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Testing the Ethos of Tolerance: Chin's Interpretation of Rorty's Political Theory

For Contemporary Pragmatism symposium on Clayton Chin, The Practice of Political Theory: Rorty and Continental Thought

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Abstract

In *The Practice of Political Theory*, Clayton Chin puts Richard Rorty's pragmatism in dialogue with a range of contemporary political theorists, particularly focusing on how his notion of cultural politics can speak to the ontological turn in political theory. This article focuses on Chin's claim that Rorty's cultural politics provides an ethos of inclusive and tolerant political engagement. After exploring the basis for Chin's interpretation, it identifies three tensions in this ethos, in relation to character of its demandingness, the fissure between ethnocentric and egalitarian engagement, and the relationship of this ethos to the virtues and procedures of democratic citizenship.

Keywords

rorty – tolerance – cultural politics

Clayton Chin's *The Practice of Political Theory: Rorty and Continental Thought* is a very rich and attentive text, making an important contribution to a new wave of thinking about Richard Rorty's significance for political theory.¹ I am

1 Clayton Chin, *The Practice of Political Theory: Rorty and Continental Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). And see the contributions to Alexander Gröschner, Colin Koopman and Mike Sandbothe, eds. *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy to Cultural Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

sympathetic with its overall approach and agree with many of the arguments made. In making a persuasive case for the importance of Rorty's pragmatism as a paradigm of post-foundational political theory, Chin develops a contrast between Rortyan pragmatism, traditions of critique, and the kind of approach captured by Stephen White as "weak ontology", particularly the version in William Connolly's work.² Weak ontologists think that some particular view of political reality, "both fundamental and contestable, both unavoidable and ungrounded", is needed in order to ground political claims.³ While Chin largely zeroes in on Connolly, the proliferation of ontologies of the political in recent political thought give his project wider significance. For the Rortyan pragmatist, there is only "cultural politics", the process of trying to provide more fruitful, humane and useful descriptions: the ontologists' effort to get things right is likely to be a relatively fruitless endeavour. Instead, "cultural politics should replace ontology and whether or it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics".⁴ We don't decide between these two options by considering which one gets things right, or appeal to some other neutral criterion. Instead, we decide with reference to cultural politics – we beg the question. This isn't a debate I want to consider here but leave for those who want to defend an ontology of the political as a central framing project in political theory, or who identify in Chin's own account of social practices a form of ontological commitment. Nor will I discuss Chin's broader mapping of the relationship of Rorty's texts to Foucault, Habermas, Tully, and others.

Instead, this article focuses on Chin's development of the idea that beyond the rejection of epistemological and ontological frames for political theory, there lies a "deeper positive project in Rorty, one both theoretical and political" and that "Rorty provides a series of important methodological imperatives and proscriptions for political thinking".⁵ Given Rorty's scepticism both about method and about political theorising, this is a significant claim. It's also timely: as Rorty (along with many others) is tainted with the cognitive and ethical irresponsibility of the "post-truth" miasma, it is an important moment to try to get a clearer fix on the political consequences of his pragmatism.

According to Chin, Rorty outlines "a democratic ethos for socio-political thinking among abnormal conditions of pluralism that takes inclusion beyond

2 Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

3 Chin, *Practice*, p. 16.

4 Richard Rorty, "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God", in Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers* vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 5 (emphasis in original).

5 Chin, *Practice*, pp. 203, 244.

the quasi-foundational approaches of both liberal proceduralism and the radical ontological reification of difference".⁶ This ethos does not rest on the discovery or construction of some common ground between normative frameworks. Rather, Rorty is said to delineate

an ethos for contemporary pluralistic democracy that takes inclusion beyond the quasi-foundational approaches of liberal proceduralism, Habermasian universal validity, and the reification of difference in radical ontological thought [...] cultural politics is the conception of public dialogue within this ethos. It is the positive metatheoretical (metapolitical) vocabulary that enables intercultural critical and normative exchange (i.e., pluralist socio-political criticism).⁷

According to Chin, cultural politics specifically consists in "the socio-political process of justification where we contest the current context in terms of which languages, categories, and objects to employ".⁸ Rational argument and ontological questioning are only possible in normalised situations where established standards are in place. Instead, cultural politics is a form of theoretical contestation in political theory relevant those moments when established standards are "up for grabs" and should "only be understood as *interpretive intervention* into existing socio-political discourses".⁹ In the absence of neutral theoretical criteria, cultural-political argument consists in comparative interpretative interventions, a matter of offering new descriptions and seeing what we make of alternative ways of doing things.

