Philosophy as Social Hope:

Rorty’s Critique of Epistemology

Rorty’s anti-Platonism, or more specifically, his anti-dualism, attacks the privileged quasi-scientific character of western philosophy, a methodological fetishism about ‘getting things in the right way’. Such a disciplinary privilege over accurately representing reality, resting upon the transcendental/doxactic divide, determines the methodological controversies between the sciences in their pursuit of capturing the essence of reality, human or nonhuman. Philosophy’s professionalization of pronouncing One way the reality is, or redemptive truth, as Rorty claims it, brings it at the margin in relation to other areas of culture. To him, the goal of epistemology is not distinct from the democratic utopia of social solidarity and, in this regard, the search for the antecedent truths determining the sense of who we are and what we should do is misleading, which also weakens our social fabric. Rorty questions the supremacy of the outlived, uninteresting Platonic vocabulary and revisits philosophy as cultural politics, a labored, ‘useful’, literary position that has to forgo its ‘ambition for transcendence’ and find a way to strike a concord with other discourses. The paper examines Rorty’s post-philosophical, post-positivist critique that revisits epistemology in an interesting way hitherto caught in the methodologically-stricken language of accurate representation. In revisiting knowledge as collaborative inquiry having ‘contingent starting points’, the business of ‘grounding’ our beliefs in an overarching framework gets replaced with trusting human rationality in a hermeneutic-conversational realm. In this conversational shift, the disinterested philosophical wisdom gets deprofessionalized in the rational, persuasive task of cultural politics, in which the ideal of social hope may get realized.
Introduction

Rorty’s critique of western philosophy or philosophy-as-epistemology, as he terms it, is critical of the very subject-matter of Philosophy that is secured upon the Platonic bivalence. Systematic philosophy essentially operates on splitting the subject-matter (nature vs. history, or facts vs. value), method (objectivation vs. reflection), faculty (reason vs. imagination) and normalizing or objectivising them around ‘the discovery of a permanent framework of inquiry’.¹ It has been the business of philosophy, systematic, or therapeutic, either in positing or edifying, Rorty argues, that there are philosophical questions of fundamental importance. History of western philosophy, as he views it, is always that of finding a successor to epistemology that centers around giving a Grand theory about the way reality is. Rorty’s ‘epistemological behaviorism’, a non-representational position pace James, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Sellars, Kuhn questions the very business of ‘accurate representation of reality’ in the quasi-divinity of mind or language as the successor medium. To him, an epistemic inquiry is a coordinated activity toward purposive goals where incommensurability does not entail incompatibility. Attempts to objectivize epistemology, is also not a ‘useful

vocabulary’ now, Rorty concedes. It has converted philosophy ‘into a boring academic specialty’, a scholastic pursuit after a canonical, final commensurating vocabulary that stops the flow of conversation in a non-interesting way. The professionalization, in ‘knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well’, and that there is a philosophical method, according to Rorty, is a necessary evil that has marginalized philosophy in relation to other areas of culture. He revisits philosophy as cultural politics, a labored task that places it along other areas of culture. This shift from being transcendental to conversational is progressive that does not split ‘will to truth’ and ‘will to happiness’ in exploring better human conditions. It also dehierarchizes epistemology built around rigid disciplinary boundaries in the positivistic credo of reaching closer to reality. In what follows the paper examines the quasi-scientificity of philosophy and the sciences in pursuit of giving a grand unified theory of reality that prevents them from becoming conversational in useful ways. Philosophy can participate in this cultural discourse only when it gives up its privileged position of announcing the absolute conception of reality.

