HUMAN AFFAIRS *17*, 71–77, 2007 10.2478/v10023-007-0007-8

RORTY AND NORMATIVITY

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The paper summarizes some of the main ideas in Rorty's philosophy and indicates the views he holds on normativity. As a neopragmatic thinker, Rorty wants as little normativity as possible, but this does not mean that he rejects all types of normativity.

Keywords: Rorty; pragmatism; normativity; ethics; philosophy.

Rorty's Philosophy in General

Each perspective of normativity is dependent on the whole of a particular philosophy. As is well-known, Richard Rorty was an analytic thinker and it was only later, in the 1970s, that he became a neopragmatic philosopher. In contrast to the traditional foundational philosophers, Rorty hailed first Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and later Derrida as the most important philosophers of the twentieth century.

Without embarking upon a thorough analysis of his philosophy, I would simply like to emphasize that Rorty struck out on his own and drew certain conclusions from his views. Of these conclusions, I emphasize only the five most important to my topic:

a) Pragmatism, according to Rorty, is an anti-essentialist, historicist constructivism. Since we create both language and truth about the world, we should be constantly interested in reconstructing language to make it more useful and rewarding and to make our experienced world more satisfying to our needs and desires. (Cf. Rorty 1989, Ch. 1., and Rorty 1990, xvi-xxxii, 31-39.)

b) As every pragmatist knows, Rorty is also a pan-relationist. He expounds in his article, "A World without Substances or Essences," (published in 1994) that the gap between the so-called 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophies shows few signs of being bridged, although the best works being done in these two traditions overlap to an important extent. The quickest way of expressing this commonality is to say that philosophers as diverse as William James and Friedrich Nietzsche, Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida, Hilary Putnam and Bruno Latour, John Dewey and Michael Foucault—and Richard Rorty, of course—are anti-dualists. They are trying to replace the world pictures constructed with the aid of

metaphysical dualisms inherited from the Greeks (essence and accident; substance and property; appearance and reality, etc.) with a picture of a flux of continually changing relations.

c) Rorty appropriates the standpoint and explains it as his own, stating that "everything is a social construction" and that "all awareness is a linguistic affair". Rorty (1999, 48) would like to convey the following:

> Both (theories—A. Kremer) are ways of saying that we shall never be able to step outside of language, never be able to grasp reality unmediated by a linguistic description. So both are ways of saying that we should be suspicious of the Greek distinction between appearance and reality, and that we should try to replace it with something like the distinction between 'less useful description of the world' and 'more useful description of the world'. To say that everything is a social construction is to say that our linguistic practices are so bound up with our other social practices that our descriptions of nature, as well as of ourselves, will always be a function of our social needs.

Once we have said that all our awareness is under a description, and that descriptions are functions of social needs, then 'nature' and 'reality' can only be names of something unknowable—something like Kant's 'Thing-in-Itself.' From all of this, however, Rorty draws not only the conclusion that it is hopeless to get behind appearance to the intrinsic nature of reality, but he also claims that there is no such thing as absolute intrinsic nature at all. The anti-essentialists, like Rorty, cannot even believe that human reason would be a special faculty for penetrating through appearances to reality. As he wrote: "We anti-essentialists, of course, do not believe that there is such a faculty. Since nothing has an intrinsic nature, neither do human beings." (*ibid.,* 63)

d) Inquire further as to Rorty's truth theory! From Rorty's above mentioned views, it follows that he represents a kind of nominalism which goes together with the denial of traditional representational epistemology, but he cannot be considered a solipsist philosopher. He does not deny the existence of the world:

> We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by describing activities of human beings—cannot (Rorty 1989, 4-5).

According to Rorty, truths, language, objects of inquiry, etc., are more made than found, that is, we create them in describing and re-describing ourselves, our

society. In his opinion, the correspondence theory of truth is untenable, for truth as proportional is given only in language. It is a kind of coherence theory of truth:

> We pragmatists, who have been impressed by Peirce's criticism of Descartes, think that both skeptics and foundationalists are led astray by the picture of beliefs as attempts to represent reality, and by the associated idea that truth is a matter of correspondence to reality. So we become coherentists. But we coherentists remain divided about what, if anything, needs to be said about truth. I think that, once one has explicated the distinction between justification and truth by that between present and future justifiability, there is little more to be said (Brandom 2004, 5).

e) Rorty, as a neo-pragmatic, ironic liberal thinker, does not of course emphasize the definitive role of the past, but rather the future and our creative activity. He claims that the human being is a finite and historical being, and everything is a timely, historical process in our world. These processes always have a continuous and discontinuous dimension, and only their proportion is different. Rorty knows well what makes continuity, he simply emphasizes the discontinuous moments of the historical process much more.