The political payoff of this for Chin is that it provides a "method for the critical reconciliation of diverse ways of speaking", effectively engaging "those with whom we share no normative horizon. [Rorty] offers it as a metavocabulary of intervocabulary normative exchange in the absence of agreed-upon criteria and without reference to an external source of authority. By expanding the logical spaces we inhabit to include new groups and languages, Rorty places an important agonistic constraint that opens up existing standards and consensuses".¹⁰ In this way, Rorty provides "*a general governing ethos for the cultural-political realm* that allows the pursuit of common social change among cultural-political diversity: commonality among nonhierarchical difference".¹¹

6 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 206 (emphasis in original).

10 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 209 (emphasis in original).

This is an ethos of inclusive tolerance.¹² It is worth quoting Chin at some length in order to highlight the key features of this ethos as he understands it, which I'll go on to explore in a little more depth:

This engagement across normative frameworks must not prioritise the normative standards of any particular participants, which is its great difficulty. Further, it must be broadly critical. Rorty's response to this problematic unites his social conception of normativity with his democratic politics; his later reconstruction of rationality posits it as a pragmatic series of virtues, or ethos, given to reflexive learning. Thus, *rationality is an ethical relation among groups* – a disposition toward new and existing conversation partners that frames their engagement in reflexive equality. Each is subject to the critical perspectives of others, but none is privileged from the outset. Rationality is no longer authority but a willingness to subject ourselves to intersubjective construction, to deeper and reflexive relations with others. It is a “continuum of degrees of overlap” – or reflexive growth (outward from the situated present). Inclusive commonality is a piecemeal and pragmatic process of common norm building situated in present communities, practices and norms but striving beyond them through socio-political conversation across difference.¹³

For Chin's Rorty, rationality requires an ethical relationship of equality among groups, viewed as conversational partners; engagement on this basis must not prioritise the normative standards of any of these partners; and this is the basis of an ethos of tolerance and inclusive engagement in politics.

It is worth underlining that asking why we should adopt this ethos and what it consists in doesn't obviously fall into the category of justificatory questions that a Rortyan would dismiss as question-beggingly resting on the representationalist or authoritarian worldview. To ask whether and how to be inclusive isn't to raise the theoretical or “paper doubt” scepticism that pragmatists reject. For Chin's claim that there is an ethos of inclusive engagement in Rorty's work to have theoretical or political significance requires that there at least be some alternative live practical options – not to be inclusive, not to engage at all – which in turn suggest that there is a meaningful justificatory question about this ethos.¹⁴ A modernity of epistemically unanchored description and

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 217; and see *ibid.* p. 233.

¹⁴ E.g., Richard Rorty, “Kant vs. Dewey: the current situation of moral philosophy”, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 199: “the question ‘Why should I be moral?’ should be taken seriously only if an alternative morality is beginning to sound plausible...”

counter-description isn't an obviously tolerant or democratic one. We can see how a commitment to antiauthoritarianism and reflexivity removes the obligation to orient ourselves around something that purports to be more than a contingent societal standard. Viewing standards as social achievements politically up for grabs isn't necessarily to view them in democratic terms.¹⁵ So we are confronted with the question of why overcoming an attitude of abasement and embracing a self-conscious understanding of the social basis of normativity involves inclusiveness and egalitarian engagement on the broad terms that Chin sets out.

Rorty's critique of epistemology is well-known and consists in two main negative claims. The first is that there is no particular description of the world or set of terms in which the world should be described that provides the terms in which any true description must be couched. The second is that knowledge shouldn't be understood in terms of the alignment of the subjective capacities of the knower with the way the world is in itself. In Rorty's later writings, he comes to stress what he thinks of as the anti-authoritarian dimension of these claims, and its roots in Dewey's pragmatism. Forms of realism are authoritarian as they claim to put something above us to which our mundane beliefs and actions are required to conform. As he puts it, the "pragmatists' anti-representationalist account of belief is, among other things, a protest against the idea that human beings must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality".¹⁶ This sees the critique of epistemology as part of a process of intellectual maturation and continuous with the rejection of a religious outlook that required sinful human beings to abase themselves before a non-human authority. In the same way that we should learn to give up thinking that we have a duty to follow God's will, we should give up thinking that our beliefs and actions should conform to an external authoritative description of reality, and that we should humble ourselves before this non-human Other: "What Dewey most disliked about both traditional 'realist' epistemology and about traditional religious beliefs is that they discourage us by telling us that somebody or something has authority over us". Rather, "human beings should regulate their actions and beliefs by the need to join with other human beings in cooperative projects, rather than by the needs to stand in the correct relation to something non-human".¹⁷ Instead of striving to establish the character

