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Ironies, Virtues and Educational Hopes: Richard J. Bernstein in Conversation with Pádraig Hogan

Pádraig Hogan: Let's start with your intellectual background. Your PhD dissertation was titled 'John Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience', and was completed in Yale in 1958. You've written that interest in Dewey was at a low point in America during the 1950s. Did you have to go against the advice of your tutors to study Dewey for your PhD?

Richard J. Bernstein: Not really. But I have to explain what was the unique situation at that time. I started my graduate studies in 1953. I had been an undergraduate at the University of Chicago and then spent a couple of years at Columbia. This was a period during which there was beginning to be a transformation in graduate education in philosophy. You had the influence of logical empiricism in the philosophy of science, and more widely the growing influence of 'Oxford philosophy', or analytic philosophy. There were only a few philosophy departments that were pluralistic and that took seriously the history of philosophy and different currents in philosophy. Perhaps the most outstanding at that time was Yale. There's an irony here because Dewey himself had taught in the University of Chicago. There had been a great dispute between Robert M. Hutchins (President of University of Chicago) and Dewey and we were implicitly—or sometimes explicitly—taught in Chicago that pragmatism and Dewey represented everything that was bad in the world. That was a prevalent attitude, but a complete vulgarisation of Dewey. At Columbia I first did some readings in pragmatism, but I wasn't deeply interested in it. But when I went to Yale there was a young Assistant Professor there, John Smith**,** who had a very serious interest in American philosophy—he had written on Josiah Royce. As frequently happens in graduate education there were reading groups organised among the students. Smith organised one on Dewey's *Experience and Nature* and I discovered that the book I was now reading had nothing to do with the Dewey I had previously heard about. I got deeply fascinated. Yale was a place where you were really encouraged to pursue the things you were interested in. So even though I knew Dewey was at a low point of interest in American philosophy, I found his work tremendously interesting and that's why I wrote my dissertation on his metaphysics of experience. It was primarily focused on *Experience and Nature* (2000 [1925]). What this led to was a rather more comprehensive understanding. After I finished my dissertation I was asked to give some lectures on Dewey and to write a popular book on Dewey. That was the occasion for me to read Dewey from beginning to end. Although

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I'm critical of some aspects of Dewey I still find myself, sixty years later, very sympathetic toward Dewey's vision and understanding. I've always liked what Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wrote after reading *Experience and Nature*: 'although Dewey's book is incredibly ill written, it seemed to me after several re-readings to have a feeling of intimacy with the inside of the cosmos that I found unequalled. So, methought, God would have spoken had He been inarticulate but keenly desirous to tell you how it was' (quoted in Bernstein, 2005, p. 21).

PH: That's high praise indeed, despite the rebuke. My own first encounter with Dewey was his book *Experience and Education*, written towards the end of his active life (1997 [1938]). Dewey and 'progressivism' had also received some bad press on our side of the Atlantic, so it was good to discover a thinker so thought-provokingly different from the caricature. I was glad to find in *Experience and Education* a concise restatement of his key educational arguments, in the light of criticisms they had received. As a young teacher it opened up new vistas for me and made me think about education, and about thinking itself, in a very different way.

I'd like to ask you now about Dewey's understanding of education, and more particularly about apparent tensions in that understanding. In *Democracy and Education* (1997 [1916]), for instance, he writes that 'education proceeds ultimately from the patterns furnished by institutions customs and laws' (p. 89). But the pages of *How we Think*, published six years previously, strike a more independent note. There Dewey speaks of what is, and is not, 'the business of education'. In relation to what *is* the business of education he stresses teachers' responsibilities 'to cultivate deep-seated and effective habits of discriminating tested beliefs from mere assertions, guesses, and opinions; to develop a lively, sincere, and open-minded preference for conclusions that are properly grounded.' He speaks of the 'office' of education as something more independent (pp. 27–28).

