



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

English Faculty Works

English

---

2013

## Rhetorical Pragmatism and Histories of New Media: Rorty on Kierkegaard on the Internet

Steven J. Mailloux

*Loyola Marymount University*, [steven.mailloux@lmu.edu](mailto:steven.mailloux@lmu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/engl\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/engl_fac)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mailloux, Steven. "Rhetorical Pragmatism and Histories of New Media: Rorty on Kierkegaard on the Internet." *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2013, pp. 279–290.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

# Rhetorical Pragmatism and Histories of New Media: Rorty on Kierkegaard on the Internet

STEVEN MAILLOUX

## ABSTRACT

This essay begins with Hubert Dreyfus's Kierkegaardian critique of the Internet and then turns to Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatist response, an unpublished text found in the Richard Rorty Papers. After considering these contrasting perspectives, the author proposes a third view, arguing that a rhetorical pragmatist should borrow from both Dreyfus's critique and Rorty's defense. The Internet does enable media users who are unthinkingly complacent in their passionate commitments as well as those who are complacently unthinking in their detached, everyday busyness. But the Internet also provides its own unique opportunities for thinking critically and for challenging complacency. After proposing this more rhetorically pragmatic view, the author discusses Rorty's published and unpublished comments on Kierkegaard more generally, concluding with Rorty's comparison of Kierkegaard and William James.

## I.

Internet users "are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price." This judgment was actually rendered by Søren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth-century about another new media, the penny press.<sup>1</sup> But a recent interpreter of Kierkegaard, Hubert Dreyfus, asks that we consider these views expressed about the earlier mass media as immediately relevant to the dangers we face in the present. At the University of Copenhagen in August 1998, Dreyfus read a paper entitled "Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age." A longtime friend and professional interlocutor, Richard Rorty wrote a brief response to that paper. I will examine these two texts—Dreyfus's now published essay and Rorty's unpublished comments—in order to better understand one contemporary version of the Pragmatist tradition and its relation to contrasting opinions about the rhetorical effects of new media.<sup>2</sup>

Rorty had known Dreyfus since the late 1950s when he was at Wellesley College and Dreyfus at Harvard University. Rorty later claimed that he owed his acquaintance with European philosophy almost entirely to Dreyfus, and through many years their ongoing discussion and participation in colloquia helped bridge

---

<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals*, no. 489.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a paper at the conference, "Time Will Tell, but Epistemology Won't: In Memory of Richard Rorty," at the University of California, Irvine on 14 May 2010.

the wide gap between European and Anglophone philosophies. Rorty fondly remembered one of their joint ventures:

Starting in 1980, Dreyfus [...] staged a series of summer institutes [at UC Berkeley], sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. These brought Husserlians together with Searleans, Heideggerians together with Davisonians, Foucauldians together with bourgeois liberals. Some of the most fruitful teaching I have ever done, and some of the most instructive intellectual encounters I have ever had, were at these institutes. (Foreword xi)

Teaching evaluations in the Richard Rorty Papers support his memories, at least from the students' point of view. With other instructors (Dreyfus, John Searle) receiving 3.7 and below on a scale with 4.0 as the highest score, the person summarizing the student evaluations felt it necessary to explain Rorty's average of 4.03: Rorty received more A-pluses than A-minuses and was routinely praised for his ability to make very difficult material clear.<sup>3</sup>

It is this ability—to make difficult thinking clear, to translate one piece of language into another usefully, profitably, pragmatically—that was one of Rorty's greatest rhetorical strengths. Redescription was a trope that Rorty used again and again, a philosophical strategy that played an important role in his rhetorical pragmatism as he applied it in his commentary on a wide range of cultural and philosophical topics, including the topic of new media as attacked by his friend Hubert Dreyfus. Dreyfus is, of course, the author of such influential books as *What Computers Can't Do*, a Heideggerian critique of artificial intelligence; *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Phenomenology* (1982), with Paul Rabinow, a book for which Rorty provided a press reader's report; *Being-in-the-World* (1991), a commentary on Division I of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which also includes some comments on Division II and Kierkegaard; and, most relevant to this essay, *On the Internet* (2001), published appropriately enough in the Routledge series called "Thinking in Action," which includes a revised version of Dreyfus's "Kierkegaard on the Internet," the paper to which Rorty responded.