¹⁵ Chin, *Practice*, pp. 218–9.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism", in *A Companion to Pragmatism*, ed. John Shook and Joseph Margolis (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 257.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 258, 262.

of an independent order of things against which to abase ourselves, while encouraging (or compelling) others to do so as well, we should concentrate instead on getting along with other human beings and on seeking a consensus with them.

Within this context, rationality as involving openness to different conversational partners is a kind of epistemic virtue that should inform the process of consensus building. Chin puts it more than once, this means that we should “subject our claims reflexively to as many linguistic challenges as possible”.¹⁸ This virtue does not derive directly from either the recognition of the contingency of normative frameworks or from acknowledging their plurality. In the first case, Rorty describes liberal societies as having “produced more and more people who are able to recognize the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes – the contingency of their consciences – and yet have remained faithful to those consciences. Figures like Nietzsche, William James, Freud, Proust, and Wittgenstein illustrate what I have called ‘freedom as the recognition of contingency’... such recognition is the chief virtue of the members of a liberal society”.¹⁹ Yet, as this list of figures suggests, while freedom as the recognition of contingency may be the chief virtue of members of a liberal society, this recognition in itself does not make someone commit them to an ethos of inclusive tolerance, and Rorty doesn’t think that it does.²⁰ In any case, to support the ethos of inclusive engagement by appealing to the requirement to face up to contingency seems to be an unstable move in philosophy as cultural politics. For this looks like itself another demand to abase your conception of how to live before a particular philosophical account of the way the world truly is.

Recognition of a plurality of frameworks also does not in itself supply a reason to adopt openness as an epistemic virtue. Rorty writes: “I take the anti-representationalist view of thought and language to have been motivated, in James’s case, by the realization that the need for choice between competing representations can be replaced by tolerance for a plurality of non-competing descriptions, descriptions which serve different purposes and which are to be evaluated by reference to their utility in fulfilling these purposes rather than by their ‘fit’ with the objects being described”.²¹ The context here is James’s reconciliation of science and religion as competing routes to human happiness.

18 Chin, *Practice*, pp. 59, 216.

19 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 46.

20 As Rorty in effect notes: Richard Rorty, “Universality and Truth”, in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), .

21 Rorty, “Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism”, pp. 261–2; cf. Chin, *Practice*, pp. 218, 221.

Eliminating an apparent conflict by relativizing the conflicting points of view to different frameworks of distinct purposes is an important move for Rorty and pragmatism but not one that seems immediately germane here. Rorty's relationship to relativism isn't straightforward. Officially, he disavows it, but, as the passage quoted suggests, there are forms of justificatory relativism that he seems to accept.²² However, it isn't clear how this kind of justificatory relativism supports an ethos of tolerance.²³ Rorty is explicit that he doesn't accept the equal validity of all justificatory frameworks (a position he sometimes identifies with relativism), and accepting that a belief or action is justified relative to a framework of purposes does not in itself provide a reason for tolerating it.

Combining the recognition of the contingency and plurality of justificatory frameworks, with pragmatist fallibilism, acknowledging the possibility that beliefs and norms within your own framework may be wrong, seems to provide support for an ethos of openness toward others. Even where other frameworks seem misguided or incomprehensible, we should still entertain the possibility of learning from them, and so adhere to an ethos of tolerance. In part, this appeals to what Rorty calls "the sad fact that many previous communities have betrayed their own interests by being too sure of themselves, and so failing to attend to objections raised by outsiders".²⁴ However, adopting this ethos shouldn't just be valued as instrumental for correcting errors. Anti-authoritarianism means the refusal to countenance any authority save that of consensus. Yet, Rorty says, we should ask of any consensus, "[w]hat are the limits of our community? Are our encounters sufficiently free and open? Has what we have recently gained in solidarity cost us our ability to listen to outsiders who are suffering? To outsiders who have new ideas?"²⁵ This openness

22 For the disavowal, see Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism", *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 160–75; Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity", in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 21–34. See Christian B. Miller, "Rorty and Moral Relativism", *European Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2002): 354–74.

