

Comment on Amelie Oksenberg Rorty's Paper: "The Moral Duty of Promoting Political Conflict"

Yael Tamir

University Center for Human Values, Princeton

There is no better way to respond to Amelie Rorty's beautifully written, rich, and engaging paper than by telling a legend, a myth, which is told by the Athenian to Kelinias.

Long before the cities whose formation we described earlier there is said to have come into being a certain very happy rule and arrangement under Kornos...Kornos understood that...human nature is not at all capable of regulating the human beings when it possesses autocratic authority over everything, without becoming swollen with insolence and injustice. So, reflecting on these things, he set up at that time kings and rulers within our cities -- not human beings but demons, members of a more divine and better species. He did just what we do now with sheep and the other tame herd animals. We don't make cattle themselves rulers of cattle, or goats rulers of goats; instead, we exercise despotic domination over them, because our species is better than theirs. The same was done by the god, who was a friend of humanity: he set over us the better species of demons, who supervised us in a way that provided much ease both for them and for us. They provided peace and awe and good laws and justice without stint. Thus they made it so that the races of men were without civil strife, and happy.

What this present argument is saying, making use of the truth, is that there can be no rest from evils and toils for those cities in which some mortal rules rather than a god.¹

This is a daunting vision for those of us who have no confidence in kings, gods, demons, reason, or even in ourselves. For us, no divine or royal regime can provide peace and awe, good laws, and justice without stint. We must then ask ourselves whether any human regime can teach or promote virtue, whether it can steer its citizens away from evil and in the direction of moral decency (not to mention moral excellence).

In a modern democratic regime this question raises special difficulties as in a democracy we, the people, are the rulers and we must therefore guide ourselves. Politics, Rorty claims, provides the answer to the problem of moral education. It is the structure of the state -- its laws, its economy, its institutions, its public culture -- that form and direct the moral life of its citizens. Yet these institutions are our own creations, and the political arrangements we construct inevitably reflect our virtues and vices. How can these institutions teach us the virtues we lack, or shelter us from the vices we possess? Can we, like the legendary Baron von Munchausen, pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and save ourselves from the evil that is inherent in us?

Experience, Rorty rightly argues, cannot guide us. Emile, she reminds us, could properly learn from experience only when his experience was an experiment "controlled by a benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent tutor who regulated the events that presented Emile with occasions for learning." This obviously presupposes that the tutor knows how to distinguish right from wrong. Like the philosopher-king, the tutor's authority to teach is grounded in the knowledge of truth.

But the belief in philosopher-kings has faded away in the transition from the ideal state of *The Republic* to the actual state of the Laws. The authority to teach is thus delegated to the political leader, who should employ only those teachers "who concur with his own appreciation" and "to them he should entrust the young for their instruction and education."² But if the rulers, as Locke

argued, enjoy no advantage in their search for the truth--if "neither the right, nor the art of ruling, does necessarily carry along with it certain knowledge of other things"³ then why should the governing bodies or their agents have any right to impart their own views on the rest of us? This disbelief in the power of the government to know the truth lies at the heart of the crisis of legitimation with which the modern state contends.

In such skeptical times, a political approach that relies on the leader's knowledge of the good is doomed to rejection. Moral disagreement thus becomes a permanent feature of our society; as neither the leader nor the public can resolve it, we pay homage to public deliberations in which we air our conflicting points of view. Yet we have no assurances that these public deliberations will lead us closer to the truth. Why then do we value disagreement?

Mill believed disagreement to be valuable as he believed that the doctrines in such conflicts, "instead of being one true and the other false, share the truth between them, and nonconforming opinion is needed to supply the remainder to the truth of which the received doctrine embodies only a part."⁴ Public deliberations of conflicting points of view are valuable because, through discussion, our mistakes will offset each other. We may then hope that "if there be a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the meantime we may rely on having attained such approach to truth as is possible in our own day."⁵ Consequently, Mill thought, moral disagreement and discussion would lead to a process whereby truth is slowly, but consistently, revealed and hence, "As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase; and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested."⁶ Evidence, however, points to a contrary process -- one of diminishing, rather than increasing, consensus.

If moral conflict will not bring us closer to the truth, we could still justify it on other grounds. The pluralistic view of error, which lies at the heart of democratic thinking, assumes that it is better for us to make our own mistakes than to be misled by others, even if others could lead us to more correct positions than those we hold. Conflict on this view is not "the homage that a corrupted society pays to morality," but the homage an insecure society pays to personal autonomy.

Conflict is there to remind us of our limitations and fallibility, as well as our right to govern our own lives. This approach can serve to justify the democratic belief in freedom of expression and political pluralism, but it does not offer a theory of education. The right to make a mistake is not, after all, equivalent to the right to mislead others. Given the democratic right of each separate individual, and of society in general, to commit their own errors, we cannot infer that teachers or society have a right to mislead those they are educating. And the fact that, according to democratic theories of education, children are to be exposed to a multiplicity of views cannot serve to counter this objection.

So how can we educate ourselves or the young in an age when faith in the existence of an absolute moral truth breaks down, when the belief in the liberating power of science is shattered, when the plurality of knowledge comes to be perceived as an educational burden rather than a blessing, when a question mark is placed over the effectiveness of rational deliberations? Conflict itself is of no help as it cannot but breed occasional agreement on the one hand -- not necessarily on the right issues or opinions -- and more conflict on the other.

Conflict is a valuable educational tool to those who know where they heading. For those who are lost it can give no direction. In fact, for those who have no clear moral goal, a sense of direction may be of no value. One cannot but remember the dialogue between Alice and the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" Alice asked. "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the cat. "I don't much care," said Alice. "Then it does not matter which way you go," the cat said, and he disappeared.

1. Plato, The Laws 713c-714a.
2. Plato Laws III, 812e
3. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 36.
4. Mill, *On Liberty*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1977), 56
5. Ibid., 81, 108.
6. Ibid, 53

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