In what follows I will first present Dreyfus's Kierkegaardian criticisms of the Internet as new media and then consider Rorty's response to Dreyfus on Kierkegaard on the Internet. I will conclude with some additional remarks on Rorty's interpretation of Kierkegaard and its connection to Rorty's take on William James's "The Will to Believe."

## II.

A preliminary disclaimer: Rorty would not have called himself a *rhetorical* pragmatist. Indeed, he often avoided the term 'rhetoric' in reference both to rhetoric as a field of study and to rhetoric as a useful concept. I once asked Rorty why someone with his interests in language, in conversation, in persuasive redescription

<sup>3</sup> Box 22, Folder 2, Richard Rorty Papers, MS-C017, Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Further references to this archive will be given in the following form: RRP box: folder.

tion, seemed so obviously to avoid using the term rhetoric. He answered simply that he did not want to reinstate a distinction between logic and rhetoric that Dewey, one of his masters, had so effectively and quite appropriately dismantled (Mailloux, *Reception* 33). We can find the same questioning of that distinction in Rorty's teaching notes archived in the Rorty Papers. His 1995 "Notes on Plato" contrast a Platonic notion that there is an ultimate "nature to goodness rather than just conventions about what counts as good conduct here or there" to "Dreyfus-like reasons" for thinking that we learn how to use words by "picking up conventions rather than recalling essences." Rorty then makes a list of the "binary oppositions of Western, Greek, metaphysics" that Heidegger and Derrida "will be trying to undermine." Rorty includes the usual suspects (usual, that is, from a Pragmatist and Post-Structuralist point of view): at the top of these questionable binaries is Knowledge/Opinion; later comes The True World/The Apparent World, Necessary/Contingent, Form/Matter, Soul/Body, Up/Down; and near the bottom of list, the suspect opposition Logic/Rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

So it is with some hesitation that I refer to Rorty as a rhetorical pragmatist. My pseudo-justification is that if we try to think our way around the Logic/Rhetoric distinction and define rhetoric simply as the use of language in a context to have effects—effects that include persuasion and figuration—then Rorty's version of neo-pragmatism is rhetorical in that it clearly emphasizes the importance of language in our understanding of human being and defines language as a tool rather than a medium of representation or expression. For Rorty, language is an instrument for achieving our purposes in the world—an effective means for social interaction—rather than a medium that properly represents the intrinsic structure of nonhuman reality or that properly expresses the essential nature of the human species (cf. Rorty, *Contingency*, esp. 11-12, 41). Thus, just as one of his admirers, Cornel West, describes his own theory as *prophetic* pragmatism with its particular emphasis on liberation, justice, and political theology, we might call Rorty's theory a kind of *rhetorical* pragmatism with its emphasis on redescription and democratic conversation.<sup>5</sup>

In his paper, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," Dreyfus uses Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* to draw an analogy between an earlier period and our own. Kierkegaard characterizes the mid-nineteenth century as a time of disinterested curiosity that levels all values upon which action is based, and he blames the Public produced by the new media for this leveling process. "Even if my life had no other significance," he writes in his journal, "I am satisfied with having discovered the absolutely demoralizing existence of the daily press" (qtd. in Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard" 97). Dreyfus remarks that it is no accident that Kierkegaard, writing in 1846, chose the Public and the Press to attack. Summarizing Habermas's *The*

<sup>4</sup> "Notes on Plato," RRP, <http://hdl.handle.net/10575/241> (accessed 1 Jan. 2014). Also, see Rorty, *Take Care* 70, where he accepts differences between good, sincere, or formally valid arguments and those that are bad, insincere, or formally invalid but sees no need for "an additional distinction between logic and rhetoric."

<sup>5</sup> See also Rorty's positive review of Ceccarelli's *Shaping Science with Rhetoric* in "Studied Ambiguity." For more on rhetorical pragmatism, see Mailloux, "Rhetorical Pragmatism"; Mailloux, "Euro-American"; and Mailloux and Gilyard.

