

DEWEY AND RORTY

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Richard Rorty holds for his great teacher and master John Dewey he often said, that people should not read him, but Dewey, because he takes most of his ideas from Dewey. Rorty holds Dewey for one of the most important thinker of the twentieth century.¹ He says, he has no „broader perspective to offer”, as what is offered by Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, who are „the richest and most original philosophers of our time”.²

There are three areas, where the ideas of Dewey influenced the thinking of Rorty, these are the question of truth, the concept of philosophy and democracy as theory and praxis. I will investigate these three areas.

1. Truth

Rorty takes the idea from Dewey that there is not much interesting work to do in the area of truth. There are four arguments for this: a historical, an epistemological, a linguistic-philosophical, and a democratic one.

1.1. The historical argument

The historical argument is, that if we look the history of philosophy, we can see countless theories about truth, and the holders of those theories were convinced that their truth is the only right one. It is impossible, that all would be true. Due to the high number of different theories, it has a very low historical probability, that just our actual theory is true. Dewey, influenced by Hegel and Darwin proposed „a naturalized version of Hegel’s vision of history”.³ We should look truth as a process, rather than actual representation of something.

Rorty remarks, that Dewey is both, Hegelian and Darwinian. As Hegelian historicist he denies that natural sciences would look into the essences of things, as Darwinian, he is naturalist and accepts the natural sciences as the best way to discover the structure of reality. Rorty writes, „Dewey, it seems to me, is the one author usually classified as a ’naturalist’ who did not have this reductive attitude, despite his incessant talk about ’scientific method’. Dewey’s peculiar achievement was to have remained sufficiently Hegelian not to think of natural science as having an inside track on the essences of things, while becoming sufficiently naturalistic to think of human beings in Darwinian terms.”⁴

¹ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, 1979. (cit. *Mirror*) 5. „the work of the three most important philosophers of our century – Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey”.

² R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982. (quotation: *Consequences*), 51.

³ R. Rorty, *Mirror*, 5.

⁴ Rorty, *Mirror*, 362 n.

Philosophers tried always escape history in the sense, that they thought, they can grasp or even already grasped the absolute truth, they thought, that they found „nonhistorical conditions of any possible historical development”. Rorty holds that the „common message of Wittgenstein, Dewey and Heidegger is a historicist one. Each of the three reminds us that investigations of the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may be simply apologetics, attempts to eternalize a certain contemporary language-game, social practice or self-image.”⁵

1.2. The epistemological argument

The epistemological argument is, that if we investigate the structures of knowledge, that means the conditions of possibility of knowledge, we have only these structures, but we cannot say anything about the content of knowledge. The content „comes” from outside of the structure, and the content as such, or the origin of the content of knowledge remains obscure for the knower. We can never reach as known the thing outside the structure, so we can never reach a truth about the world, or a truth in ontological sense. Epistemological structures have notional, conceptual character their relationship is inferential, rational or logical. The structures of the world are causal. It is not clear, how to reduce causality on rationality, since the laws of them are completely different.

The representationalist theory, where we oppose cognitive structures to the world, and then say, these structures represent or mirror the reality, should be left behind us. As Rorty emphasizes, „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

This abandonment does not happen however with argumentation, but with throwing away. As seventeenth century philosophers did not argue against scholastic philosophers, but they deliberately forgot about them, similarly Dewey does not really argues against representationalism, but just he forgets it. Rorty proposes this kind of forgetfulness to his contemporaries. He describes the historically proposed solutions to the mind-body relationship, but he does not think, „there is a problem”.⁷

Dewey calls the representationalist theory of knowledge „spectator theory of knowledge”, which is not only quoted with approval by Rorty, but Rorty uses this concept as a synonymous to the representationalist epistemology. Rorty quotes Dewey with agreement, „Dewey sees the metaphor of the Eye of the Mind as the result of the prior notion that knowledge must be of the unchangeable: ’The theory of knowing is modeled after what was supposed to take place in the act of vision. The object refracts light and is seen; it makes a difference to the eye and to the person having an optical apparatus, but none to the thing seen. The real object is the object so fixed in its regal aloofness that it is a king to any beholding mind that may gaze upon it. A spectator theory of knowledge is the inevitable outcome.’^{8,9} This is a powerful metaphor, Rorty uses over and over again. If we let the world to determine our knowledge, we let it be a kind of god, a king of our knowledge. So, research for knowledge becomes a kind of religious activity. Rorty proposes, that we „Western liberal

⁵ R. Rorty, *Mirror*, 10.

⁶ R. Rorty, *Mirror*, 6.

