RICHARD RORTY'S DISCOURSE ON THEORY
AND
SELF-CREATION : A PERSPECTIVE

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Contemporary philosophy addresses many questions with regard to the status of normative theorizing : is it possible to have a universally applicable normative theory with practical consequences? Or, are valid practices justified by referring to other dominant practices within a given society? If so, is it impossible to cross-culturally determine the validity of practices? Are all attempts at normative theorizing confined to acts of self-creation? Richard Rorty has contributed to this debate by arguing that it is not possible to have a universally applicable theory. Further, according to Rorty, theory should be confined to the cultural domain of self-fulfillment since it has no practical consequences. Rorty upholds that the validity of practices cannot be theoretically or cross-culturally determined. All attempts at normative theorizing are viewed by Rorty as primary ahistorical. According to Rorty, practices that are always historically located can be judged as valid or invalid only with reference to other practices within the framework of a given society.

This paper reconstructs Rorty's fundamental arguments for his apporoach to normative theory. It examines Rorty's arguments and explores the prospects for the possibility of normative theorizing with practical consequences[1].

A Reconstruction of Rotry's Historicism

According to Rorty, all normative theories with universal applicability have been formulated in terms of a subject-object model of knowledge. This framework involves an appeal to either a given content or a given subjective structure.[2]

An appeal to a given content refers to a first principle or a foundation that is said to be the essential nature of reality.[3] The subject has knowledge of the foundation by passively reflecting upon an externally given object. Thus, the subject knows the object's essential nature by having a representation of it. The history of philosophy is filled with numerous examples of given contents that have been offered as first principles; rationality, empirical reality etc.[4] However, Rorty points out that this approach is open to the sceptical challenge.[5]

Since there are a variety of givens that confront a subject, and only of these is given the status of a first principle, how can it be justified? Any attempt to justify it further would lead to an infinite regress or circularity, which are the only alternatives facing a foundationalist attempt to answer the sceptical challenge. Further, if the sceptical challenge were not met, then there would be the dilemma of dogmatism for the foundationalist to contend with.

The apporach of appealing to the subjective structure of consciousness was ushered by Kant's transcendental philosophy to escape these dilemmas. According to this apporach, the subject constitutes truth by its structure of consciousness, rather than passively receive the contents of a given entity. However, Rorty argues that transcendental philosophy is also open to the sceptical challenge. For the subject has a given structure prior to its act of constituting the truth. Consequently, transcendental philosophy also faces the dilemmas afflicting the representative model of knowledge.[6]

From the presumed collapse of the traditional approaches to normative theorizing, Rorty concludes that a normative theory with universal applicability cannot be advanced by philosophy.[7] For any attempt at normative theorizing would result in the foundationalist problems afflicting the traditional approaches. This conclusion motivates Rorty's turn to historically located practices.[8] For given that the search for an absolute first principle as the criterion of validity is futile, Rorty exhorts philosophers to give up this search.[9] In place of absolute first principles, Rorty recommends a culture specific criterion of validity that is historically located within the web of human practices. Rorty turns to linguistic practice in particular as having prescriptive potential. For, according to Rorty, language is a concrete and contingent practice that reflects the culture in which it is located.[10] Language exists in mutual interaction with other activities, such as economic, political etc. Linguistic practice derives its content from these

activities and also makes them intelligible by articulating them. Thus, according to Rorty, validity is a property of sentences which depend on a vocabulary.[11] Vocabularies are constituted by human beings who are historically situated. Therefore, truth and validity are also products of human creation. Given the historicist character of language, Rorty infers that the criteria by which validity is linguistically determined are internal to the network of historico-social presuppositions of a given discourse.[12] According to Rorty, any attempt to transcend the historicity of discourse will reintroduce the problems of the traditional approach enumerated above. Rorty like Alasdair Macintyre,[13] Michael Walzer[14] and others, views all discourse as being contextually located within the framework of the tradition and practices of a given society.

Although Rorty turns to historically given practices to avoid the dilemmas facing foundationalism, he distances himself from relativism.[15] The relativist approach does not distinguish between right practices and wrong ones. On the relativist stance all practices are equal and hence this approach does not adhere to the notion of validity. However, according to Rorty, relativism does not distinguish between right and wrong practices because it assumes that validity can be argued for only in the traditional manner. The Rortian approach distinguishes between right and wrong practices by justifying valid practices in a holistic and pragmatic way. Such a justification involves an appeal to other practices that are historically situated within the framework of a given culture.