*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Dreyfus gives a brief media history of the Enlightenment creation of a Public Sphere “as a space in which the rational, disinterested reflection that should guide government and human life could be institutionalized and refined” (98) and, quoting Habermas, notes how an expanding daily press extended the public debate to more and more ordinary citizens until by the middle of the nineteenth century “the reign of public opinion appeared as the reign of the many and mediocre” (99).

But Kierkegaard’s chief concern was not the media’s encouragement of mediocrity, nor the “merging of the individual with the group,” nor the mass conformity of “the crowd” (99). Dreyfus claims that Kierkegaard’s originality was in seeing the Public Sphere itself “as a new and dangerous cultural phenomenon in which the leveling produced by the Press brings out something that was deeply wrong with the Enlightenment idea of detached reflection from the start” (99). Dreyfus clarifies how for Kierkegaard the new media produced this leveling in several interrelated ways.

In redescribing Kierkegaard’s media critique using his own version of an early-Heideggerian vocabulary, Dreyfus explains:

the new massive distribution of desituated information was making every sort of information immediately available to anyone, thereby producing a desituated, detached spectator. The new power of the Press to disseminate information to everyone in a nation led its readers to transcend their local, personal involvement and [...] encouraged everyone to develop an opinion about everything. (100)

Habermas views this development as “a triumph of democratization,” but Kierkegaard “saw that the Public Sphere was destined to become a realm of idle talk in which spectators merely pass the word along” (100). From this Heideggerian-inflected Kierkegaardian perspective, the media-produced Public Sphere appears to promote “ubiquitous commentators who deliberately detach themselves from the local practices out of which specific issues grow and in terms of which these issues must be resolved through some sort of committed action. What seems a virtue to detached Enlightenment reason, therefore, looks like a disastrous drawback to Kierkegaard.” The Public Sphere becomes “a world in which everyone has an opinion on, and comments on, all public matters without needing any first-hand experience and without having or wanting any responsibility” (100).

Worst of all, according to Dreyfus’s Kierkegaard, in this media-produced Public Sphere “anyone can hold an opinion on anything without having to act on it,” and this situation results in “the possibility of endless reflection” with “no possibility of decision and action,” no possibility of the kind of unconditional commitment that makes life meaningful. Thus, Dreyfus quotes the passage from Kierkegaard’s journal with which I began: “Here men are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price” (101). And then Dreyfus makes explicit the analogy between Kierkegaard’s media world and today’s, writing of Habermas’s idealized Public Sphere:

The desituated and anonymous press and the lack of passion or commitment in our reflective age combine to produce the Public, the agent of the nihilistic leveling characteristic of his time and ours. [...] Kierkegaard would surely have seen in the Internet, with its web sites full of anonymous information from all over the world and its interest

groups which anyone in the world can join and where one can discuss any topic endlessly without consequences, the hi-tech synthesis of the worst features of the newspaper and the coffee house. (101-02)

Dreyfus then goes on to expand on this pessimistic Kierkegaardian vision of new media by explaining how Kierkegaard's three-stage model of development (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) can be used to specify further the dangers of the Internet. But now I want to move on to Rorty's response to Dreyfus, so let me just give Dreyfus's conclusion: "So it looks like Kierkegaard may be right. The press and the Internet are the ultimate enemy of unconditional commitment, but only the unconditional commitment of what Kierkegaard calls the religious sphere of existence can save us from the nihilistic leveling launched by the Enlightenment, promoted by the press and the public sphere, and perfected in the World Wide Web."<sup>6</sup>

Rorty begins his response to Dreyfus in typical rhetorical pragmatist fashion by citing some books that have had effects on their readers who have then used them for various purposes. He says:

Bert Dreyfus and I admire many of the same authors, in particular Heidegger and Kierkegaard. But we differ about the use to which they can be put. Most of us Heidegger-freaks read him the way Christians pray, Zen Buddhists meditate, Janeites reread *Persuasion*, or Shakespearians rehearse the sonnets. We treat Heidegger as an author who helps us toward something like spiritual or imaginative perfection. It does not occur to us that he might be used for public purposes. Writers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, we believe, were not at their best when commenting on current events or public policy.

