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# THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: BETWEEN REASON AND IMAGINATION

TATIANA CÁROVÁ

When compared to other products of human culture, philosophy is very difficult to grasp and define. Throughout the history of philosophical thinking, its character and purpose have been interpreted in many different ways by various philosophers, which makes it rather difficult to state unanimously for what purpose and in what way we should cultivate philosophy nowadays. Reflecting today's multicultural and globalized world, marked with religious diversity and cultural relativism, some philosophers hope that philosophy might take the place of a crucial unifying tool for transforming the scattered cultural systems of various societies into one; some heavily oppose this idea and have much more down-to-earth expectations of philosophy so as not to impose the importance of metaphysics on the citizens of the post-modern world; and still others see the primary focus of philosophy in different areas. In this paper, I would like to present one of the possible perceptions of the role and character of philosophy in the multicultural world, which Richard Rorty presents in his philosophical papers entitled *Philosophy as Cultural Politics.*

Rorty's pragmatist image of philosophy as "cultural politics" results from his search for the most appropriate character and goal of philosophy suitable for this period of human existence. Today's world is often seen as being on the razor's edge of capitalist globalization and many intellectuals call for a massive ideological renaissance to lead humankind to a more environmentally friendly and less consumerist approach to life that favours a more sustainable and humane world. Rorty, in contrast to this vision, thinks that when we compare the situation today with that of history, we are currently far from experiencing major ideological conflicts, which means that we no longer need philosophy as a unifying ideological power. Rorty believes that the unifying role of philosophy is needed only in times of crisis—when everything seems to be falling apart and people need a new vision to follow. He ascribes a similar role to philosophy as to that played by religion at the time of the Renaissance, and calls both of them "transitional genres". For the time being, he suggests that we should abandon our traditional view of philosophy as something that provides us

with the larger picture necessary for framing our metaphysical truths and instead perceive philosophy as "cultural politics".

Rorty offers his explanation of cultural politics as the most appropriate vision of philosophy for this diverse modern world against the background of three major historical conflicts about the nature of philosophy. The first conflict—between transcendentalist and materialist perceptions of the nature of reality, introduced by Plato under the name "the battle of the Gods and the giants"[1]—has had the least influence on Rorty's vision of philosophy, as he thinks that this conflict has become marginal within philosophical discussions about the nature of philosophy due to the popularity of materialistic philosophy among Western philosophers. He is more inspired by the other two quarrels over the character of philosophy introduced in Plato's dialogues, which are still present in philosophical debates today as the battle between philosophy and poetry, and the battle between "lovers of the Truth and sophists". According to Rorty, the "Plato versus Nietzsche quarrel" between philosophy and poetry persists in our current contemplations about the appropriate character of philosophy for the multicultural world in the form of a question—are people better off "when they use reason to discover how things really are, or when they use imagination to transform themselves"? (Rorty 2007, 74) In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato critically comments on the usefulness of poetry in comparison to rational philosophy by stating that "all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them." (Plato 2004) Plato's reason for regarding poetry as an inferior form of expression is that the poet "is someone who is by his nature third from king and truth" (Plato 2004, 598a) and therefore cannot provide us with the picture of the real state of things. Another reason Plato openly despises poetry is that it damages a well-ordered state due to its concern with "an inferior part of the soul, as it awakens, nourishes and strengthens the feelings, and impairs the reason" (Plato 2004). This perception of poetry/the arts found strong opposition in Nietzsche's philosophical writings, where he often defends the idea that the essence of things does not appear in the empirical world more than it surfaces in poetry, or in other forms of arts (Nietzsche 1956). Rorty's vision of philosophy as cultural politics does not fully correspond to any of the two extremist positions characteristic of this quarrel. He adopts the third option, claiming that both elements—reason and imagination—should be present in his vision of philosophy as cultural politics, because both reasonable consensus and inspiring novelty are needed for philosophy to be successful practised as cultural politics. Further in the text as well as in his other papers, it seems that Richard Rorty indeed prefers one of the elements to the other, saying that:

> The advantage that well-read, reflective, leisured people have when it comes to deciding about the right thing to do is that they are more imaginative, not that they are more rational. Their advantage lies in being aware of many possible practical identities, and not just one or two. Such people are able to put themselves in the shoes of many different sorts of people (Rorty 2007, 202).