RJB: I don't see these positions as incompatible. I'll say something on how I think it should be read. This has great relevance to what subsequently happened, at least in the United States. Dewey always begins, it seems to me, with some kind of identification and understanding of the situation you're in. I think his impulse is always towards reforming this situation—making it richer, more enlightened. Many of Dewey's critics failed to do this. The failure was very significant, as illustrated by the kind of sympathetic criticism that my good friend Richard Rorty was making about left intellectuals in the US in the 1960s. The intellectuals showed such a disdain for the country as it was, such a suspicion of any kind of patriotism, that they just lost connection with normal people living out there. I think that's been a disaster, ever since. In part, the president we have now is a result of that.

In any case you have to begin with some perceptive understanding of the situation you find yourself in. And with education, there's always a critical edge. You have to try to overcome prejudices and misinformation and fight to advance things a bit more. Take for instance the slander that has been cast on Dewey by critics of so-called 'child-centred' education. Dewey in fact places a very high demand on the *teacher.* The teacher is the

person who has to take young people from where they are and move them towards a richer and more enlightened world. In my first book on Dewey *John Dewey* (Bernstein, 1966), I said that in one respect this effort is very Socratic. When we consider some of the early dialogues of Plato, Socrates is speaking to young boys. See, for example, the Lysis. And what is he doing? He's starting with things that *they* know about—and then on the basis of that trying to get them to see the larger context. The idea of having some understanding of where the student is, and then, not imposing something, but opening up that world and enriching it—that seems to me to be the heart of Dewey's educational argument; and it's a very difficult thing to do.

PH: That's very interesting. But I haven't been able to find explicit references to the early Platonic dialogues in Dewey's own writings on education.

RJB: Well, there is the famous statement in his 1930 essay 'From Absolutism to Experimentalism'—his autobiographical sketch—where he says: 'Nothing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a "Back to Plato" movement; but it would have to be back to the dramatic, restless, co-operatively inquiring Plato of the Dialogues, trying one mode of attack after another to see what it might yield; back to the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn, and not to the artificial Plato constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor' (p. 22).

PH: A great remark. Anyone genuinely concerned with education can hardly fail to be attracted by this: the idea of a practice where a discerning educational leader builds a learning environment through energetic and co-operative dialogue; but one that enables unacknowledged presuppositions to come to light, and in ways that don't ridicule or belittle any participants.

RJB: Yes, Dewey, like Socrates, is primarily concerned with the education of the young. Most of his writing you'll recall is about elementary and secondary education. He rightly emphasised the cultivation of critical habits, and he had the insight that it's very important to achieve this at a young age . I'm deeply sympathetic with that theme of developing critical habits. We should also highlight here, particularly in considering Dewey's role in American education, his scepticism, all the way through, of bad forms of individualism; *laissez faire* individualism. He continually stressed the importance of making the school into an enlightened, enriched, cooperative community.

PH: That's a goal that's frequently been marginalised in educational reform policies in recent decades. Here in the US I'm thinking of policy measures like 'No Child Left Behind' and its consequences, including teaching-to-the-test, or teaching chiefly to some else's prescription. Take for instance the point we've just mentioned about opening up new worlds for students. Such possibilities seem to have receded in schools and colleges.

RJB: I think you're being too gentle. I believe what's been happening in education internationally, not just in America, is a disaster. I really do. I have

to speak here in more global terms: we can clearly see a prevalent mentality, a neoliberal one. There is an emphasis on metrics, on measurement, on testing. Unfortunately**,** there is a common acceptance of education as a kind of objective process of teaching to the test. It's not only in elementary schools and high schools. This mentality has infiltrated universities as well, and all over the world. I'm very sceptical of it. It is un-Deweyean, and ultimately undemocratic.

If you have a centralised educational system and if such a mentality takes over it's easy to enforce and it affects everything. In America we don't have a centralised system but there are disadvantages as well as advantages to that. There can be a strong bias in local communities and very conservative or reactionary forces can prevail. There is another thing that's important here. I think there is a failure in this country to recognise sufficiently the effect of material conditions on children: the economic conditions and family circumstances they come from. There's an excessive reliance on what the school alone can do. There's an unwillingness to face up to the fact that in some cases children are coming to class without having breakfast. I know what the school *can* do in co-operation with committed school principals. Here in New York I've seen many instances of what a creative principal, working against the system and with the local community, can do to provide conditions where genuine education can take place.

