

## RORTY'S NEOPRAGMATISM AND THE IMPERATIVE OF THE DISCOURSE OF AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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**Abstract:** Pragmatism, as a philosophical movement, was a dominant orientation in the Anglo-American philosophical circles in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Pragmatism, as expressed by its classical advocates, namely, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey, emphasized the primacy of practice or action over speculative thought and a priori reasoning. The central thesis of pragmatism (though there exist other variants) is the belief that the meaning of an idea or a proposition lies in its "observable practical consequences". And as a theory of truth, it diverges from the correspondence and coherence theories which see truth in terms of correspondence of a proposition to facts and coherence of propositions to other propositions within the web respectively, but instead contends that "truth is to be found in the process of verification". In other words, pragmatists would emphasize the practical utility or "cash value", as it were, of knowledge and ideas as instruments for understanding reality. Neopragmatism is used to refer to some contemporary thinkers whose views incorporate in a significant way, though with minor differences bordering on methodology and conceptual analysis, the insights of the classical pragmatists. Our intention in this paper is to explore Rorty's neopragmatism, particularly his critique of analytic philosophy and then argue that his views have potential for the establishment of African epistemology as an emerging discourse within the African philosophical tradition.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism; philosophy; culture; development; African epistemology.

### Philosophy as Mirror

Richard Rorty has caused some thing like a stir in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition since the Publication of his classic book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In fact, some scholars would prefer to call Rorty an "academic rebel", apparently because of his expressed intention to deconstruct and dismantle the self-image wound around philosophy as the cultural overseer which vets the presuppositions of other areas of inquiry. This perception seems justified judging by the opening sentence in the book in question. According to Rorty (1979, 7)

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 to be a theory and which has foundations and in philosophy as it has been conceived since Kant.

With this expressed intention, Rorty made quick excursion into the history of the constitution of philosophy as epistemologically centred and as mirror picturing reality.

In a chapter entitled, "The invention of the mind", Rorty discusses how certain perennial problems in philosophy like the distinction between mind and body, sensation and thought and

the general problem of consciousness were introduced into modern philosophy by Descartes, though the Greeks were not totally oblivious of the problem since Plato once talked of the optical metaphor of an eye of the mind in an apparent attempt to explain our knowledge of universals and eternal truths. Rorty extends the discussion to Part Two which chronicles the development of the modern notion of a “theory of knowledge” where Descartes’ invention of the mind as a mirror held up to nature and truth as the achievement of accurate representations is seen as an extension of Plato’s doctrine of knowledge as inner representation of outer reality. The import of this section is to show the historical root of the epistemological problem of privileged access, incorrigible knowledge which is the fount and origin of foundational epistemology.

### **Philosophy as Epistemology-Centred**

Rorty seems to concentrate effort on modern philosophy because it was the period which witnessed the inauguration of philosophy as a foundational discipline by the trio-Descartes, Locke and Kant. While Descartes introduced the notion of the mind as inner representation, Locke committed a critical blunder when he confused explanation with justification and Kant professionalized philosophy in an attempt to reconcile the tension between rationalism (Cartesian inner space of reason) and empiricism (Lockean Sensualism). The intention of Kant is presented by C.I. Lewis (1956, 38) thus

There are in our cognitive experiences two elements, the immediate data such as those of sense, which are presented or given to the mind, and a form, construction, or interpretation which represents the activity of thought.

Now following Kant’s view of philosophy as an institutionalized authority, the impression is created that the task of philosophers is to investigate the foundations of other disciplines including the sciences, arts, culture and morality. Again, philosophy is erected as the “Queen of the sciences” sitting in judgment and assessing the presuppositions of these areas of inquiry. (Jaegwon Kim 1980, 390). On this Rorty says

He (Kant) thus enabled philosophy Professors to see themselves as presiding over a tribunal of pure reason, able to determine whether other disciplines were staying within the legal limits set by the structure of their subject matters (Rorty 1979, 139).

Modern philosophy as characterized by the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition in both its analytic and continental forms share the view of philosophy as a foundational discipline as hinted above. Rorty (*ibid.*, 3) summarizes this view (which he sets out to dismantle and deconstruct) as

Philosophy can be foundational with respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge and philosophy adjudicates such claims ... Philosophy’s central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent less well and those which do not represent it at all.