23 Christian B. Miller, "Rorty and Tolerance", *Theoria* 50 (2003): 84–108.

24 Rorty, "Universality and Truth", p. 5. See, for example, Chin, *Practice*, pp. 190, 213.

25 Rorty, "Solidarity", p. 13. For some thoughts on the Deweyan pedigree of this, see Matthew Festenstein, "Inquiry and Democracy in Contemporary Pragmatism", in 2007, *Pragmatism and European Social Theory*, ed. P. Baert, and B. Turner (Cambridge: Bardwell Press, 2007), pp. 115–136; Matthew Festenstein, "Does Dewey Have an 'Epistemic Argument' for Democracy?", *Contemporary Pragmatism* 16 (2019): 217–41. See also Maria Baghramian, "The Virtues of Relativism", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 93 (2019): 247–69; Martin Kusch, "Relativist Stances, Virtues and Vices", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 93 (2019): 271–91.

flows from a commitment not to betray the community's own interests – not, of course, the interest in getting things right in a framework-independent way but something more like an interest in being the best sort of community it can be, by its own lights.

Rorty's dialectic notoriously grinds to a halt here: “[t]he pragmatists’ justification of toleration, free enquiry, and the quest for undistorted communication can only take the form of a comparison between societies which exemplify those habits and those which do not, leading up to the suggestion that nobody who has experienced both would prefer the latter”.²⁶ Critics press him for some framework-transcending reason why these societies should embrace those values, and, further, insist that the relevant epistemic virtues of openness and engagement require a commitment to an external standard. Rorty insists that at this point the spade turns, and there is no deeper justification available. If this reconstruction of Chin’s conception of Rorty’s ethos is right, there are three tensions that I would like to highlight.

The first is revealed in the different modalities of the claims Chin makes on behalf of Rorty. He sometimes presses a strong claim. For example, he says of Rorty’s conception of rationality that, by “necessitating the engagement of different normative frameworks, he requires us to view our language and practices from the lens of the other”.²⁷ Elsewhere the claim is weaker: that “the vocabulary of cultural politics is a metatheoretical frame oriented to enabling egalitarian engagement across linguistic-normative difference”.²⁸ On the one hand, cultural politics suggests that this account of rationality is an interpretation that we may or may not accept – it isn’t impressed on us by the character of reality, including by the recognition of the contingency of our frameworks. If we do adopt this interpretation (and follow Chin’s line of argument) then we should foster an ethos of egalitarian openness. On the other hand, this ethos imposes or necessitates some quite stringent requirements.

On the face of it, then, the more demanding the contents of this ethos – the more it necessitates and requires – the less we will be inclined to entertain this cultural-political interpretation of rationality as attractive. The less demanding we find these requirements – the more they fit with our conception of ourselves and the world – the less we need an innovative cultural-political interpretation of rationality to help make sense of them.

²⁶ Rorty, “Solidarity”, p. 29.

²⁷ Chin, *Practice*, p. 186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

The second fissure is between what we can call ethnocentric engagement and egalitarian engagement. Rorty tends to call for “frankly ethnocentric” engagement. For example:

the rhetoric we Westerners use in trying to get everyone to be more like us would be improved if we were more frankly ethnocentric, and less professedly universalist. It would be better to say: here is what we in the West look like as a result of ceasing to hold slaves, beginning to educate women, separating church and state, and so on. Here is what happened after we started treating certain distinctions between people as arbitrary rather than fraught with significance. If you would try treating them that way, you might like the results.²⁹