In keeping with his spirit of discursive historicism, Rorty recommends the linguistic arbitration of disputes concerning the validity of practices.[16] According to this approach, justification for right actions does not consist in offering reasons that have a normative character. Rather justification consists in describing the need of the practice whose validity is at stake. This description refers to the antecedent causes that underlie the need or the practice. As Rorty points out".. this attitude ... naturalizes mind and language by making all questions about the relation of either to the rest of the universe causal questions, as opposed to questions about the adequacy of representation or expression.[17] Thus, Rorty offers a historicized account of validity where valid practices are descriptions of existing customs of a given society.

In virtue of being a member of Western Society, Rorty delineates a method of determining validity which can be used within the context of Western

society. The method delineated by Rorty is that of free discussion.[18] The contents of free discussion are needs which arise within the framework and practices of North Atlantic bourgeois democracies. Rorty views this method as a thorough going historicist one for the following reasons:[19]

a)   The concepts of freedom and equality that constitute the method itself are descriptions of existing Western institutions.

b)   The needs which are arbitrated by the method are derived from the social practices of Western societies.

The structure of the self that engages in moral deliberation is itself constituted by concrete needs that constantly adjust and readjust to the web of historical practices in which the self is actively engaged. Agents cannot disentangle themselves from this web to determine validity from a vantage point outside history. Rather, Rorty upholds that situated agents determine validity within the framework of a historicized discourse. According to Rorty, the necessity for arbitrating the validity of needs and practices by free discussion arises only when there is a conflict between moral agent regarding their needs. Thus, Rorty has a historicist conception of personhood. A subject is not an abstract entity, whose primary task is thinking. Rather, according to Rorty, human subjects are constituted by needs and practices which arise within the institutional framework of their society.

Rorty defines the method of free discussion as, "Simply the sort which goes on when the press, the judiciary, the elections, and the universities are free, social mobility is free and rapid, literacy is universal, higher education is common and peace and wealth have made possible the leisure necessary to listen to lots of different people and think about what they say".[21] From the above it is clear that Rorty adheres to a pluralistic notion of freedom. On such a view, freedom consists in the right of each individual to peacefully pursue his/her unique needs.

Rorty sees the actuality of pluralistic freedom in the divide between the public sphere and the private sphere that is characteristic of bourgeois liberal democracies.[22] The public sphere, which consists of the institutions of the state and civil society, guarantees equality of freedom to all individuals. It does this by arbitrating conflicts on the basis of free discussion. The freedom that is

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In virtue of being a member of Western Society, Rorty delineates a method of determining validity which can be used within the context of Western

self-creation.

Although Rorty might want to confine his approach to the context of Western societies, in order to avert foundationalism, he still faces the problem of justifying his particular description of Western society. Rorty professes to have arrived at his description in a manner that is analogous to John Rawls, by using the method of reflective equilibrum.[23] This method consists in reflecting upon the assumptions and practices of a given society to balance them in a coherent manner. But, since this method is a subject's report of what is given, it reproduces the subject-object model of knowledge and its dilemmas. Thus, there can be a wide variety of opposing descriptions of a given culture whose claims cannot be arbitrated by the method of reflective equilibrium.

There are many accounts of Western society that, unlike Rorty, view the private sphere as a site of coercion rather than freedom. These accounts have been offered by thinkers like Jurgen Habermas who are committed to normative theorizing and those such as Michael Foucault who argue against the possibility of such theorizing.

Jurgen Habermas has extensively argued that despite there being a formal equality enjoyed by all individuals in liberal societies, yet many do not enjoy substantive equality.[24] In the contemporary West, class and gender differences often inhibit equal participation and decision making of private individuals in public life. Habermas points out that although civil society in the West got started as a rational domain of discursive interaction between equals, it has now degenerted into a domain where individuals have become consumers of products and ideas. Habermas analyzes this transformation to be a result of economic and political systems that are used to serve the particular interests of a few, rather than the general interest of all. Unlike Rorty, Habermas does not profess that the discursive arbitration of disputes has been realized. In fact, Habermas recommends a discursive arbitration of disputes as a solution to the major crises and inequlities in liberal societies.