PH: If one looks at Europe, and beyond England, one can see some good examples in this connection. There are countries like Denmark, Finland, Sweden until fairly recently, and to some extent Scotland and Ireland, where the neoliberal pattern has not been the predominant one. Municipalities or school authorities have been sufficiently trusted and resourced that they can work meaningfully with local communities in making inroads on social and economic barriers and in building inclusive and healthy educational environments.

RJB: Yes, revealing counter-instances. One of the things I find interesting, particularly in relation to the good news we hear about Finnish schools, is that one of their heroes is John Dewey. There's an irony here, in that I really do feel that a serious encounter with Deweyean principles is very demanding, and I don't think it has ever taken place in a large-scale way in America. If anyone really reads Dewey they will see that the severest critic of 'child-centred' education—'let the children do whatever they like'—was Dewey himself.

PH: Yes, indeed. I'd like to ask now about the idea of education as a practice in its own right. We have been implicitly touching on this theme already. Such a practice is not something that is led and controlled by a church or by the state, but a practice that enjoys some degree of autonomy from the powers-that-be in society where the practitioners and their leaders are trusted to carry out their office.

RJB: You're talking about utopia.

PH: Of course!

RJB: Yes, but let me explain what I mean by my comment here. It seems to me that things have become much worse. One of the great disgraces in this country, more so than other countries, is the low status of the teacher; the low respect in society for what teachers do, as compared to 'high professions'. Look at the failures: to put the resources into teaching in terms of salaries; to raise teaching in the estimation of the public; to earn the confidence of young people more widely to consider teaching as a career choice. The decline here is one of the great tragedies of America. Look at the history of public education that was celebrated in our democracy. Now it's denigrated.

PH: A sorry picture indeed. If you say my standpoint is utopian I'd like to take that as standing to its credit, because without an inspiring and sustaining vision the pressures to cave in to defeatism of one kind or another will gain the upper hand.

RJB: I think the pragmatic response when things get bad has to be: 'Well, what's to be done?' and not think about giving up hope. You can point to many instances of the confidence of people reacting to the many bad things that have happened in education. I'm impressed by the success of what is being done in some of the most impoverished areas—including in New York—mainly through the leadership of dedicated school principals.

PH: In *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010) and other recent writings and lectures, you have identified a number of key pragmatic themes in the widely different currents of philosophy of the last half century: American analytic philosophy, critical theory, hermeneutics, later Wittgensteinian philosophy, and even postmodern philosophy. If I may, I'd like to present in summary here some of these key features. I have selected the following five, because they seem to me to be particularly pertinent to how education is to be understood and how its constitutive practices are carried on: (a) recognising the non-foundational, or ever-provisional character of human thought and reason; (b) acknowledging an inescapable fallibility in all human claims to knowledge; (c) viewing formal learning as a community endeavour guided by constructive criticism; (d) accepting contingency and becoming resourceful in the face of it; (e) recognising the unlimited plurality of the human condition. As an educator, features such as these five strike me as providing pedagogical orientations that are particularly promising, but also ethical orientations that are defensible, even in radically pluralist circumstances.

RJB: Well, I'm very pleased to hear it.

PH: Of course educators of a more traditional or conventional cast of mind might take a contrary view to the one I've just put.

