



Rorty's postmodern stance on the idea of representation: rejection of the entire project of realism

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Abstract: *Realism is a flawed project and the idea that language and mind can capture reality in its purest form is a far-fetched one. Postmodern world does not accept the idea that both language and mind can represent or capture true reality. In fact, the very possibility of final reality is negated or not accepted by postmodernists. Postmodernists clearly state that such acceptance of objective reality is not possible as there are either multiple realities or no realities at all. In the present paper, Richard Rorty's viewpoint on the project of representation is discussed. Along with Rorty, other philosophers' viewpoints are also included to highlight the postmodern stance on realism.*

Keywords: *Representation, Objectivity, Realism, Pragmatism, and epistemology*

Richard Rorty is an important American philosopher of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. His major contribution in philosophy lies in "The New Pragmatism" or "neopragmatism." He rejects the Platonist tradition which he categorized as representationalism, a flawed concept that does not have any relevance in the present times. He has been influenced by the writings of Darwin, Gadamer, Hegel and Heidegger and the influence led him to what we call today neopragmatism.

He represents American wing of postmodern movement through a unique pragmatic form of postmodernism. He argued that Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian project of foundationalism that is the attempt to justify our realistically true knowledge of the world was wrong headed and impossible. There can be no noncircular justification of any metaphysical or epistemological point of view. Our cognition is always mediated with what he calls final vocabulary. If the final vocabulary is what we perceive depending on the cognitive abilities, then the naked reality can never be checked.

In his most noted book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he abandons all claims to a privileged mental power that allows direct access to things-in-themselves or external reality and offers an alternative narrative which adapts Darwinian evolutionary principles to the philosophy of language. He establishes a thoroughly naturalistic approach to the issues of science and objectivity, to the mind-body problem, and to concerns about the nature of truth and meaning. In his view language is to be employed as an adaptive tool used to cope with the natural and social environments to achieve a desired, pragmatic end. Rorty naturalizes language. Just as other species have developed the tools of night-hunting, migration and hibernation to adapt to environmental change, we have used language as a tool for our survival. This is how Rorty points out the naturalized role of language as influenced by Darwin.

He points out the lack of relationship between cognition to its objects. As he says that our cognition is always mediated with a final vocabulary; sign, culture, theories, propositions and culture which we bring to our experience. If the final vocabulary always mediates between our statements of what we perceive or our ultimate cognitive capacities and their objects, then the relationship between the vocabulary to naked reality can never be checked. For example, if I am wearing rose coated glasses, everything looks rosy. And if I cannot take off the glass, how can I check whether reality is really rose coated or not.

Early 20th century philosophy had continued the foundationalist project of early modern philosophy evolved into two radical forms: Husserlian phenomenology on the one hand and logical positivism on the other hand. Both the early continental philosophers or phenomenologists and early analytical philosophers in particular positivists tried to ground the roots and basic foundations of knowledge. This results into two different accounts of knowledge; on the one hand transcendental account of experience and on the other hand physiologically caused sense-data and logic. He further rightly states in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, "Analytic" philosophy is one more variant of Kantian philosophy, a variant marked principally by thinking of representation as linguistic rather than mental, and of philosophy of language rather than "transcendental critique," or psychology, as the discipline which exhibits the "foundations of knowledge" (8).

But by midcentury each project ends in bankruptcy. That bankruptcy was the result of their internal critic. All descriptions of ultimate evidence of sense-data-logic are themselves caught up in theoretical disputes.

Rorty rightly suggests this point in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* "The attempts of both analytic philosophers and phenomenologists to "ground" this and "criticize" that were shrugged off by those whose activities were



purportedly being grounded or criticized. Philosophy as a whole was shrugged off by those who wanted an ideology or a self-image” (5).

Quiene and others criticize the basic ideas of the positivist program. The same message was also seen in the later representatives of the continental project. Just as Quiene and Wittgenstein undermine the logical positivism, Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida undermine Husserl. In each case they undermine the initial foundational hope of the discipline. Though these two schools do not seem to correlate each other in terms of ideas, Rorty says that they had a lot in common, i.e., their basic purpose to find out the ultimate truth. But in each case the later generation discovered the problems with their ideas and in each case the school itself started undermining itself. Rorty claims that pragmatism is an alternative to these two forms of foundationalism – analytical and continental philosophy.