Ontological Priority, Methodological Differentiation and Epistemic Inquiry

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2} Ibid, p. 385.}\]
Rorty’s critique of quasi-scientific aspirations of philosophy to find the absolute truth, the intrinsic nature of reality attacks the Platonist as well as the Positivist as they both ‘ground’ truth in a transcendental, atemporal world beyond the space of conversation, the inexhaustible descriptions and explanations of the same situation. Theorization of truth and the use of terms such as ‘objectivity’, ‘rationality’ and ‘method’ are hooked on the postulation of this world of Really real that has inspired the scientific inquiries and the methodological precision henceforth. The ontological priority to the world outside has dictated philosophy’s search in the western history for finding the right methodological key that fits the ‘way reality is’. This search, Rorty argues, rests on the principle that only a certain vocabulary works because it rightly fits the essential nature of things, humans or nature. As a result, philosophy turns quasi-scientific, ‘Galilean’ in its approach. The Galilean success rests on the claim that the mathematized vocabulary works because it fits well the infinite, cold and comfortless nature of physical reality (as against the animistic, teleological and anthropomorphic account), or as the nature wants it to be described.

Modern philosophy is awed at the success of science to have found Nature’s own vocabulary and is never able to overcome this fetishism for scientific method in search for the objective conception of reality. The Cartesian vocabulary of ‘clarity’ in self-certitude (devoid of any confusion) and the Lockean reductionist language of simple ideas are attempts to write in the Galilean cold language
devoid of any metaphysical and moral comfort. The search for finding the right
methodological key, Rorty argues, however, gets over in the Kantian claim to
have constructed the lock (the a priori forms) behind that the keys get fitted into.
Analytic and phenomenological approaches too rely on the scientific, methodical
rigor to eliminate the prejudiced, the non-essential. Assumption of essentiality,
the intrinsic nature of reality, physical or non-physical, drives the methodological
precision toward getting closer to reality. Social sciences too trend on this
positivistic rigor to make predictive generalizations about the social reality, the
way it wants to be described.

The Diltheyian Naturwissenschaften and Geisteswissenschaften distinction,
however, demands the liberation of the human-social sciences and an exclusive
vocabulary to understand the meaning-impregnated human reality. The
methodological debate intensified in this way is grounded in the core belief that
the physical and the human worlds are essentially distinct, and therefore
‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’ serve as two separate adequate methods. By
saying that human reality is semantically constituted, the human-social sciences
announce that the physical world is a-linguistic, a mind-independent reality
subject to causal explanation. Dividing the domains of inquiry as distinctively
suitable to ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’ is to create an unbridgeable or
rather a disastrous gap between ‘facts’ and ‘values’. This gap becomes all the
more alarming when the social researches pattern themselves on the Galilean
model in attempting to be successful in making predictive generalizations but refraining from improving human conditions. Maintaining value-neutrality by segregating the descriptive and evaluative in human matters (to Rorty it is unimaginable how any term cannot be used *evaluatively*) is to leave policy matters to be decided by a different set of people who seem to ‘live on the other side’. A quarrel between a value-free or hermeneutic social science, according to Rorty, is a misguided one in the want of a common goal such as making accurate generalizations about the implications of certain policies. ‘Explanation’ and ‘understanding’ do not contrast the way ‘the abstract contrasts with the concrete’, he argues. They are not opposed ways of doing social science; they are rather more or less useful vocabularies for different purposes. For making predictions and evaluating a policy-decision, two different vocabularies can stake their claims for their usefulness. The controversy over the value-free or hermeneutic social science, Rorty argues, is mistakenly about asserting the supremacy of One vocabulary that can predict and control and, at the same time, decide what is just for fellow-humans. The supremacy of one vocabulary is to assume the intrinsic nature of human reality and correspondence to that determines the success of a methodology. “To be told that only a certain vocabulary is *suited* to human beings or human societies, that only *that* vocabulary permits us to “understand” them, is the seventeenth-century myth of Nature’s Own Vocabulary all over again”, Rorty

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argues.\textsuperscript{4} The deadlock over the scientific or hermeneutic discourses whether they have or do not have any intrinsic connection can get over when the idea of epistemic inquiry is taken as purposive, coordinated activity rather than drawing a ‘principled distinction between man and nature, announcing that the ontological difference dictates a methodological difference’.\textsuperscript{5} It is only when we stop asking the epistemologically pregnant question about the method to get us right, closer to reality can we understand methods as tools, as instruments that work well, or more useful to cope with reality. That a vocabulary works better because the reality is so is a mistake.

