

Evaluation of Miroslaw Woznica dissertation *The Practice of Education and the Politics of Culture: Richard Rorty's Pragmatic and Cultural Landscapes*

Evaluator: Prof. Dr. Ramsey Eric Ramsey, Barrett, the Honors College Arizona State University

The dissertation of Miroslaw Woznica, *The Practice of Education and the Politics of Culture: Richard Rorty's Pragmatic and Cultural Landscapes*, is an accomplished piece of work in the philosophy of education with a concise focus on the hermeneutic and pedagogical consequences of the work of the American philosopher Richard Rorty. As a hermeneutic philosopher who reads and often teaches the work of Rorty, who was Rorty's host when he spent a week at my institution, and who publishes work in the hermeneutics of education, I have learned much from this quite fine dissertation. Its merits are many. It accomplishes much and promises further work due to what is achieved here. Every worthy dissertation, of course, must do the former, better ones in my estimation also do the latter. Below I shall share those major highlights of Woznica's work I consider the most salient evidence of my laudatory evaluation.

Clearly written, well organized, and concerned with pressing questions concerning education's role in our collective futures, this dissertation shows itself to be the type of work that merits a doctoral degree. Undertaking the work necessary to complete a dissertation exhibiting this type of success puts Woznica in a position to add to the existing scholarship in at least three areas: that dealing with Rorty's philosophical legacy, hermeneutic philosophy more broadly, and the philosophy of education. In my estimation, this dissertation cites the proper amount of and most salient passages from Rorty's work to support the explication/interpretation being offered. As these citations come from a wide range of Rorty's writing, they demonstrate the work that needed to be done to account for the wealth of Rorty's collected works. In dealing with Rorty's critics, Woznica shows a more than adequate facility with secondary literature.

Each of the seven chapters makes a unique contribution to the overall theme announced in its title and acts as a wonderful provocation to those thinking deeply about the philosophy of education. Furthermore, the organization of these chapters leads the reader to an understanding of how much Rorty, when interpreted in this manner, has to offer to the larger, important, and ever-on-going conversation concerning the philosophy of education and its relation to culture and democratic politics. Woznica's writing achieves this without redundancy with each chapter addressing an issue or series of issues at the heart of his project and more general discussions in the field. The dissertation shows Woznica is well prepared to join his voice, shaped by this wide-ranging study of Rorty's *oeuvre*, to literary culture and the conversation of humankind (as Rorty might put it).

Woznica's dissertation, which in one sense is a model of what is able to be achieved by way of thoughtful and careful explication of a single thinker, is also and more so a subtle lesson in hermeneutics demonstrating how even in a closely read explication an interpretation is being

**Barrett**  
**The Honors College**

Mailing Address: PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069-7100  
Street/Shipping Address: 4701 W. Thunderbird Road, Glendale, AZ 85306-4908  
Phone: (602) 543-3410 Fax: (602) 543-3410  
<http://honors.west.asu.edu>

undertaken. That is to say, Woznica's desire to think deeply about what happens in education guides his careful explication, leads him to read Rorty one way rather than another, and in the end gives us a powerful sketch of a philosophy of education. This focus, as we might call it, directs our attention throughout the vast majority of the dissertation to questions of how education happens, what allows it to happen, and what happens to everyone involved when we engage in pedagogical practices. I find this a key merit and not to be overlooked as Woznica gives us this lesson with a sense of modesty.

Woznica does an excellent job of addressing early in the work enough of Rorty's intellectual biography (including certain salient aspects of Rorty's upbringing) to demonstrate that Rorty's "leaving" the so-called analytic philosophical camp for the continental one is a moment of some importance and leads to understanding how powerful and thorough is Rorty's critique of the philosophical tradition. This interpretive/explicative work allows Woznica the opportunity to situate Rorty's work in the traditions of American Philosophy (e.g., James and Dewey) and contemporary hermeneutic philosophy (e.g., Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida). Woznica shows that Rorty might be understood as one who informs and transforms American Pragmatism by way of hermeneutics and hermeneutics by way of American philosophy. With this accomplished early in the dissertation, Woznica asks us to think then with Rorty about the issues surrounding the philosophy of education.