RJB: I think that's true. If you take the standard view—it may be a caricature but I don't think it is—we can picture a teacher who sees things as follows: 'I have a syllabus that I have to teach. My students have to take exams. I'll be judged, to some extent at least, on how successfully they *do*'. Now that tends to undermine most of the things I have been talking about. My real belief is that if you have the right circumstances and a creative environment education can be exciting and promising, even a joy. This

belief, like Dewey's is not just theoretical. I've seen it regularly in practice. So I'm not pessimistic. All the more reason then why one has to be concerned at what has been happening. We can deal with these themes philosophically of course, but for me, the features you called attention to now are not just theoretical. Let's take fallibilism for example. Fallibilism is not just an epistemological doctrine. It's a set of virtues, and hard virtues at that: to really listen to people; to acknowledge that you don't know, that you might be wrong. It takes real courage to change your mind. Fallibilism has a lot to do with what Dewey called 'character'. I've come to appreciate that there are many, many forces in society that draw people away from that. I'm thinking particularly here of perceived crises. People are quick to seek and cling to foundational certainties—a kind of 'Cartesian anxiety', to use a phrase I coined some years ago. I explored these kinds of reactions further in a short book I wrote during the George W. Bush era, *The Abuse of Evil and the Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (2005). Reactions like: 'Things have gotta be right or wrong'. 'We're the good guys and they're the bad guys'. When people widely think this way there's a lack of nuance, a lack of critical understanding. That book was written for intelligent lay people who are not philosophers.

PH: Could we look more closely now at the idea of viewing formal learning as a form of community endeavour, guided by constructive criticism. It has some clear links to the notion of fallibilism.

RJB: Yes. Let's start with Dewey, although the situation now is even more serious than in Dewey's time. Dewey was living in a world where he keenly observed the abuses of what he regards as *laissez faire* individualism. To understand his insights more fully we have to take what he writes about critical thinking together with what he writes about art, and above all with the importance he gives to the category of the social: What we are as individuals is shaped by the kinds of communities that we live in. The idea of the community versus the individual is completely foreign to Dewey. That's already there in his earliest work. And I do think that one of the other signs of disaster of the times we're in is, very frequently, the loss of positive communities. You have interest groups of course. But if a politician in the United States got up now to speak about the *common* good, that politician would be laughed at. It's a sign of how extreme we've become.

Of course these things are never black and white. They are more complicated. Now where I work myself, the New School for Social Research—one of the founders was Dewey. It was founded as a progressive institution, a community of researchers, including the European scholars who joined it in the 1930s and afterwards, fleeing from tyranny in their own countries. People come here because of that legacy. My students want to belong to such a community. One of the good things that has happened as result of our recent presidential election is that many of the students have been newly energised.

PH: That's encouraging to hear. If I can refer briefly again to the 'utopian' theme, I think it's crucial if one is working as a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, that

one has to hope for the very best, even if the circumstances are inhospitable, or even hostile.

RJB: I agree, and here's a further point. One has to have an eye for continually identifying the potentials, the possibilities, for bringing us closer to that goal. 'Utopian' in fact is an idea I've written in defence of; if you're not stirred by a utopian impulse things won't change. I've held that view from when I was a participant in the early civil rights movement. You have to believe that things can be better and work hard to make them happen. You have to believe that you can ultimately get there. Very frequently what's going to happen is that there's going to be disappointment. The wrong reaction here is to opt out. You have to keep at it and try again.

PH: Yet, all too often people won't act on their beliefs on the one hand, or won't opt out on the other; rather they will comply resentfully with an imposed order of things. This compliance itself becomes a way of life and the promise of what might have been possible for them, individually and co-operatively, gets bypassed.

RJB: I think this might be true. But here's something I'm keen to communicate: I'm deeply sceptical of a kind of utopianism that is unrelated to what is really going on, which can turn right into a dystopia. One needs to be wary of that. One always needs to suspect a story that says that nothing is going to change, that things are only going to get worse. We need to remember that every interesting social movement in the world started in a way that seemed completely against the odds.

PH: One of the things that has struck me about the conversational manner of your philosophy is that you seem to have gone out of your way to talk to unlikely partners.

