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# Reply

## Critical Thinking, Rational Evaluation, and Strong Poetry: A Response to Hatcher

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**Key words:** Critical thinking, rational evaluation, strong poetry, foundationalism, postmodernism.

**Abstract:** This paper tests Hatcher's thesis by attempting to reconstruct how Rorty might respond to Hatcher's criticisms. It argues that Rorty would approve of Hatcher's rejection of foundationalism and would agree that standards arise from practices, but he would claim that it is an error to set up principles of practice as normative constraints. He would further attempt to ward off Hatcher's criticisms by claiming that he is engaging in a practice different from rational argument, the practice of "strong poetry". The paper then argues that, faced with the alternatives of rational evaluation and strong poetry, the only responsible choice is to rationally evaluate them.

My initial reaction to Donald Hatcher's paper, "Critical Thinking and the Conditions for Rational Evaluation", was one of complete agreement. His arguments seemed to me correct, and obviously so. Yet I feared that such a reaction might indicate that I was merely confirming beliefs I already held and failing to consider seriously an alternative view. Thus what I have attempted in this paper is to seriously test Hatcher's (and hence my) views by sympathetically reconstructing the view with which we disagree and then seeing what conclusions I could draw. This task seemed to be particularly useful in light of a) the inexorable logic of Hatcher's position; b) the fact the arguments he proposes are not radically new, but are really variations of familiar and long-standing ones; and c) the fact those who hold the view he criticizes seem to be not at all struck by the force of these arguments. Perhaps Donald Hatcher and I are missing something.

### Hatcher's Argument

Let me begin by reviewing Hatcher's argument. He sees postmodernism as a challenge to critical thinking, or more specifically, to the standards and principles of rationality assumed in critical thinking classes. Because of the context-relativity claim, critical thinking becomes just one way among many of evaluating the reasonableness of claims, with no universal or meta-disciplinary standpoint from which to critically evaluate the rationality of all claims.

Hatcher argues, however, that even given the demise of foundationalism, one can offer a non question-begging justification for standards of rationality in terms of the principles which are constitutive of the practice of discussion and inquiry. These principles are 1) the principle of non-contradiction (that contradiction should be avoided); 2) the principle of reciprocity (that reciprocity should be allowed with respect to moves in arguments); 3) the reasons principle (that beliefs should accord with the evidence); and, 4) the clarification principle (that views should be clear). These principles are necessary in order for any beliefs to be supported and communicated, including the beliefs which constitute the postmodern position.

**What Would Rorty Say?**

One difficulty with Hatcher's paper is that he does not distinguish among various versions of postmodernism. He does mention Rorty at some point, however, and as Rorty is a particularly influential theorist, I have chosen him as spokesperson for the view Hatcher is criticizing. Given Hatcher's critique, what would Rorty say?

First, I think that he would express his approval that Hatcher has recognized the error of foundationalism and has realized that one must seek justification for claims in human practices. He might, however, want to clarify the precise nature of the challenge which this move poses to critical thinking. Rorty would deny that his view implies that critical thinking standards are unjustifiable or arbitrary. Rather, his claim is that justification is limited to particular practices or language games but makes no sense between them. Thus the standards used in critical thinking classes may be perfectly well justified within particular practices. What they cannot do is adjudicate between practices/contexts/vocabularies. What is at issue, then, is critical thinking's claim to offer a universal or meta-disciplinary standpoint from which to evaluate the rationality of all claims, as Hatcher rightly points out. Nor would Rorty see critical thinking standards as arbitrary, for arbitrariness implies that something could have been reasoned but was not. It is not a question of arbitrariness in our acceptance of critical thinking standards. They simply are an agreed-upon part of the practice.

This discussion raises the issue of what, exactly, constitutes a practice. Hatcher seems willing to agree with Rorty that standards grow out of practices, but rather than limiting the notion of practices to particular disciplines or contexts, he views discussion or inquiry in general as a practice. Given this move, he can then view certain principles as emanating from and necessary to the practice of inquiry.

Rorty's response at this point might be to point out that, in attempting to set up these principles as normative constraints, Hatcher has misunderstood the nature of the relationship between such principles and practices. Rorty would claim that the practices are prior, and the principles are simply ways of describing the practices. They are empty outside of the context of particular practices. Moreover, they have no normative force. He refers, for example, to the fallacy of "seeing axioms where there are only shared habits, of viewing statements which summarize such practices as if they reported constraints enforcing such practices" (Rorty 1991, p.26). Thus someone who engaged in a different sort of practice under the name of inquiry might simply not agree to the principles which Hatcher outlines.

This, in fact, seems to be Rorty's stance with respect to his own position, and he would doubtless attempt to ward off Hatcher's criticism by maintaining that he is not putting forth theories, that he is not playing the game of rational discussion and argument, that he is engaged in a different practice, that he is changing the subject. He maintains frequently, in fact, that he is *not* arguing for his position since argument is only relevant within vocabularies but not between. Thus he states, "It [the new method of philosophy] does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old thing which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else. But it does not argue for this suggestion on the basis of antecedent criteria common to the old and the new language game. For just insofar as the new language game really is new, there will be no such criteria." (Rorty 1989, p.9). Rather than arguing, what Rorty claims he is doing is redescribing. His aim is to make his redescription attractive so that people's patterns of talking will gradually change, and they will gradually come to adopt his new vocabulary. He makes the point thus: "The method [of the new philosophy] is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new

ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions" (Rorty 1989, p.9). Thus as an alternative to rational argument and evaluation, Rorty offers us strong poetry. "A sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species ... I shall try to develop this last point ... in terms of Harold Bloom's notion of the strong poet" (Rorty 1989, p.20). His claim, moreover, is that culture never changes through argument and rational choice of alternatives, but rather through such a process of speaking differently. "What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change" (Rorty 1989, p.7). The strong poet, not the critical thinker, is the agent of cultural change.