⁷ R. Rorty, *Mirror*, 7.

⁸ J. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, New York, 1960. 23. (quoted by Rorty, *Mirror* 39.)

⁹ Rorty, *Mirror* 39.

intellectuals” should abandon the reality as a superpower over us, since the reality with its causal laws has not the laws of our discussions and the grammar of our vocabularies. After having abandoned religion and metaphysics, we should abandon the search for certainty and for the things in the world as presuppositions of truth knowledge.

It should be mentioned, that the metaphor, the mind as an eye does not originates from Dewey but from the old Greeks. As Rorty remarks, „Plato’s description of *nous* (is) ’the eye of the soul’ (...) the archaic use of *noein* (...) the grasp of images”.¹⁰ As a matter of fact if we abandon the representationalist or spectator theory of knowledge, we abandon almost the whole history of philosophy, since the ancient are the origins of it, and since they influenced everything what came after.

That is why Rorty can write, that we should not look on Dewey as an epistemologist, who corrected towards holism the atomism of early analytic philosophy. „As long as we see James or Dewey as having ’theories of truth’ or ’theories of knowledge’ or ’theories of morality’ we shall get them wrong. We shall ignore their criticism of the assumptions that there ought to *be* theories about such matters.”¹¹ Dewey rejects any epistemological theory, and replaces such questions as „Does this sentence represents reality accurately” with sentences as „What would it be like to believe that? What would happen if I did? What would I be committing myself to?”¹²

Rorty emphasizes, that there are no constrains on inquiry, unless conversational ones, and since objections or conversational constraints cannot be anticipated, it cannot anticipated, when a conversation comes to a temporary end.

1.3. The linguistic argument

The linguistic argument is structurally similar to the epistemological argument, and says, that all analysis of language remains in language. We never reach the world outside the language. The world has no linguistic character, the world does not speak, only we, human beings have language, only we are speaking. The world cannot answer to our questions, only human beings answer to questions.

We are enclosed in our language. It is not possible to think or to speak about the world without language. As Rorty says, „there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language. ... Philosophy, the attempt to say ’how language relates to the world’ by saying what *makes* certain sentences true, or certain actions or attitudes good or rational, is, on this view, impossible.”¹³ This is one of the most powerful arguments of Rorty against any hopes, to answer our philosophical questions with the help of analytic philosophy.

Language can be only a tool, but not a mirror of reality, since we cannot take a third position, look on language and reality, and then to say, how they fit together whether the representation of reality in language is correct or not.

¹⁰ Rorty, *Mirror*, 40. n.

¹¹ Rorty, *Consequences*, 160.

¹² Rorty, *Consequences*, 163.

¹³ Rorty, *Consequences* xix.

Linguistic philosophy or analytic philosophy analyzes concepts, but they do not create or bear real philosophical concepts. They can show, how different concepts are related to each other, or what structure concepts have, but they cannot develop brand new philosophical research programs. They even cannot develop or create new philosophical concepts. Rorty says, following Dewey, that „I am fairly sure that the philosophy of language has not given us any interesting new debating points.”¹⁴

1.4. The democratic argument

The democratic argument comes partly from the new logical thinking of Dewey, partly from the needs of democracy. Dewey says, that traditional logic describes the structures of a thinking, which belongs to the oppressive societies, where there were the oppressors and the oppressed. The thinking was in the hand of the oppressors, or the higher classes, and they distinguished always between themselves and the others. For this distinction they had to establish a way of thinking where the good, the right people were in truth and the bad people were in falsity. Dewey says, in the democracy we cannot have, and we cannot allow such kind of thinking. Dewey, who read a lot of Hegel in his youth, proposes that we overcome the binary true-false structured thinking, and as in democracy everyone is on the good side, so everyone is in some sense in truth.

Dewey proposes that instead of studying the representationalist, the mirroring models, we should change the topic and turn toward democracy. „Dewey ... wrote his polemics against traditional mirror-imagery out of a vision of a new kind of society. In his ideal society, culture is no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement. In that culture, as he said, the arts and the sciences would be 'the unforced flowers of life'.”¹⁵ And then, Rorty interprets his own activities, which does not give too much to what Dewey has said, but perhaps helps to shatter the traditional image. As he says in the introduction of *Mirror*, his book „has little to add to these criticism (those of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey – J. B.), but I hope that it presents some of them in a way which will help pierce through that crust of philosophical convention which Dewey vainly hoped to shatter.”¹⁶

