

Richard Rorty, a professor emeritus of comparative literature at Stanford and public intellectual who is perhaps best known for revitalizing the philosophical school of American pragmatism, died Friday, June 8, at his home on the university campus. He was 75.

The cause was complications from pancreatic cancer, family members said.

"He was such an unbelievably captivating presence as a lecturer and as a writer, and he was a model citizen," said Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, the Albert Guerard Professor of Literature and an early advocate of bringing Rorty to Stanford. "He always had these large classes of undergraduates. He had this huge, high opinion of the students here."

Rorty, who first came to the university as a fellow at the Humanities Center in 1996 and then joined the faculty of the Comparative Literature Department in 1998, is one of the most famous and widely read philosophers of the late 20th century.

"He entered the department as this towering figure, perhaps the leading intellectual in the United States," said Russell Berman, chair of the Department of Comparative Literature and the Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities. "And what was breathtaking about him was his modesty and consistency in duty. There was no department meeting for which he was too good to attend. There were no office hours that he was too busy to hold."

Among his peers, Rorty also was controversial. His notoriety stemmed largely from the challenges he mounted, beginning in the 1970s, against the idea of philosophy as a discipline that could discern general and timeless truths about the world. Attempts to do so, he asserted, were motivated by western philosophy's misguided reliance on Platonic metaphysics, the notion that there are underlying structures, realities or truths that stand firm against the vagaries of history and social mores. We have only a linguistic and causal relationship with the world, Rorty insisted. Hence any attempt to obtain some kind of transcendent, unmediated knowledge about it is futile.

Jerome Schneewind, a longtime friend and professor emeritus of philosophy at Johns Hopkins University, said Rorty "lived in a peculiar relation to philosophy."

"He was a major figure in challenging the accepted pieties of analytic philosophy and the accepted pieties of so-called continental philosophy," Schneewind said. "He put a bug in everyone's ear."

Indeed, Rorty was accused of everything from promoting irresponsible relativism to sabotaging reason. In a 1997 *New Criterion* review of *Pragmatism: A Reader*, by Louis Menand, the philosopher Susan Haack described what she termed "Rortyism" as "vulgar pragmatism."

"Repudiating the idea that beliefs are objectively true or false, evidence objectively better or worse, Rortyism induces a factitious despair of the possibility of real inquiry of any kind, misprizes the truths that literature can teach us, and undermines the hope of knowing what would truly improve the condition of society," Haack writes.

Rorty forged ahead on the path cleared by American pragmatists, particularly John Dewey, in asserting that ideas are tools; the ones we call "true" are simply those that help us cope best with our present circumstances. Politically liberal, he especially admired Dewey's focus on social activism—his famous urging that intellectuals shift their attention from "the problems of philosophy" to "the problems of men."

"Rorty esteems above all the possibility of progress: political, intellectual, and cultural," wrote Robert Brandom, a philosophy professor at the University of Pittsburgh, in an e-mail. "Where he parts company with many of his contemporaries is that he thinks the idea of progress on these fronts that can somehow be guaranteed by our increasing knowledge of facts is one of the biggest hindrances to the sort of open-minded conversation and honing of practical skills that really matters most," added Brandom, editor of *Rorty and His Critics*, a collection of essays.

Rorty also echoed old-fashioned liberals in his support of labor unions and efforts to reduce economic disparity. But he remained very suspicious of sweeping social-engineering schemes and was a lifelong critic of communism. Instead, he believed that progressive change stood to be most successful if it was incremental.

"Rorty's thinking, whether one agrees with its particular outcomes or not, was about how we should grapple with the challenges that life presents," Berman said.

Precocious student

Richard McKay Rorty was born Oct. 4, 1931, in New York City. Shortly before turning 15, he enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1949 and a master's degree in philosophy in 1952. From 1952 to 1956 he attended Yale, where he earned a doctorate in philosophy. His dissertation was titled *The Concept of Potentiality*. After spending two years in the Army, he received his first faculty appointment at Wellesley, where he taught from 1958 to 1961 before joining the faculty of Princeton, where he served until 1982. From 1982 until coming to Stanford, he was on the faculty at the University of Virginia.

It was during his tenure at Princeton that he published his landmark book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), which would set the foundation for his later work arguing that the general distinction between objective and subjective realities is meaningless.

"The aim of the book is to undermine the reader's confidence in 'the mind' as something about which one should have a 'philosophical' view, in 'knowledge' as something about which there

ought be a 'theory' and which has 'foundations,' and in 'philosophy' as it has been conceived since Kant," Rorty wrote in the introduction, adding, with characteristic dry humor: "Thus the reader in search of a new theory on any of the subjects discussed will be disappointed."

Instead, he suggested that "we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature."

In a review of three books about notions of truth, Jim Holt, writing in *The New Yorker*, neatly sums up Rorty's views of epistemology: "The idea that we could somehow stand outside our own skins and survey the relationship between our thoughts and reality is a delusion. Language is an adaptation, and the words we use are tools. There are many competing vocabularies for talking about the world, some more useful than others, given human needs and interests. None of them, however, correspond to the Way Things Really Are."

Literary culture

"I don't see much use for the idea of philosophy as knowledge production," Rorty said, in a typical statement, during an afternoon campus forum, "The Silences of Philosophy: A Conversation with Richard Rorty," in March 2001. "Philosophy is a tradition of overlapping texts. It's not a scientific discipline."

Rorty viewed the dialectics of philosophy and literature as part of the same conversation.

"By insisting on the literariness of philosophy, he was pursuing his agenda of democratizing philosophy and moving it away from the authoritative pronouncements and determinations of statements, and into the realm of irony, doubt and conversation," Berman said. "For Rorty, the big agenda of philosophy had to be literary in the sense of the opening of the imagination to articulate new ways to live."

In late April, Rorty was awarded the Thomas Jefferson Medal for Distinguished Achievement in the Arts, Humanities or Social Sciences from the American Philosophical Society, the oldest learned society in the United States, of which he was a member. The citation was "in recognition of his influential and distinctively American contribution to philosophy and, more widely, to humanistic studies."

Rorty also has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and MacArthur Fellowship, and he was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In addition to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty is the author of several popular and academically influential books, including *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th-Century America* (1998) and four volumes of papers.

He is survived by his former wife, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty of Boston, and wife, Mary Varney Rorty, a bioethicist and faculty associate at the Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics. He also is survived by sons Jay Rorty of Santa Cruz and Kevin Rorty of Richmond, Va.; daughter Patricia Rorty of Berkeley; and two grandchildren.

Services will be announced later.