heideggerian critique of artificial intelligence; *Michel Foucault: Beyond Phenomenology and Structuralism* (1983), with Paul Rabinow, a book for which Rorty provided a press reader's report; *Being-in-the-World* (1991), a commentary on Division I of Heidegger's *Being and Time* but which also includes some comments on Division II and Kierkegaard; *What Computers Still Can't Do* (1992); and, most relevant to my paper, *On the Internet* (2001), published appropriately enough in the Routledge series called "Thinking in Action," which reprints a revised version of Dreyfus's "Kierkegaard on the Internet," the paper to which Rorty responded. What I would like to do is put out there for your consideration some of Dreyfus's Kierkegaardian comments on the Internet as new media and then Rorty's comments on Dreyfus on Kierkegaard on the Internet. In so doing, I will quote a bit more than necessary from Rorty's response in order, once again, to give a sense of his unique style and artful

rhetorical strategies, even as I disagree with this or that argument.

First a preliminary disclaimer. Rorty would not have called himself a rhetorical pragmatist. Indeed, he often avoided the term rhetoric in reference both to rhetoric as a field of study and to rhetoric as a legitimate concept. At a conference, I once asked Rorty, why someone with his interests in language, in conversation, in persuasive redescription, seemed so obviously to avoid using the term rhetoric. He simply answered that he didn't want to reinstate a distinction between logic and rhetoric that Dewey, one of his masters, had so effectively and quite appropriately dismantled. We can find the same questioning of that distinction in Rorty's teaching notes in the archive. In a set of 1995 "Notes on Plato," in which he mentions "Dreyfus-like reasons" for assuming we learn how to use words by picking up conventions rather than recalling essences, Rorty points out approvingly that "the idea that there must be something like Forms to know--something unchanging and once-seen-never-mistaken--is basic to what Heidegger and Derrida will be [questioning as] the 'binary oppositions of Western, Greek, metaphysics'". In a long list of such binaries, Rorty includes the usual suspects (usual, that is, from a

Pragmatist and Post-Structuralist point of view): At the top is Knowledge/Opinion; then The True World/The Apparent World; Necessary/Contingent; Form/Matter; Soul/Body; Up/Down; and, near the bottom of list, the suspect opposition Logic/Rhetoric.

So it is with some trepidation that I refer to Rorty as a rhetorical pragmatist. My pseudo-justification is that if we try to think our way around the Rhetoric/Logic distinction and define rhetoric simply as the use of language in a context to have effects, effects that include persuasion and figuration, then Rorty's version of neo-pragmatism is rhetorical in that it clearly emphasizes the importance of language in our understanding of human being and defines language as a tool rather than a medium of representation or expression. For Rorty, language is a tool for achieving our purposes in the world, an effective tool for social interaction, rather than a medium that properly represents the intrinsic structure of nonhuman reality or that properly expresses the essential nature of the human species. Thus, just as one of his admirers, Cornel West, describes his own theory as prophetic pragmatism with its particular emphasis on liberation, justice, and political theology, we might call Rorty's

theory a kind of rhetorical pragmatism with its emphasis on redescription and democratic conversation.

In any case, rhetorical pragmatism frames my comments on Dreyfus's Kierkegaard and Rorty's response to Dreyfus, including Dreyfus's claim that Heidegger is a secularized version of Kierkegaard.

I begin with Dreyfus's paper, "Kierkegaard on the Internet": here Dreyfus uses Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* to draw an analogy between an earlier period and ours. Kierkegaard characterizes his age (the mid-nineteenth century) as a time of disinterested curiosity that levels all values upon which action is based, and he blames the Public produced by the new media for this leveling process. "Even if my life had no other significance," he writes, "I am satisfied with having discovered the absolutely demoralizing existence of the daily press." Dreyfus remarks that it is no accident that Kierkegaard writing in 1846 chose the Public and the Press to attack. Summarizing Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Dreyfus gives a brief media history of the Enlightenment creation of a Public Sphere "as a space in which the rational, disinterested reflection that should guide government and human life could be institutionalized and refined," and he notes how the Press "extended the

Public debate to a wider and wider readership" until by the middle of Kierkegaard's century "the reign of public opinion appeared as the reign of the many and mediocre."

But Kierkegaard's chief concern was not the media's encouragement of mediocrity nor the "merging of the individual with the group" nor the mass conformity of "the crowd." Dreyfus claims that Kierkegaard's originality was in seeing "the Public Sphere [itself] as a new and dangerous cultural phenomenon in which the leveling produced by the Press brings out something that was deeply wrong with the Enlightenment idea of detached reflection from the start." Dreyfus explains how the new media produced this leveling in several interrelated ways.

