

TOWARDS RORTY'S ACCOUNT OF PHILOSOPHY AS A REDESCRIPTION

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Richard Rorty called by David Hall a prophet and a poet of neo-pragmatism is probably the most famous and popular American intellectual in Slovak academic intellectual life.¹ However, I am not sure where we should look for the roots of his popularity; whether it is a reaction to his ideas such as liberal utopia, romantic polyetism, rejection of truth, ethnocentrism, emphasis on solidarity rather than on objectivity of knowledge. Or whether the attraction of Rorty's ideas is related to his style of writing, irony, self-description as a postmodern bourgeois liberal, although that this self-description was supposed to be a joke? Of course, his influence in many fields like social and political theory, literary theory, and theory of historiography is obvious, and I am not going to argue against this. Nevertheless, I take the liberty to state that Rorty's fame is not a reaction to pragmatism² as a vital source in contemporary thought, because American pragmatism is among Slovak scholars a quite unknown subject and nobody was explicitly steeped in pragmatic tradition. Marxist philosophy as such in so-called communist countries tended to be hostile to American pragmatism. Anyway, a question about Rorty's fame in Slovak academic life is a very interesting topic.

Among Rorty's followers and interpreters of Slovak academics I have to mention mainly L. Habova, thanks to her translation of the path-breaking work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (2000). Further connoisseurs and interpreters of Rorty are E. Višnovský, F. Mihina, E. Gál, P. Michalovič and others. Rorty's work that came to definite end in 2007 has been also the subject of several master and

¹ Today pragmatism is treated as an important bridge between European social thought and American pragmatism with its commitment with American theory of democracy. See e.g. *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 7, No 3, August 2004, p. 287.

² Yet in 1998 the first publication under title *Malá antológia filozofie 20. storočia* (*Short Antology of the 20th Century Philosophy*) with translations from publications by Ch. S. Pierce, W. James, J. Dewey and R. Rorty has been published in publishing house IRIS. Editors and interpreters were F. Mihina and E. Višnovský, who wrote comprehensive preface and introduction.

doctoral theses. It seems to me a bit odd that contrary to Czech and Polish languages in particular, the most important works of philosophy, e.g. those by Leibniz, Descartes, Hegel, Hume, are still missing in Slovak translations despite the hitherto underestimated edition *Filozoficke odkazy (Philosophical Heritages)* and *Antologia z diel filozofov, (Antology from Philosophers' Works)*, Rorty's publications have been extensively interpreted and reviewed. For example the publishing house Kalligram has published *Philosophical Orchides, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in the 90s, the publishing house *Archa* published three relevant essays, the journal *Kritika and Kontext* published several papers and interviews with Rorty and significant articles by Rorty appeared in Czech language, too. Rorty himself visited Bratislava twice, in 1993 and recently in 1996. So, why has Rorty sparked this remarkable interest among Slovak scholars who mostly have not been aware of the genealogy of American pragmatism?

It seems to me that the popularity of Rorty's thoughts in Central Europe and fast spreading of them has something to do with the hidden heritage of Marxism, despite the fact that Rorty, who declares himself a socialist, dislikes Marxist philosophy. He states e.g. the following: "...Marxism always struck me as a perfectly reasonable criticism of capitalism, imbued with a lot of philosophy. However, compared to Hegel and Heidegger, Marx seemed to me third rate. Marx was good for economics" (*Kritika and Kontext*, No. 34, 2007, p. 19). In my view his attitude to Marx is unjust just like that of Popper towards Hegel. If we take into account some aspects of the Marxist philosophy, Rorty's echo in Central Europe can be understood much better.³ So I cannot help feeling that his popularity is connected with some features of Marxist philosophy (e.g. antimetaphysical approach, naturalism, Darwinist evolutionism, historicism, virtue of activism) because Marxist philosophy was trying willy-nilly to become both a universal interpretation of the world as well as a foundation for all scientific disciplines. Adopting Rorty in our context has been underpinned by attributes of Marxist philosophy as such: its naturalism, mixed with historical relativism, embodied by a knowledge in socio-cultural context, stressing upon interests in production of knowledge, a notion of science as a guide to action and the orientaton toward the rejection of traditional moral authority in favour of a praxis.

³ Despite Rorty's negative attitude to Marxist philosophy Dewey recognized the close relationship between pragmatism and Marxism. See B. Turner. *Democracy in One Country? Reflections on Patriotism, Politics and Pragmatism*. In: *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 7, No 3, August 2004, p. 287.

