

## Rorty, Critical Thought, and Philosophy of Education

Jerrold R. Coombs  
*University of British Columbia*

Like a good suspense film, a good philosophy paper requires what Alfred Hitchcock called a “Maguffin,” a device that initiates and sustains the action. Professor Okshevsky’s paper has at least three separate Maguffins, each yielding a particular strand of argument. Strand one attempts to show that Richard Rorty’s seemingly disparaging views of the contribution philosophy can make to education are not as disparaging as they appear; strand two attempts to explain why Rorty’s philosophical views should not be taken as undermining the idea that critical thinking is an important goal or ideal of education; and strand three attempts to explain how Rorty’s work can be viewed as continuous with earlier attempts to understand the power and limits of philosophical reflection. Although these argument strands are closely interwoven in Professor Okshevsky’s text, I will deal with them separately. Because of space limitations I will deal only with the first two strands. These address the most important educational issues.

### STRAND 1. SALVAGING PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Professor Okshevsky is concerned that the educational community may misinterpret Rorty’s doubts about whether philosophy has anything to offer education. He notes that Rorty has expressed the belief that philosophical reflection, far from enlightening educational deliberation, may interfere with our achieving our larger educational purposes. He also quotes Rorty’s comment that “The best that us philosophers can do is to develop a suitable rhetoric for the presentation of new [practical] suggestions — making them a bit more palatable.” Wrongly interpreted, these views could lead to the educational community’s discounting the possibility that philosophy can make any valuable contributions to public deliberations about educational policy and practice.

To forestall this sort of misunderstanding Okshevsky argues that when Rorty’s views are properly understood it will be seen that “Rorty would have no valid objections to philosophers of education raising and addressing the kinds of questions we today typically pursue.” His argument in support of this position runs as follows. In part Rorty’s disparagement of the relevance and importance of philosophy for educational deliberations is the result of his belief that certain philosophical traditions have both transgressed the proper limits of philosophy’s “authentic powers” of reflection, and failed to make good on their claims that their arguments have significance for practical problems and policies. The traditions Rorty criticizes are those that attempt to discover, by philosophical reflection, an ultimate foundation upon which genuine knowledge, truth, rationality, morality, and objective reality can be secured. Okshevsky concludes that since most contemporary philosophy of education is not of the foundationalist sort, Rorty’s critiques of foundationalist philosophy do not apply to it. Unfortunately this argument is largely irrelevant, for it is fairly clear that Rorty does not disparage the relevance and importance of philosophy for educational deliberations because he believes philosophers of education are foundationalists.

However, Okshevsky also argues that Rorty's seemingly disparaging comments are not genuinely disparaging — that a proper understanding of Rorty's views shows philosophy to be “an important and practically valuable discipline and disposition of thought for the enterprise of education.” He maintains that in limiting the philosopher's role to that of developing a suitable rhetoric for presenting practical suggestions, Rorty is not implying that philosophical reflection can offer no justifications for the alternatives it advances. On the contrary, philosophy is limited to developing a rhetoric because the only kind of justification that is possible is itself rhetorical. That is to say, it consists in securing unforced agreement through argumentation rather than in providing demonstrations or proofs based on undeniable foundational premises. But this line of argument does not establish Okshevsky's conclusion, for it does not show that Rorty's philosophical views imply that philosophy is important and practically valuable for the enterprise of education. It merely shows that in his view rhetorical justification of educational alternatives is conceivable.

Okshevsky acknowledges that Rorty clearly does disparage the effectiveness or force of philosophical reflection in influencing educational decision making, but attempts to mitigate the force of this concession by making a distinction between philosophy's pragmatic effects, in other words, its persuasiveness for a given community, and its intrinsic power, that is, its power of justification. Although Rorty may deny that philosophy has persuasive power in influencing educational decisions, he does not, according to Okshevsky, deny its justificatory power; and it is this power that makes philosophy practically valuable for education. I am suspicious of this line of argument, for I believe Rorty must reject the distinction between intrinsic, justificatory power and extrinsic, persuasive power. Given that the aim of justification is unforced agreement under conditions of free and open discussion, it would seem that if philosophy lacks external, persuasive force, it must also lack internal, justificatory force, for if it fails to persuade it necessarily fails to secure unforced agreement. Thus, I believe Okshevsky has failed to show that, in Rorty's account, philosophy remains a valuable discipline and disposition of thought for the enterprise of education. Moreover, there is little in Rorty's work to indicate that he regards philosophy as either a distinctive discipline or a disposition of thought.

#### STRAND 2. DEFENDING CRITICAL THINKING

Okshevsky's reasons for explicating Rorty's views on critical thinking as an educational ideal are not entirely clear, but he appears to be concerned that some educators might read Rorty's rejection of foundationalist epistemology as implying that critical thinking is either not a defensible or not an important educational ideal or goal. Thus, he sets out to show that Rorty's views have no such implication. From Rorty's critique of Philosophy Okshevsky extracts what he calls a negative criterion of critical thinking. This criterion cautions that in attempting to justify knowledge claims the critical thinker should avoid transcending (transgressing) the legitimate powers and resources of critical thought. In particular, critical thought must not attempt to justify or adjudicate between entire language games or whole vocabularies that are incommensurable, for, according to Rorty, there can be no criteria to use in such a justification. To this negative criterion Okshevsky adds Rorty's positive

conception of critical thinking as essentially concerned with comparing the desirability of one projected set of consequences of action over another in the context of generating and deliberating upon actual or possible alternative policies or courses of action. Thus he shows that although Rorty's philosophical views limit the scope of critical thought, they are not inimical to regarding critical thinking as a desirable educational ideal and goal.

Okshevsky notes that if Rorty's critique of foundationalist philosophy is mistaken, we must also question his conception of critical thinking as confined to comparing alternatives within practical deliberation. He suggests the possibility that Rorty is mistaken in his claim that foundationalist philosophy is incommensurable with his own brand of pragmatism. I want to pursue this issue a bit further, for it brings to the fore a very important concern with Rorty's account. Although Rorty claims there can be no argument for adopting one incommensurable language game over another, he clearly does argue that his pragmatic view of knowledge, mind and language are preferable to foundationalist alternatives. We might conclude from this that he is either mistaken about these two vocabularies' being incommensurable or he is wrong about it's being impossible to genuinely argue about which of two incommensurable vocabularies should be adopted. I believe that we should be extremely skeptical, not only about Rorty's claims, but about any philosophical claims concerning the incommensurability of language games or vocabularies and hence about any conclusions drawn from such claims. The only way I know to give concrete application to the term "incommensurable" is by interpreting it in such a way that two vocabularies are incommensurable if and only if neither can be translated into the other to any substantial degree. Likely Rorty would not accept this interpretation, but if he does not, it is not clear on what basis he identifies two vocabularies as incommensurable.

Given this interpretation, however, the prospects for finding genuinely incommensurable vocabularies or language games do not seem very promising.<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly the prospects for extending the range and depth of critical thinking beyond the confines suggested by Rorty do seem promising. This is not to suggest that critical thinking can have access to criteria of judgment beyond those embodied in some vocabulary and culture. Rather it suggests that the gulfs between seemingly very different vocabularies may not be so wide, nor the commonalities so minimal as to preclude the possibility of rhetorical arguments that bridge them.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 . For a good discussion of the notion of incommensurability see Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), ch.. 3.

2. Useful discussions of this issue are to be found in Steven Toulmin, *Human Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), ch. 8, and in Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch 5.