In his redescription of Kierkegaard's media critique, we see at work Dreyfus's own version of an early-Heideggerian interpretive vocabulary: "The new massive distribution of desituated information was making every sort of information immediately available to anyone, thereby producing a desituated, detached spectator. The new power of the Press to disseminate information to everyone in a nation led its readers to transcend their local, personal involvement and . . . encouraged everyone to develop an opinion about everything. This is seen by Habermas as a triumph of democratization but Kierkegaard

saw the Public Sphere was destined to become a realm of idle talk in which spectators merely pass the word along." From this Heideggerian-inflected Kierkegaardian perspective, the media-produced Public Sphere "promotes ubiquitous commentators who deliberately detach themselves from the local practices out of which specific issues grow and in terms of which these issues must be resolved through some sort of committed action. What seems a virtue to detached Enlightenment reason, therefore, looks like a disastrous drawback to Kierkegaard. The Public Sphere is a world in which everyone has an opinion on, and comments on, all public matters without needing any first-hand experience and without having or wanting any responsibility."

Worst of all, according to Dreyfus's Kierkegaard, in this media-produced Public Sphere "anyone can hold an opinion on anything without having to act on it," and this situation results in "the possibility of endless reflection" with "no possibility of decision and action," no possibility of the kind of unconditional commitment that makes life meaningful. Thus, Dreyfus quotes the passage from Kierkegaard's journal with which I began: "Here men are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price."

And then Dreyfus makes explicit the analogy between Kierkegaard's media world and our own, writing "The desituated and anonymous press and the lack of passion or commitment in our reflective age combine to produce the Public, the agent of the nihilistic leveling characteristic of his time and ours. . . . Kierkegaard would surely have seen in the Internet with its web sites full of anonymous information from all over the world and its interest groups which anyone in the world can join and where one can discuss any topic endlessly without consequences, the hi-tech synthesis of the worst features of the newspaper and the coffee house" of Habermas's idealized Public Sphere.

Dreyfus then goes on to expand on this pessimistic Kierkegaardian vision of new media by explaining how Kierkegaard's three stage model of development (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) can be used to specify further the dangers of the Internet. But I want to move on to Rorty's response to Dreyfus, so let me just give Dreyfus's conclusion: "So it looks like Kierkegaard may be right. The press and the Internet are the ultimate enemy of unconditional commitment, but only the unconditional commitment of what Kierkegaard calls the religious sphere of existence can save us from the nihilistic leveling

launched by the Enlightenment, promoted by the press and perfected in the World Wide Web."

Rorty begins his response to Dreyfus in typical rhetorical pragmatist fashion by citing some books that have had effects on their readers who have then used them for various purposes. He says

Bert Dreyfus and I admire many of the same authors, in particular Heidegger and Kierkegaard. But we differ about the use to which they can be put. Most of us Heidegger-freaks read him the way Christians pray, Zen Buddhists meditate, Janeites reread *Persuasion*, or Shakespearians rehearse the sonnets. We treat Heidegger as an author who helps us toward something like spiritual or imaginative perfection. It does not occur to us that he might be used for public purposes. Writers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, we believe, were not at their best when commenting on current events or public policy.

In contrast, Dreyfus "reads these philosophers differently," having "once, famously, organized a conference on "Applied Heidegger" and now, in the present paper, using Kierkegaard to offer "advice about problems of our own day." Behind the contrast Rorty draws here is his well known distinction, argued most fully a decade earlier

in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, a distinction between authors "in whom the desire for self-creation, for private autonomy, dominates" versus authors "in whom the desire for a more just and free human community dominates." Rorty mentions Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger among the former as "useful exemplars . . . of what private perfection--a self-created, autonomous, human life--can be like"; and he lists Marx, Dewey, and Habermas as "fellow citizens" who "are engaged in a shared, social effort--the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel." Rorty argued further that it was usually a mistake to try to mix these two very different human activities. Theoretically or philosophically, it was impossible, he wrote, to come up with a comprehensive outlook that lets "us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision." And practically or socio-politically, it was better not to mix the vocabularies of the two different kinds of tasks. "The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange."

But it was not just on liberal principle that Rorty objected to a private Kierkegaardian vocabulary being put

to purposes of public critique. More to his immediate point, Rorty thought Kierkegaard's analysis of the Public and new media was simply wrong both in his time and ours. Rorty says he is particularly dubious about using the text Dreyfus relies on in his paper, Kierkegaard's *The Present Age*, which Rorty characterizes as "Kierkegaard at his crankiest" and "a big come-down from books like [Kierkegaard's] *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Scientific Postscripts*."