[1] The Giants represent (also in today's philosophical context) materialist philosophers who attempt to explain everything in terms of the underlying material mechanism, the Gods represent people who maintain that real existence consists of certain ideas conceived by a mind which has no body (Plato 1984).

Nevertheless, the presence of reason in philosophy as cultural politics is necessary to protect our imagination from becoming just a pure fantasy, which might be full of novelty but practically inapplicable.

> If one is going to challenge an ongoing cultural practice, one must both explain what practice might be put in its place, and how this substitute will tie in with surrounding practices. That is why to turn a question over to cultural politics is not to turn it over to "unreason". Arguments within cultural politics are usually just as rational, though typically not as conclusive, as those within natural science (Rorty 2007, 20).

Even though in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Rorty does not explicitly give his description of a reason/rationality typical of cultural politics, it is apparent that instead of adopting the model of rationality typical for empirical science or analytical philosophy, he prefers the pragmatist model of rationality which is based on conversation and cooperation aimed at reaching democratic consensus. In order to make his opinion on the role of rationality in cultural politics clear, Rorty brings the third quarrel over the nature of philosophy into discussion. The conflict defined by Plato as a "battle between the lovers of the truth and the sophists" had split philosophers into two groups: those who defend "the love of truth" as the proper aim of philosophy and those who perceive the truth as being relative. Rorty, who calls himself a neo-sophist, considers Platonic love for the Truth to be an obsessive and dangerous idea to prevail in the contemporary world. He asserts that philosophy as cultural politics should not strive to be an authority in distinguishing reason from unreason, as "metaphysical questions like "does God exist?" and "is the spatiotemporal world real?" are undiscussable because there is no list of "neutral" canonical designators by reference to which they might be answered" (Rorty 2007, 20). In general, pragmatists defend the relativist opinion that the truthfulness of our metaphysical beliefs is highly dependent on our cultural background, which makes all the philosophical disputes between rationalists and empiricists, as well as between science and religion rather unimportant. Despite arguing over the proper answers to the most alarming questions facing our society they are not able to give us any practically relevant advice for figuring out "the right" universal way of coping with living in a multicultural society characterised by a pluralism of worldviews. Pragmatists disagree with Plato's vision that we should pursue one Truth, which is typical of all monotheistic religions as well as of the monistic perception of science. Rorty believes that the tendency to search for definite answers to questions as well as the "need to fit everything—every thing, person, event, idea, and poem—into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined, and unique" (Rorty 2007, 90) is caused by our fascination for "redemptive truth". It was probably this vision of redemptive truth,, understood as a finite set of beliefs answering all our questions with no need for further reflection, which inspired Rorty to say that "there is no such thing as love of TRUTH: "What has been called by that name is a mixture of the love of reaching intersubjective agreement, the love of gaining mastery over a recalcitrant set of data, the love of winning arguments, and the love of synthesizing little theories into big theories" (Rorty 2007, 35). Rorty identifies Plato's transcendental idealism as the primary source of philosophy's fascination for pursuing the ideal of redemptive truth and considers religion to be the successor of this Platonic tradition. However, as far as the most significant inspirations for philosophy