In contrast, Dreyfus "reads these philosophers differently," having "once, famously, organized a conference on 'Applied Heidegger'" and now, in the present paper, using Kierkegaard to offer "advice on the problems of our own day" (Rorty, "Comments").

Behind the contrast Rorty draws here is his well known distinction, argued most fully a decade earlier in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, a distinction between authors "in whom the desire for self-creation, for private autonomy, dominates" versus authors "in whom the desire for a more just and free human community dominates." Rorty mentions Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger among the former as useful exemplars, "as illustrations of what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life—can be like"; and he lists Marx, Dewey, and Habermas as "fellow citizens" who "are engaged in a shared, social effort—the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel." Rorty argues further that it is usually a mistake to try to mix these two very different human activities. Theoretically or philosophically, it is impossible, he writes, to come up with a comprehensive outlook that lets "us hold self-creation and jus-

---

<sup>6</sup> These are actually the concluding words of the paper as slightly revised and published in Dreyfus, *On the Internet* 88-89. The paper in its original published form ends more definitively—"Thus Kierkegaard is right"—but less expansively, referring only to the "leveling launched by the Enlightenment and perfected in the Press and the Public Sphere" with no final reference to the Internet (Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard" 109).

tice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.” And practically or socio-politically, it is better not to mix the vocabularies of the two different kinds of tasks, as the “vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange” (Rorty, *Contingency* xiii-xiv).

But it is not just on liberal principle that Rorty objects to a private Kierkegaardian vocabulary being put to purposes of public critique. More to his immediate point, Rorty doubts that Kierkegaard’s analysis of the Public and new media is usefully applicable to either his time or ours. Rorty says he is “particularly dubious” about using the text Dreyfus relies on in his paper, Kierkegaard’s *The Present Age*, which Rorty characterizes as “Kierkegaard at his crankiest” and “a big come-down from books like [Kierkegaard’s] *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*” (Rorty, “Comments”).

Rorty provides a very different history of the new media and politics in Kierkegaard’s time:

You would never guess from reading [Kierkegaard’s] *The Present Age* that it was written in a period when representative government was really beginning to get a grip on Europe, when movements for the expansion of the franchise were frequent and often successful, and when increased literacy was both a cause and an effect of the success of the penny press. It is hard to imagine the development of mass democracy without the sort of popular press which grew up in the [nineteenth] century.

Rorty grants that Kierkegaard, along with other “great political and literary figures,” were “savaged by the press,” but adds that Kierkegaard’s *The Present Age* seems to him “not much more than an ill-tempered reaction to being baited by one’s inferiors.”

Turning to views of the Internet, Rorty declares that “the triviality of the chat rooms and the mindless proliferation of websites are a small price to pay for the political opportunities which the net offers. We in the rich old democracies, who are accustomed to intellectual freedom, may not appreciate what the net can do for people in places like Peru and Kazakhstan.” He goes on to recommend that funds spent on UNESCO “and on shipping people like [him] to international conferences” should “be spent on fiber optic cables providing internet connections between every educational institution in the world, starting with the universities and proceeding down to the primary schools.” This would lead to more public transparency, easier whistle-blowing of hidden governmental abominations, and more accessible education for poor children. Indeed, according to Rorty, “a lot of wonderful things would happen. The internet could be for the development of an international political class what the penny press was for the widening of this class in nineteenth century Europe.”

Getting to the specifics of Dreyfus’s paper, Rorty grants that the views of the Internet Dreyfus puts into Kierkegaard’s mouth are true enough “but fairly inconsequential.” Dreyfus “does point out all the disadvantages of the net” Rorty admits, but then he adds in typical pragmatist fashion that the advantages, the beneficial consequences, of the Internet clearly outweigh the disadvantages “just as they did in the case of the scurrilous, muck-raking, redneck, penny press.” Rorty gives as a representative example the fact that “the net is a perfect medium

for slander and innuendo,” but he notes that such statements are “like saying that money is a perfect medium for fraud and theft. So it is, but a money economy is still clearly better than a barter economy. Any medium of exchange of information will be put to slanderous purposes, but we are still better off with cheaper and more fluid media than without them.”