It is no secret to anyone even tangentially related to such philosophical questions that Rorty is a polarizing figure and that his thought is a well-known provocation; as a result, Rorty has more than his fair share of critics. It is a great virtue of this work that Woznica does not shy away from Rorty's critics but rather gives them their due. Without listing all the criticisms with which he deals, suffice it to say the major ones are there—the charge of relativism and the pragmatic notion of truth being foremost among them. In explicating Rorty's many generous, detailed, and seriously considered replies to his critics, Woznica opens a space where he is able to pursue Rorty's thought in a non-hagiographic manner (an ever-present danger when dealing with a single thinker with whom one is sympathetic). This wise choice on Woznica's part gives the reader a great amount of confidence that the conclusions drawn in the dissertation are well-earned. Woznica is as fair with Rorty's critics as was Rorty himself. It is worth noting here as well, these critics are not left behind but make appearances later in the work as is called for by the topics under discussion.

It is no small matter that the issues above are integrated quite well in the history of Western philosophy from Platonism through to the "choice" Rorty often proffers between a traditional and restrictive Kantianism and an Hegelian historicism. This situating of Rorty allows Woznica to highlight Rorty's abandoning of analytic philosophical concerns and focus on his turn to language, history, and the politics of democracy with the ultimate aim of questioning after education and learning. (The dissertation begins fittingly, if also quite chillingly, with Rorty's unfortunately prescient view in 1997 on the likelihood of the rise of authoritarian anti-democratic world political leaders who win public support as a consequence, in part, of certain educational failures.) These opening chapters, so focused, allow the dissertation to turn to language, history, and democracy and their relation to education understood as a contextualized conversation that is always future directed and historically grounded.

Against this backdrop, Woznica proceeds to address a number of key concepts in Rorty's work, and he does this quite well and thoroughly. I shall not rehearse them all (although I find them each treated with equal care) rather focus on those that had the most consequence for this reader. I am drawn to these in part because they assist me in understanding better how Rorty is a

profound ally of those such as myself who think about how broad the texts pertinent to hermeneutic philosophy and the philosophy of education needs to be.

Woznica does a wonderful job of interpreting what Rorty's reoccurring claims to being an ironist means. He shows how irony is linked well and profitably with the hermeneutic commitment to ongoing conversation. Woznica does well to show the ironist has a position that is both well considered and open to challenges that might come from texts such as a novel or a piece of art, one's conversation partner broadly conceived, and/or the changes wrought by history. It addresses one of the common criticisms against Rorty (*viz.*, he is a rank relativist) when Woznica demonstrates that for all his ironic openness, Rorty is open not to any-old-thing; rather, he is open first and foremost because of a commitment to social justice and to thus to achieving democratic consensus.

This commitment to social justice—as ironic as it might be said to be—allows Woznica to link Rorty's claim addressed later in the dissertation that education is edification: a powerful change in vocabulary fitting to Rorty's overall intellectual task. Woznica makes evident that if edification is associated with moral improvement, then the implications for education are many. The dissertation allows the reader to understand just how much is at stake in this formulation of education. It brings language to the fore because edification takes place hermeneutically, which is to say lingually and communicatively. Furthermore, the dissertation argues this brings communicative reason, conversation, and hermeneutic reason into a type of bulwark against charges of irrationality and relativism popularly made against education understood as edification.

Woznica, in working through Rorty's understanding of edification and language, shows us the virtue of taking a sophisticated understanding of vocabularies as a hermeneutic concept. Education as edification presents new vocabularies for evaluation, shows how new vocabularies 'fit' our desires for a more socially just future, and shows what is the relation between vocabulary and interpretation. Woznica is keen then to reveal how these new, admittedly risky, and experimental vocabularies shape the culturally and politically relevant task of description and redescription of who we are both as a collective and as individuals.