nowadays are concerned, Rorty thinks that the heritage of the search for redemptive truth has been relinquished to natural science. Science, which is based on the ambition to explain how things really are instead of limiting its efforts to merely providing hypotheses about how things work, is severely criticized by pragmatists; and so are the redemptive attempts of current philosophers who try to derive knowledge about humankind and human nature from the latest scientific discoveries. Rorty openly expresses his "doubts about the idea that natural science should serve as a model for the rest of high culture. Both are suspicious of what I shall call "universalistic grandeur"—the sort of grandeur attained by mathematics and mathematical physics" (Rorty 2007, 75). The most significant scientific inspiration for Rorty's vision of philosophy as cultural politics is found in the deglorifying visions of the authority of science brought to philosophy by Popper, Kuhn and further developed by Dewey. They all preferred philosophy and philosophers "to bourgeoisify themselves, to stop trying to rise to the spiritual level at which Plato and Nietzsche confront each other" (Rorty 2007, 79). Rorty therefore concludes that the proper role of philosophy with the character of cultural politics is not to search for redemptive answers to questions about the existence of God or human consciousness, but to transform them so that the question reads "what will help create a better world?" (Rorty 2007, 5) so that the problems and conflicts (scientific, moral or political, etc.) present in our everyday lives can be solved effectively. By stating that "the question of existence of immaterial and infinite beings is not one for transcendental philosophy but rather one for cultural politics" (Rorty 2007, 19), Richard Rorty expresses his opinion that we actually do not need any metaphysics in philosophy. According to him, it is enough if the primary aim of philosophy as cultural politics consists of nothing less or more than solving the practical problems of our current society by "suggesting changes in the uses of words and by putting new words in circulation—hoping thereby to break through impasses and to make conversation more fruitful" (Rorty 2007, 124). The importance of conversation and democratic consensus for the pragmatists' perception of philosophy lies in their conviction that today's highly diverse and multicultural world requires our acceptance of the idea of pluralism more than our efforts to unify various worldviews into one. In his opinion, a unifying and redemptive image of philosophy does not differ much from the one which religion used to evoke before the era of Renaissance. Redemptive truth pursued either by religion, science or by philosophy, is no longer needed in a pluralistic society as it is very exclusive and does not support a democratic dialogue among various cultures. Philosophy and religion as we previously perceived them are, according to Rorty, just so-called "transitional genres", which have served us as "stepping-stones, stages in a continuing process of maturation" (Rorty 2007, 95). According to what Rorty thinks, they have been losing their central position within current high culture due to the continual decline in the human need for redemptive truth and metaphysics, characteristic of modern high culture. The new genre to replace religion and philosophy in our current intellectual society is literary culture, which "is always in search of novelty, rather than trying to escape from the temporal to the eternal" (Rorty 2007, 94). Even though people who turn to religion or philosophy with the purpose of acquiring a specific ontology in order to gain easy-to-follow guidelines for a good life still exist, there are still more and more people who feel the need for pluralism and who do not fear to enter the process of achieving a democratic consensus. As Rorty says, "bookish youngsters in search of redemption nowadays look first to novels, plays, and poems"

(Rorty 2007, 94), which seems to suggest the creation of "a new sort of intellectual—one who does not take the availability of redemptive truth for granted, and is not much interested in whether either God or Truth exist" (Rorty 2007, 94). Rorty's fascination with literary culture stems from his admiration for the pluralism of literature, from his formerly expressed respect for the human capacity of imagination, as well as from his need to see the redemption of "the alternative ways of being human" (Rorty 2007, 93) come from humans rather than from some metaphysical beliefs. In his contemplation about the advantages of literary culture over those of previous philosophies or religions, Rorty repeatedly underlines the importance of its imaginative potential:

> For members of the literary culture, redemption is to be achieved by getting in touch with the present limits of the human imagination... It is a premise of this culture that though the imagination has present limits, these limits are capable of being extended forever (Rorty 2007, 94).

The aim of gaining objective or redemptive truth cannot be achieved by following the path of literary culture; however this is not to be perceived negatively as "progress of the literary imagination is not a matter of accumulating results" (Rorty 2007, 101).

The conclusions which can be drawn from Rorty's contemplations about the proper character of philosophy for the multicultural world of today are as follows: Rorty believes that the traditional role of philosophy which ascended with the fall of religion has now reached its limits. He definitely doubts that philosophy, relevant to our daily lives, should try to imitate the attempts of science and focus on deriving cumulative philosophical knowledge about humans, or other objects of philosophical interest. "The point of philosophy, on this view, is not to find out what anything is "really" like, but to help us grow up—to make us happier, freer, and more flexible. The maturation of our concepts, and the increasing richness of our conceptual repertoire, constitute cultural progress" (Rorty 2007, 124). The way to reach this overall goal of cultural progress and achieve a more flexible, happier development of humankind seems to be based on two suggestions that Rorty has for philosophy. Firstly, philosophy should withdraw from the scene of life-directing trend-setters and become an academic discipline called cultural politics; the role of which would lie in transforming confusing questions about our every-day real lives into questions which would make the philosophical conversations about them fruitful and lead to practical actions and policies. In order to make this possible, it is necessary to combine rationality with creativity and imagination. This is the crucial tool for assisting us in the problem-solving process which works by "redescribing the situation that gave rise to the various problems, finding a way of thinking about it that both sides might be able to live with" (Rorty 2007, 81). Rorty's second suggestion for philosophy is that it should lead the way to a new cultural form—literary culture, which has developed hand in hand with the emerging young generations living in a diverse multicultural world. Its advantage is that, instead of offering a unanimous Truth, it provides the reader with a variety of opinions and worldviews, which represent the pluralistic character of today's world better than any redemptive system (religion, philosophy or science) would ever do. What is more, literary culture entails us with freedom of choice and imposes on us neither one single correct way of perceiving things, nor any specific purposes. "We know what purposes scientific theories are supposed to serve. But we are not now, and never