These features of Marxism played their role in the assimilation of Rorty's ideas like behaviourism regarding nature of knowledge, anti-foundationalism, anti-representationalism, anti-essentialism. On the other hand, Rorty's view on history of philosophy differs radically from the Marxist one and from the continental tradition, while Rorty rejects any theory at all, and Marxist philosophy possesses also a theory of history. After the collapse of communism and its ideology, a free empty space was ready for establishing Rorty's view according to which philosophy has only one voice in conversation of mankind and as he claims: „... which ever happens, however, there is no danger of philosophy coming to an end..... The only point on which I would insist is that philosopher's moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than its insisting upon a place for tradition of modern philosophy within that conversation“ (*Philosophy and Mirror of Nature*, p. 394).⁴

In what follows I will focus only on two issues: on his criticism of representation and an idea of post-philosophical culture in order to examine the viability of Rorty's ideas facing today's philosophy. It is a matter of fact that Rorty's philosophical neopragmatist position is closely related to his political attitude and political outlook. However, it is questionable whether he really has developed feasible and effective conceptual tools for solution to problems which he is actually interested in.

For roughly the first three-quarter of the 20th century problems posed by representationalist theories of knowledge amounted to problems of linguistic representation; during the last quarter they shifted back to the problems of mental representations. Otherwise the image of knowledge as a mirror of nature was persisting. (See Ch. S. Peirce metaphor on knowledge like mirror.) According to Rorty, knowledge cannot be mediated by any metaphysic entity and there is no connection between Cartesian consciousness and the theory of mental phenomena that have only a quality to appear before the consciousness. With regard to this we have to note that Rorty holds a view of eliminative theory of mind and later on he adapted connectionism á la D. Dennett. If we abandon metaphor of mind as a mirror, we leave aside also mind and body dualism including mind and language distinction. Therefore, an objection against Rorty as anti-realist is not correct as he rejects mind and body problem as such. This problem is completely meaningless. Rorty claims

⁴ The metaphor on conversation by Rorty has been borrowed from M. Oakeshott's *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*.

that opinion on mind as a mirror and posted mental phenomena have resulted from interchange of questions about the origin of knowledge, how we obtain knowledge, with the question on justification of knowledge.

This rejection of the representationalist model of mind and language becomes fundamental in Rorty's writings and reflects his identification with the tradition of pragmatism. Going back to his *Philosophy and Mirror of Nature* Rorty's reliance on John Dewey did not become apparent, but since the publication *Consequences of Pragmatism* 1982, Dewey's pragmatism is acknowledged by Rorty himself as a source for his antifoundationalism. Non foundational and non representational aspects of his pragmatism are related also to Davidson's critique of conceptual scheme. Rorty's attack against representationalism depends on Davidson's rejection of facts and conceptual schemes. „By undermining the scheme content distinction, Davidson made it all but impossible to formulate many traditional philosophical problems.” It is a virtue of Davidson's work, says Rorty that it shows us „how to give up truth makers and representations“ (R. Rorty, "Twenty-Five Years After", in *The Linguistic Turn*, 2nd edition, ed. R. Rorty. London: Hackett, 1992, pp. 371-374).

However, as S. Neale shows in his book *Facing Facts*, Rorty pushes Davidson scheme content distinction to its limit and while putting it into the framework of tradition from Heidegger, Dewey, Quine, and Sellars to Wittgenstein who reject reciprocal relations of making true and representing, that are central to the so-called representationalism. “If one gives up thinking that there are representations, then one will have little interest in the relation between mind and world, or language, or world. So one will lack interest in the old disputes between either realists and idealists or the contemporary quarrels within analytic philosophy about realism and anti-realism. For the latter quarrels presuppose that bits of the world make sentences true, and that these sentences in turn represent those bits. Without these presuppositions, we would not be interested in trying to distinguish between those true sentences which correspond to „facts of matter“, and those which do not (the distinction around which the realists- vs. anti-realist controversies revolve)” (*Twenty five Years After in Lingusitic Turn*, 2nd edition, London, Hackett, 1992, p. 372).