Rorty provides a very different history of the new media and politics in Kierkegaard's time:

You would never guess from reading [Kierkegaard's] *The Present Age* that it was written in a period when representative government was really beginning to get a grip on Europe, when movements for the expansion of the franchise were frequent and often successful, and when increased literacy was both a cause and an effect of the success of the penny press. It is hard to imagine the development of mass democracy without the sort of popular press which grew up in the [nineteenth] century.

Rorty grants that Kierkegaard along with other "great political and literary figures" were "savaged by the press, but adds that Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* seems to him

"not much more than an ill-tempered reaction to being baited by one's inferiors."

Turning to his view of the Internet, Rorty declares that "the triviality of the chat rooms and the mindless proliferation of websites are a small price to pay for the political opportunities which the net offers. We in the rich old democracies, who are accustomed to intellectual freedom, may not appreciate what the net can do for people in places like Peru and Kazakhstan." He goes on to recommend that funds spent on UNESCO "and on shipping people like [him] to international conferences" should "be spent on fiber optic cables providing internet connections between every educational institution in the world, starting with the universities and proceeding down to the primary schools." This would lead to more public transparency, easier whistle-blowing of hidden governmental abominations, and more accessible education for poor children. Indeed, according to Rorty, "a lot of wonderful things would happen. The internet could be for the development of an international political class what the penny press was for the widening of this class in nineteenth century Europe."

Turning finally to the specifics of Dreyfus's paper, Rorty grants that the views of the Internet Dreyfus puts

into Kierkegaard's mouth are true enough "but fairly inconsequential." Dreyfus "does point out all the disadvantages of the net," Rorty admits, but then adds in typical pragmatist fashion that the advantages, the beneficial consequences, of the Internet clearly outweigh the disadvantages "just as they did in the case of the scurrilous, muck-raking, redneck, penny press." Rorty gives as a representative example the fact that the net "is a perfect medium for slander and innuendo," but he notes that such statements are "like saying that money is a perfect medium for fraud and theft. So it is, but a money economy is still clearly better than a barter economy. Any medium of exchange of information will be put to slanderous purposes, but we are still better off with cheaper and more fluid media than without them."

Addressing Dreyfus's use of Kierkegaard's three-stage model of self-development (the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious), Rorty makes the point I noted earlier: such development is a private matter not public, and it is probably only applicable anyway to "intellectuals who read a large number of books." That is, Rorty doesn't see a general problem with the new media's leveling process leading to endless reflection and the impossibility of passionate commitment to action. "I am not sure that

paralyzing self-scrutiny is a big problem for more than a few intellectuals. I find it hard to imagine that the incidence of this problem will be increased by the internet."

Wrapping up his remarks, Rorty quotes a statement from Dreyfus's paper that does not appear in any of its published forms. Dreyfus says that "it should be the job of information technology to look for structures that solicit and support unconditional commitments and implement them." Rorty thinks such statements smack of the Orwellian world of loving Big Brother. He'd just as soon have information technologists stay out of the unconditional commitment business, no matter how attractive Kierkegaard and Nietzsche might make such commitments sound. Rorty concludes, "I would prefer it if information technologists just put everything they could think of on the net-- rigorously hierarchical organized data bases, hypertexts, the complete works of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, programs that teach you symbolic logic and Danish and test your progress, and so on. They could just let us surfers take it from there."

In response to Dreyfus's and Rorty's contrasting views of the Internet, we might suggest a slightly different scenario, perhaps one that borrows a bit from

both. What seems most striking today is that so many media users are either unthinkingly complacent in their passionate commitments or complacently unthinking in their detached, everyday busyness. Examples of the former are religious and secular dogmatic fundamentalists, unthinkingly complacent in their passionate commitments. Examples of the latter are most of the rest of us in our busy professional and personal, public and private lives. The Internet does encourage both ways of being unthinking and complacent. I have in mind, on the one hand, the partisan, self-validating websites and blog discussions of fundamentalists on the right and left, religious and secular; and then, on the other hand, everyone's time-consuming activities of checking emails, web-surfing, and information overloading. But it is also the case that the Internet provides its own unique opportunities for challenging unthinking complacency: after all I retrieved Dreyfus's essay on Kierkegaard first from his website and, of course, Rorty's digital archive online was my source for his critique of Dreyfus. Arguably both texts are opportunities for thinking through our complacencies in reference to new media. One of these opportunities is certainly the models they provide for thinking rhetorically about media history. They demonstrate how arguments

proposing different accounts of new media in the past help in thinking about media in the present and, indeed, might even motivate different self-reflective uses of that media in the future.

As an epilogue to these remarks, I'd like to note briefly some related points about Rorty and Kierkegaard that emerge from the texts now available in the Rorty Papers. I've indicated how Rorty, while agreeing with some of Dreyfus's descriptions of the Internet, ultimately disagrees with Dreyfus's Kierkegaardian condemnation of that media. But, we might ask, does Rorty actually agree or disagree with Dreyfus's interpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy independent of its application in assessing new media.