Rorty shows a familiarity with Habermas' works and defends his own approach to liberalism aginst that of Habermas.[25] However, Rorty's defense overlooks the empirical aspects of Habermas' critique of existing liberal institutions and instead focuses exclusively on conceptual issues. Rorty claims that there are no political differences between Habermas and himself.[26] He, thus,

assumes that Habermas endorses existng liberal institutions in the West. According to Rorty, the only difference between his own views and that of Habermas is philosophical.[27] The difference, according to Rorty, centers around the issue of justifying liberal institutions. Habermas, according to Rorty, attempts to provide an ahistorical and universal grounding for these institutions. Rorty argues that such a grounding would only reinstate the problems of the traditional approaches to philosophy discussed above. Hence, Rorty upholds the contingency of liberal institutions and steers clear of normative theorizing.

Rorty, thus, overlooks Habermas' critique of liberal institutions and thereby assumes that Habermas endorses existing liberal institutions. This assumption is also based on Habermas' normative commitment to a discursive arbitration of validity.[28] However, Rorty's assumption that Habermas espouses existing liberal institutions is unjustified. It ovelooks Habermas' critique of liberalism and ignores the normative standpoint of a discursive arbitration of validity from which Habermas levies his critique. Habermas finds existing liberal institutions deficient in respect of giving all individuals the actual opportunity of discursively arbitrating their needs. Thus, Habermas' normative commitment to a discursive arbitration of disputes does not have a descriptive character as Rorty upholds. Rather than being a description of existing liberal institutions it is a prescriptive ideal that existing liberal indititutions ought to attain. Rorty's discussion of Habermas does not address these aspects to thereby establish the accuracy of his own account of liberal institutions.

Although Rorty seems to overlook Habermas' critique of Western societies, he does address Michel Foucault's critique of these societies.[29] In doing so, Rorty defends his own description of bourgeois liberal societies, albeit indirectly.

Foucault who shares Rorty's suspicion of universal theories has offered an account of liberal institutions that is similar to that of Habermas and contrary to Rorty's description.[30] In his genealogical works, Foucault aims at depicting the structures of power that allegedly prevail in Western societies. According to Foucault, power permeates every part of the social structure and controls every single practice of human life. Power in liberal societies, Foucault argues, is masked in the rhetoric of freedom and equality. It is not centralized in any specific institution. Rather power, according to Foucault, exists in a decentered

way and controls the public sphere and the private sphere as well. Given this description of Western societies, which is contrary to Rorty's, Foucault's politics also has an entirely different character from that of Rorty's politics. Although like Rorty, Foucault retreats to historicism from antifoundationalism, he does not move to liberalism from historicism, as Rorty does. Rather, in the case of Foucault, historicism leads him to a critique of liberalism, Consequently, Foucault advocates a politics of local resistence to power. However, Foucault unlike Habermas warns against conducting such resistances in the name of any positive ideal. For this would imply a retreat to the problematic universal theorizing.

Thus, Rorty and Foucault, who are both members of North Atlantic societies offer two opposing descriptions of these societies. Rorty's move from historicism to liberal politics is not self-evident.

In order to make such a move Rorty would have to defend his particular description of Western societies as an accurate one against Foucault's description. Rorty does offer such a defense against Foucault. However, it will be seen below that Rorty's defense undermines his professed distanciation from universal, normative criteria.

Rorty's liberal picture of Western societies is one that is characterised by a harmonious but irreconcilable divide between the public sphere and the private sphere. According to Rorty, Foucault disagrees with this picture because of his own normative commitment to the view that socio-political institutions must embody individual autonomy.[31] However, according to Rorty, given the variegated ideas of self-expression that are implied by autonomy, it cannot be expressed in a conflict free manner at the institutional level.[32] Hence, Rorty argues that institutions can only play a minimal role in an individual's life. This role is one of creating the conditions of minimizing pain that will give each person the private space for self creation. As it is apparent, Rorty's argument relies upon the normative criterion of freedom to justify its description of Western society. Rorty has an individualistic and a pluralistic view of freedom that is characteristic of the liberal tradition. According to this view, individuals are free when they have the ability to pursue their chosen needs in an unhindered manner. However, in defending Western societies in this manner, Rorty brings in precisely the distinction he wants to renounce : this being the distinction

between validity and socially acceped views.

Further, Rorty's description does not see Western societies as evolving into any other structures besides their current liberal ones.[33] In virtue of this Rorty's stance comes close to that of Francis Fukuyama, the U. S. State Department official who proclaimed the end of history.[34] History has ended, according to Fukuyama, because democratic egalatarianism has entrenched itself in the West during the post cold war era. Such a democratic consciousness, according to Fukuyama, has become internalized as a permanent aspect of Western society. Thus, Rorty like Fukuyama, views liberalism as the highest stage of political thought and conceives of all new events as revolving around liberalism. Rorty, thus, contradicts his professed goals in subscribing to an ethic at the end of history.

