

“A LIBERAL WHO IS UNWILLING TO BE AN IRONIST”

RORTY’S RELATION TO HABERMAS

György Pápay

(papaygy@gmail.com)

The relation of recent pragmatist thought to the distinguished German philosopher Jürgen Habermas – and inversely, the relation of Habermas to pragmatism – is an interesting topic in itself. Thinkers considered as pragmatists like Hilary Putnam or Richard Bernstein refer to his work frequently, and some of them even classify him as a quasi-pragmatist: take, for example, Matthew Festenstein’s *Pragmatism and Political Theory* in which the author devotes many pages to Habermas’ ideas on politics.¹ The catalyst of the neopragmatist revival, Richard Rorty also treats Habermas with a distinctive respect and regards him as one of the most important contemporary philosophers.² Therefore one might think that the investigation of Habermas’ influence on Rorty’s thinking could result in deep and subtle insights. But a closer look to Rorty’s writings does not verify this assumption and makes it clear that his relation to Habermas is much more complicated than it seems at the first sight.

Although Rorty’s admiration for Habermas as a thinker is indisputable, it is restricted to a very general level. As he mentions in a response given to Habermas, “His *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* made an enormous impression on me. Ever since I read it I have thought of the ‘linguistic turn’ as subsumable within the larger

movement from subject-centered rationality to communicative rationality.”³ One of Rorty’s central aims is to create a broader narrative framework in which he can synthesize the main figures of both the Continental and the analytic tradition who rebelled against the Cartesian–Kantian – or else, “epistemological” – conception of philosophy, and, as the quotation shows, Habermas seems to provide him useful conceptual tools for this purpose. For Rorty, the switch from subject-centered rationality to communicative rationality is the abandonment of the idea of philosophy as a strict science or queen of the sciences. If we attribute epistemic authority to the subject in the Cartesian way, then we will need a quasi-science – epistemology – to bridge the gap between the subject and the world; but if we attribute it to a communicative community, we can dissolve the need for hard scientific objectivity in the need for intersubjective agreement.⁴

The notion of community is also suitable to connect the two fields of interest those are common to both thinkers: post-Hegelian philosophy and democratic politics. Both of them are suspicious of the core philosophical project of the Enlightenment – that is, epistemological foundationalism – while provide a massive support for its political project. According to Rorty, the *ethos* of the Enlightenment was to create more inclusive societies in place of the former traditionalist and exclusivist ones, and the best present form of such an inclusivist community is the constitutional, liberal democracy of Northern-Atlantic countries. Rorty counts Habermas among those philosophers who work on the latter project rather than the former one; as he puts it, “For Dewey, as for Habermas, what takes the place of the urge to represent

¹ Cf. Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory*, Polity, Cambridge (Mass.), 1997, 146–168.

² See, for example, Richard Rorty, „Religion as a Conversation-stopper”, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin, New York, 1999, 170 („Rawls and Habermas [are] the two most prominent social thinkers of the present day”) or Richard Rorty, „Habermas, Derrida and the Functions of Philosophy”, in *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge (Mass.), 1998, 307 („I think of Jacques Derrida as the most intriguing and ingenious of contemporary philosophers, and of Jürgen Habermas as the most socially useful”).

³ Richard Rorty, *Response to Jürgen Habermas*, in Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, 56.

⁴ This is, of course, the main line of the argument that Rorty presents in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton UP, Princeton, 1979, 173–182). Thus Habermasian concepts of subject-centered and communicative rationality contribute only to a later reformulation of the position that he labels there as „epistemological behaviorism”.

reality accurately is the urge to come to free agreement with our fellow human beings – to be full participating members of a free community of inquiry.”⁵ The Deweyan–Habermasian branch of philosophy puts “the warfare between science and theology” aside and results in what Rorty describes as “a combination of intellectual history and cultural criticism”.⁶