Rorty insists that we need to change the language of a thing as ‘so constituted’, interpretively or non-interpretively having an intrinsic character of its own. It is not the case that we understand our fellow-humans and their actions within a ‘web of meaning’ and the fossils, for example, are probably understood in a non-relational language. An understanding about the nature of a thing is about knowing how it is ‘constituted’ in relation to other things, by a web of meanings within the “intra-disciplinary criteria”. Things make sense in relation to other things, in relation to the existing terminology which helps gloss on new meanings to the puzzling objects till a new terminology, a new discipline gets stabilized. The birth of a new science or a new vocabulary is thus ‘hermeneutic’ in nature and, Rorty sees no difference between Galileo’s mathematized vocabulary

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, p. 199.
or Darwinian evolution or what ‘biblical exegetes, literary critics, or historians of culture do’ in this regard.\textsuperscript{6} This does not make hermeneutics special, an overarching discipline or method. The point that Rorty emphasizes is that an inquiry about the physical object or a text, for that matter, is holistic, ‘a coherent narrative which will incorporate the initial object’\textsuperscript{7}. The hermeneutics of sciences negates the idea of any special vocabulary or method that stands to the putative ontological status of things. Epistemology is no more than a matter of good epistemic practices within the Kuhnian idea of ‘normal science’ as puzzle solving activity refined, reformulated against the existing jargons.

The idea of epistemic privilege goes hand-in-hand with moral privilege to position certain cultures or discourses over the others. This epistemic baggage makes science and equally philosophy pre-eminent in making pronouncement about the absolute conception of reality. The unlabored philosophical privilege of finding the very ‘language’ of mapping the outside reality or pronouncing the ‘redemptive truths’, as Rorty puts it, weakens our social fabric. For, the sense of who we are and what we should do is dictated by certain foundational truths rather than being a work of our shared labor. In the pragmatic construal, an epistemic inquiry is a coordinated, purposive activity that cuts across disciplinary boundaries. Once we give up the idea of methodological dominance to attain truth as an end-in-itself, the dichotomies between mental/physical,


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, p. 200.
understanding/explanation, less objective/more objective become spurious. It is the contingent needs and purposes that guide our epistemic activities and the success of methodologies as the tools of inquiry depend on coping with reality more effectively. The question between different tools is not about which one ‘has got the universe right’. Instead, “the purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring about consensus on the ends to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behavior is not inquiry but simply wordplay’.” Since epistemic inquiries, in the Kuhnian sense, are problem-solving activities, drawing a line of disciplinary privilege between the ‘cognitive and non-cognitive’, serious and non-serious domains prevents them entering into fruitful coordinated efforts. To him, ‘vocabularies are useful or useless, good or bad, helpful or misleading, sensitive or coarse, and so on; but they are not "more objective” or "less objective” nor more or less "scientific”.’

The Platonic dream of perfect knowledge, surpassing all conceptual confusions and opening ourselves to the world outside as the mappers of some extra-linguistic reality, Rorty says, makes knowledge ‘into something supernatural, a kind of miracle’ and refrains epistemology to relate to other disciplines in an interesting way. This pseudo conception of expert culture, a privileged discourse that enjoys a special relation to reality is a

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desire for transcendence objectivising the sense of who we are. To him, the idea of
specialty is not more than seeing ‘how things hung together’; there is no special
‘method’ to solve some special ‘problem’, with some universal regulative
principles. In the following section, I examine Rorty’s arguments against any such
ambition and repositioning of philosophy within the literary culture as
suggesting more ways to be human, increasing the chances of human happiness.