Addressing Dreyfus’s use of Kierkegaard’s three-stage model of self-development (the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious), Rorty makes his usual point that such development relates more to private life than public politics and adds that it is probably only applicable anyway to “intellectuals who read large numbers of books.” Rorty does not see a general problem with the new media’s leveling process leading to endless reflection and the impossibility of passionate commitment to action: “I am not sure that paralyzing self-scrutiny is a big problem for more than a few intellectuals. I find it hard to imagine that the incidence of this problem will be increased by the internet.”

Wrapping up his remarks, Rorty quotes a statement from Dreyfus’s paper that does not appear in any of its published versions. Dreyfus says that “it should be the job of information technology to look for structures that solicit and support unconditional commitments and implement them.” Rorty thinks such statements smack of the Orwellian world of loving Big Brother. He would just as soon have information technologists stay out of the unconditional commitment business, no matter how attractive Kierkegaard and Nietzsche might make such commitments sound. Rorty concludes, “I would prefer it if the information technologists just put everything they could think of on the net—rigorously hierarchical organized data bases, hypertexts, the complete works of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, programs that teach you symbolic logic and Danish and test your progress, and so on. They could just let us surfers take it from there.”

In response to Dreyfus’s and Rorty’s contrasting evaluations of the Internet, I suggest a different view, one that borrows a bit from each of theirs. What seems most striking today is that so many media users are either unthinkingly complacent in their passionate commitments or complacently unthinking in their detached, everyday busy-ness. Examples of the former are religious and secular dogmatic fundamentalists, unthinkingly complacent in their passionate commitments. Examples of the latter are most of the rest of us in our busy professional and personal, public, and private lives. The Internet does encourage both ways of being unthinking and complacent. I have in mind, on the one hand, the partisan, self-validating websites and blog discussions of fundamentalists on the right and left, religious and secular; and then, on the other hand, everyone’s time-consuming activities of checking emails, web-surfing, and information overloading. But it is also the case that the Internet provides its own unique opportunities for challenging unthinking complacency. After all, I retrieved Dreyfus’s essay on Kierkegaard first from his website, and Rorty’s digital archive online was my source for his critique of Dreyfus. Arguably both texts are opportunities for thinking through our complacencies in reference to new media. These opportunities include the models they provide for thinking rhetorically about media history. Dreyfus and Rorty demonstrate how arguments proposing different accounts of new media in the past help in thinking about media in the present and, indeed, might even motivate different self-reflective uses of that media in the future.

### III.

As an epilogue to these comments, I would like to note briefly some related points about Rorty and Kierkegaard that emerge from the texts now available in the Richard Rorty Papers. I have indicated how Rorty, while agreeing with some of Dreyfus's descriptions of the Internet, ultimately disagrees with Dreyfus's Kierkegaardian condemnation of that media. But, we might ask, does Rorty fully agree with Dreyfus's positive evaluation of Kierkegaard's philosophy independent of its application in assessing new media? And how does Rorty's interpretation of Kierkegaard relate more generally to his rhetorical pragmatism?

In answering these questions, we receive some help from Rorty's published work. Though there is little sustained discussion of Kierkegaard in Rorty's books and articles, the Danish philosopher is often mentioned in passing to illustrate this or that Rortian generalization about the history of philosophy. For example, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty lists Kierkegaard among his edifying as opposed to systematic philosophers (369), and more than once Rorty cites his "favorite remark of Kierkegaard's about Hegel" ("Response" 221n2). He puts it this way in "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre": "The verdict of the literary culture on this [Hegelian] metaphysics was nicely formulated by Kierkegaard when he said that if Hegel had written at the end of his books that 'this was all just a thought experiment' he would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived, but that, as it was, he was merely a buffoon" (96). Rorty comments that Kierkegaard's "epithet is too harsh, but the spirit of the remark seems right" ("Response" 221n2).

