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**richard
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critical
dialogues

Response to Richard Shusterman

Richard Rorty

I am surprised to be told by Richard Shusterman that 'the Rorty-Habermas debate' he describes seems 'urgent to us philosophers'. For, as Shusterman rightly says in section IV of his contribution to this volume, it is hard to find differences between myself and Habermas which concern the role of art and literature in culture. As he notes, we both acknowledge the role of metaphor in making 'world-disclosure' possible. We agree that world-disclosure typically links up with problem-solving, and that the latter typically requires the use of familiar, traditional, literal language.

As I see it, the only serious or interesting disagreement between Habermas and myself is about whether you need notions like 'unconditionality' and 'universal validity' in order to justify social democratic institutions. This disagreement does not put us on opposite sides of what Shusterman calls 'a misleading dualism between reason and aesthetics that seems inconsistent with their [Habermas's and Rorty's] own basic pragmatism.' Granted that each of us has written passages which can be construed as propounding such a dualism, there are many other passages – some of which Shusterman cites in section IV – which are more tempered and less misleading.

Both Habermas and I have, indeed, sometimes spoken of the 'primacy' of reason or of 'the aesthetic', but this locution is particularly unfortunate. Primacy is always primacy in a respect or for a purpose. Once the needed distinctions between different respects or purposes are made, there is little left for the two of us to quarrel about. I entirely agree with Habermas that, as Shusterman summarizes him, 'there is no escaping reason, because there is no

escaping language and because language is essentially and necessarily rational.' But saying that is quite compatible with saying that metaphor and fantasy will always be required if the crust of convention is to be broken, and new worlds disclosed. So I do not think it helps to view all the oppositions Shusterman lists at the beginning of section III of his contribution as illustrating a 'reason' vs. 'the aesthetic' dualism.

I doubt that I have ever put forward, nor that Derrida would affirm, the view which Shusterman attributes to us both: that language is 'more fundamentally aesthetic ... more a matter of disseminating creativity, persuasive rhetoric and world-making tropes than of logical validity'. Language has lots of functions – two of which are problem-solving and world-disclosing – but I doubt that there is any need to debate which of its functions is 'fundamental'. That would be like asking whether liberal politics is more fundamental than conservative politics, or whether spending money is more fundamental than saving it, or up more fundamental than down. The most I would say is that the world-disclosing invention of a vocabulary is temporally prior to its use in solving problems, just as fashioning a tool is temporally prior to employing it.

On the other hand people were probably using language to solve problems long before they started disclosing new worlds. Language presumably started out as a way of getting cooperation in projects of basket-weaving, arrow-shaping, antelope-hunting, raising families, propitiating the gods, and the like. That seems reason enough not to say that 'language is ... primarily an aesthetic tool for new creation and self-fashioning.' As civilization has progressed, however, the use of language to create new ways of being human, and to dream up new projects, has become more frequent and prominent. But words have no built-in preference for being used for such purposes rather than for more mundane ones.

Shusterman says that I think that 'particular, contingent, historicized linguistic practices ... are simply tools for coping with experience, and their highest function is not the Habermasian one of cooperative problem-solving. ... Instead, this function is aesthetic: individual, original creation'. This is right only if 'highest' is taken in the sense of 'most beautiful, most exciting and most fun'. Orchids are higher than trees in order of phylogenesis, and they strike many of us as more beautiful and more interesting. But without the forests we should not only have no orchids, we should have no oxygen. Without the banal, routine, problem-solving uses of language we should not only lack occasion and motive for inventing orchidaceous language, but would have no economy and no society.

I think there is a reasonably firm distinction between orchids and trees even though all the really showy orchids are epiphytic, and that there is a reasonably firm distinction between the private and public even though, as Shusterman rightly says, 'the private self and the language it builds upon in self-creation are always already socially constituted and structured by a public field.' The private-public distinction I want is between our responsibilities to ourselves and our responsibilities to others. It took many millennia of social cooperation before that hothouse flower, the private self, could blossom. Human beings had been using language for a very long time before anybody had the wealth, leisure and security to develop a private agenda. But that does not detract from the beauty and excitement of such agendas.