If we would like to summarize most of Rorty's views, perhaps the best way would be to use one of his short paragraphs from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that claims that the 'supporting-pillars' of our human existence, language, self and community are contingent in the sense that we do not rely on any absolute, metaphysical foundation:

> The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance (Rorty 1989, 22).

Rorty on Normativity

What does normativity mean? This concept is used in very different contexts. We can find texts that discuss normativity e.g. in moral, epistemological and even ontological contexts. (This is the case when, for example, a philosophical-theological article attempts to show the normative role of God.)

The most common interpretation of the normative may well be when we use it as an opposite of the descriptive. However, the descriptive/normative dichotomy is based on the fact/value distinction which comes from Hume's philosophy.

How does Rorty relate to this fact/value distinction? Not only James and Dewey (cf. e.g. Rorty 1999, 31), but also Rorty *ab ovo* rejects this distinction because it cannot be harmonized with his neopragmatic views on human life. Rorty already took this standpoint in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

> …from the viewpoints of Gadamer, Heidegger, and Sartre, the trouble with the fact-value distinction is that it is contrived precisely to blur the fact that alternative descriptions

are possible in addition to those offered by the results of normal inquiries.[1] It suggests that once "all the facts are in" nothing remains except "noncognitive" adoption of an attitude—a choice which is not rationally discussable. It disguises the fact that to use one set of true sentences to describe ourselves is already to choose an attitude toward ourselves, whereas to use another set of true sentences is to adopt a contrary attitude. Only if we assume that there is a value-free vocabulary which renders these sets of "factual"statements commensurable can the positivist distinction between facts and values, beliefs and attitudes, look plausible. But the philosophical fiction that such a vocabulary is on the tips of our tongues is, from an educational point of view, disastrous. It forces us to pretend that we can split ourselves up into knowers of true sentences on the one hand and choosers of lives or actions or works of art on the other. These artificial diremptions make it impossible to get the notion of edification into focus. Or, more exactly, they tempt us to think of edification as having nothing to do with the rational faculties which are employed in normal discourse (Rorty 1990, 363-364).

It clearly follows from this that Rorty uses a different vocabulary in which he tries to eliminate the fact/value distinction and therefore also the descriptive/normative dichotomy. I am persuaded that it can be justified not only by his arguments mentioned above in relation to this topic, but also by his moral views.

We can already guess from Rorty's above mentioned philosophical views that his ethics are also opposed to traditional ethics which require metaphysical foundation and/or claim universal obligations. For not only our moral philosophical, but also our everyday thinking is influenced strongly by these traditions, I undertake the almost impossible task of sketching Rorty's new but obviously not unprecedented ethics.[2]

Rorty rejects first of all the claim of foundation: he regards it as impossible from a rational point of view and as unnecessary from a moral point of view. It is impossible, because the absolute, metaphysical foundation—and Rorty clearly speaks of this standpoint—cannot be rationally justified, that is it can only be the result of confession, of a world-view decision, but as such it cannot be considered philosophy any more. It is unnecessary from a moral point of view, because it is true on the one hand that the absolute necessity of moral laws and obligations could be assured exclusively by a metaphysical foundation,[3] but on the other hand

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[1] See Heidegger's discussion of 'values' in *Being and Time*, p. 133, and Sartre's in *Being and Nothingness*, pt. two, chap. 1, sec. 4. Compare Gadamer's remarks on Weber (*Truth and Method*, pp. 461ff.).

[2] Rorty specifies his predecessors in different articles: the most important are J. Dewey, F. Nietzsche, L. Wittgenstein, M. Heidegger.

[3] It is clear I think that the relative, permanently changing social considerations and values can assure only a relative foundation of morals. (However, it seems to be enough for moral decisions and actions!) Exclusively an eternal, unchangeable, metaphysical transcendence (e. g. the Christian God) could give an absolute, metaphysical foundation, but according to Rorty—following on from his above mentioned philosophical views—we cannot justify any

we do not need it if we act in a concrete moral situation. In the fight against real suffering, cruelty and other moral injustice we simply need phronesis (prudence) and the moral traditions of our own social and/or intellectual community. Naturally, these traditions are also changing steadily for they are relative and contingent because of their historicity.

Rorty also rejects the universal obligation that is the universal form of moral normativity. He begins with the distinction between morality and prudence. Traditionally it means the opposition between unconditional, categorical obligations and conditional, hypothetical ones. However, pragmatists have doubts about the suggestion that anything is, or could be nonrelational. Rorty reinterprets these distinctions in ways which dispense with the notion of unconditionality. After his critique of Kant, Rorty (1999, 76) stated that

> moral obligation does not have a nature, or a source, different from tradition, habit and custom. Morality is simply a new and controversial custom.