**What Do I Do Now?**

As an inquirer faced with these conflicting views, the postmodern view as exemplified by Rorty and the rationalist view as exemplified by Hatcher, my problem is to know what to do next. According to Rorty's view, I should probably see if his new vocabulary appeals to me aesthetically, if I am tempted away from my rationalist vocabulary by it in much the same way as I might be tempted away from a game I was playing by another game which seemed more interesting at the moment, a game which is not necessarily bound by the principles which Hatcher expounds. Or I could wait and see if I become swept up in a general change in the prevalent way of speaking engendered by his new vocabulary, a vocabulary not bound by Hatcher's principles.

According to Hatcher's view, I should critically evaluate the opposing views according to the standards of rationality explicated by his principles.

It seems to me that I have only one possible and responsible choice. Given the purposes of inquiry as determining what to believe and do, these purposes are served only by critical evaluation. I realize that once I make that move, I am ceasing to try and play Rorty's game and I am opting into the rationalist position. What I think this demonstrates is that one can only play Rorty's game so far. Eventually one has to ask why one should accept his view over another. Try as one might to postpone the moment, at some point one must critically evaluate his view. For if he is wrong, then it is possible to rationally evaluate views, and a refusal to do this would amount to an abdication of one's responsibility as a rational agent in the world. The consequences of this are serious, unlike a decision to give up chess in favour of Trivial Pursuit. Moreover, any critical evaluation must take place according to the standards afforded by the principles outlined by Hatcher, that is the view must be clear, must avoid contradiction, must accord with the evidence, and must allow reciprocity with respect to argumentative moves, even if what constitutes compliance to these principles can only be determined within specific contexts.

A rational evaluation of the Rortyian view reveals numerous problems in addition to the ones pointed out by Hatcher. One is that despite his recognition that engaging in argumentation would undercut his view, Rorty does argue. In some cases he does so explicitly. Note, for example, the following: "Only if we do that [accept the Wittgensteinian approach to language] can we fully accept the argument I offered earlier – the argument that since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their

existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths." (Rorty 1989, p.21). In some cases, the appeal to reasons is implicit, as when he talks about old vocabularies as a nuisance or unfruitful and new vocabularies as more attractive and promising, thus implying some grounds for comparison. Thus, despite disclaimers (e.g., Rorty 1989, p.9 cited previously), he does argue for his view. Indeed he must if he wants us to take it seriously in the first place.

Another problem is that his view presupposes a radical discontinuity between contexts/vocabularies. Experience and reason cast serious doubt on this claim, however. Numerous philosophers have demonstrated the problems inherent in the Kuhnian notion that scientific paradigms are incommensurable (Scheffler 1982, Siegel 1980) and continuities between successive paradigms are evident in all domains (Bailin 1992). Such continuity provides one basis for rational discussion between contexts.

The Rortyian view also seems to be based on a view of language as self-contained and unconnected with the world. Yet this is highly implausible. Even Rorty concedes that some vocabularies are "better tools for dealing with the world for one or another purpose" (Rorty 1989, p.21). But why would this be the case unless the vocabulary were connected in some manner with the world, even if we do not want to see this connection as one of representation?

Finally, the Rortyian view does not seem to allow for critical discussion of justificatory procedures used in particular practices, of the relative merits of various practices, nor of purposes themselves. Yet we do engage in a meaningful way in these types of discussions, and indeed, they are central to inquiry. Rorty would doubtless object that one is always speaking from the point of view of one's particular context in such discussions, and so the belief that there are objective, non context-dependent standards for the adjudication of such debates is an illusion. Objectivity need not, however, be construed as implying independence from any context. Rather, offering a claim as objective implies that, despite the fact that it emanates from a particular point of view, it is being proposed as a candidate for universal acknowledgement, that the grounds for accepting it are not merely subjective. Robertson puts the point thus: "To put forth a claim as objective is to imply that it is rational for others to accept it. It is not to suppose that the claim can be supported by reasons which are independent of all conceptual schemes or that judging what is rational to believe is an algorithmic process." (Robertson 1992, p.177). She states, further, that in claiming objectivity for our claims, "we invite others to reveal to us the ways in which our viewpoint is partial" and that this opens up the possibility of more inclusive points of view and an enlarged vision. The Rortyian position seems to deny this effort at objectivity between perspectives, since the notion of good reasons no longer has any purchase outside particular contexts. He leaves us with only rhetoric as a source of cultural change. This is a result which seems totally in opposition to our purposes as inquirers.

Poetry, even of the strongest sort, may be diverting, provocative, and enriching. When faced with serious choices regarding belief and action, however, we must, in the end, engage in rational evaluation, and such evaluation entails the principles outlined by Hatcher. The alternative strikes me as decidedly unattractive.[1]

## Notes

[1] I would like to thank David Hammond for extremely helpful discussion regarding Rorty's position. A version of this paper was presented at the Western Division, American Philosophical Association meeting, Portland, Oregon, March 1992.

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