Cultural Politics, Philosophy and Social Hope

Positing that there is an absolute conception of reality, the objective truth to
which we humans are related in special ways and derive our moral sense is the
language of offering ‘redemptive truths’ that philosophy, religion and science
may equally offer. Relativism, in matters of morality, Rorty concedes, is still an
interesting position, but to say that we make sense of our lives and purposes in
the light of some objective truths is not a tenable position. Philosophically, such a
claim toward a grand theory, solving a jigsaw puzzle, or cracking the Code of
codes complies with cogito-centricity. To know the self is to know everything; and
an incorrigible experience of this kind is to believe that we humans are related to
this mental stuff in a special way. To Rorty, this is an intriguing idea of positing
qualia or raw feel that we human beings possess but zombies do not. It is like
separating pain from pain behavior and assigning some philosophical meaning to pain experiences which are not known to us in ordinary ways. Such scholastic pursuits, he argues, are of no interest to the like-minded finitists and materialists; they can only influence the Chalmers-leaning or Dennett-leaning philosophy departments for believing or not believing in the quest for ‘what it is to be a human’. Claiming supremacy in this uninteresting, contemplative, leisured positioning (which demeans the sweaty practicality also) and, pronouncing redemptive truth in the similar vein, is the reason for philosophy’s marginality. Rorty revisits philosophy as cultural politics, changing its role from epistemology to social hope, a more powerful relation between knowledge and social solidarity than between knowledge and power.

Philosophy as cultural politics in an interesting, useful cultural position along other areas but takes away the justificatory authority from it. Following Brandom, a neo-Hegelian, Rorty argues for the priority of the social or cultural politics over ontology. The priority of the social alludes to the Heideggerian notion of the primordiality of zuhandenheit. To Brandom, the question of authority and also that of epistemic authority belongs to the society and any belief in the ideas of truth, reality, objectivity other than the society are the ‘disguised moves’. A belief, or let’s say, a new God-report, or for that matter the discovery of a new physical particle finds its reliability within the already existing belief-system. A new God-report makes sense only with reference to the sacred scriptures, religious sects
and, most importantly, with respect to our own understanding of what God wants us to do; it must live up to the previous expectations. Brandom’s inferentialism rejects any such perceptual report establishing or repudiating a truth, dislocated from the cultural-political initiatives. Rorty agrees with Brandom that our ‘assertions are assumptions of responsibility to the other members of the society’. In Brandom (who is not a utilitarian), he finds support to James’ pragmatism. The pragmatic standpoint here is that the society is the last authority in matters of our beliefs and social practices on the sole criterion of their advantages or disadvantages. There is no other philosophical ‘truth’ or mysterious theological authority. For James, we believe in the ideas of God, Truth, Objectivity because our practices are improved so by them. Or to put it differently, ‘truth and reality exist for the sake of social practices, rather than vice-versa’. Hence, there is no way to separate the question of ‘will to truth’ from that of ‘will to happiness’.

In this so-called conflict between the question of intellectual purity and moral slackness, Rorty finds a space which he defines as ‘cultural politics’. We play cultural politics when we reason that the white people should stop calling the black people as ‘niggers’, for example. In the similar vein ‘should the scientists continue investigating the correlation of skin color and intelligence’ is a matter of cultural politics that cannot be answered philosophically or scientifically. Cultural

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11 See Rorty, 2007. P. 7
politics is about evolving a conversation as to whether we should practice or
discard certain beliefs, certain terms from our discourse from the standpoint of
utilitarian ethic. This line of thinking that ‘ancestors does matter’ needs to be seen
in fresh light of evaluating short-term dangers over long-term benefits. Rorty’s
suggestion is that we may replace it with the talk of genes, for medical purposes,
rather than the talk of race and racism. Philosophy may play a useful task in
unsettling and reweaving beliefs; constantly changing the conversation and
persuading people that taking one side rather than another makes a significant
difference to our social hopes and programs of action. However, philosophy is
not capable of giving us a grand theory of risk-management. For, each person is
capable of this discourse and cultural politics, he says, is ‘the least norm-governed
human activity’.12 This conversational arena of dropping some beliefs does not
consider that there are some ontological, antecedent truths of importance; for
human happiness or the idea of a good global society does not require any such
foundation.

