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Book Review

Carlin Romano


In America the Philosophical, journalist, philosopher, and professor Carlin Romano defends the seemingly indefensible:

For the surprising little secret of our ardently capitalist, famously materialist, heavily iPodded, iPadded and iPhoned society is that America in the early twenty-first century towers as the most philosophical culture in the history of the world, an unprecedented marketplace of truth and argument that far surpasses ancient Greece, Cartesian France, nineteenth-century Germany or any other place one can name over the past three millennia (p. 10).

As more articles and books decrying American anti-intellectualism appear every year, asserting that we already live in the dystopian future of Mike Judge’s film Idiocracy, Romano has set a prodigious task for himself. He is up to it, covering an immense range of culture, history, and philosophy. His “full-scale assault” (p. 19) on the idea that America is unphilosophical, at best, covers seven distinct points:

1. A reappraisal of American philosophy, one sensitive to biography.
2. The rise of nonprofessional philosophers and their role in the public sphere.
3. The increasing role of underrepresented peoples in changing what counts as ‘philosophy.’
4. The development of ‘cyberphilosophy’ and its concentration in America.
5. A characterization of American philosophy as following Isocrates, rather than Socrates.
6. An explanation for the rejection of 'justification' talk, as exemplified in the success, and failure, of John Rawls.
7. Finally, an account of Barack Obama as a cosmopolitan philosopher-in-chief.

Let me fill in a little more of Romano's trajectory. He starts with Emerson, and moves through Peirce, James, Santayana, and Dewey to Quine, Nozick, Rawls, Dworkin, Posner, Danto, Cavell and ultimately Rorty. For each, Romano uses his journalistic eye to present each man as more than a set of arguments and theories to be analyzed. Instead, they were people (not so) simply trying to figure things out, including the very meaning of philosophy as a profession. Rorty receives the most attention, as both the apotheosis of classical pragmatism's pluralism, and also the deflation of the aspirations of technical analytic philosophy. Romano highlights Rorty's (re)introduction of Continental thinkers into mainstream philosophical debates. Fortunately, while Romano does not address 'American Continental Philosophy' thematically, he does acknowledge the continuous influence of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt in non-mainstream philosophy.

Rorty's revolution, in Romano's phrase, also opens the possibility for considering those outside philosophy departments as philosophers, whether broadcasters (Bill Moyers), psychologists (Oliver Sacks), or literary critics (Kenneth Burke), among others. Romano's point throughout is that considering American unphilosophical only makes sense within the parochial view that true philosophy is what happened at Harvard in the 1950s:

Yet if one recognized "philosophy" as a word and activity that preceded this professional sect into the world, didn't the burden fall on those identifying "philosophy" with rarefied "research programs" that sought universally satisfying definitions for contested everyday words such as "truth," "meaning" and "knowledge" (not to mention "can" and "must") to justify their artificial narrowing of the terms? (p. 143).

Next, Romano reviews the expansion of philosophy through the still-too-neglected role of African Americans, homosexuals, Native Americans, and women in American thought. Again, Romano is remarkably inclusive, sketching the ideas and lives of the (grudgingly) canonical (Jane Addams, Alain Locke), well-established (Kwame Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum), and the supposedly unphilosophical (Michael Eric Dyson, Susan Sontag). His sections on Native American and gay thinkers are relatively brief, and, as he acknowledges, he neglects Asian and Latino [sic] American thinkers. I should also note
the absence of disabled, neurodiverse, non-binary, and trans philosophers, among others, whose work has slowly become more appreciated since the publication of *America the Philosophical*.

The following sections are less tightly linked, as Romano moves from the growth of 'cyber-' fields, to the rehabilitation of Isocrates as a better philosophical model than the Platonic Socrates, to the failure of John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, to conclude with reflections on the presidency of Barack Obama. Finally, there is a 34-page bibliography, which at nearly 7% the length of the digital edition is "...like the text, ... an argument for America the Philosophical" (p. 472).

While it appears in the 'grab bag' second half, in some ways Romano's account of Isocrates is the heart of the book: "America the Philosophical operates under the sign of Isocrates. We simply haven't heard of him" (p. 418). In Isocrates, Romano finds a model of philosophy "...as an imprecise form of 'civilized discourse' or 'public deliberation,' what he called *logos politikos*, aimed at persuasion about great matters" (p. 418). One might naturally contend that Socrates provides such a model, but Romano argues that Socrates, or at least the Platonic Socrates, "...viewed philosophy as a rational, scientific, dialectical process that led one to eternal verities and right answers" (p. 417). This Platonic vision of philosophy has dominated, despite the occasional resurgence of a more pragmatic vision. In other words, Plato's success in casting Isocrates as a mere sophist rather than a rhetorician and philosopher turned philosophy into a pursuit less democratic, indeed less human, than it might have been.

This Straussian reading of history, inspired in part by Nietzsche, is controversial, although to my knowledge Romano's use of the classicist literature is well-grounded. Regarding pragmatism in particular, Plato's disdain for poetry and rhetoric parallels that of logical positivism:

Suddenly, several of the traditional bridges between philosophy's more abstract concerns and the man in the street's real-life dilemmas were not just considered unfashionable, but worthless. The bottom fell out of pragmatism, except in the rarefied epistemological vein that Quine could be said to pursue it (p. 112).

The 'eclipse narrative' of pragmatism is also controversial, as Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin, among others, have argued that it is simply false. However, looking at the table of contents for their anthology perhaps supports Romano's point, as it is mostly 'analytic' epistemology and philosophy of language. Similarly, those who argue that pragmatism did not disappear, but rather moved into other disciplines, are in effect agreeing with Romano.
Regardless of where one stands on these issues, Romano's inclusion of Isocrates brings the question of "America the Philosophical" into the long history of debate about the very nature of philosophy, along with the nature of human capacities and goods. Even those who balk at this Isocratic and Rortyan conception of pragmatism and philosophy will be rewarded by Romano's richly-drawn introduction to this conversation. While readable enough, this book is probably too long for undergraduate courses. However, it would be a welcome supplement to upper-level and graduate courses in classical and contemporary pragmatism, history of analytic philosophy, and U.S. intellectual history. Finally, it should be on the shelf of anyone interested in these topics.

Reference


*Daniel J. Brunson*
Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD, United States
daniel.brunson@morgan.edu