The idea that there are two cleanly distinguishable components in knowledge, the factual element given to consciousness and the constructive elements contributed by mind or latter by language, Sellars attacks the myth of the given and Quine's scepticism about the language fact distinctionism constitutes decisive rejection of this

indispensable idea. It is in the light of Wittgenstein's approach to language through the notion of use rather than that of picturing, the idea that language is in correspondence with reality has come to seem increasingly dubious. Rorty's conclusion from criticism of representationalism seems more radical. Once we accept that we have to give up representations, we realize that the standard problems of philosophy can be eliminated and traditional problems disappear with disappearance of representations of reality. If the word representation is out, philosopher must find another business to deal with. „If there are no representations, a good deal of work that passes for serious research in philosophy, in cognitive psychology, in linguistics, and even in philosophical logic is going to be worthless“ (S. Neale, *Facing Facts*, Oxford 2001, p. 7). Neale's diagnosis is to my mind appropriate when he states: “Rorty is surely right that most philosophical problems will not be dissolved by a criticism of language. But this is where he blunders. It is quite wrong to conclude from this that a careful (and perhaps formal) examination of sectors of our language will not be philosophically fruitful, for it is by such examination that a great deal of nonsense is exposed“ (S. Neale, *Facing Facts*, Oxford 2001, p. 7). Work which has been done respectively on logical and semantic issues concerning the nature of compositionality, extensionality, inference principles, and the semantic of definite descriptions and class abstracts and so on are not corresponding with Rorty's view on philosophy of language that did not provide us with any useful thought worth of discussion according to him.

Of course Rorty's statement, that there are links between language and the rest of the world, but these links are causal, not epistemological is a plausible hypothesis, and also his view that we, our body and language, are shaped by our environment can be on the one hand adopted. On the other hand what is rather an inpalusible route is his approach to truth that is neither a criterion for correcting our beliefs nor an explanatory property explaining why we have the beliefs we have or regarding some beliefs justified and other beliefs unjustified. What we are justified in believing taking for true comes to forging what for a time is the widest and most coherent pattern of beliefs we can muster. But there are no basic beliefs which all the rest of our knowledge and justified beliefs are based on. Neither philosophy nor science can deliver such beliefs. So far so good and with regard to this there is a parallel between Rorty and J. F. Lyotard who also claims (e.g. in *Postmodern Condition*) that there are no final “grand narratives.” This parallel made possible to

designate Rorty as a postmodern philosopher however he did not develop his neopragmatist position directly from postmodern thought, but from Dewey, and James, and along with that at the same time he is heavily influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger in many aspects. However we should be aware that Rorty rejects the whole legacy of Kantian tradition and heritage of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason, subjectivity and rationalism. Pragmatist like Rorty is probably right to argue that there is no “ahistorical metavocabulary in terms of which to formulate algorithmus for theory choice” (Rorty *Philosophical Papers*, Vol.1: Objectivity, Relativism and Truth. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 67-69), but when he suggests that we have to abandon theory altogether he is plainly wrong.

One could argue, in the spirit of Rorty, that the idea of philosophy as a basis of culture must be abandoned. This radical repudiation of philosophy based on Kantian ideal (as his epistemology is a core of philosophy) means also an escape from so-called traditional binary opposites like true-false, objective-subjective, original-derivative, unified-diverse, and so on. Under the influence of Heidegger and Wittgenstein Rorty insists that we have come to believe that a general search for any sorts of foundations - epistemological, ontological - is misguided. His anti-representationalism, by which he means an account „which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality“ (*Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. Cambridge, 1991, p. 1), plays an important role in the whole of his writings. With the abandonment of foundationalism and along with Kantian understanding of the key task of epistemology we abandon a classical self-image of philosopher as someone who stands in some privileged position and can tell us, what counts as genuine knowledge.

He makes a distinction between ironist and metaphysician. Under the influence of Kuhn’s distinction between normal and abnormal discourse Rorty claims that philosophy has no particular object and he has only one voice in the conversation of mankind. Philosophy has no special mission. If philosophy plays any role, it is only to keep this conversation alive, to produce new vocabularies and experiences, to shape oneself. (The metaphor has been borrowed from M. Oakeshott’s *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*.) Rorty formulated a notion of the so-called *edifying philosophy*, which should be identified as being of abnormal discourses. We turn away from epistemology and move to hermeneutics combined with pragmatic account of plurality of practices, vocabularies and experiences. A vocabulary after being used

is substituted by another one. We must, so to speak with Wittgenstein, throw away the ladder after we have climbed up it (see *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.53-7). In Rorty's further works, philosophy is seen as a literary genre. "Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form of matter, but by tradition – a family romance involving, e.g. Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad Brother Derrida" (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, 1982, p. 92).