Because Rorty maintains (against his reputation as a post-modern thinker) a distinction between public and private life, Woznica is right to focus on how education has a unique function in each realm. He does well to express how this is also tied to how education needs to function as more of a socializing traditional force early and then as more of an individuating force later in one's educational life. This is also articulated in terms of the necessity of both reason and imagination and the necessity of both safeguarding tradition and moving beyond it. This returns the reader to the discussion of hermeneutic/communicative reason with respect to a robust and justice-seeking democratic culture.

Woznica's focus on what Rorty has to say about language and interpretation leads him to address what type of understanding we need to have of culture so as to link them together with our goal of an education directed toward a democratic politics, which is as he has made clear motivated by an idea of social justice and social hope. Embracing a social hope, Woznica claims, makes Rorty a cultural philosopher who wishes to interpret culture as a literary culture, which turns philosophy away from traditional philosophical problems and turns it instead toward using language and new vocabularies to describe and redescribe our sociality in ways that are ever more inclusive and widening in their reach. This concept of beginning within and contributing to a literary culture places philosophers embracing hermeneutics and our inescapable linguality in solidarity with poets, novelists, and essayists – indeed, with all those whose task is to keep conversations on-going in light of social hope and democracy.

It is here where the dissertation persuasively demonstrates that bringing philosophy into solidarity with other types of humanist writers as Rorty counsels—while seeming to “dethrone” philosophy—in fact makes it, we might say, more important as a major yet not sole contributor to literary culture. Literary culture as a culture of words, vocabularies, and (re)descriptions becomes the *milieu* in which education as edification originates and makes it additions to social, political, and democratic life. Following Rorty’s lead, Woznica thus establishes the educative necessity of significantly expanding the number and types of texts belonging legitimately to the never-ending task of education in and for democracy.

In this light, two phrases Rorty employs emerge, which help us understand his position: romantic polytheism and strong poets. The description romantic polytheism allows for placing certain thinkers in a matrix fitting to them when understood such. Woznica expresses well how this allows Rorty to make room in the same understanding for philosophers and poets whose work is traditionally thought to be at odds (for instance, Nietzsche, Whitman, and JS Mill). So understood, literary culture liberates philosophers to consort with poets, painters, and novelists and thus allows their pedagogical practice to offer the opportunity of lingual and thus existential liberation to students. Consequently, Woznica interprets Rorty as saying, a new philosophy of education will be literary criticism or, said otherwise, hermeneutical. Edification will be achieved in a literary culture by an exploration of how we do things with words and ought become the *sine qua non* of educational practice.

To conclude, the success of *The Practice of Education and the Politics of Culture: Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic and Cultural Landscapes* sets the stage wonderfully for Woznica to write, when a certain type of explication as the necessary precursor gives way to a more risk-taking work, what I am sure will be welcomed contributions to scholarship. I am anxious to see, for instance, what he might achieve in exploring in even finer detail the mutual benefits of an engagement between continental hermeneutics and American Pragmatism (this stands as a needed contemporizing of work undertaken decades ago by the likes of Richard Bernstein). In any event, I look forward to reading published work by Woznica in future.

This reader (who understands—see above—more than his fair share of Rorty’s philosophy) has learned much from this dissertation. It has been, if I may, edifying to have read closely this fine and accomplished dissertation and to have had the consequence of it allowing me to think again and anew about what it means to learn (and teach). I cannot but be excited by the thought of integrating what I now think in light of this dissertation in my upcoming university seminars. I do not know if your university recognizes passing with high honors or distinction; however, were they to do so I would recommend this dissertation for such. My gratitude to the author, his supervisor, all those involved in directing him to this accomplishment and for my being able to submit this evaluation in full support of Miroslaw Woznica being granted his doctoral degree.



Prof. Dr. Ramsey Eric Ramsey  
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