

EDITORIAL



One of the central themes of a great deal of recent philosophy has been that of 'anti-foundationalism'. The view that the Enlightenment search for the 'foundations' on which knowledge or moral principles could be built is in some way in a state of terminal crisis has been shared by philosophers who otherwise often seem to have little in common.

In this issue, we are publishing three articles which, in different ways, engage with the question of the 'foundations' of knowledge or morality. The contemporary American philosopher who has perhaps nailed his colours most firmly to the anti-foundationalist mast is Richard Rorty. In Rorty's recent book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, which is a critique of the quest for 'foundations' in either knowledge or morality, and a defence of pragmatism, the female gender is ascribed to the central character of the book, the 'liberal ironist'. In the book, however, Rorty did not explicitly address questions about feminist practice, or about the ways in which feminist writings have themselves theorised their challenges to what they have seen as 'masculinist' constructions, both in epistemology and in ethics. In his article 'Feminism and Pragmatism', which we publish in this issue, Rorty does precisely this; the article is about Rorty's view of the relevance of his defence of pragmatism to feminist thinking.

Rorty argues that pragmatism is the philosophical viewpoint that is most suited to feminism. Universalist notions of Reason or Morality, which attempt to see 'reality' behind the 'illusions' constructed by male thinking, or which see moral progress in terms of any sort of extension of 'universal rights', theorised in terms of 'human nature', are not, Rorty argues, helpful in understanding the situation of women. Many feminists still make realist claims; others mingle realism and pragmatism. Rorty argues that feminism would be better served by dropping altogether the claim that feminist discourse aims to represent reality better, or that the oppression of women is something intrinsically abominable, since women have 'right' or 'justice' or 'humanity' on their side. Feminist theory and practice should, rather, be thought of as an imaginative vision of a possible new community and a new sort of moral identity; and the creation of a new 'semantic authority' of women over their own lives.

The issues that are discussed by Rorty have been at the centre of many recent feminist debates. We would be very interested to receive responses from readers to his article; and I would like here to signal a couple of themes that might well figure in such responses. The first is this. Rorty's 'anti-foundationalism' has been seen by many commentators as aligning his work with 'postmodernism', and Rorty himself, whilst somewhat ambivalent about this label, does not entirely reject it. There is by now a considerable literature on the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. But at the centre of this is a question which Rorty's article seems to evade; namely, the question of the extent to which the category of 'woman' itself needs deconstructing, and the extent to which the notion of 'gender' itself can be seen as a useful analytic category. Rorty suggests that the problem for feminism is how women can find a 'moral identity as women';

but it is precisely the possibility of finding such an identity without assuming a false 'essentialism' of gender that has preoccupied much recent feminist writing. How satisfactory is 'identity politics', and in what ways might it marginalise or exclude women whose relationship to white Western feminism remains problematic? The question then is whether Rorty's view of the application of his epistemological critique to feminism avoids one form of 'essentialism' only to reinstate another.

My second theme is this. Rorty conceives of feminism as a struggle for women to gain 'semantic authority' over their own lives. But the powers exercised over women, and the oppressions from which they have suffered, have not of course been just semantic. They have often involved such things as physical suffering and violence, and material deprivation and exploitation. They have involved power relationships which are not simply semantic ones. The question then is whether Rorty's imagined 'community of women' who are able to form a new moral identity is not a form of liberal idealism which evades not only questions about the differences between women, but questions about the forms of power and exploitation out of which such a community is supposed to emerge. How, without any appeal to concepts such as 'justice', without any notion that some analyses of the situation of women might be more apt and 'closer to reality' than others, can a *politics* of feminism be conceptualised or constructed (as opposed to a utopian vision of a new female community)?