RJB: Perhaps that's the way it looks from the outside. Maybe I'm stubborn or perverse, but here's an interesting thing about the kind of education I had, particularly in graduate school. I never understood the extreme divisions that exist in academic life. I found reading Kierkegaard and Hegel as exciting as reading Wittgenstein. The idea that you had to be on one side or the other just made no sense to me. Neither did the business of an Analytic / Continental split. I've never thought of myself as building bridges between different orientations and philosophic traditions. With a certain amount of imagination you can see that people from widely different philosophical backgrounds are dealing with similar problems, but very deep problems. I've always said to my students: You don't hit a philosopher over the head for his weak points. You should always try to learn something from him/her. This is something that I have tried to practise. I've seen many things change within philosophy. Many people resonate with the kinds of things I do. Going back to my earlier book *Praxis and Action* (1971), I wrote there about Marxism, existentialism, analytic philosophy, and pragmatism. Many young academics today wouldn't write such a book. I had sufficient self-confidence, perhaps stubbornness, to do it, because I was trying to follow important philosophical questions on human action.

I consider myself to have been graced with a great deal of good luck, because I've been able to do intellectually in my life what I've wanted. I never did anything to get a job or to receive tenure. And I've been extremely lucky at Yale, at Haverford, at the New School. At the New School we have a pluralistic, dynamic department where people do widely different things intellectually, while still working together. It's like making music together.

PH: Now that's what might be called a healthy educational environment; an exemplary case of good educational practice.

RJB: Yes, in fact it is. I don't think I'm romanticising here. I happen to be friends with most of my colleagues. You know in academic life that's not the norm; that academic politics can be petty and bitter. Students come to our department knowing that we have strengths and weaknesses. You wouldn't come to the New School if you were going to study medieval philosophy. That's not one of our strengths. But the students also know that whatever topic they are going to write on—whether it's Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, or Heidegger's reading of Plato—nobody is going to sneer at it. It's really important in education to have this sense of pluralistic endeavour. But that's rare. It's certainly rare in the philosophical world.

PH: Yes. It's also important to stress that there's a strong ethical orientation involved here. There are certain virtues embodied in this kind of practice, just as there are in the fallibilism we discussed a little earlier.

RJB: I have no hesitation in agreeing with you. If we think of *ethos* in the Greek sense, my own orientation is Greek in *that* sense. And that's why I speak about the pragmatic *ethos*. And so I'm sceptical of an extreme obsession with epistemological issues. That's one of the reasons I came to write *Ironic Life* (2016). I never thought I'd be writing a book about irony. But it's only when I'd finished writing it that I came to realise that I was talking about philosophy *as a way of life*. And I really believe that.

Radical questioning is not easy. We all like to talk about it. That's one of the reasons I love the example Alexander Nehamas uses from teaching Plato's dialogue Euthyphro: Of course**,** everyone can see how stupid Euthyphro is. But are we really in a position where we can answer Socrates' questions to him any better? There's a deep point at issue here. And it relates directly to something we raised earlier about pursuing study for the right reasons. The massive 'professionalisation' that's been taking place in the world of education, the preoccupation with 'standards', or more precisely with metrics and measurement, diverts education from what should be its true aim—intellectual, aesthetic and emotional growth. It's not *just sentimental* to say that philosophy once had something to do with the quality of life. In writing *Ironic Life* I became increasingly conscious of a need to restore a sense of balance. My belief and hope is that what my students encounter is going to change the way they live.

PH: I'd want to say that any education worthy of the name must have something of this questioning and exploratory quality. As a teacher I have to try to open up new imaginative neighbourhoods for my students, in all

their plurality, including those who are well-circumstanced and those who mightn't have had breakfast this morning. And I have to question how I do that. If I'm preoccupied with grades and scores I may be evading a central responsibility here. I may need to be pulled up short and reminded of the ironies and deeper questions that underlie my practice.

RJB: I'm sympathetic with you. I have taught in high schools and I believe philosophy should be taught to adolescents. But I do feel, at college and university level, given the whole trend we're in now that favours science, computing and digital thinking, that there may be something 'conservative' about my position. I believe the best way to teach philosophy is through serious encounters with great philosophers. And if this suggests 'classics' I'd say ok, provided we define by 'classic' a work that retains the capacity to speak to you across time. Moreover you have to *open yourself* to it. In that sense I have a certain scepticism of 'techniques' for teaching. I'm not a Luddite, or anti-technology, but I want students to read and think—not to master in a philological way—but to listen and to encounter. This is something I find that Dewey didn't stress enough.