The term "moral obligation" and therefore of course the term "moral normativity"

> become[s] increasingly less appropriate to the degree to which we identify with those whom we help: the degree to which we mention them when telling ourselves stories about who we are, the degree to which their story is also our story (*ibid.,* 79).

What does Rorty suggest instead of traditional ethics? He prefers the permanent reinterpretation that is the re-description of our moral situations, because in this way we can regularly update and correct our moral views. Such an interpretation of morals also results in a new description of moral progress:

> Pragmatists think of moral progress as more like sewing together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt, than like getting a clearer vision of something true and deep. (…) Convinced that there is no subtle human essence which philosophy might grasp, they do not try to replace superficiality with depth, nor to rise above the particular in order to grasp the universal. Rather, they hope to minimize one difference at a time—the difference between Christians and Muslims in a particular village in Bosnia, the difference between blacks and whites in a particular town in Alabama, the difference between gays and straights in a particular Catholic congregation in Quebec. The hope is to sew such groups together with a thousand little stitches—to invoke a thousand little commonalities between their members, rather than specify one great big one, their common humanity (*ibid.*, 86-87).

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superhistorical, nonrelational, unchangeable metaphysical entity. Furthermore, Rorty rejects the idea of *foundation* at all, because in his opinion it is impossible to achieve a noncircular argumentation in this case. See e.g. Rorty (1999, 10), and also my earlier article regarding the impossibility of the absolute foundation of morals (Kremer "What is the Origin of Obligation?", Human Affairs Vol. 13, 2003.)

Last but not least, I have to mention here one of the confessed social aims of Rorty's moral philosophy explicated in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. He tries to promote the realization of a truly liberal democratic society:

> One of my aims in this book is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal. A postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable (Rorty 1989, xv-xvi).

He has sketched here the characteristics of the liberal ironist. In Rorty's interpretation, liberals are the people "who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do", and an ironist is the sort of person "who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires" (*ibid.*, xv). For liberal ironists there are no eternal, unchangeable, supernatural and superhistorical essences, and nothing has an eternal, unchangeable, metaphysical intrinsic nature. As we have seen, for liberal ironists the main pillars of our life are also contingent: our language, self and community. However, we have to keep in mind that nihilism of total relativism does not follow from these contingencies! Rorty emphasizes namely that the

> fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance (*ibid.,* 189).

It is as clear as day that according to Rorty there are neither absolute values nor absolute normativity. It is worth discussing only relative normativity, because our existential world is constituted only by our private and social life. Life, however, can be regarded essentially as practice, for pragmatists—both old and new—say that theory is also practice. Although the effects of the past and the present influence practice, it can never be determined absolutely. We humans are always able to re-describe our world in different ways, and it follows from this that only the future's possibilities are open to us. We can change our world and we can make it better exclusively by practice focused on the possibilities of the future. Hence, only the future can be really normative for a pragmatist.

How do we meet the future in practice? It is manifested in the practice, in our actions and conduct as an aim, for the aim is nothing other than a plan of the future. After positing the aim it will determine the choice of the means and even the implementation of our plan. That is why and to this extent we can discuss normativity of purposes in Rorty's work, but it is obviously a relative normativity. Normativity of purposes and the values drawn from them prevail only within a vocabulary, a language-game, and they survive only if the new vocabulary, language-game also builds this normativity, usually after transformation, into its own texture.

Rorty's considerations on *solidarity* can be considered one of the clear justifications of his views about the normativity of the future. By denying the eternal, superhistorical, intrinsic essences and nature, Rorty must also reject the traditional form of solidarity. We have to keep in mind however, that aversion to historically

developed and perhaps provisional forms of solidarity does not mean that he should reject solidarity in general. Rorty does not see the basis of solidarity in previously hidden depths or an eternal, unchangeable essential humanity but, rather:

> as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people (*ibid.,* xvi).

Rorty intentionally wants to distinguish human solidarity as the identification with "humanity as such" and as the self-doubt which has gradually been inculcated into inhabitants of the democratic states. It is a

> doubt about their own sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives. The identification seems to me impossible—a philosopher's invention, an awkward attempt to secularize the idea of becoming one with God (*ibid.,* 198).

In contrast with this identification, the permanent enlargment of our "we-intentions" is possible on the basis of this self-doubt. According to Rorty's view we can speak of moral progress in this sense, and this progress indeed goes in the direction of greater human solidarity (cf. Rorty 1989, 192).

In summarizing my view, I can say that Rorty does not discuss normativity in the traditional Platonic sense. Normativity can only be a human phenomenon. Rorty gives special meaning to "normativity", when he speaks of the determining role of our purposes within the actual vocabulary. In the present, Rorty wants to have as little normativity as possible, because the more normativity we establish, the less freedom we have. For Rorty, normativity does not mean anything in itself, it is simply a tool for realizing richer freedom in the future.

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