Substituting 'responsibilities to oneself alone' for 'freedom' in Hegel's aphorism, one might say that in the beginning only One had such responsibilities (the Emperor, perhaps). Now only Some do (since the vast majority of people now alive cannot afford any such luxury), but eventually (with luck) All will. Political liberalism is not *merely* 'a means to provide the necessary stability and negative liberty for pursuit of our private aims', because it is also a means to minimize suffering. But minimizing suffering and maximizing negative liberty go hand in hand. In most political situations one does not have to choose between these two aims.

There is a sense in which Shusterman is right that I hold 'an essentialist view of human nature as essentially linguistic'. As I say in my response to Norman Geras in this volume, it seems to me that what differentiates us from the brute creation is no more and no less than our ability to use language. But I do not see this claim as any more banefully essentialistic than saying that what differentiates animals from plants is their ability to move around. The only trouble with essentialism is the metaphysical suggestion that some of our classifications, but not others, divide nature at the joints. But one can give up the idea that nature has joints and still remark that we use certain predicates pretty much coextensively with others.

I am a bit at a loss about how to deal with Shusterman's claim that I neglect the fact that beautiful flowers, birds, poems, music and other things 'make us forget for a moment about language and reason, allowing us to revel, however briefly, in nondiscursive sensual joy'. They do indeed. But in what exactly does my 'neglect' consist?

Shusterman goes on to say that because I am the product of a 'puritan America' my 'aesthetic programme' is 'one-sidedly driven by the restless, relentless production of new vocabularies and narrative identities'. What aesthetic programme? I do not know of any

fruitful way to bring nondiscursive sensual joy (of the sort birdwatchers like myself get when kingfishers flash fire) together with the sorts of non-somatic thrills I enjoy as a person who, as Shusterman puts it, 'just likes to read books'. But neither do I know any interesting descriptions of the relationship between the somatic pleasures of food and those of sex, or between the non-somatic delight of reading Wodehouse and that of reading Hegel. Do we need an aesthetic theory or an aesthetic 'programme' to exhibit such relationships?

This last rhetorical question expresses my scepticism about 'aesthetics' as a field of inquiry. That has always struck me as another of Kant's bad ideas – of a piece with the bad idea (to which I think Habermas unfortunately prone) of splitting culture up into three spheres, one for each of the three *Critiques*. Some good books have been written about painting, others about literature, others about music, others about sex, and still others about birdwatching. But I have never read a book that succeeded in saying something interesting about what all these have in common. What Shusterman calls 'the somatic' typically turns up in all these books, in one form or another. But I am not sure that we need 'a somatic aesthetics' because I am not sure that we need an aesthetic theory, or an aesthetic programme, at all. I doubt that there is much to be said about what unites painting, literature, music, sex and birdwatching while distinguishing all these from science, morals, politics, philosophy and religion. (One reason for my uncertainty on this point is that I entirely agree with Shusterman that 'the aesthetic power of an artwork... can be deeply enhanced by its political engagement'.)

My doubts about making as much as Shusterman does of the 'reason vs. the aesthetic' distinction are of a piece with my doubts about his claim that 'the body... remains... a promising place where discursive reason meets its limits, encounters its other.' For better or worse – perhaps because of being a product of puritan America, or perhaps because my views are indeed determined by 'the intellectual field and consumerist world of late-capitalist liberalism' – Foucault's, Bataille's and Deleuze's discussions of the body leave me cold. But even if they turned me on, I would still resist talk about where 'discursive reason meets its limits'. I do not see a difference between 'discursive reason' and talking about things, and I cannot see that talking about things has either 'limits' or an 'other'.

Talking about things is one of the things we do. Experiencing moments of sensual joy is another. The two do not stand in a dialectical relationship, get in each others' way, or need synthesis in a programme or theory. We can agree with Gadamer that 'being that can be understood is language' while remaining aware that there is

more to life than understanding. Inventing others to reason and then purporting to provide a better discursive understanding of these non-discursive others (a project which stretches from British empiricism through Bergson to existential phenomenology) seems to me a beautiful example of kicking up dust and then complaining that we cannot see.