Rorty understood himself as continuing the work of Dewey to shatter the old crust. With this, he does not want to abandon the project of Enlightenment, but as he understands, he tries to liberate from supposed obstacles which hold up its further development and the realization of social hopes. Rorty writes about this, „James and Dewey rejected neither Enlightenment's choice of the scientist as moral example, nor the technological civilization which science had created. They wrote, as Nietzsche and Heidegger did not, in a spirit of social hope. They asked us to liberate our new civilization by giving up the notion of 'grounding' our culture, our moral lives, our politics, our religious beliefs, upon 'philosophical bases.' They asked us to give up the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty which had been one result of Galileo's frightening new cosmology, the quest for 'enduring spiritual values' which had been one reaction to Darwin, and the aspiration of academic philosophy to form a tribunal of pure reason which had been the neo-Kantian response to Hegelian historicism.”¹⁷ Rorty emphasizes here as over and over again, that the search for certainty should be replaced by the

¹⁴ Rorty, *Mirror*, 311.

¹⁵ R. Rorty, *Mirror*, 13.

¹⁶ R. Rorty, *Mirror*, 13.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Consequences*, 161.

search for a better society. Social hope can emerge only there, where people try to change practically their social environment.

2. Philosophy

Rorty holds philosophy for an obsolete activity. Many classical philosophical questions belong today to the natural sciences or to humanities. The rest is the question of truth and meaning, but these are unsolvable problems. The search for truth should be replaced by the search of a just society.

Both, analytic philosophy and contemporary continental philosophy are in Rorty's time trying to overcome traditional philosophical questions and methods. Analytic philosophy tries to sharpen analysis, continental philosophy discovers communicative philosophy, deconstruction, hermeneutic, all movements, which try to abandon in it's on way philosophy. But, Rorty says, James and Dewey are waiting on the end of the road, analytic and continental philosophy are walking on. „James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling”.¹⁸ The end of the road is overcoming traditional philosophical questions, a time after philosophy.

Dewey prepares the understanding of the end of the philosophy (every Hegel scholar tries to formulate his version of the end of philosophy) with the distinction between theory and practice, between the holy and the lucky. For him, „the little dualisms of subject-object, mind-matter, experience-nature are seen ... as dialectical diminutions of the great dualism between the holy and the lucky – the enduring and the day-to-day.”¹⁹ Our contemporary task is to reject all such dualisms, because they have nothing to do with nature – and to return to the experience, to which human beings „are most deeply and passionately attached”.²⁰ Rorty is happy to continue and to realize the project of Dewey, which is described by him: “Meantime a chief task of those who call themselves philosophers is to help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future”.²¹ To care about the future it is to turn away from classical philosophy, which builds conceptual hierarchies or analyzes them. The last step is to be done: “Until the dogma of fixed unchangeable types and species, of arrangement in classes of higher and lower, of subordination of the transitory individual to the universal or kind had been shaking its hold upon the science of life, it was impossible that the new ideas and method should be made at home in social and moral life. Does it not seem to be the intellectual task of the twentieth century to take this last step? When this step is taken ... the reconstruction of philosophy [will] be made an accomplished fact.”²² The reconstruction of philosophy, the project what Rorty continues, that philosophy turns to social and moral life, searching a life with more imagination, freedom and justice.

For Dewey the full naturalization of philosophy is the way, we should go, which leads us to the society, which is the best for human nature: to democracy.

¹⁸ Rorty, *Consequences*, xvii.

¹⁹ Rorty, *Consequences*, 43.

²⁰ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, New York, Dover, 1958. 25. (quoted by Rorty, *Consequences*, 43.

²¹ Dewey, *The Later Works*, 5.160.

²² Dewey, *The Middle Works*, 12.122k.

3. Democracy

To maintain and develop democracy, this is the best and noblest task for today intellectuals and philosophers. Dewey and Rorty agree that philosophers should turn their attention toward the questions of a just society. Rorty accepts and develops the idea of Dewey, that with the constitution of the United States of America a new epoch in human history began, or more precisely, the history of mankind restarted. The first modern democracy was founded, in which human beings are recognized as equals in law and they receive the same respect and the same possibilities to develop their own life. The constitution guarantees, that no tyrants can take over the political power, that the elections are free, that presidents cannot be longer on the top of the administration as two terms. Dewey discovers, and Rorty applauds, that democracy is the form of government, which correspond the best to human nature. Democracy is not only a political structure, but „it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience”.

Rorty argues that although there is no foundation for democracy, democracy is the common search for justice. In searching justice we can have, what we cannot have in searching truth: agreement, where we can be sure, that we have agreement. It is difficult to reach truth, and to know, that we reached it. But we can realize when we have justice. The task of intellectuals should be to work on justice in the constitutionally just society.

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