And what about the self-image of philosopher we have now? His identification of himself as such, rather than as, perhaps, a historian, or a mathematician, or a poet - depends almost entirely upon how he sees the history of philosophy. It depends upon which figures he imitates, and which episodes and movements he disregards (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 41). On the one hand regarding criticism of philosophy his work under the title *Truth and Progress* from 1988 did not bring any new ideas, but on the other hand his stress on that we have to give up deceptive self-concept that philosophy can know things that no one can know so well, brings together pragmatism and hermeneutic. There is no possible transcendental perspective, there are only some particular social practices, moreover, and we never can escape fallibilism and historicism.

To focus on Rorty's account of philosophy we may call him as Hans Kellner states, the philosopher of redescription that has a lot of antagonism and irony towards the attempt to redscribe philosophical text. Rorty noted this and wrote: "Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of redescription. But most people do not want to be redcribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just they talk. The ironist tells them that language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless" (R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 89). It is a different story, whether this method of redescription and Rorty's approach to history of philosophy is right.

If we compare Rorty's approach and account of philosophy with today's situation, it is very hard to approve of his diagnosis. Facing facts it is becoming clear that Rorty's predictions did not fulfil. The analytic philosophy which is understood as the style of argumentation, writing and thinking is alive and well despite all his efforts to show it to be worthless. Moreover, among thinkers who meet criteria of Rorty's

conversationalist philosophy there are on one hand systematic authors like Robert Brandom and – on the other hand – aesthetic author á la Stanley Cavell, as has been mentioned by Czech philosopher T. Marvan. Also epistemology as a discipline is alive and well.

Rorty's ideas and work can be assessed in terms of positive and negative aspects. Negative aspect expresses a radical change and questionable assertion about philosophy as a discipline, which has no mission regarding shaping culture. A positive aspect highlights the new post-metaphysical vision of culture in which poetry will play a key role. From this point of view philosophy can be seen, at most, as a conversation which has no task to reach any truth, or to persuade somebody into doing something; conversely the conversation should be only creating new vocabulary, a stream of speech acts and shaping discourse. And the most important is the statement that every vocabulary is incommensurable with another and there is no final vocabulary with which one can arbitrate normative and epistemological claims. However, this vision is a very nebulous agenda.

After deconstruction of philosophy Rorty has turned back and starts to deal with other problems related with social issues including democracy, private and public distinctions, politics, friendship, equality of opportunity, individual liberty and so on. Philosophy has no special knowledge and dogma that is the role of a „queen of the sciences,, has been abandoned. For Rorty language without representation is a poetic tool that creates worlds, and language can provide us with the description of this world, which is thoroughly contingent and historical in nature. Thus for Rorty “the method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it... This sort of philosophy does not work piece-by-piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis, rather it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like „try thinking of it this way” or, more specifically, „try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possible interesting questions”. It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things, which we did when we spoke in the old way... Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against vocabulary I want to replace, instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favour look more attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics“ (R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 9).

Theory is replaced by irony, for Rorty denies that the theory can definitely argue, evaluate or even deconstruct since there is no fulcrum from which to push one claim as better, correct, or right than other. We should be aware of ineliminable contingency of self and discourse. According to Rorty literature is a far more powerful tool for interpreting world and offering the descriptions needed for self-creation and social progress. Literature seemed to take the place of theory. Thus in Rorty's view philosophy can provide no shared or viable foundation for political concepts as justice; it should be replaced with poetic descriptions and historical narratives. Rorty wants to revive liberal values without the need to defend them in terms of philosophical grounds. For him: „what is needed is a sort of intellectual analogue of civic virtue, tolerance, irony, and willingness to let spheres of culture flourish without worrying too much about their „common ground“, their unification, the „intrinsic ideals“ they suggest, or what picture of man they presuppose“ (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 168). We live in contingent world of competing vocabularies and narratives and none of them could serve as legitimising force or a tool for achievement of consent.

Rorty has paid attention to societal and political issues like solidarity, democracy, happiness, justice, romantic polyetism, freedom, etc. in last decades of his life. His considerations about the problems mentioned, generally speaking, are mostly rather vague and indefinite metaphors, which, if at all, are related only to his neo-pragmatic slogan „*take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*“.