PH: It's something that Gadamer does, as you've illustrated in your own writings, particularly *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983). His works featured centrally in my own PhD studies. It came across to me strongly then that any fertile educational encounter is less about technique, or even method, and more about listening. Another educationally crucial insight I gained was that in an encounter with texts, including classics, 'tradition' doesn't have an authority beyond question because tradition itself has to be understood as a dynamic totality of influences—voices to be heard and explored.

RJB: Yes, and responded to.

PH: Indeed.

RJB: And we have to recognise that in the world we're in, the things that Gadamer illuminated are not being appreciated. The truly humanistic opening up of dialogue, of conversation, of learning from tradition, is being attacked, even undermined. I'm deeply sympathetic to what Gadamer is saying. I'm probably more radical politically than he is and I'm familiar with all the knee-jerk reactions against 'tradition' and 'authority'. But true authority, as he points out, is based on knowledge, or that what authority states can be seen in principle to be true; and this he identifies as the basis for the authority of the teacher (Gadamer, 1975, p. 249).

PH: In fact, from such Gadamerian themes, and from those we mentioned earlier—that you have those you have highlighted from the Pragmatic tradition—we could say that to be an educator, or more specifically a teacher, is to learn to live an ironic life, and to become in a sense 'comfortable' with the discomfort that this involves.

RJB: I think that's true. And we have to combine this with working to further what Dewey called 'creative democracy' where all participate and all share.

PH: Turning specifically now to *Ironic Life*, I'd like to focus initially on the experience of being pulled up short, of having one's settled view of the matter unsettled, or even overturned. I should mention that I had this kind of experience years ago when first reading your book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. It forced me to abandon a notion that I had embraced for years, not only where philosophy was concerned but where research and indeed all educational effort were concerned. That notion was that anything less than demonstrable certainty was a deficiency; a deficiency moreover that study, research and practice must continually seek to put right. I had already read Gadamer's *Truth and Method* at that time and had been deeply impressed by it. But I had still been harbouring the epistemological judgement—a prejudice—that there was something of the relativist about him. The philosophers you engage with in *Ironic Life*—Socrates, Kierkegaard, Richard Rorty, Gregory Vlastos, Alexander Nehamas, and in a particular way Jonathan Lear—each in their own way see irony as bringing about such an unsettling. Perhaps we could start with Lear. In *A Case for Irony* (2011) he draws a striking contrast between two kinds of reflective thinking, and he takes teaching as an example to illustrate his point. The first kind of reflective thinking involves a critical interrogation of one's work as a teacher, and a commitment to improving that work. Reflective thinking is here informed by demanding standards that have been articulated and acknowledged by the profession. It is dedicated moreover to the pursuit of such standards. The second kind of reflective thinking involves what Lear calls 'ironic disruption':

> 'I am sitting at home in the evening grading papers, and I begin to wonder what this has to do with actually teaching my students. . . . I am struck by teaching in a way that disrupts my normal self-understanding of what it is to teach' (p. 17) . . . The life and identity I have hitherto taken as familiar have suddenly become unfamiliar. . . . Coming to a halt in a moment of ironic uncanniness is how I manifest—in that moment—that teaching matters to me. I have a strong desire to be moving in a certain direction—that is, in the direction of becoming and being a teacher—but I lack orientation' (p. 19).

RJB: When I read Lear's *A Case for Irony* (2011), I thought: 'this is really very interesting', but I also thought: 'there's something wrong here': in what he says about relating 'a capacity for irony' to 'human excellences', and in what he writes about Rorty's understanding of irony. I actually set out to write a critique of Lear's argument. In doing that I adopted the stance—this is in fact the way I teach also—'Always make the strongest possible case for the argument you're addressing'. That's when criticism becomes most interesting. So I wanted to present his view in the best possible way. I also found out when I got into it that this could turn out to be something very big, and I intended to write a fairly short book. Three things are worth mentioning here. Firstly, the key figures for Lear's case were Kierkegaard and Socrates, so that gave a particular shape to the case I was making myself. He was exploring irony philosophically.