Rorty’s idea of cultural politics revisits the relation between philosophy,
poetry and sophistry and the controversies surrounding them. The first
controversy is whether human beings can realize their special powers to the
fullest by using reason or imagination, aggravated by the romanticists and now
represented as C.P. Snow’s ‘two-culture syndrome’. The second line of thinking

University Press, p. 21.
which is deeply rooted in the Platonic legacy is the division of the society
between the ‘lovers of truth’ and the ‘deniers of truth’. To put the lovers as well as
the deniers of truth with the lovers of imagination crucially requires being
tolerant to the other side. To put philosophy and sophistry together is
undoubtedly upsetting. In Plato’s standard of ‘the love of truth’, they are
antithetical. But, Rorty calls himself a neo-sophist and argues that being anti-
Platonic (or more specifically anti-dualist or anti-essentialist) is not tantamount to
be an irrationalist. He defines his rationalism in the hermeneutic-humanist stance
of democratizing knowledge and realizing self-sufficiency in imaginative ways
rather than in the redemption of any truth. Sophistry and poetry, in this regard,
share their aversion to the natural science, the mathematized physics for its
‘universalist grandeur’ – a desire to give an overarching framework of reality.
Romanticism, however, equally faces the charges for claiming what Isaiah Berlin
terms ‘depth’ or ‘profundity’ – an experience of the ineffable in imaginative
venturing. To Rorty, both the metaphors of ‘grandeur’ and ‘depth’, subsisted on
the philosophical rationality and poetic geniality, are public relation gimmicks that
have no reliability.

Rorty takes up this controversy between ‘grandeur’ and ‘profundity’ further
by discussing two of Habermas’s distinctions made in his book The Philosophical
Discourse of Modernity (1985). The first distinction is between the ‘subject-centered
reason’ and ‘communicative rationality’ and the second is between ‘reason’ and
'an other to reason'. The idea of subject-centric reason, is the Platonic idea of a natural endowment, the self’s eternal co-naturality with the immaterial world. As opposed to this, Habermas’ idea of communicative reason considers rationality emerging from social practices, or what Brandom terms, in ‘the game of giving and asking for reasons’. The subject-centric reason, Rorty argues circumvents all conversations, opinions, competing claims and heads straight to knowledge. Replacing it with communicative rationality is to “see truth as what is likely to emerge from free and imaginative conversation”. This shift replaces knowledge, a possible mental state of enjoyment (by virtue of being closer to reality than opinions and beliefs) with consensus, arrived at by rational, persuasive argumentation. It helps us to see human cooperation and success in solving puzzles and handling things in rather small ways and abandons any metaphysical comfort of ‘universal validity’ over agreeable consensus.

The idea of ‘an other to reason’ in Habermas characterizes mystic insights, poetic geniuses, religious faith, imaginative power, and authentic self-expression – the claims of superiority over reason. Habermas avoids the seduction of such romanticists’ claims and upholds universal validity as the goal of inquiry. Rorty argues that these ‘other to reasons’ are short-cuts around conversation and persuasion, and are guarded to ‘compete in the market place of ideas’. He grants no concession to the Platonists or to the Romanticists either (though the latter

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explodes the Platonist-universalist idea of the Truth in the metaphor of depth).

Rorty has recourse to Isaiah Berlin’s view that universalism-romanticism contrast
is a variance of the idea of the ‘infinite’. While universalism takes the idea of
infinity, let’s say, in the idea of God, as encompassing everything,
unchallengeable to any outside source; the romanticists’ idea of infinity is to
break away from all limitations, and as Rorty himself puts it, ‘the idea of perfect
freedom decoupled from that of perfect knowledge and of affiliation with the
invulnerable’14 Both the universalist grandeur, in the capacity of human reason,
and depth or ineffability in the ‘other to reason’, he argues, are moves away from
human finitude - the contingent solutions to contingent problems. They
dramatize the needs of intersubjectivity and novelty respectively. A pragmatist
solution pace Dewy to him is to balance the need for consensus and the need for
novelty. This balancing requires putting our beliefs and practices to rational
argumentation toward agreeable solutions which will bring moral responsibility
toward other fellow-citizens. This conversational-humanist shift liberates the
Platonic universalism from the defect of glossing the metaphysical varnish of
universal validity, and at the same time bestows responsibility to the newer,
imaginative ways to be human that the romanticists lack in.