On this general level Habermas does seem to be a quasi- or a fellow pragmatist from Rorty’s perspective, too. However, when it comes to more specific philosophical questions, Rorty’s relation to Habermas becomes rather polemical. What is more, sometimes he even uses Habermas to illustrate a philosophical position that he finds problematic. The explanation for this seemingly contradictory situation is Rorty’s conviction that Habermas is heading the right direction but his break with foundationalist philosophy is not consequent – or else, not radical – enough. According to Rorty, he tries to preserve certain features of metaphysical thinking which will prove to be unnecessary if we get rid of the notion of philosophy as a foundational enterprise. In the following I will examine three questions which are connected to each other and in which Rorty’s opinion diverges from Habermas’ significantly. The examination of these questions – about the function of philosophy, the ideal of universal validity, and the use of a philosophical theory of democracy – sheds a different light on the relation of the two philosophers and shifts the emphasis from their similarities to their differences.

1. The function of philosophy

As Rorty notes in his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, “Habermas shares [...] the assumption that the real meaning of a philosophical view consists in its political implications [...]. For the tradition within which Habermas is working, it is as obvious that political

philosophy is central to philosophy as, for the analytic tradition, that philosophy of language is central.”⁷ Many schools of philosophy assume that there is a central function of their discipline; for Habermas and his disciples this function is essentially social. In contrast, Rorty thinks that there is no such thing as the central function of philosophy because we are not able to find a single notion of philosophy that can include such different thinkers as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Carnap, Heidegger, Rawls and Derrida – all we have are family resemblances in the Wittgensteinian sense. Therefore he suggests that if once we have given up the idea that the function of philosophy is to provide foundations for human knowledge, we had better not to try to substitute it with another central function.

This question becomes important when we make decisions about the merit of certain philosophers. If the ultimate context in which one intends to judge the work of a philosopher is a political one, then many of them will prove to be worthless easily. As Rorty points out, the explanation for Habermas’ highly critical attitude towards such philosophers as Heidegger and Derrida is the fact that he treats them as failed public philosophers. In contrast, Rorty suggest that we had better treat them as philosophers whose work is suitable for private purposes – that is, whose work can provide us new self-descriptions or self-images. One of the main reasons for the private-public distinction established by Rorty in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is the intention to protect idiosyncratic philosophers such as Derrida from one-sided interpretations for which the only criterion is political usefulness. I will not try to decide here the question whether Rorty’s “private” reading is consistent with the self-understanding of Derrida, but it is clear that if we abandon the idea of an ultimate context – whether it is politics or language – we will take a huge step towards a more pluralistic picture of philosophy.

⁵ Richard Rorty, „Education as Socialization and as Individualization”, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 119.

⁶ Richard Rorty, „Naturalism and Quietism”, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge (Mass.), 2007, 148.

⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge (Mass.), 1989, 83.

According to this pluralistic view, there are not only different kinds of philosophers whose work is suitable for different purposes but it is also possible for a philosopher to be committed to different purposes without trying to synthesize them in a single theory or in a single vocabulary. A philosopher can be, to use Rorty’s terminology, a liberal – whose aim is to maximize social solidarity – and an ironist – who puts private self-creation in the first place – at the same time. Many philosophers think that the two positions contradict to each other. There are ironists who are unwilling to be liberals, like Foucault and other representative figures of contemporary French thought. And the best example of the liberal who is unwilling to be an ironist, according to Rorty, is Habermas himself.⁸ Whether this classification is fair or not, the fact that Rorty picks out Habermas as an influential thinker with whom to contrast his “liberal ironist” position shows that he gives more weight to the differences between their perspectives than to the similarities between them. Habermas reminds Rorty of those philosophers who try to unify all possible human concerns in a single vision of social utility.