That's not what people would normally expect when dealing with the issue of irony. Secondly, when I read what Lear writes about the teacher (the ironic disruption), I agreed that there *is* something right about that. There are those moments when we deeply question; when nothing seems to make sense. Thirdly, I also think what's right about Lear, what makes the instance he writes about different from despair is that the teacher has a loyalty to becoming a true teacher—that there is a concern with the way in which you *want* to be good teacher. It's those three aspects that led my approach.

PH: Looking more closely at irony in the philosophical sense, Rorty's depiction of the liberal ironist is of the person who realises that there are no 'noncircular' arguments available to justify one's ultimate stances. For him the educational task then becomes one of 'redescribing' ourselves: 'finding a new and more interesting way of expressing ourselves, and thus of coping with the world' (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 1980, p. 359). I've always thought that there's something peculiar about this, because something more than an apparently aesthetic task of redescribing ourselves is called for by the insight that a foundational argument can't be advanced to justify our ultimate beliefs and convictions; something more Kierkegaardian perhaps, as you suggest in *Ironic Life*.

RJB: I have been critical of Rorty, most severely perhaps in the chapter 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward' in *The New Constellation* (1991), but also in other writings and most recently in *Ironic Life*. And I've had many critical discussions with him. But I feel strongly about one thing—and it's something that people don't appreciate about Rorty. There was, of course, his ongoing fight with academic philosophy; his disillusionment with it. But in an important sense he was like Montaigne, a moralist. He was deeply concerned with meaningfully extending sympathy; learning to be more sympathetic to others. And the only kind of criticism that really touched him, or stunned him, was when critics accused him of being insensitive or cruel.

PH: I see. This recalls to my mind what you say about him in *Ironic Life*. That was an eye-opener to me, because his own accounts of himself and his work—the jesting and free-floating polemic—seem to suggest ultimately an aesthetic orientation: most particularly perhaps in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989).

RJB: I can understand how that understanding might arise from the excesses in his writings. I've said it before, I think there was more than one Rorty. On the one hand you have the provocateur: 'live in your own terrain, cultivate your own private garden and forget about the rest of the world'. I think that backfired. It was widely dismissed. But at a deeper level, irony touches very deeply on Rorty's life and work. When dealing with Rorty on irony in the book I talked about Rorty's own life. He is the one who lived through a crisis in his professional life, and arranged his life accordingly, and very deliberately.

PH: These passages are illuminating. They disclose a different Rorty—someone who was previously unknown, at least to me—by

supplying some crucial points about the context of his philosophy: the passion and commitment, the enduring seriousness, underlying his work.

RJB: I'm glad, because I was a little concerned about talking about his biography. I was Rorty's friend at that time and if ever anyone went through the kind of uncanny crisis that Lear talks about, that person was Richard Rorty. But in the end, I think his whole distinction between redescription (as belonging to 'edifying philosophy') and argument (as belonging to epistemology) doesn't hold up. All philosophy involves argument.

PH: Can I raise here, in relation to the issue of irony and how it disposes one's thoughts and attitudes, what you describe as 'a passion for a certain direction?'

RJB: Yes, this is crucial. When I read *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*—I'd known Rorty for a long time and I could see that in places he might be trying to irritate people—what really struck me was the need to challenge the idea that if you're not going to assert things with absolute certainty then you cannot be passionate about anything. That idea is, I think, pernicious. My whole life has been against it. I'm passionate and committed to all kinds of things. I can agree that there are no ultimate foundations that my thoughts can rest on. But that doesn't justify the demand: 'Well why do you believe this? You haven't proved it!' The question needs to be put back to the questioner: 'Do you think *you* can do it?' Nietzsche is right on this. You can be a fallibilist, yet passionately committed; you *should* be a fallibilist; you *should* be open. But this is not incompatible with a passion in your own public life and in your private life. I try to live my life that way.