will be, in a position to say what purposes novels, poems, and plays are supposed to serve. For such books continually redefine our purposes" (Rorty 2007, 101). It seems that in Rorty's image, literary culture shifts from the role of a "leader" to the role of a "facilitator" as it only helps us discover our way of living by giving us various options to choose from, accompanied by multiple opportunities to ameliorate our faculties of empathy and critical thinking. Further considering Rorty's suggestions for adjusting the character of philosophy in order to fit the needs of today's world, we might find ourselves a bit perplexed by the fact that in the course of contemplation about the proper character of philosophy, the notion of philosophy suddenly disappears. It is replaced by two brand new notions of cultural politics and literary culture, which appear less vague (and also more specific as far as the disciplines which they denote are concerned) than was the case with philosophy. Such clarification might help simplify the discussions about the roles and other questions concerning the new disciplines, which could qualify as an incidental practical demonstration of the main task of cultural politics as demonstrated by Rorty in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. The role of cultural politics, as defined by Rorty, seems to be a mixture of a Wittgensteinian vision of philosophy and a pragmatist one, which takes the goals of philosophy as cultural politics out of the sphere of metaphysics and sets them down to earth. The practical usage of such a version of philosophy is very tempting; however, the practical application of some of the tasks of cultural politics remains questionable. At one point, Rorty says that one of the competences of philosophy professors practicing cultural politics should be "suggesting changes in the uses of words and by putting new words in circulation—hoping thereby to break through impasses and to make conversation more fruitful" (Rorty 2007, 124). Initiating changes in our vocabulary and word usage is a philosophical activity which has recently provoked many discussions among analytical and social philosophers, philosophers of science, and others, about the possibilities and potential risks of influencing our vocabulary in this way. There are also concerns over the danger of abuse of power by the few philosophers in charge. Rorty's idea that literary culture should take over the position of philosophy in today's world also evokes many inspiring thoughts and questions. Even if it shows his preference of imagination over rationality in the every-day lives of humans, the fact that he defends the power and meaningfulness of imagination by means of using rational arguments inherently proves that Rorty appreciates above all a combination of rationality and imagination. This message seems beneficial not only for improving our problem-solving efforts in our personal lives, but also on the larger scale, when applied to intercultural dialogue. If it is to be successful, according to Rorty, we have to first admit that all our contemplations are embedded in our west-centred way of thinking. At the same time, it is necessary for us to try to reduce our rationalistic style of rhetoric as much as possible in order to approach other cultures more easily. Following Rorty's argumentation on this matter, it seems that we could make our Western culture more open and appropriate for an intercultural dialogue with other cultures by means of trusting more in our imagination and letting ourselves be inspired by the diversity of literary culture. However good and inspiring it sounds, in the end we always have to comment on the fact that Rorty's vision of the pluralistic world, inspired by literary culture and effectively guided by democratic intercultural dialogue, is not far from west-centric utopianism, and it also encompasses the potential danger of cultural relativism. Nevertheless, as Rorty says, in order to have a successful dialogue—even about the most proper character of philosophy in

a multicultural world, it is first important to realize the cultural limits of our way of thinking, and then to find the courage to imagine that each of the discussed matters could also be perceived differently.

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Department of Philosophy and History of Philosophy,
Faculty of Arts,
Comenius University
Gondova 2,
818 01 Bratislava,
Slovak Republic
E-mail: tanjacarova@yahoo.com