2. The ideal of universal validity

According to Rorty, Habermas is not only convinced that political philosophy is the center of philosophy itself but tries to preserve in this field some disputable ideas of foundationalism. As he puts it, “[Habermas’] theory of communicative action is a sort of surrogate for metaphysics and epistemology”.⁹ Rorty is suspicious of notions such as “undistorted communication” or “ideal speech situation” but the main target of his criticism is not specific to Habermasian theory. Rorty notices that many non-foundationalist philosophers, including Habermas and even pragmatists such as Hilary Putnam, cling to the ideal of universal validity that is characteristic to metaphysical thinking. The reason for this is not purely philosophical but also political. It seems

that if we give up the notion of universal validity, then we will not be able to defend liberal democracy against its enemies. If there is no universally valid justification for democratic commitment, then it will be only one opinion among others. Therefore, goes the argument of Habermas and his disciples, we either preserve the notion of universal validity or accept an unrestricted form of relativism that treats every political views as equal and thus opens the gate before authoritarianism.

In contrast to this line of thought, Rorty insists that we had better get rid of the notion of universal validity. As he writes, a universally valid justification would be one that sounds convincing to all possible audiences – including ones in the past or in the future, or ones which consist of people whose beliefs are radically different from ours.¹⁰ Rorty thinks that this is only a philosopher’s dream; in reality, we are able to justify our theories or institutions only in a community that already shares a great amount of our values and convictions. Maybe it sounds like relativism but Rorty is certainly not a relativist – he is convinced that democracy is *better* than any other forms of government. What he questions is that there is a common ground for the debate between the admirers of democracy and that of authoritarianism; not because they cannot understand each other or have incommensurable views, but because they rely on significantly different premises. He dubs his own stance as ethnocentrism in order to highlight the fact that the scope of justification is always limited to a discursive community – an “ethnos” – the members of which will take one’s reasons *as reasons*.

While Rorty condemns the ideal of universal validity as a remnant of foundationalist philosophy, he is also aware of that Habermas’ insistence on it can be explained by certain historical reasons. As he puts it, “The idea of communal self-creation, of realizing a dream which has no justification in unconditional claims to universal validity, sound suspicious to Habermas and Apel because

⁸ Cf. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 61.

⁹ Richard Rorty, „Pragmatism and Law: A Response to David Luban”, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 108.

¹⁰ Cf. Richard Rorty, „Universality and Truth”, in *Rorty and His Critics*, 12–14.

they naturally associate it with Hitler. It sounds better to Americans, because they naturally associate it with Jefferson, Whitman and Dewey.”¹¹ Maybe that is why Habermas is looking for ahistorical, neutral, context-independent principles in order to justify liberal democracy. The question is, on what basis can we decide between Hitler and Jefferson. As Rorty argues, the adequate basis for a such a decision are proper historical narratives rather than philosophical theories. That is why he thinks, *pace* Habermas, that even if we the give up the notion of universal validity, we will have effective tools against the enemies of democracy. For Rorty, the defence of democracy consist not in arguments but in socialization, education and the construction of convincing narratives.

3. The theory of democracy

Since Habermas thinks that philosophy has important political implications – or even that its main implications are political – and also believes that theoretical justification of democracy is not only possible but necessary, it is not surprising that he gives much weight to the theory of democracy. On the one hand, he has a general conviction that philosophy as a discipline can make valuable contributions to democratic politics. On the other hand, he practices what he preaches: he has worked out a substantive theory of democracy. In contrast to the received proceduralist and communitarian models of democracy, he has argued for another normative model that is now widely acknowledged as deliberative democracy.¹² Since notions like consensus and conversation appear frequently in Rorty’s writings, some interpreters attribute to him a similar conception of democracy than that of Habermas.¹³ However, Rorty’s views on the

relation of theory and practice, and thus on the need for a theory of democracy differ significantly from his views.