Philosophy, according to Rorty, was a transitional genre, offering humanity
novel solutions, ‘when things seem to be falling apart’. One such example is

University Press, p. 83.
replacing love of God with love of truth or reason that satisfied the need of people, at the same time. Though this age of commonsensical materialists which cares for the respect and happiness for all does not face any such cultural crisis, an important turn that has taken place after Kant, from the time of Hegel, in thinkers like Marx that philosophy cannot offer any redemptive truths, truths independently of human needs and interests. Rorty’s argument is that if professionalization is the reason for the marginality of philosophy, relooking it as a literary genre can make it a useful discourse. From the literary perspective, philosophy and, so is religion, optional. They can be sought for more options, more ways to be human. From this perspective they are not obsessions with the nonhuman in the cognitive and non-cognitive ways respectively. The literary culture treats them as “noncognitive relations to other human beings, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs. These artifacts provide a sense of alternative ways of being human”. The non-cognitive relation to the humans replaces the question of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ with novelty and hope. And this is a desirable change according to Rorty. “It represents a desirable replacement of bad questions like “what is Being?”, “what is really real?”, and “what is man?” with the sensible question “Does anybody have any new ideas about what we human beings might manage to make of ourselves?” This shift strikes a balance between the persuasion for novel ways to

solve our problems and moral responsibility toward increasing the chances of happiness. The present materialist and experimentalist world that cares for equality and justice for all is disillusioned with the idea of ‘infinity’, Rorty concedes. Philosophy can assert its usefulness by reweaving our beliefs in imaginative ways, by evolving a conversation, rather than circumventing it in some grand picture of the world. Within this conversational, literary culture philosophy can align itself with other areas in an interesting way. To him, philosophy cannot be aconversational, having its relation to die sache selbst; rather, “the value of philosophy itself is a matter of its relation not to the subject matter but to the rest of the conversation of mankind”.\(^{16}\) This alone is the sign of self-reliance.

Revisiting philosophy within the pragmatic fold of a useful vocabulary demolishes the privileged language of redemptive truths and treats epistemology as a social hope in the realization of democratic ideal – the Good Global Society. A democratic utopia of this kind sees no demarcation between the sciences, between theory and practice when they all are part of ‘the same endeavor to make life better’. Such a goal, however, requires trusting human abilities and improving coordinated activities, or recognizing what Putnam calls ‘the epistemological justification in democracy’ - a condition to exercise human intelligence to the fullest. In Putnam’s views “democracy is not just one form of social life among

\(^{16}\) Ibid, p. 129.
other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems”\textsuperscript{17}. The epistemological justification, at the same time, alters the fate of philosophy as a critique (without any authority of intelligence) to the beliefs, institutions, customs, policies with respect to their bearing upon good and not the Good. In the Deweyian spirit, Rorty exhorts that what matters to the pragmatists, “is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness” and, that, “this goal is not written in the stars…”\textsuperscript{18}. Philosophy democratizes itself when it aligns with other discourses, experiments with new ways of being human rather than searching some foundational, antecedent truths.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Revisiting Philosophy from the literary perspective makes it one among many areas of culture. Since all epistemic inquiries, in the culture of intellectual-moral progress, are problem-solving activities, science and philosophy are not any different. There are no final solutions to the human problems in any generation. But the desire for a better world, a hope for a democratic world

requires epistemology to be looked at as a matter of ‘increased abilities’ rather than ‘increased knowledge’. The desire for transcendence in making preeminent claims about absolute truth is not a useful vocabulary. Instead of a being a tribunal of reason, a final arbiter in all matters, philosophy can be seen only as ‘one of the techniques for reweaving our vocabulary of moral deliberation in order to accommodate new belief’ to effect change, improve human conditions.\textsuperscript{19} Rorty’s project of epistemology as social hope, in the trajectory of ‘beyond methods’ overtrusts human rationality toward the idea of social solidarity not because of the shareability of the core self but because we all feel pain and humiliation in the same manner. This alone is the pragmatic ‘foundation’ to our epistemic enterprise.

References