

Tanner Notes 12/6/90

It is my pleasure and privilege

to welcome you to this year's Tanner lecture on human values,
and to introduce to you our Tanner Lecturer, Professor Richard Rorty.

The Tanner Lecture is one of the most important

intellectual events of the year at Michigan.

It is one that I think all of us

anticipate with excitement because we know

we will be challenged to consider together

some of the most basic questions of human life and purpose.

The Tanner Lecture and Symposium bring to us each year

some of the most outstanding thinkers of our time

who are distinguished for their reflections on scholarly learning

in relation to the entire range of values pertinent

to the human condition, interest, behavior and aspiration.

We are indebted to the members of the Philosophy faculty

and their colleagues from many departments

who have planned this program and to the Tanner founder and family

whose generosity makes it possible.

Professor Rorty was recently described

in the New York Times Magazine

as "the most influential contemporary American philosopher".

He is currently Professor of the Humanities at the University of Virginia.

This title suits him especially well.

because his work reminds us that the word "human"

is at the very core of the "humanities".

Professor Rorty began his career as one

of the most prominent philosophers in the country,

But more recently he has ranged broadly across many areas of inquiry

including literature, the history of ideas, and social and cultural studies.

to illuminate his very original ideas about the human condition.

Although Professor Rorty has become perhaps

the most eloquent and influential critic of the idea

that any one view of “reality” is privileged or authoritative.
Yet, he has always insisted that, in giving up this venerable proposition,
we can substitute an “anything goes” view of life.

On the contrary, he presents to us an alternative vision

--a utopia in which moral seriousness is NOT expressed
by seeking some objective or external or absolute perspective
that will apply in all circumstances, settle all disputes,
or explain all human differences as “mere contingency”
or prejudice.

Rather, he suggests to us that moral seriousness

is a profoundly humane perspective expressed in sensitivity to
pain and humiliation of others, of opposition to cruelty in all its forms.

In his lecture, Professor Rorty emphasizes the importance

of opening up new possibilities for thought and dialog.

And, indeed, his own career is testimony

to the creative value of such openness.

Through his work he has sought to bring together major themes
from traditions that had largely been understood apart from
--or even in opposition to--one another--

American pragmatism, analytic philosophy, and recent continental
philosophy.

In the new dialog he has created, Professor Rorty has found inspiration

both for the personal freedom to see in our individual lives
as a realm of individual self-creation,

and for the social freedom

that comes when we cease to use our political institutions
to impose our personal visions upon others.

Professor Rorty could hardly have chosen

a more important or challenging set of questions

than those he will discuss in his lecture “**Feminism and Pragmatism**”

Please join me in welcoming Professor Rorty.

