



Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue

William Curtis

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Liberal democracy needs a clear-eyed, robust defense to deal with the increasingly complex challenges it faces in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately much of contemporary liberal theory has rejected this endeavor for fear of appearing culturally hegemonic. Instead, liberal theorists have sought to gut liberalism of its ethical substance in order to render it more tolerant of non-liberal ways of life. This theoretical effort is misguided, however, because successful liberal democracy is an ethically demanding political regime that requires its citizenry to display certain virtues and habits of mind. Against the grain of contemporary theory, philosopher Richard Rorty blends American pragmatism and romanticism to produce a comprehensive vision of liberal modernity that features a virtue-based conception of liberal democracy. In doing so, Rorty defends his pragmatic liberalism against a host of notable interlocutors, including Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, Hilary Putnam, Richard J. Bernstein, and Jean Bethke Elshtain.

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