

Richard Rorty: An appreciation of Jacques Derrida

BY RICHARD RORTY, PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Stanford University is greatly honored to have Jacques Derrida as its guest.

Professor Derrida's books have been translated into dozens of the world's languages. They are studied in every university in the world in which academic freedom exists. They have provoked more impassioned debate than those of any other living thinker. His amazing blend of vast learning with lighthearted wordplay, and of intense moral seriousness with silky irony -- his skill at what Kierkegaard called "indirect communication" -- has made him a marvelously original writer. His latest books typically astonish even those who have read all the previous ones. Of all the philosophers of our time, he has been the most effective at doing what Socrates hoped philosophers would do: breaking the crust of convention, questioning assumptions never before doubted, raising issues never before discussed.

When the history of 20th-century philosophy is written, Professor Derrida will be seen as having continued a sequence which runs from Hegel through Nietzsche to Heidegger and Wittgenstein. In these men's writings, Socratic doubt is turned against Platonic metaphysics. What Derrida calls "the metaphysics of presence" -- the intellectual tradition that goes back to Parmenides and Plato -- tells us that beyond humanity, and immune to historical and cultural change, there is something to which humanity owes respect. This is something which we have a duty to make clearly and distinctly present to our minds. It is, as Derrida has put it, "a fixed presence beyond the reach of play." Sometimes this thing is called God, sometimes the intrinsic nature of physical reality, sometimes the moral law, and sometimes the underlying structure of all possible human thought.

To disentangle oneself from the metaphysics of presence would be to move into an intellectual world which would be humanistic in a far fuller sense than were the worlds of Renaissance Platonists or the Enlightenment secularists. For the Renaissance believed that the source of human salvation lies outside of any actual or possible human community, and the Enlightenment believed that natural science puts in touch with the true nature of something made by no human hand. A fuller humanism would say, with Yeats, "Whatever flames upon the night/Man's own resinous heart has fed." For such a humanism, there would be no source of authority, and no proper object of respect, save products of the human creative imagination.

These products include Newtonian physics, Augustinian theology, Darwinian biology and Kantian ethics as well as the poems of Schiller, the politics of Jefferson and the irony of Socrates. To evade the metaphysics of presence would be to see all of these as poetic achievements: examples of our ability to recreate ourselves by using new words. A culture which saw art and science, politics and religion, morality and education, in this way would be as different from ours as the culture envisaged by Plato was from the culture of Periclean Athens. If such a culture ever comes into existence, it will look back to Professor Derrida as one of those who prepared the way.

At the present time, however, the metaphysics of presence, the greatest imaginative achievement of the ancient world, remains the common sense of the West. Resistance to its overthrow, and ridicule of those who question it, are as predictable as were Athenian resistance to, and ridicule of, Socrates. But the heirs of Socrates have been expressing doubts about Plato's metaphysics for a long time. Examples of such doubts

are Hegel's historicism, Schiller's and Nietzsche's aestheticism, Dewey's pragmatism, Heidegger's revisionary account of Plato as a proto-Nietzschean, and Wittgenstein's and Davidson's treatment of language as a means for coordinating human action, rather than as a means of representing the non-human.

What will historians of philosophy say when they attempt to isolate Professor Derrida's specific contributions to this sequence -- this long series of attempts to formulate a more thoroughgoing humanism? I am not sure, but I hope that they will mention three conspicuous features of his work. First, a lot of it is very funny. Derrida has shown, even more indirectly than Kierkegaard, how philosophers can make good points by making good jokes. Secondly, Derrida has brought poetry into philosophy, in a quite specific sense. He has dared to let some of his arguments depend upon the shape and sounds of words, on puns and verbal associations -- in short, on the features which have traditionally made poems different from argumentative prose. Third and last, Derrida has brought sex into philosophy, again in a quite specific sense. He has shown us how the metaphysics of presence has functioned as one of the more effective tools of a patriarchal culture. After reading Professor Derrida's hilarious accounts of the links between logocentrism and phallogocentrism, it is impossible to take either the logos or the phallus as seriously as Plato did, or as the West has long been accustomed to doing.

Admirers of Derrida like myself hope that the philosophy books of the future will be influenced by his good example: that they will be less pretentious, less professionalized, less priggish, less guarded, funnier, more poetic, and perhaps even sexier, than those of the past. Even if this hope is vain, however, Professor Derrida's books will be found shelved alongside those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The shelf that contains these three men's books will serve to remind our descendants of what can be accomplished when an original thinker lets down all his guards and entrusts himself completely to his own exuberance.

Professor Derrida will speak to us this evening about the great gray soul mother of us all: the university. His title is "The Future of the Profession, of the Unconditional University." The subtitle is "Thanks to the 'Humanities': What *Could Take Place* Tomorrow." SR