All those ideas are based on similar premises concerning anti-representational understanding of knowledge, anti-fundationalism, anti-essentialism. Rorty's critical attitude towards traditional philosophy and epistemology is related very closely to his account of social issues and democratic political philosophy, and democracy has priority to philosophy. But we can raise questions whether his account of political problems like human rights, separation between public and private spheres, solidarity, justice, patriotism, liberalism etc. can give us intellectual equipment to deal with problems in question. However, his anti-fundationalist account of democratic theory is unclear and combines economic liberalism, democracy and capitalism. Democracy should be pragmatically justified as to allow for open dispute among citizens. In this respect Rorty follows Dewey in arguing that an agreement freely reached by members of democratic community takes precedence over God, Natural Law or Reason (*Philosophy and Social Hope*, 1999, p. 237). But when Rorty states:

“My native country has world-historical importance only because it cast itself in the role of vanguard of global egalitarian utopia” (*Philosophy and Social Hope*, 234), this assertion ought to be scrutinized facing American policy to expand democracy by means of force. And when Rorty states that America cannot become a policeman of global politics, regarding international realpolitik of the USA, because the role is incompatible with democratic legacy of pragmatism, Rorty lacks effective tools to deal with this big problem. And this also makes his patriotism a bit strange for it contradicts with Rorty’s antifoundationalism and irony, for there is no self-irony in his account of patriotism for America, only belief, certainty and conviction.⁵ Rorty’s own language and vocabulary of national citizenship cannot set up cosmopolitan virtue, for it is impossible to cope with political and social troubles and issues by a return to our historical origin. He speaks very uncritically about “our country, America”. There is no discussion in Rorty how one might connect critical democratic conversation, patriotism and ethnocentric philosophy with Realpolitik. At first sight it functions as a disguised but significant final vocabulary of justification.

So for Rorty philosophy has no public or political role, these areas are ruled by political a moral traditions. So, how can we claim that liberalism is good or show convincingly which practices are to be favoured to others without some kind of theory? And what about Rorty’s choice of liberalism why has not been chosen theory of liberalism by J. S. Mill? Rorty’s view on this point differs also from Dewey, who had a simple view on democracy which has been treated by him like “the best means so far found for realising ends that lie in the wide domain of human relationship and and the development of human personality” (*Democracy and Educational Administration*, in: *The Later Works 1925-1953*, 17 Vls. p. 217). Although we can agree with Rorty’s claims that language and subjectivity are historical and contingent in nature, that our relation to world is mediated many times over, I cannot help the feeling that without any kind of theory we are not able to defend even the liberal democracy which Rorty himself affirms. His suspicion against any theory goes too far. Without any kind of theory, we are not able to explain pros and cons of democracy.

Moreover, Rorty’s political platform depends on his antirepresantionalism, and there is a direct link between his attack on epistemology and his account of

⁵ B. Turner shows in article mentioned above that Rorty’s pragmatic patriotism means final vocabulary that is in accordance with the contradictory expansion and export of American democracy.

democracy; his thinking is a mixture of different incompatible opinions of Dewey and Nietzsche. This attempt to combine postmodernism, Nietzsche and Dewey as a foundation for open, critical democratic political philosophy has failed. The reason is very simple, Nietzsche tried to defend heroic individualism and authenticity of self as virtue against modern society and democracy has been seen from his part as the triumph of the herd over the soul of the heroic individual. For this reason it is impossible to reconcile Nietzsche's view with defence of modern democracy. Also respectively Dewey, there is one different point between him and Rorty. Dewey did not accept division between private and public sphere and argued that unless democracy acquired a social and moral character, it would be undermined by the private world. In short, Rorty's bourgeois liberal postmodernism cannot adequately provide the resources for a coherent political philosophy. In his interview for journal, *Kritika a Kontext (Critique and Context)* he gave the following answer to the question about any new trend that could constitute a political basis for the coming century. „Just ordinary liberal democracy is all the ideology anybody needs. Yet, liberal democracy works in times of economic prosperity and does not and, I think we are entering a time of economic insecurity, I don't have much faith that we can keep liberal democracy going. But that's not for lack of ideas, that's for lack of money“ (*Kritika and Kontext*, No 34, 2007, p. 23).

Rorty as philosopher seems to combine a Nietzschean heroic individualism with the liberal democratic concern for justice, a composite of rather incompatible forces. Although Gramsci's philosophy does not meet the criteria of Rorty's conversationalist edifying philosophy, Rorty himself makes an allusion to the tradition of *organic intellectual* in Gramsci's thought. So such a contingency and historical narrative including a portion of irony become visible in Rorty himself as an unintended consequence of his way of philosophising, adding to its charm. Although, I disagree with Rorty on many issues, there is no doubt that it is mostly due to his writings that neopragmatism has raised the interest of various theorists like feminists, political scientists, artists etc. I think Rorty's thought despite the above mentioned weaknesses means an interesting and inspiring attempt to bridge a gap between American and continental tradition of doing philosophy. Probably I am not wrong to say, that his fame as great thinker is not the flavour of month.

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