According to Rorty, what is unique about this conception of philosophy is that it presupposes that there is out there a reality which is totally independent of us and that it is our business to gain knowledge of what reality is like in itself. However, he argues that philosophy

is ill-equipped to perform this function and saying that there is no non-trivial question of any privileged representations corresponding or failure to correspond to reality, (cf. Devitt 1984, 203) since we cannot move outside our minds in order to gain access to an independent objective knowledge of reality. For Rorty therefore, the way the world (reality) is, is in the final analysis a function of the community to which one belongs and the way the language that one has learned tends to configure that world (cf. Machan 1996, 423).

No doubt, Rorty may have arrived at this less optimistic view of philosophy after reading Quine and Wilfrid Sellars, as well as some post-empiricist philosophers of science. Rorty learnt from Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" that the analytic-synthetic distinction which Immanuel Kant has accepted as unquestionably deep-rooted in our experiences is misguided. Quine denies the cleavage arguing that our assertions cannot be legitimated by any appeal to sentence meanings that are analytic. Rather such legitimacy or justification is possible because of the stimulus response to which all members of the community assent to most of the time (Quine 1953, 20-46). Also Quine dismisses as dubious the view which takes analytic propositions and even science as well as the laws of logic as irrefutable, well-confirmed and as such immune to revision. He argues that there are no propositions which are immune to revised in response to recalcitrant experience. On this Quine says

For all it's a priori reasonableness a boundary between analytic and synthetic statements simply has not been drawn. That there is such a distinction to be drawn at all is an unempirical dogma of empiricism, a metaphysical article of faith (*ibid.*, 37).

Similarly Rorty seems to learn from Sellars's (1963, 164) attack on the "Myth of the Given" which, like the one considered above, is the view that certain beliefs within foundationalist epistemology are non-inferential self-authenticating and serves, as it were, as the ultimate court of appeal for other beliefs. Since Sellars has a holistic conception as mistaken the view that some facts are given and which are based on some pre-linguistic entities like "I am in pain". He contends that

Knowledge begins with the ability to justify and since language is public and inter-subjective, all "given" elements which purportedly ground knowledge are simply a part of our over-all social practice (cf. Pompa 1981, 364).

Another remarkable influence on Rorty are the insights of the post-empiricist philosophers of science from who we are informed that the traditional or standard view of science as the only paradigmatic mode of rationality is misguided, since there are other forms of knowledge. This group, it seems, is united in saying that a people's beliefs and status of such beliefs can only be judged rational within the totality of the society's culture, since other forms of knowledge and belief have their truth-value embedded within the context of the society from which they spring (Kuhn 1970; Feyerabend 1975; Hesse 1980).

Even though Rorty accuses Quine, Sellars and others for not been sufficiently radical in their critique of the dominant image of philosophy, knowledge and science, he nonetheless expresses optimism that, their views culminated in the eventual collapse of the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian Legacy of epistemology and thereby opens an alternative way of perceiving knowledge (Bernstein 1986, 36). On this Rorty says

When Sellars' and Quine's doctrines are purified they appear as complementary expressions of a single claim, that no account of the nature of knowledge can rely on a theory of representation

which stand in privileged relations to reality. The work of these two philosophers enables us... to make clear why an account of the nature of knowledge can be, at most, a description of human behaviour (Rorty 1979, 182).

Following from these remarks, Rorty's intention has become obvious which is a rejection of the dominant conception of philosophy as a cultural overseer and science as the paradigm of rationality.

### **Pragmatism and Social Consensus**

From Rorty's reading of the views of the classical pragmatists, particularly William James, he imbibed the view that "truth is nothing but what is warrantably assertible by us", and from Quine and Sellars, he adopted the holism with which they conceive justification which simply suggests that rather than viewing justification as a matter of some relation between words and objects, it is better seen as a matter of social practice... Again Rorty's acceptance of a holistic approach to justification yielded what he calls epistemological behaviourism". According to Rorty, epistemological behaviourism presupposes that certain epistemological notions like certainty, incorrigibility, truth, knowledge, justification are to be explained in terms of "certain ways in which human beings interact or what society lets us say". As he puts it

Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call 'epistemological behaviourism', an attitude common to Dewey and Wittgenstein. This sort of behaviourism can best be seen as a species of holism-but one which requires no idealist metaphysical underpinnings. It claims that if we understand the rules of a language-game, we understand all that there is to understand about why the moves in that language-games are made... (Rorty 1979, 174).