PH: That's important from an educational standpoint, in fact a good example: learning to live with uncertainties—or with dethroned certainties. It's particularly important for anyone who would be a teacher. Becoming a teacher here would mean becoming a committed person, but in the way you have stressed just now: becoming engaged with the influences that are active in one or more voices of tradition and accepting this as a lifelong obligation—as a teacher of history, of science, of art or whatever.

RJB: Yes indeed. But it highlights something that's sad for the younger generations of students. When I was a graduate student in the 50s it was clearly the life of the mind that was most important. It wasn't joining a profession, or even getting a job. I'm thinking now of people of my generation in philosophy; people of very different backgrounds, but roughly the same age. Whether you grew up in French Algeria, as Derrida did, or confronting the Holocaust and its aftermath, as Habermas did, we shared something crucial in common: that philosophy concerned the life of the mind and that it should make a difference in how you and others live their lives. The philosophical ethos we shared was not one of building bridges; rather one of discovering that there were lots of philosophical differences between us that were worth exploring. That ethos is gone, though not gone completely. I had the *fortuna*, to use Machiavelli's phrase, to be born at a certain time and to get interested at a certain time. Today, and I don't like

to say this to my students, I'm not sure that I'd go in for academic life. The constraints and demands are so demeaning. I couldn't live my life that way.

PH: I want to suggest to you that the kinds of ideas you have furnished in your writings are particularly productive, maybe even more so than Dewey's, where one is trying to conceive of educational environments that are promising and defensible—that are also inviting, both to the newcomer and the more experienced.

RJB: Well, that's interesting. I've written a lot. And it's always a pleasure to find that other people may get inspired by something I've written; that it really speaks to other people. You always hope for this of course, but you never know.

PH: Two points strike me here. The first is about the manner of engagement the reader discovers in your works. From your early writings onwards, your conversations with different philosophers, including Habermas and Derrida, but also MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Gadamer and of course Arendt, uncover important things that a more adversarial reading of these authors might miss. They also illustrate points that a less informed reading might misunderstand. There's crucial pedagogical merit here, in that your style of engagement 'gives voice' to the author whose work you're dealing with and quickens the reader's interest. The reader is progressively drawn into the issues, and in an exploratory, questioning way. The second point concerns the key themes of your later work that I've mentioned earlier—the non-foundational character of knowledge, fallibilism, learning as a communal undertaking, the acknowledgement of contingency and of plurality. We've already referred to the importance of these as features of a healthy educational environment. But there's also an important insight here for the education of teachers. A certain ethical orientation for such education is identified, and it contrasts with doctrinal or ideological orientations that have been historically more common in teacher education.

RJB: I'm pleased to hear you say that. What you've said actually captures the way I've tried to approach my own life and work. I haven't of course been concerned in a large way with elementary or high school education. But I have been centrally involved in higher education. And despite my critical comments a few moments ago on the changed ethos of education today, I wouldn't want to give the idea that I'm pessimistic. I tend to take the approach: see what the score is and what can be done about it. And there's always something to be done. As I've said in *The Abuse of Evil*, one thing I fault the pragmatists for—Peirce, Dewey and others—is for believing that once the battle is done, once the case has been well argued, say for fallibilism, for a community of enquiry, for creative democracy, then things are not going to go backwards. I think they were quite wrong about this. But what's the message for us here? It's not that we give up on ideas. I have difficulty in understanding anyone who says that ideas don't change the world, whether for better or for worse. Surely the message is that it becomes even more important to engage and to re-engage with these ideas. After all, living with contingency, with uncertainty, with openness, while

also being passionate in one's commitments, is relatively new in Western history. So it becomes more important that we affirm these things and try to live them out.

PH: And on that challenging and hopeful note we'll conclude. Thanks very much.

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