In support of his statement that the whole notion of representationalism is wrong headed and impossible he presents that we cannot know reality through language. He questions the conventional belief that words represent reality or descriptions of the real world can represent truth. He argues that there is no relation between knowledge and reality or between ideas and reality. We cannot show that our ideas or language corresponds to reality. What we can show is a mere fact that language corresponds to itself only. In other words, one bit of language corresponds to other bit of language. He argues in his book, “Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey are in agreement that the notion of knowledge as accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned” (6).

According to him, rejecting representationalist accounts of knowledge and language would lead to a state of mind he referred to as “ironism”, in which people are completely aware of the contingency of their placement in history and of their philosophical vocabulary as opposed to previous certainty. With this kind of philosophy he opines that there the notion of “social hope” which precedes this rejection of representation accounts and results into more peaceful human world. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he suggests that the fundamental problem in modern epistemology is based on its effort of trying to picture mind as a mirror that faithfully represents external reality.

Pragmatists reject the entire Platonic tradition considering it as irrelevant and inappropriate from the context of postmodern era and reject all those notions regarding philosophy. This does not mean that they have a new, non-Platonic set of answers to Platonic questions to offer, but rather that they do not think we should ask those questions any more. Pragmatists define the historical views of truth and say that there is nothing interesting about truth. Traditionally truth has been defined by two schools of philosophy: transcendental claims made by Platonists and empiricist claims made by Positivists. What Platonists such as Kant or Mill call spatio-temporal moral judgments such as “Men should try to be just in their dealings” as corresponding to truth have been entirely rejected by the Positivists calling it as merely an emotional expression or limiting to a subjective expression. Similarly, the empiricist statement such as “It rained yesterday” has been criticized by the Platonists calling it as a second rate statement or mere *doxa*. In addition to this, for the pragmatist, nothing can be located that is anterior to the language games that are continuously played out by a multiplicity of eternally shifting interpretative communities. As Rorty would have it, any attempt at argumentation or public intervention is simply futile, a pointless echo of a now exhausted philosophical tradition that championed logical rigor and the possibility of transcendental revelation.

Rorty further claims that it is simply a kind of language game in which one bit of language corrects the other bit of language and what we cannot do is this that we cannot go outside of language altogether and examine reality. To put it differently, nothing makes our beliefs true, he rejects the whole notion of truth, he rejects the very account of truth, and it’s a mistake of philosophy to try to define truth. Rorty states in his book regarding philosophers’ attempts to prove truth,

Philosophers have constantly seized upon some distinctive feature of human life in order to give our intuition of our uniqueness a “firm philosophical basis.” Because these firm bases are so varied, naturalisms and materialisms, when not shrugged off as hopeless attempts to jump a vast ontological (or epistemological, or linguistic) gulf, are often treated as trivially true but pointless (36).

Rorty says that the predicate truth as an endorsement of whatever statements survive our verification procedures. Those procedures are public and social. All people, all society and all cultures have ways to figure out whose statements are right and whose statements are false. There are tests and procedures and when your views pass those tests and procedures, we call them true. Truth doesn’t mean anything more than that. Additionally Rorty accepts Donald Davidson’s claim that beliefs are by nature truthful. Rorty argues that Davidson’s statement does not indicate that all our beliefs are individually true.

Rorty clearly states in his book:

We might want to insist that Davidson's argument concerns only what it is to give a theory of meaning and a theory of truth. We might claim that all he could possibly do is show that we cannot verify the existence of a language which gives a true description of the world unless it is translatable into our own, and that this would not show that there cannot be one. This line of argument would be analogous to the criticism of Black's way of dealing with the “inverted spectrum” problem, and similar Wittgensteinian antiskeptical strategies, as “verificationist” (305).

He meant that the whole interaction between humans and surrounding environment is designed to generate true beliefs. Beliefs are the way we deal with reality. Our beliefs are generated as per our best grasps of the real. And there is no further justification of



them beyond the tests we typically employ in our language to generate them. So any philosophical attempt to give out a theory or truth beyond the truth emerging out of this social or collective verification procedure is wrong headed. And hence, all philosophical attempts to prove that we have some truth are wrong-headed and impossible.