Such passing references to Kierkegaard in Rorty's published works do not help much with my questions about how Rorty agrees with Dreyfus's evaluation of Kierkegaard or how Rorty's interpretation relates to his neo-pragmatism. But if we look at unpublished texts in the Rorty Papers, I think the answers become clearer.<sup>7</sup>

According to syllabi and lecture notes, Rorty included Kierkegaard in his courses as early as 1960 during his last year teaching at Wellesley (see RRP 51:7). Later in his career and more helpful, however, are the notes for Rorty's lectures on Kierkegaard for a fall 1987 Philosophy 518 course at the University of Virginia. In his first Kierkegaard lecture Rorty remarks that both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were "illustrative of the way in which philosophical system-building died with Hegel and was replaced by artistic [...] innovation" (as well as by the political innovations of philosophers like Mill and Marx). Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were two "private eccentrics" who "are comparable in being [...] anti-Hegelian and trying to find ways of saying that *passion* ranks above thought, reflection on the situation of the *individual* over world history." Though Kierkegaard "adored" Christianity and Nietzsche "loathed" it, "both agreed that Hegel had not understood [Christianity] properly" (RRP 43:18, "First S. K. lecture" 1).

---

<sup>7</sup> For other studies examining the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Rorty, see Rudd, Visker, Frazier, and Simmons.

Rorty turns to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in which Kierkegaard argued that

[a]ll decisiveness, all essential decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity. A contemplative spirit, and this is what the objective subject is, feels nowhere any infinite need of a decision, and sees no decision anywhere. This is the *falsum* that is inherent in all objectivity; and this is the significance of mediation as the mode of transition in the continuous process, where nothing is fixed and where nothing is infinitely decided. (Kierkegaard, *Concluding* 33)

Rorty quotes from a long footnote to this last sentence as his first example of Kierkegaardian “digs at Hegel”: “The great secret of the [Hegelian] System [...] is pretty much the same as the sophism of Protagoras, that everything is relative; except that here, everything is relative in the continuing world-process. But this cannot help any living individual.” Kierkegaard goes on to cite an anecdote from Plutarch’s *Moralia* about a philosopher described to a visitor as “a wise man [...] occupied in the *search* for virtue,” to which the visitor responds: “But when does he then propose to *use* it?” (Kierkegaard, *Concluding* 34n; emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup>

Next Rorty quotes Kierkegaard’s statement that “The philosopher contemplates Christianity [only] for the sake of interpenetrating it with his speculative thought,” which Rorty glosses as Kierkegaard saying that “Hegel takes Christianity as a datum, not as an option [...]; for Hegel, the question of ‘how am I to live, what should I do?’ is put aside in favor of ‘Where is history going?’” (“First S.K. lecture” 1-2). Thus, Rorty sees Kierkegaard as opposing objective, systematic thought, which merely arranges abstract possibilities, to subjective, passionate thought, which embodies actual commitments and enables decisions to act. Rorty relates this Kierkegaardian philosophy to his own Pragmatism when, in summary, he cites William James (in “The Will to Believe”) and claims that “when we face a ‘*live, momentous and forced option*’ [...] the way in which abstract possibilities hang together is not [of much] help” (2).

Later in a published, full-blown treatment of James’s essay, Rorty expands on his Kierkegaardian point that private ‘subjective’ commitment requires no public ‘objective’ justification. He writes, “It is a consequence of James’s utilitarian view of the nature of obligation that *the obligation to justify one’s beliefs arises only when one’s habits of action interfere with the fulfillment of others’ needs*. Insofar as one is engaged in a private project, that obligation lapses” (Rorty, “Religious” 85). James resisted the view that “to be rational” means submitting *all* one’s beliefs “to the judgment of one’s peers.” Instead, James argues in “The Will to Believe” that “there are live, momentous, and forced options which cannot be decided by evidence—cannot, as James put it, ‘be decided on intellectual grounds.’” Rorty criticizes James here for assuming a too rigid distinction between intellect and passion, claiming that it is exactly this “sort of dualism which James needs to blur” as a Pragmatist who maintains that “the only point of having beliefs in the first place is to gratify desires” (88). But Rorty tries to “reinterpret James’s intellect/passion distinction so as to make it coincide with a distinction between what

<sup>8</sup> The note is partly quoted by Rorty, “First S.K. lecture” 1.

needs justification to other human beings and what does not" (89). Rorty gives Kierkegaard's faith in the Incarnation as a paradigmatic case of unjustifiable belief, noting that Kierkegaard sees no need to explain to others "how Christ can be both mortal and immortal" (95). In such ways, Rorty aligns James with Kierkegaard in viewing both as being in the business of privatizing religion.