There is a temptation here to think that Rorty is accepting with one hand what he is denying with his adoption of holism and epistemological behaviourism which appear to be successor to traditional or mainstream epistemology. However he quickly clarifies his position by saying that epistemological behaviourism does not pretend to be a successor' to epistemology, but rather attempts to show that the traditional questions about what beliefs we are entitled to entertain or about the justificatory status of our reports can be understood in terms of the status of our reports in social-institutional contexts (Kraut 1990, 170). What emerges from Rorty's holistic, anti-foundationalist and pragmatist view is that matters of justification and rationality can be understood within the context of the community in which they are made. In other words, the community is the source of all epistemic authority (Rorty 1979, 188), since he argues that there is no Archimedean point from which to determine the rationality of a belief (cf. Banes, Bloor 1982, 21-47). It is worth stating that Rorty's Pragmatism, which is anti-essentialist, boils down to the unsalutary view that there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is. That is to say that there is nothing philosophically interesting to say about truth, knowledge or reality (Rorty 1982, 162-165).

Rorty does not deny reality, truth and knowledge, but rather the status of objectivity and universality ascribed to them is rejected. This is true of what he says, for "the pragmatist, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible...." (Rorty 1985, 5).

The rejection of the status of a cultural overseer accorded philosophy should not be constructed as an expression of doubts or reservations on the argumentative competence or

skill of philosophers. Indeed, Rorty acknowledges this argumentative ability, but claims that such does not set them apart from others nor gives them any special or privileged knowledge of superconcepts. What their argumentative skills accord them is akin to what any good lawyer does, namely to make its client's position appear the better (cf. Nielsen 1986, 25).

Now the import of Rorty's position is not because he is saying something essentially novel, but because his ideas or suspicion of philosophy seems to give other disciplines and forms of life a chance to express their voice in the on-going conversation of mankind. Some critics of Rorty have challenged him to be a relativist. Prominent among his critics is Hilary Putnam (1983, 229) who preferred to call him a cultural relativist. But it is presumptuous to claim that Rorty's position leads to relativism understood in the ordinary or popular sense as suggesting that "every belief is as good as every other" (Rorty 1991, 23; Rorty 1993, 444). There is a bit of irony here because Putnam is guilty of what he is accusing Rorty, since he (Putnam) claims in his book *Realism with a Human Face* that we should accept the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values (Putnam 1990, 178). Besides, Rorty has clarified his position on relativism when he says: "Relativism is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic is as good as every other. No one holds this view..." (Rorty 1980, 727-728).

Rorty does not reject justification and rationality as concepts, but rather that justification is contingent, and again "there are no context-independent criteria of rationality".

## Discourse of African Epistemology

If we tie together the thread of our argument here, it will amount to saying with Rorty that there are no trans-cultural or context-independent criteria of knowledge and rationality. Rather knowledge, truth, rationality, justification etc. is a matter of social practice. Now if the community is the source of epistemic authority and rationality, as Rorty has submitted, then, it makes sense to talk of African epistemology because Africans have their own way of conceptualizing events or reality. Again Africans have their own view of what life is which essentially is rooted in their cultural and personal view of the world.

Our position here reinforce with the views of some African philosophers, (ethno-philosophers) namely, Senghor (1965), Onyewuenyi (1976, 521), Anyanwu (1983, 73) who have argued for a methodology of African philosophy and epistemology which is anchored on the cultures and tradition of Africans. For the protagonists of African epistemology, the dichotomy or lacuna that is said to exist between the epistemic subject and the object in the Western philosophy is absent in African thought. In fact there is some kind of interdependence and interpenetration of the self (man) and the external world, such that what happens to the one, happens to the other. This point is stated by Anyanwu (1983, 60) thus the "self vivifies or animates the world or mind so that the soul, spirits or mind of the self is also that of the world. The order of the world and that of the self are identical. What happens to the world happens to the self."

According to Anyanwu the relation is not accidental, since in African culture, there is no sharp distinction between the subject and object. He argues, instead, that within the African cultural or historical situation, the self is the centre of the world and hence every experience and reality are personal experience unlike the impersonal and scientific experience of the West. The kind of personal experience which Anyanwu alludes to here transcends reason, imagination, feeling and intuition in the sense in which Descartes used them as sources of knowledge. However, African epistemology, according to him, embraces all experiences derivable from

different sources of knowledge namely; sense perception, imagination, intuition, reason, among others. The inability of Anyanwu to separate or categorize experience with reference to the source of knowledge even when the subject and the object remain the same exposes him to attack (Roy 1986, 87). But the anticipated problem is ameliorated since Anyanwu holds a holistic view of knowledge which presupposes a unity of experience and in tune with African cultural assumption where “reality depends on personal experience and the world has meaning, order and unity by virtue of the living experience of the ego” (Anyanwu 1983, 60).

