Eidos volume 6 no. 1 (2022)

A JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

DOI: 10.14394/eidos.jpc.2022.0010

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Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas, and the Nature of Philosophical Dialogue

Review: Marcin Kilanowski,
The Rorty-Habermas Debate: Toward Freedom as Responsibility,
(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021), 304 pages

Let me begin this review on a personal note. I was interested in submitting a proposal for the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America. The MSA had issued a call for papers on the subject "Metaphysical Traditions in Dialogue" which began: "metaphysics strives to give an account of the whole by articulating the principles and structures that underlie all things."[1] The call for proposals then observed that the attempt of various types of metaphysics to give an account of the whole worked against metaphysical eclecticism because the parts in each approach generally made sense only in the context of the whole. Still, dialogue among competing traditions, including dialogue between so called "analysts" and "Continental" philosophers, was possible because "parallel problems and parallel philosophical strategies always emerge within these different traditions."[2] Accordingly, the MSA invited submissions that, among other things, "explore the history of dialogue between traditions that partially share a common metaphysical framework."[3]

1) "Call for Abstracts," *Metaphysical Society of America 72nd Annual Meeting*, accessed July 6, 2022, https://www.metaphysical-society.org/2022/2022_meeting.htm.

2) Ibid.

3) Ibid.

I received Marcin Kilanowski's thoughtful new book for review at about the same time I saw the MSA's call for proposals. Kilanowski's *The Rorty-Habermas Debate: Toward Freedom as Responsibility*[4] is the first book-length study in English[5] of the philosophical interchange between two of the most celebrated contemporary philosophers, the American Richard Rorty (1931–2007), and the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929). In its attempt to find common ground between philosophers of different approaches, Kilanowski's book immediately reminded me of the theme of the upcoming MSA conference even though both Rorty and Habermas rejected the traditional practice of metaphysics of the form suggested by the MSA. Rorty gained recognition as an analytic philosopher before achieving both fame and notoriety with his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* which often is characterized by the vague terms "neo-pragmatism" or "post modernism." Rorty criticized and tried to end traditional metaphysical and epistemological debate in terms of subject-object, representationalism, correspondence, and truth. Rorty thus rejected at the outset the traditional types of philosophical questions about reality and knowledge set out in the call for papers from the MSA.

Habermas, for his part, has long been associated with Continental philosophy, the Frankfurt School, and critical theory. I had the opportunity to read a late book by Habermas titled *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*.[6] In it, Habermas discusses the nature of philosophy and argues that since the time of Hume and Kant, the grand vision of giving a picture of reality and of the human place in it has become untenable. He argues that philosophical thinking has become "postmetaphysical" and must admit that it is fallible, abandon the quest for absolute certainties, and learn from and follow the findings of science. In these conclusions, Habermas is close to many of the American pragmatists.

The philosophical dialogue between Rorty and Habermas began on May 8–9, 1995, shortly after the fall of Communism in Poland. Rorty and Habermas had a debate and discussion in Warsaw under the auspices of the Institute for Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski was also scheduled to participate but was unable to appear in person due to an accident. The Rorty-Habermas discussion is memorialized in the 1996 book *Debating the State of Philosophy*: *Habermas, Rorty, and Kolakowski*[7] and merits a brief summary here.

The discussion is divided into three chapters: "Coping with Contingencies," "The Challenge of Relativism," and "Philosophy and the Dilemmas of the Contemporary World." Habermas begins with a lengthy, difficult presentation, "Coping with Contingencies: The Return of Historicism" which starts with the Greeks and proceeds through Dilthey and Heidegger. Habermas rejects Platonism and subject-object dualism and in this respect agrees with Rorty's rejection of the questions traditionally raised by metaphysics. But Habermas also argues that reason and rationality have an important place in what he describes as a redirected philosophy of communicative rationality and in the attempts of democracies and speakers of different perspectives to live together peacefully.