It is right that we have some series of capacities such as linguistic capacities and cultural parameters with the help of which we generate knowledge of the world. So one has the means with the help of which one knows the world and they generate certain amount of knowledge in one. Rorty does not escape it. He accepts everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge about the world. He argues that there is no problem with the everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge of the world. The only problem lies in the philosophers attempt to prove that we have some truth. Because philosophers, in order to prove that we have knowledge, find some neutral place to stand, view the universe as it is, and then, presents how the human beings understand the universe. But this approach adopted by the philosophers is not possible.

Rorty discusses the nature of philosophy in his book, "For the view that there is no permanent neutral matrix within which the dramas of inquiry and history are enacted has as a corollary that criticism of one's culture can only be piecemeal and partial never "by reference to eternal standards" (179).

He further denies the search of the stable and permanent knowledge:

I am claiming, in short, that the Quine-Sellars attack on the Kantian notion of two sorts of representations-intuitions "given" to one faculty, and concepts (or meanings) "given" to another-is not the attempt to substitute one sort of account of human knowledge for another, but an attempt to get away from the notion of "an account of human knowledge (180).

Only way one knows or can know the world is through the means by which they know the world. We cannot step out of the means and judge them. Hence, Rorty says that Philosophy with capital P is dead. That the philosophy that tries to figure out the underpinnings of all the knowledge is finished, it never made any sense.

Rorty interprets his views as part of pragmatism. Having read and been a part of pragmatism, Rorty had been more inclined to the ideas of one of the pragmatists -William James. As James gave a kind of practical definition of truth i.e., truth is what works, truth is what is successful etc. However, other philosophers define this practical definition of truth as sloppy; Rorty contradictorily supports his statements by suggesting the real meanings of what he said. Rorty interprets that what William James ultimately means by his statements is simply a denial of any need of truth. He opines and counter argues to those who say that pragmatic theory is a theory of truth. He says that if it is properly understood, pragmatism is a denial of the need of any account of truth at all.

Now rejecting the whole notion of truth, Rorty's pragmatism leaves us with simply verification procedures of our culture. These are no philosophical foundation which can tell us that which ultimate values are the right ones in human life or in science.

Now the picture that we are left with is non-philosophical naturalism. Naturalism is something that does not require philosophical justification. He does not justify naturalism philosophically as he does not want to justify it as he himself criticizes the philosophical tradition of justification. Our naïve or everyday approach is a kind of natural approach to the world is a kind of naturalism. It simply means no philosophical justification. And in this context the function of philosophy should be just a generalized cultural criticism that opens up new ways to conceive society. In this way he brings Dewey and Foucault together. Foucault said that all truth is power and all claims to attempt truth is to attempt power. Foucault said that we can find power within this society to improve society. Similarly, Dewey said that the ultimate concern of society is the improvement of society. And truth is evident in ongoing improvement in society. Philosophy proves to be a critique to society and tries to improve society. But what it cannot do is that it cannot do is to prove that one of them is right. It cannot give justification to this.

According to Rorty, Derrida is a "liberal ironists" because Derrida pragmatically accepts the absolute contingency of his personal belief systems while accepting the irreconcilable division of the public and the private. The liberal ironist knows that any attempt to synthesize individualist quests for autonomy and self-creation with a concern for public justice is a categorical and often dangerous mistake. Further Rorty says that irony is neither possible nor desirable within public discourse, it is inherently a private matter.

Rorty has said in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey are in agreement that the notion of knowledge as accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned. Here the foundations of knowledge based on the Cartesian attempt to answer the epistemological skeptic are set aside. Further, they set aside the notion of "the mind" common to Descartes, Locke, and Kant-as a special subject of study, located in inner space, containing elements or processes which make knowledge possible.

Rorty further adds:

The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations-some accurate, some not-and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself. Without this latter notion, the strategy common to Descartes and Kant-getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror, so to speak-would not have made sense (12).



It is construed that Rorty had different ideas about realism. Realism and the idea of representation is a flawed project and does not have relevance in the era of postmodernism. In the postmodern times, there is no possibility of objective representation and Rorty, an American Postmodernist, clearly denies such realist projects.

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