Sean Sayers's article, 'F. H. Bradley and the Concept of Relative Truth', raises some interesting questions about the epistemological framework offered by Rorty. Traditional epistemology, Sayers argues, is based on the view that truth and error are absolutes. The job of epistemology, according to this view, is to provide a method to determine such truths, and thus guarantee knowledge. These 'foundationalist' assumptions of traditional epistemology are now in crisis; and it is often thought that the only alternatives are scepticism and relativism. Bradley, Sayers argues, suggests another way to think about knowledge. Bradley's philosophy provides a historical and developmental account of knowledge, which avoids both absolutism and pure relativism by giving an account of knowledge which is both historical and developmental. Sayers, using examples from the history of science, shows how Bradley's view originated in the philosophy of Hegel, and argues that, despite Bradley's own idealism, his philosophy has much to offer more realistic and materialist approaches. Rorty offers us an either/or; either we adopt Universalist notions of Reason and Truth, in traditional 'foundationalist' style – or we drop altogether the claim that feminist discourse represents reality better. Sayers's article argues that these do not exhaust the alternatives.

The question of 'foundations' is also addressed by Kai Nielsen in his article 'Does a Marxian Critical Theory of Society Need a Moral Theory?' Nielson discusses a recent book by R. G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*. Peffer argues that Marx indeed has a moral perspective, and an implicit ethical theory. Marx, he suggests, is an egalitarian, has an egalitarian theory of

social justice, and takes the question of rights seriously. Peffer's project is to rectify what he sees as the inadequacies of the moral theory that he thinks is proposed by Marx. In this article, however, Nielsen raises the question of whether the *project* of a Marxian moral theory, undertaken both by Peffer and by Nielsen himself in previous writings, is in fact essential to Marxist social critique. He argues that, whilst we need an empirically informed critical social theory, the normative commitments on which such a theory must be based do not need philosophical 'foundations'. They simply need acceptance of the moral truisms which Peffer thinks are widely accepted in 'modernizing' societies, along with a wide reflective equilibrium to articulate these consistently. We shall, Nielsen argues, be better off with 'commonly held considered judgements of an uncontentious sort', than with the more rarified and unconsensual claims of moral theory.

Nielsen does not clearly identify the 'moral truisms' which he sees as so uncontentious, and as able to form the basis of a critical social theory. Nor does he discuss the question of what is to happen if such moral truisms conflict rather than cohere with each other. Readers who are sceptical about such a consensus might like to reflect whether, despite their very different concerns and starting points, the articles by both Rorty and Nielsen make problematic assumptions about 'communities' who agree with each other and share an unproblematic moral identity.

Finally, something rather different. Discussion and exegesis of Hegel has been something of a growth industry within academia recently; and 'readings' of Hegel have varied widely. In this century, from Hobhouse to Popper, Hegel has often been presented as an apologist for the Prussian state, if not an outright

fascist. Now the pendulum has swung the other way, and the Hegel renaissance has in many cases taken the form of a liberal reading in which it is alleged that for Hegel a free state is simply a state of free individuals. In Germany, Joachim Ritter, building on Hegel's admiration for the French revolution, was the leading figure. But this interpretation is increasingly common in America. Ritter's translator, Richard Dien Winfield, has produced a book and several articles using Hegel's philosophy to validate bourgeois economic 'freedoms'. Only if one understands this background can one fail to be amazed when Fukuyama's version of the current Western triumphalism takes the form, not, as with Popper, of burying the twin-headed monster Hegel-Marx, but of the claim that Western democracies embody the 'end of history' and instantiate Hegel's concept of the modern state.

John Rosenthal's paper convincingly rebuts Ritter's interpretation, and has an afterword on Fukuyama. What is impressive about Rosenthal's critique is that he does not simply rely on substantive defects in Hegel's scheme, such as the elevation of the monarchy and the subordination of women, but on how the fundamental logic of Hegel's concept of freedom means that personal freedoms not only can but must come into conflict with the 'concreter' freedom of Spirit; and this later gains expression precisely to the extent that it succeeds in using this conflict to reassert its primacy, namely, through the exercise of state power. Here Rosenthal leaves it. The substantive question for us is how to escape the alternatives articulated in this debate; the egocentric claims of the individual of civil society versus the claims of the totalising, if not totalitarian state.

Jean Grimshaw



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