Rorty offers presentations in each chapter, titled "Emancipating our Culture," "Relativism: Finding and Making," "On Moral Obligation, Truth, and Common Sense," and "The Notion of Rationality." He takes issue with Habermas' efforts to find an underlying sense of communicative rationality even while he largely agrees

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4) Marcin Kilanowski, *The Rorty-Habermas Debate: Toward Freedom as Responsibility*,(Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2021). Hereafter referred to as RHD, using in text citations.

5) Kilanowski references, RHD, 214, n.31, to two earlier book-length studies of the Rorty-Habermas debate: P.L. Proulx, *Réalisme et Vérité: Le Débat entre Habermas et Rorty*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012); Barbara Weber, *Zwischen Vernuft und Mitgefühl, Jürgen Habermas und Richard Rorty im Dialog über Wahrheit, politische Kultur, und Menschenrechte*, (Freiburg: Alber Publisher, 2013).

6) Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, (Polity Press, 2017),

7) Józef Niżnik and John Sanders, eds., *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty, and Kołakowski*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996).

with Habermas' social and political aims. The tendency is to find commonality in the positions of the two thinkers while minimizing disagreement. As always, Rorty writes and speaks beautifully.

Habermas and Rorty would continue their discussion in the ensuing years through their own writings and through addressing the writings of each other up to the time of Rorty's death.

A Professor of Law at Nicholas Copernicus University in Poland, Kilanowski offers the following description of the philosophical contours of the Rorty-Habermas debate.

> This exchange concerned fundamental philosophical issues: the nature of reality, the status of truth, the understanding of modernity, and the universality of philosophical concepts, as well as the implications of these for the issues of freedom, democracy, and the present and future of liberal societies. Adversaries have often emphasized the mutual sympathy of the two philosophers, personal and philosophical, as well as the fact that they do not differ much in practical terms, in particular regarding the social and political consequences of their positions. Their discussion took the form of a dialogue between the great philosophical traditions of European continental philosophy represented by Habermas, with particular emphasis on critical theory, and the tradition of American pragmatism represented by Rorty. (RHD, 8)

And with the passion of a philosopher, Kilanowski observes that the issues of the debate "such as truth, reason, freedom, and the role of philosophy are timeless" though particularized in the Rorty-Habermas debate of some years ago (RHD, 8).

Kilanowski has three broad aims in his book. First, he aims to present an exposition of the thinking of both Rorty and Habermas. Second, he compares and contrasts their positions as they developed in time and in discussions with one another to show large areas of convergence and agreement. Third, Kilanowski wants to suggest lessons that may be learned from the Rorty-Habermas debate about the kind of politics to be pursued going forward (RHD, xii–xiii).

Thus, Kilanowski intends to show the broad and growing convergence in the sociopolitical thought of Rorty and Habermas, in the face of their at least partially different philosophical starting points, and argues for the importance of the position that the two philosophers come to share. Kilanowski argues that the shared position of Rorty and Habermas centers upon the concept of freedom rather, than as in traditional subject-object metaphysics, upon the concept of truth. Their thought invites further development of the nature of freedom, in a direction that Kilanowski terms in his book's title and throughout, "freedom as responsibility" (RHD, xii).

The intended audience for the book is scholars in law and government and graduate students more so than professional philosophers. Perhaps over-optimistically Kilanowski assumes that most philosophers will be familiar with this material. At the same time, the density and detail of Kilanowski's book asks a great deal of readers, specialist or non-specialist. The book includes large and valuable sections of exposition of the thought of Rorty and Habermas. This detailed presentation of the difficult thought of each thinker is a great virtue of the book. Kilanowski stays close to and carefully elucidates their writings. For the most part, he addresses differing interpretations of each thinker in the endnotes.