In tacitly adhering to a normative commitment to freedom, Rorty like the traditional approaches to philosophy faces the problem of meeting the sceptical challenge. He also has the onus of explaining how and why Western societies can be viewed as embodying this freedom. For as it has been argued above there are alternative accounts of Western societies, such as that of Foucault and Habermas that contradict Rorty's thesis. Thus, Rorty's move from anti-essentialism to a blind loyalty to his culture is not a historicist one. For there is no historical connection between being opposed to first principles and affiriming one's cultural practices as legitimate. Such a connection can be made only by transcending history.

Rorty's move from historicism to liberalism prevents him from doing justice to pluralism. His liberalism imposes the dominant vocabulary of a given society upon all others within that society. The basic problem underlying Rorty's approach is that he assumes society to be intergrated in a monolithic way. However, a look at any society reveals that it contains a wide number of groups and structures. Each group has its own vocabulary and hence within each society one finds a multiplicity of vocabularies. Rorty ignores this hybrid character of society by giving it a homogenous cast. Rorty's characterization of society reveals it to name only one vocabulary - this being that of the dominant section. Further, Rorty also implies that the disadvantaged cannot construct their own vocabularies and articulate their problems since they are too busy suffering to do so. Hence the task of the privileged liberal intellectual, according to Rorty,

is to construct their vocabulary for them by describing their experiences.[35] This, however, does not involve looking at things from the perspective of those who suffer. Rather the perspective of the dominant group is reinstated as the objective perspective of a dispassionate observer. As Rorty himself puts it, ''I claim that the force of ''us''is, typically, contrastive in the sense that it contrasts with a ''they'', which is also made up of human beings - the wrong sorts of human beings.''[36]

However, this ignores the factor of historical reality to which Rorty intends to be faithful. History has shown that the oppressed have often expressed their suffering in their own idiom and have struggled for doing away with it. Thus, for example in the sixties, during the civil rights movement in North America, African-Americans fought for equal rights by constructing their own vocabularty and struggling to express it. Further, when Rorty assigns the role of charitably describing the experiences of the disadvantaged to the dominant group, he reverts back to the problematic subject object model of knowledge. Thus, to assume as Rorty does that there is only one type of discourse in a given society is to adhere to a historicism.

Further, viewing a given society as homogenous in the Rortian way also implies that each society constitutes an unencumbered, self-contained unit ‚that has no interaction with any other society or culture, Yet a look at any metropolis or village whether in the West or in the East belies this notion. For exmple, in Bombay or London one finds a heterogenous mixture of people who come frcm many different racial, cultural, religious and national groups. This demonstrates that the various societies, nation states and nation states in the making have in the past and present interacted with one another. Hence, to view societies as self-contained, as Rorty does, is to uphold that each society has a homogenous, ahistorical essence.

A closer look at Rorty's liberal utopia makes his ahistoricism even clearer. Rorty's distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere reveals that the two do not interact with one another. The public, political sphere exists purely to give each agent a chance to fulfil his/her self in the private sphere of culture. The private sphere is ahistorical for within it individuals engage in acts of self-creation, according to their given capabilities, which do not have any significance in the public sphere of institutions. All theoretical

activity in being confined to the private sphere also becomes politically insignificant and ahistorical. Yet Rorty cannot substantiate this separation between private sphere and the public sphere on empirical grounds. The so-called private sphere of culture consists of diverse activities such as aesthetic, theoretical, pleasurable, etc.. However, although all these activities are *distinct* from the public sphere, they are *not isolated* from it. There is a give and take between culture and politics as is clear from many historical examples. Progressive ideas in the cultural realm have influenced politics. Thus, for example, the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau influenced the French Revolution. Similarly, the Indian Independence Movement had a theoretical base in the works of thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi. On the other hand, fascist culture has also influenced politics. For example, the films of Leni Riefenstahl emerged from Nazi politics of Hitler's Third Reich in West Germany and contributed to it. From the above it is clear that culture can affect people's lives in positive or negative way depending on its contents. Progressive cultural ideas constructively contribute to the growth and development of the people, whereas fascist cultural ideas destroy the lives of people. Thus culture does have political consequences. Rorty's endorsement of an irreconcilable public-private divide ignores this and artificially construes culture as ahistorical and individualistic. This in turn is headup with Rorty's sub-scription to Fukuyama's end of history thesis : Since the best possible form of politics has been actualized, there is no need for political theory. To quote Rorty, " The events which make us able to say new and interesting things about ourselves are, in this nonmetaphysical sense, more "essential" to us (at least to us relatively leisured intellectuals, inhabiting a stable and prosperous part of the world) than the events which change our shapes or our standards of living ("remaking" us in less "spiritual" ways)". [37] Thus, Rorty's conclusions regarding culture and theory are based upon his picture of a perfect society : a perfect society does not need theory, since it has reached its ultimate goal. However, it is a matter of great controversy whether Rorty can make such an assumption that transcends history.