In answering this question, we receive some help from Rorty's published work. Though I haven't found any sustained discussion of Kierkegaard in Rorty's books and articles, the Danish philosopher is often mentioned in passing to illustrate this or that Rortian generalization about the history of philosophy. For example, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty lists Kierkegaard among his edifying as opposed to systematic philosophers, and more than once Rorty cites his "favorite remark of Kierkegaard about Hegel." He puts it this way in

*Philosophy as Cultural Politics*: "The verdict of the literary culture on this [Hegelian] metaphysics was nicely formulated by Kierkegaard when he said that if Hegel had written at the end of his books that 'this was just a thought experiment' he [Hegel] would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived, but that, as it was, he was merely a buffoon." Rorty comments elsewhere that Kierkegaard's "epithet is too harsh, but the spirit of the remark seems right."

But such passing references to Kierkegaard in Rorty's published works do not really help with my question about whether Rorty agrees with the details of Dreyfus's interpretation of Kierkegaard. But if we look at unpublished texts in Rorty's archive, I think the answer does become clear.

According to syllabi and lecture notes, Rorty included Kierkegaard in his courses as early as 1960 during his last year teaching at Wellesley. More helpful and closer to our time, however, are the notes for his lectures on Kierkegaard for a fall 1987 Philosophy 518 course at the University of Virginia.

In his first Kierkegaard lecture Rorty notes how both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were "illustrative of the way in which philosophical system-building died with Hegel

and was replaced by artistic . . . innovation." The two "private eccentric[]" philosophers "are comparable in being . . . anti-Hegelian and trying to find ways of saying that passion and will rank above thought, reflection on the situation of the individual over world history." Though Kierkegaard "adored" Christianity and Nietzsche "loathed" it, "both agreed that Hegel had not understood [Christianity] properly."

Rorty turns to "some digs at Hegel" in *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, in which Kierkegaard argued that "as soon as subjectivity is eliminated [in favor of objectivity], and the infinite interest eliminated from passion, there is no decision at all. . . . All decisiveness, all essential decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity. A contemplative spirit, and this is what the objective subject is, feels nowhere any infinite need of a decision, and sees no decision anywhere. This is the *falsum* that is inherent in all objectivity; and this is the significance of mediation as the mode of transition in the continuous process, where nothing is fixed and where nothing is infinitely decided." Rorty quotes from a long footnote to this last sentence as his first example of a Kierkegaardian dig at Hegel: "The great secret of the [Hegelian] system . . . is pretty much the same as the

sophism of Protagoras, that everything is relative, except that here, everything is relative in the continuing world-process. But this cannot help any living being."

Kierkegaard goes on to cite an anecdote from Plutarch's *Moralia* about a philosopher described to a visitor as "a wise man . . . occupied in the search for truth," to which the visitor responds: "But when does he then propose to use it?"

Next Rorty quotes Kierkegaard's statement that "The philosopher contemplates Christianity [only] for the sake of interpenetrating it with his speculative thought," which Rorty glosses as Kierkegaard saying that "Hegel takes Christianity as a datum, not as an option . . .; for Hegel, the question of 'how am I to live, what should I do?' is put aside in favor of 'Where is history going?'" Thus, Rorty sees Kierkegaard as opposing objective, systematic thought, which merely arranges abstract possibilities, to subjective, passionate thought, which embodies actual commitments and enables decisions to act. Rorty relates this Kierkegaardian philosophy to his own Pragmatism when, in summary, he cites William James [in "The Will to Believe"] and claims "when we face a 'live, momentous and forced option' the way that abstract possibilities hold together is not [of much] help." And here we can see a

direct connection with Kierkegaard's decisionist views as applied in his critique of the new media in his time.

Indeed, Rorty's lectures quote some of the same Kierkegaardian words that Dreyfus applies in his critique of the Internet: "Demoralized by too assiduous an absorption in [abstract Hegelian] world-historical considerations, people no longer have any will for anything."

So, Rorty does seem to agree with Dreyfus's interpretation of Kierkegaard, at least with those aspects of Kierkegaardian thought most relevant to the demoralizing media-effects of leveling and inaction. But Rorty disagrees that Kierkegaard, so interpreted, actually applies to current media in a way that justifies a condemnation of the Internet. That is, for Rorty, it is not the case that with the new media, people "are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale at the cheapest possible price."

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\*Draft, not for quotation without permission. A version of this paper was delivered at the conference, "Time Will Tell, but Epistemology Won't: In Memory of Richard Rorty," at the University of California, Irvine, on 14 May 2010 (<http://virtualpolitik.org/rorty>).