A quotation from Rorty about the need to prevent the horrors of the twentieth century from happening again frames Kilanowski's exploration of the discussions between Rorty and Habermas (RHD, 1). Rorty had written:

> At times like that of Auschwitz, when history is in upheaval and traditional institutions and patterns of behavior are collapsing, we want something which stands beyond history and insti-

> tutions. What can there be except human solidarity, our recognition of one another's common humanity?[8]

For Kilanowski, Rorty and Habermas each faced the "Specter of Auschwitz" and came to a similar conclusion. Habermas aimed "to indicate such forms of coexistence that would allow for preserving dignity within a community" (RHD, 1) while Rorty wanted to promote forms of coexistence that did not depend on coercion and that did not cause human suffering. Although both recognized that the persistence of difficult times offered grounds for pessimism, Rorty and Habermas shared a hope that their common goal could be accomplished. Their hope was based on "the conviction that we are able to deliberately and consciously change ourselves and our surroundings" and by the "renunciation of the search for the one and only truth" (RHD, 2). For Kilanowski, a common thread underlying the convergence of Rorty's and Habermas' thought is a commitment to a philosophy of pragmatism.

Although they came from different philosophical backgrounds, Rorty and Habermas were erudite, well-versed in the history of philosophy, and familiar with the intellectual traditions of each other. Recognizing their differences, Kilanowski sees both Rorty and Habermas as within the broad pragmatist tradition in philosophy. He describes Rorty's "neo-pragmatism" as a successor of the American pragmatist tradition of the early twentieth century. Habermas, in his turn, many times stressed the influence of pragmatism on his thought in both its Kantian and American forms. Habermas stated that it was the "anti-elitist, democratic, and egalitarian" attitude that attracted him to American pragmatism more than any specific essay on politics or democracy (RHD, 3). Kilanowski finds that both American pragmatism and Habermas's pragmatism "can be characterized by antipositivism, antiessentialism, fallibilism, pluralism, a critique of dualisms and industrial societies, sensitivity to ambivalences, and approaching philosophy as a tool for tackling human problems" (RHD, 3). Kilanowski calls Habermas's form of pragmatism "continental pragmatism" (RHD, 4). In a short suggestive statement developed throughout the study, Kilanowski writes that for both Rorty and Habermas "it is social consensus, and not the attitude towards nonhuman reality that is of the utmost significance" (RHD, 2).

In the five chapters and conclusion of the book, Kilanowski develops the thought of Rorty and Habermas through close readings of their works. He compares and contrasts their thinking emphasizing their broad areas of agreement. Kilanowski concludes with a discussion of what he finds valuable and suggestive in the work of the two philosophers. There is a suggestion throughout that neither Rorty nor Habermas are as far from metaphysics as they profess. Rather each philosopher addresses the questions of metaphysics in his own distinctive way.

Both Rorty and Habermas acknowledged the broad influence of the American philosopher John Dewey on their own thinking. Thus, emphasizing the convergence of their thought, Kilanowski begins with a brief introduction to the work of Dewey. He stresses how Dewey rejected philosophers' traditional search for fixity and certainty in understanding reality and focused instead on how thinking was not a mirror of reality but was instead a way to address and resolve concrete problems. Dewey saw a world of ethical and ideological pluralisms rather than certainties and argued that these pluralisms could best be addressed through peaceful, participatory democracy in which the views and needs of all were considered. Both Rorty and Habermas took from Dewey "the idea of freeing human beings from what is to be prior to their own selves and … in particular to the corresponding emergence of utopian possibilities and better chances for individual self-realization" (RHD, 22). He amplifies upon Dewey's great influence in his treatment of the thought of both thinkers.

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8) Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 189.

In the following two chapters, Kilanowski presents a detailed discussion of the philosophies of Rorty and Habermas. Ranging broadly over Rorty's writings, his focus is on the book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Kilanowski explains key concepts in Rorty's sociopolitical thought, including ethnocentrism, contingency, rationality, and the distinction between public and private spheres. Kilanowski addresses criticisms of Rorty, including the often-levelled charge of relativism while adding criticisms of his own. Kilanowski questions Rorty's rejection of the concepts of truth and rational justification and his attendant sharp distinction between public and private spheres.[9] Still, Kilanowski praises Rorty for teaching that "the idea of truth as responsibility toward reality may gradually be replaced with the idea of what we begin to believe in free and open encounters, in the course of domination-free discussions" (RHD, 72). Kilanowski summarizes Rorty's thought as proposing "a shift from epistemology to politics, from explaining the relation between 'reason' and reality to explaining the ways in which political freedom has changed our understanding of the goals of human cognition" (RHD, 73). Kilanowski then turns to the thought of Habermas with an emphasis on whether this philosopher shares Rorty's views on the centrality of human freedom.