The Ingredients of a Normative Theory

Rorty postulates a false dichotomy between universal humanity (as an abstract, atemporal category) and an individualist affiliation to a static

community. This dichotomy echoes the dilemmas of the representative model of knowledge in viewing human beings as having a universal essence or an individual essence. In order to escape the pitfalls of correspondence theory a historically engaged account of subjectivity is needed. On such a view, human beings are not cogitating egos, but are involved in a web of activities. However, historically engaged subjects are not static products of a particular society as Rorty seems to uphold. Rather, such subjects have a certain fluidity in virtue of the innumerable practices they perform. On account of their activities, human subjects partake of many different collectivities and groups that are constitutive of society. Each collectivity has its own practices, culture, history and vocabulary. Hence, any given society exhibits the complexities stratifications, multiplicities and differences that emerge from a variety of such coexisting collectivities. This multifariousness is in turn reflected in subjective identity. Further, since societies are not self-contained units, the confluences and tensions that arise from the mutual interaction of various societies are also constitutive of the subject's identity. Thus, a subject's identity is not a given essence that can be discovered by reflecting upon society. Rather the subject's identity is mutable. Further, this identity in virtue of not merely being given is also complex. It is complex because this identity is constituted within the wide and diverse web of the subject's activities. Hence, rather than passively apprehend their identities as given essences, subjects have to actively constitute and articulate their identities. In the process of actively articulating their identities, subjects are confronted with the issue of their involvement with traditions, cultures, experiences and hopes besides their own. In addressing this complex issue subjects engage in theoretical activity, which cannot occur from an ahistorical, archimedean vantage point or from Rorty's brand of historicism. Thus, only situated agents whose identities are diverse and fluid can participate in a historically engaged theoretical activity.

Rorty is right in recognizing that any attempt to renounce the encumbering needs and interests that constitute subjective indentity will only reintroduce the predicament of the representative model of theorizing. However, the predicaments underlying Rorty's own version of historicism reveal that in retaining the needs and interests of agents, one cannot renounce theory *per se.* In order to comprehend and articulate the indetity of subjects and the societies in which they are situated, theory is necessary. Such a theory distances itself

from the correspondence model and stresses on constructivism. It aims at describing social relations from numerous perspectives and artrticulates the possibility for social change. Such a theory is not the pastime of Rorty's ironist intellectuals who speak for others from a privileged perspective in society. Rorty's brand of theorizing occurs outside the web of social relations where ironists even out all the problems facing the numerous marginalized and disadvantaged strata of society into acts of self-creation that can even be cruel at times.

Therefore, theory is not intrinsically tied up with the elite sections of society. Rather, the marginalized and the disadvantaged sections can also be engaged in theory. The diverse groups in societies construct theory by speaking for themseleves out of their own experiences. Theory would then reveal the inequalities and oppressions that face the various marginalized groups. This, in turn, would allow theory to function as a new description of social relations having the critical power to serve as a force of social change.

In the words of Edward Said, theory would then'' .... speak of overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, white and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and on the peripheries, past as well as present and future; these territories and histories can only be seen from the perspective of the whole secular human history.''[38] One can add that talking this way consists in a historically involved critical theory. Such a discourse is a pre-condition for acting morally by selectively appropriating the practices of a given society.

Rorty accurately recognizes the need to pay heed to the plurality of societies and individual differences in settling issues concerning the validity of pracitce. Further, Rorty also rightly recognizes the limitation of ultimate first principles that will serve as a theoretical, normative base in this endeavour. His turn to activities in which language plays a central role is commendable. However, Rorty's mistake lies in assuming that the turn to history makes theory irrelevant. Rorty's identification of theory *per se* with foundational theory is narrow. Further, this rejection of theory on the basis of the public-private divide in liberalism is arbitrary. Theory can, thus, be historically responsible and nonfoundational.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4.   Richard Dien Winfield, *Reason and Justice*, (Albany : State University of New York, 1988), P. 10.

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