However, privatizing religion does not mean that religious beliefs have no effect on public actions. According to Kierkegaard, just the opposite is the case. Such beliefs provide the ultimate commitments upon which decisions to act are made. As Rorty notes, for Kierkegaard these passionately-held commitments, rather than abstract systems, constitute the grounds for deciding among live, momentous, and forced options.<sup>9</sup> And here we see a direct connection with Kierkegaard's decisionist views as applied in criticizing the new media of his time. Indeed, Rorty's lectures quote some of the same Kierkegaardian words that Dreyfus applies in his critique of the Internet: "Demoralized by too assiduous an absorption in [abstract Hegelian] world-historical considerations, people no longer have any will for anything" ("First S. K. lecture" 2).

So, Rorty does seem to agree with Dreyfus's interpretation of Kierkegaard, at least with those aspects of Kierkegaardian thought most relevant to the demoralizing media-effects of leveling and inaction. But Rorty disagrees that Kierkegaard, so interpreted, actually applies to current media in a way that justifies a condemnation of the Internet. That is, for Rorty as a rhetorical pragmatist, it is *not* the case that with the new media, people "are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale at the cheapest possible price."

### Works Cited

- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1991. Print.
- . "Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age." *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1999*. Ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999. 96-109. Print.
- . *On the Internet*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- . *What Computers Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason*. New York: Harper, 1972. Print.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. Print.
- Frazier, Brad. *Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment: Philosophical and Theological Connections*. New York: Palgrave, 2006. Print.

---

<sup>9</sup> Thus, Kierkegaard stands as one of those Christians who successfully integrate (what Rorty calls) private and public final vocabularies, vocabularies that Rorty goes great lengths to keep separate. "For a few such people—Christians (and others) for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others—the two sorts of questions come together. For most such, they do not" (Rorty, *Contingency* 143).

- Gross, Neil. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008. Print.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1989. Print.
- James, William. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979. Print.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Journals and Papers*. Ed. and Trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong. Vol. 2. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970. Print.
- . *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1941. Print.
- Mailloux, Steven. "Euro-American Rhetorical Pragmatism: Democratic Deliberation, Humanist Controversies, and Purposeful Mediation." *Pragmatism Today* 2.2 (2011): 83-91. Web. 15 Jan. 2014.
- . *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998. Print.
- . "Rhetorical Pragmatism and the Uses of Literature." *REAL* 15 (1999): 171-80. Print.
- Mailloux, Steven, and Keith Gilyard. "Conversation." *Conversations in Cultural Rhetoric and Composition Studies*. Ed. Gilyard Taylor and Victor E. Taylor. Aurora, CO: Davies, 2009. 30-51. Print.
- Rorty, Richard. "Comments on Dreyfus." Richard Rorty Papers. MS-C017. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Web. 1 Jan. 2014. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10575/1055>>.
- . *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.
- . Foreword. *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*. Ed. Mark A. Wrathall and Jeff Malpas. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2000. ix-xiii. Print.
- . *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979. Print.
- . "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre." *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 89-104. Print.
- . "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance." *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. Ed. Ruth Anna Putnam. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 84-102. Print.
- . "Response to Allen Hance." *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. Ed. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt UP, 1995. 122-25. Print.
- . "Studied Ambiguity." Rev. of *Shaping Science with Rhetoric* by Leah Ceccarelli. *Science* 293 (2001): 2399-400. Print.
- . *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*. Ed. Eduardo Mendieta. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2006. Print.
- Rudd, Anthony. "Kierkegaard's Critique of Pure Irony." *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*. Ed. George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. 82-96. Print.

Simmons, J. Aaron. "Violence and Singularity: Thinking Politics Otherwise with Rorty, Kierkegaard, and Levinas." Diss. Vanderbilt U, 2006. Print.

Visker, Rudi. "'Hold the Being': How to Split Rorty between Irony and Finitude." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25 (1999): 27-45. Print.