Kilankowski's lengthy exposition of Habermas discusses his massive work *The Theory of Communicative Action* together with Habermas's later work, *Truth and Justification* which, Kilanowski finds, helps "the reader to learn about Habermas' main arguments regarding the foundations on which we should base our thinking about freedom, communication, politics, and democracy" (RHD, 10). He explores many of Habermas' key concepts, on the face of it different from Rorty's including lifeworld, communicative rationality, and validity claims. The importance of Habermas' understanding of communicative rationality lies in its enabling of "domination-free communication and consensual regulation of social conflicts, so that moral and political progress, measured with individualization and emancipation, can be possible" (RHD, 124). Kilanowski argues that just as for Dewey and Rorty, Habermas' thought "rests not on discovering some sort of ultimate truth but on the occurrence of free and undistorted communication" (RHD, 124–25). Kilanowski elaborates upon this issue in the following chapter, which develops the commonalities in the thinking of Rorty and Habermas.

The fourth chapter of the book, together with the chapter titled "Postscript" and the conclusion, work through the thought of Rorty and Habermas to show their increasing convergence. As I read the chapters, I was reminded again of the MSA's call for papers illustrating dialogue between competing philosophical, metaphysical traditions and of how Kilanowski's book might serve as an example to show this dialogue. Kilanowski suggests that Rorty and Habermas frequently misunderstood one another but gradually came to *understand that the views they shared were more important that the matters on which they continued* to disagree. He finds that many of their disagreements were more verbal than substantive. Kilanowski also points out "idealizations" in the thought of both philosophers that cast into doubt their self-descriptions as "post metaphysical." As the lengthy discussion of the convergence in Rorty's and Habermas' thinking proceeds, Kilanowski gradually comes to a consideration of human freedom rather than the search for a nonhuman truth as the underlying ideal driving both philosophers. Freedom for both thinkers requires a broad openness of communication among equals and a commitment to avoid the infliction of pain. Kilanowski argues that both Rorty and Habermas, under the influence of Dewey, point the way to the development of an understanding of freedom as responsibility, which tries to minimize the traditional dichotomy between the individual and the society and honors their inseparability. Kilanowski introduces several other important philosophers into the discussion, including Sir Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar, Hilary Putnam, and Sidney Hook. Hook concluded an essay titled *Pragmatism and the*

9) Kilanowski offers a critique of Rorty and of Rorty's rejection of metaphysics in his essay "Abandoning Truth is not a Solution: A Discussion with Richard Rorty," included in a collection of essays, Randall Auxier, Eli Kramer, and Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, eds., *Rorty and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

Tragic Sense of Life with the observation: "pragmatism is the theory and practice of enlarging human freedom in a precarious and tragic world by the arts of intelligent social control. It may be a lost cause. I do not know of a better one" (RHD, 198–99).

Kilanowski's study admirably meets its three-fold goal of presenting the thought of Rorty and Habermas during their long debate, showing its convergence while recognizing important areas of continued disagreement, and suggesting the continued importance of their thought for both non-philosophers and philosophers. As Kilanowski writes: "it is up to each member of our society to decide whether it is language and not violence that is to become our means of communication, whether in a discussion we will treat our partners as our equals and whether we will give them a chance to speak, freely and without constraint" (RHD, 210). The book also encouraged me to think beyond its stated goals and to reflect upon the nature of metaphysical dialogue. In spite of the apparent strictures of both Rorty and Habermas, Kilanowski's book also encouraged me to reflect on the continued importance of metaphysics.

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