Onyewuonyi, another advocate of African epistemology, claims that knowledge in Africa is not different from African metaphysics or ontology. In other words, to say that a person has knowledge in Africa does not necessarily imply how many books he has read nor how many college degrees he has acquired, but essentially how he understands the nature and ontological balance of forces. Hence Onyewuonyi (1976, 525) defines African theory of knowledge (epistemology) as “how deeply he (the African) understands the nature of forces and their interaction”. In our analysis of the views of those who argue for an African epistemology, one thing is common and that is that in African knowledge system, there is some kind of symbiotic relationship between the subject and the object. In other words, the advocates of African epistemology believe in epistemological monism.

The notion of epistemological monism implicit in the views of the protagonists of African epistemology might create the impression that the African cannot draw a line between himself and other objects in the external world. But on the contrary, the African knows that there is a distinction between him and other objects like trees, mountains, stones and wood. On this point, Anyanwu says

Because everything is a vital force or shares in this force, the African feels and thinks that all things are similar, share the same qualities and nature. (But) it does not mean that the African does not know the distinction between a tree and a goat, a bird and a man (Ruch, Anyanwu 1981, 90).

Some professional African philosophers, namely, Kwasi Wiredu (1980, 132), Hountondji (1983, 72), Bodunrin (1981a, 173; 1981b, 178) who seem to hold a universalist conception of philosophy and rationality argue for the adoption and deployment of the critical edge of science and technology to the understanding of African proverbs, folktales, oral tradition with a view to sifting out the philosophical contents in them. But our professional African philosophers are mistaken in their adoption of criteria of rationality developed elsewhere in assessing the cultural matrix of other societies. It is an illusion to think that rationality has any foundation in terms of universal criteria. Their universalist conception of philosophy as a rational and critical reflection seems to land them in an erroneous impression that philosophy is an activity that can set up a theory or standard of rationality that is permanent, culture-transcendent, and an impartial matrix that can adjudicate between different cultures by assessing what is rational or irrational in this or that culture (Irele 1994, 88).

Since the discourse of African epistemology is couched within the contours of ethno-philosophy, it is expected that Kwame Anthony Appiah would express the same reservations he has for it. That is the possibility of an African epistemology in the face of many distinct cultures and languages of Africa. Again for it to be a genuine philosophical discourse, it should be receptive to the Anglo-American analytical philosophy with its emphasis on criticism, systemization, rational inquiry etc. In fact the message, I believe, in Appiah’s classic work, *In My Father’s House* (1992) is that any philosophical work in contemporary Africa has the

potential to interpret the word from a specific view point, yet its import or significance lies in how such contextual approach constitutes answers to universal human problems.

## Conclusion

Let us conclude by saying that our African analytic philosophers who seem to think that modernization and development of Africa requires that Africans must alienate from their cultural heritage are mistaken since they seem to be oblivious of the centrality of culture and people in development. This point is summarized by Ade Ajayi (1990, 2) a renowned historian, when he says

The past is not only the time of our youth as individuals or as communities which we outgrow and leave behind in our march towards greater maturity or progress and development. Rather it is our origin which defines the essence of our being which can be modified under the impact of various influences but which remains part of our being and which we cannot outgrow or leave behind.

Our African analytic philosophers seem to agree with the modernization theories in development studies where development is thought of as a diffusion of western model and its constitutive elements such as science, technology, institutions and values from the metro poles to the developing (Third World) and backward countries (Bennaars 1993, 93).

Again this group of African philosophers seems to be unmindful of the factor of man in development. For as Julius Nyerere (1967, 1979) submitted, in his linkage of education and development with emphasis on self-reliance, that development is a human phenomenon. By this he means that development is not a mechanical process, determined by external forces (Western), rather it is a human enterprise controlled by man himself. An approach to development similar to Nyerere's is elaborated by Draaisma (1987, 10) when he says

Development is a liberating process defined by the community concerned and aimed at distributive justice and economic growth and at self-reliance, both individual and collective, in important societal spheres (political, economic, cultural etc.) through the participation of the members of that community...

Based on our discussion so far, using Rorty's anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist and pragmatist view of justification, knowledge, truth, rationality etc. as our anchor sheet, we submit that there is an escalation of horizons for other discourses to sprout—one of which is African epistemology. The position of the universalist African philosophers is unilluminating because of their demonstrable lack of appreciation of the philosophical import of oral tradition and culture in African's quest for development. Again they are accused, especially by Maurice Makumba (2007, 124) of propagating an elitist philosophy by their insistence on the application of the rigorous method in African philosophy—a method which smacks of western scientific method.

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