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Philosophy And Social Hope



Synopsis

Richard Rorty is one of the most provocative figures in recent philosophical, literary and cultural debate. This collection brings together those of his writings aimed at a wider audience, many published in book form for the first time. In these eloquent essays, articles and lectures, Rorty gives a stimulating summary of his central philosophical beliefs and how they relate to his political hopes; he also offers some challenging insights into contemporary America, justice, education and love.

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Customer Reviews

Rorty is one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries not because he offers a new theory or new system, but precisely because he is so good at warning us about getting addicted to theories and systems. For this he is hated by many philosophers, despised by many in the literati, scorned by metaphysicians and clerics (as a nihilist or relativist), and reviled by philosophical purists who believe he gleefully misreads the works of their heroes and masters. But like acid on the dross of idiotic or, to be more charitable, useless ideas which have led many a thinker into the deep and twisted woods of high theory, never to be seen again, Rorty pours out his neo-pragmatist criticisms on the various "isms" that claim to be more in touch with the "real world" than their competitors. What is left after the acid bath is a stark realization that there is little that we have to build a better world than our strenuously forged concessions, compromises, agreements, collaborations, and conversations about what in fact having a better world means. This antifoundational view leaves wholly unsatisfied people who believe that something more concrete is

needed to build the world into something more salutary and livable than it was yesterday. Rorty tells the reader that there is nothing more concrete than he or she, that the need for rationalist foundations is a diversion from the true font of social hope and freedom. In this, he surpasses even John Dewey in democratic credentials, although such a claim is seen as heresy in many philosophical circles. Unlike Dewey, Rorty offers no decision procedure for democratic practice. He bids us only to go and be democrats (his preference), or come up with your own good reasons for going in another direction.

This book serves as an excellent introduction to Pragmatism (or at least Rorty's interpretation.) Pragmatism is pretty radical--it challenges basic philosophic assumptions such as the Greek search for truth, as well as the Cartesian self. Consider this quote, which is quintessential Rorty from his essay "Ethics Without Principles": "Just as the pragmatists see scientific progress not as the gradual attenuation of a veil of appearance which hides the intrinsic nature of reality from us, but as the increasing ability to respond to the concerns of ever larger groups of people--in particular, the people who carry out ever more acute observations and perform ever more refined experiments--so they see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people (...) Pragmatists do not think of scientific, or any other inquiry, as aimed at truth, but rather at better justificatory ability--better to deal with doubts about what we are saying, either by shoring up what we have previously said or by deciding to say something different. The trouble with aiming at truth is that you would not know when you had reached it, even if you had in fact reached it. But you can aim at ever more justification, the assuagement of ever more doubt. Analogously, you cannot aim at 'doing what is right', because you will never know whether you have hit the mark. Long after you are dead, better informed and more sophisticated people may judge your action to have been a tragic mistake, just as they may judge your scientific beliefs as intelligible only by reference to an obsolete paradigm. But you can aim at ever more sensitivity to pain, and ever greater satisfaction of ever more various needs.

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