Rorty’s conception of tolerance is based on an ethnocentric self-assertion of a society that deems itself tolerant. Of course, it can be wrong or limited in how it in fact realizes this virtue – it needs to recognise its own fallibility – but it measures success or failure against its own values and standards. For Rorty, the motivation to be open and inclusive on egalitarian terms specifically derives from the privileging of a certain normative framework, one from which this is an epistemic virtue. By contrast, Chin eschews, and indeed tends to ignore, this provocative usage. Instead, he argues that Rorty’s ethos aims at “commonality among *nonhierarchical difference*” and is “motivated by the question of how to bring diverse perspectives together *without hierarchy in their norms*”, and his own picture of Rortyan politics as critical agonistic inclusion seems to rely on this.³⁰ It is open to Chin to respond that by “nonhierarchical” must be meant “nonhierarchical by the fallible standards of our normative framework” rather than by some framework-independent standard, which is *ex hypothesi* not on the table. Yet this still seems to fall short of Rorty’s call for a frankly ethnocentric confrontation with difference.

The third respect in which this ethos of tolerance seems equivocal is at the political level. Chin persuasively reads Rorty as more than merely a cheerleader for political liberalism, which remains a common interpretation of his political philosophy. Yet he doesn’t engage with Rorty’s own ambivalence, which shades into scepticism, about forms of politics that break with political liberalism. Is Rorty’s own view of politics as having undergone its own final conceptual revolution in the form of political liberalism a betrayal of his own ethos – a dated

29 Richard Rorty, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty”, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 55; cf. Rorty, “Universality”, pp. 41, 50–3.

30 Chin, *Practice*, pp. 209, 236 (emphasis added).

echo of the far-off nineties – while the latter should rightfully be viewed as promoting something closer to permanent revolution (Trotsky as well as wild orchids)? Or is its natural complement? Rorty combines this commitment to political liberalism with a blend a blend of pessimism and utopianism about the future of liberal states, and particularly worries about the effects of intensifying inequality, stressing the importance of class politics and patriotic identification to mobilise an alternative. Interesting as Rorty's reflections on these matters are, we may think that he glosses over any systematic discussion of questions of political procedures, institutions and power.

Chin seems to agree and quite reasonably argues that we shouldn't look to Rorty for a comprehensive political theory.³¹ Beyond the textual reconstruction of Rorty's own scattered remarks about politics, however, there is a more important issue about the interpretation that Chin so deftly elaborates. Given the centrality of the ethos of tolerance to Chin's reading, the character and boundaries of this conception of ethos in politics remain quite unclear. Exposure to different perspectives is not only a learning opportunity, as pragmatists cheerfully emphasise, but can be deeply unpleasant, painful, offensive and enraging: in political contexts, tolerance as an attitude on most accounts involves your putting up with a belief or practice that you find false or otherwise disapprove of.³² Does this ethos create obligations for all of us as citizens to be open and inclusive, a requirement which is sometimes seen to be excessively demanding and transformative for citizens? Or is it a systemic feature that supervenes on institutions and procedures? How is nonhierarchical engagement possible? And is it always desirable?

A possible response is that these questions are misaddressed. It may be argued that the ethos of tolerance has nothing to do with first-order normative questions about political institutions, procedures and virtues but only with the methodological question for political theorists of how to reflect on debates between different normative frameworks. However, firewalling this argument off as necessarily irrelevant to first-order normative questions in politics doesn't seem to me to be a fruitful strategy for cultural politics. For, in Chin's conceptualisation of cultural politics, this would seem to rely on the heroic assumption that the standards of first-order politics aren't "up for grabs". And this seems not only to be not the case but far from what Chin believes. Given the implausibility of this view, it seems that there is still a question about how

³¹ Chin, *Practice*, p. 236.

³² See David Heyd, ed., *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Of course, this is a problem with the frame of tolerance for some writers: e.g., Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

the Rortyan ethos articulates with the requirements of democratic citizenship and political office.³³

Of course, it's a sign of a thought-provoking work that it opens up such areas for further reflection. Even if in the final instance Chin's reconstruction of Rorty raises some difficult unanswered questions, he has rendered a hugely impressive feat of scholarship and argument. Anyone committed to thinking through the options for political theory after its ontological turn owes Chin an important debt and should ponder the implications of his work with great care.

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33 Chin's invocation of Tully's post-colonial humanist conception of agonistic deliberation is suggestive but no more. This isn't the place to explore Tully's work but there is a case to be made that it falls silent at just this point: see David Armitage, "Probing the Foundations of Tully's Public Philosophy", *Political Theory* 39 (2011): 124–30.

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