Although democracy is obviously an important topic for Rorty, in his work we will not find a detailed – substantive or normative – theory of democracy. According to him, in order to understand democratic politics we do not need a theory of democracy, as well as in order to unmask totalitarian politics we do not need a theory of totalitarianism. Granted, the sort of theory in which Habermas is interested in is not only descriptive but normative: its aim is to correct the practice of actual democracies. But, unlike Habermas, Rorty thinks that “the rich democracies of the present day already contain the sorts of institutions necessary for their own reform and that the communication among the citizens of those democracies is not ‘distorted’ by anything more esoteric than greed, fear, ignorance and resentment.”¹⁴ As his persistent polemy against the so-called American Cultural Left shows, Rorty is convinced that abstract social theory makes more harm than good. The more normative our theoretical framework is, the more imperfect will our actual democratic practice seem. And, as Rorty argues, this will lead only to impatience and not to the careful reform of that practice.

Elsewhere I argued for in more details that Rorty’s relation to deliberative theories of democracy is not necessarily sympathetic at all.¹⁵ He is not only suspicious of highly normative approaches to democracy such as deliberative ones but, as his ethnocentrism indicates, he is also aware of the limits of deliberation and has doubts about that every contested political questions can be resolved by the means of discussion. What is more, his realistic or even pessimistic views presented in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* concerning the formation of the communal “we” – which he treats as

¹¹ Rorty, „Universality and Truth”, 3.

¹² Cf. Jürgen Habermas, „Three Normative Models of Democracy”, in *The inclusion of the Other*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1998.

¹³ See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, „Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy”, in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, Routledge, New York, 1996, 4–9.

¹⁴ Rorty, „Habermas, Derrida and the Functions of Philosophy”, 326.

¹⁵ See my book published in Hungarian: *Demokrácia filozófiai megalapozás nélkül: Richard Rorty és a politikai filozófia [Democracy Without Philosophical Foundations: Richard Rorty and Political Philosophy]*, Ráció, Budapest, 2010, 59–74.

always contrasted to “them” – suggest that he is aware of the limits of political consensus, too.¹⁶ But whether we accept the latter interpretation or not, it is clear that, according to Rorty, once we have given up the idea that the main function of philosophy is to provide foundations to our practices and institutions, then we will not necessarily need a philosophical theory of democracy. That is why he can say without any scruples that “Unlike Habermas, I do not think that disciplines like philosophy, linguistics and developmental psychology can do much for democratic politics.”¹⁷

Given that Rorty explicitly denies (1) that there is a central function of philosophy and it is essentially social, (2) that we are able to justify liberal democracy in an unconditional, universal way, and (3) that in order to understand and to improve democratic politics we need a well articulated philosophical theory of democracy, the main question remains: why does he still insist that Habermas is an exemplary philosopher? I think, the answer lies in the special role that Habermas plays as a public intellectual rather than in his – otherwise very impressive – philosophical work. In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty considers Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey as the three most important non-foundationalist philosophers. I think, he also recommends them as role-models for philosophers: the later Wittgenstein represents the philosopher as therapist, Heidegger as creative inventor of new, idiosyncratic vocabularies and Dewey as public intellectual. And we might say that among contemporary philosophers the one who is nearest to the Deweyan ideal is obviously Jürgen Habermas.

If we are looking for an explicit formulation of this consideration, we will find it in one of Rorty’s papers: “Habermas, almost alone among eminent philosophers of the present day, manages to work as Dewey did, on two tracks. He produces both a stream of philosophical treatises and a stream of comment on current events. I doubt that any philosophy professor since Dewey has

done more day-to-day work in the political arena, or done more for the goals of us social democrats.”¹⁸ The careful investigation of Rorty’s work testifies to that the stream that made deeper impressions to him is not that of treatises – with the exception of the above mentioned *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* – but that of comments on current political situation of Western democracies. If we think of Habermas as a Dewey of the present day, it will explain why is Rorty eager to count him among that “we” – “we, liberals” – that he often refers to. Even if he is a liberal who is unwilling to be an ironist.

¹⁶ Cf. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 189-198.

¹⁷ Rorty, „Universality and Truth”, 14.

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, „Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein”, *Political Theory* 1987/4., 580, n31.