The Self as an Object of Criticism:
Richard Rorty's Denial of the Objectivity of Truth

Do Kien Trung, Kobe University, Japan

Abstract

Denial of the objectivity of truth in the Self's creation is one of the most critiqued aspects for which Richard Rorty received both consensus and contradiction. Rorty's post-philosophical response to the human language debate lies in the intersection between the younger Heidegger who rejected an ambitious desire to describe the linguistic turn as a Platonic reference structure, which separate the Self from contingency in social practice, and the later Wittgenstein who denied a possible existence of a priori space of Kant's transcendental idealism in which sociology and sciences cannot penetrate. If the role of truth is to stimulate thought and motivate action, the essence of language cannot be described merely as an intermediate tool between the Self and reality. Moreover, if all problems of traditional philosophy can be resolved when the general structure of language is exposed, we must consider that language has supreme authority in which the limitation in our language is the limitation of the world. Rorty overcomes those restrictions by emphasizing that there is no abstract authority independent from rational justification whose only authority is conviction via human discourse. By focusing on discourse, Rorty separates his neo-pragmatism from the experience-focused pragmatism of his predecessors. This article focuses on the two most controversial ideas of Rorty's account of the Self: firstly, the Self's ideal is merely its narrative; secondly, language cannot precede the Self's existence.

Keywords: Richard Rorty, contingency of language, community of language, pragmatism, objectivity of truth

Introduction

Rejection of the objectivity of truth, or denial of the role of language as a general structure to describe reality as "a limited whole" leads Rorty to align with pragmatism, a philosophical movement founded by Charles Peirce along with William James. However, Rorty's departure from traditional pragmatism has received a lot of criticism from Peircean scholars such as Susan Haack and Cheryl Misak. While Rorty refused every theory of representation, promoting an anti-representationalist paradigm, Peirce embraced the theory of representation as progress in the sciences which related to truth. Moreover, Rorty's denial of truth as a theory is no different from James' account of "concrete truths rather than abstract Truth"; therefore, Rorty's anti-representationalism did not extend beyond James's "ideal set of formulations" and Peirce's ultimate representation which "surely refers to something like a set of propositions" (Haack, 2006). Rorty rejects Peirce's account of "truth as a belief that would remain forever justified" (Misak, 2013) and stresses that the concept of truth in Peirce's pragmaticism did not provide any practical guidance. He asserted that Peirce's notion of truth was a "pragmatic elucidation" that did not create a metaphysical concept but confirmed our beliefs on "something at which we aim that goes beyond what seems right to us here and now." (Misak, 2013) Rorty doubted the necessity of internalization and recursive structure in language learnability; and from his standpoint, meaning, truth and learnable languages are closely related to each other in which people do not need to internalize themselves to learn and understand language. However, there must be certain areas where language expresses its existence in being. Rationality must have nature to make sense, and interpretation must exist in interpersonal communication to make conversation understandable (Davidson)[1]. Rorty expands his research on the mind-body identity theory by challenging the notion that we can draw a probable line between the conceptual and the empirical (Bernstein, 2010). One of the most important consistencies in Rorty's thought is the challenge of any attempt to create a new metaphysics in contemporary philosophy in which language is separated from its contingency and adaptation in social practice. His meta-philosophy emphasizes *"understanding and criticizing"* (Bernstein, 2010) that truth must be replaced by justification. The mind-body problem, particularly his argument on Descartes's modern philosophy of epistemic expression to identify the mind-body issue, became the central topic for Rorty's critique. Robert Brandom pointed out that Descartes "defined the mind in terms of its relation to our knowledge of it" (Brandom, 2000), and the cognitive approach must take place in a perfect cognitive condition in which impossibility must be excluded. The human mind, in this metaphysical framework, is externalized by our exact interpretations thereof. Rorty denies this modern metaphysics as an "incorrigibility" in his metaphilosophy, especially in his concept of final vocabulary.

The Self's Ideal Is Its Narrative

"The linguistic turn" is nothing more than an attempt to replace traditional metaphysics with a new form under a new name; Rorty stresses this argument in his research on Wittgenstein and Heidegger. The central framework of Rortian – anti-representationalism – comes from Wittgenstein's later work that overcomes and denies the ambitious exposure of a defined general structure of language, in which the problems are solved. Istvan Danka mentions that Rorty found in the later Wittgenstein the idea of anti-representationalism that "provides good arguments against representationalism without mysticism" (Danka, 2011, p. 68) as an opposite of Schopenhauerian mystical thinkers.

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[1] Interview: The Rorty Discussion with Donald Davidson (http://sociologicalimagination.org/archives/12993)

Wittgenstein, Rorty's inspiration to explore how thinking is expressed in language, was mostly concerned about the dissonance between thought and writing as well as its aesthetic presentation, in other words, the disparity between how we think and how we write about a particular idea. Early Wittgenstein tried to discover a systematic structure of logical language in which the dispute between facts and propositions could be easily solved. Because of the statement "True propositions are correct representations of facts; knowing a fact is, therefore, holding a true proposition about it" (Danka, 2011, p. 70), Rorty assumed that early Wittgenstein was responsible for representationalism that placed language into a supreme position in traditional metaphysics as a mirror of reality. However, later Wittgenstein realized that instead of complete dependence on a priori discipline and grammar, the better way is to release mind flows in uncountable discourses and metaphors. This change creates a free space in which the "knowing subject" can enhance conversation with blank spaces, unspeaking, and unwriting that can be re-created in different contexts by other writers – a discontinuity in the contingency of language. From the beginning of a conversation, participants produce perception through propositions, cutting the stream of life with descriptions of the subjects and objects of the conversation. These slices have their disciplines to express meaning in a determined space and time.

When a conversation is formed, those partners start their "language game" (Wittgenstein's concept) with their own motivation and purpose, and create the meaning of the conversation by re-creating their Self without pre-determined suppositions. No one, including the partners have precise knowledge of one another's "final vocabulary;" therefore, the conversation is unpredictable to participants, and enable others to re-describe. When the conversation ends, the meaning will complete its existence as a form of the Self's creation. Every new attempt to re-create the conversation is merely a rethinking and recollection with new meaning in a new slice of the stream of life. We cannot determine the story's realm of existence in the sense of the "knowing subject."

> How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe games to him, and we might add: "This and similar things are called 'games'". And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is? – But this is not. ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary – for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all (Except for that special purpose.). (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 33)

This discontinuity in the contingency of language is called "justification", a concept used by Rorty to describe what he stresses as the creation of a part of our Self by producing our intellect. He agrees with Nietzsche that "this sort of self-knowledge we are not coming to know a truth which was out there (or here) all the time […] The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home." (Rorty, 1989, p.27). The Self produces its existence via language in context with a specific purpose in an interrupted slice in a continuous flow of contingency.

A conversation is a single moment in the life process, giving it structure, morphology, and direction. A language game begins to carry the dynamic dimension of deployment in time. In other words, the emergence of a conversation from the flow of life also means a break with the time of practice; the birth of a new transformation with the beginning and the end, a configuration with its own time. Language games are also structured by principles, but in the

intention of human action. These rules are born of the playing process, in the material structure of the object and in the social context.

Obviously, there must be some premises to produce a conversation for every participant. For instance, they must understand each other's language and accept a discipline, like grammar, as the game rule before any conversation. However, those pre-existing premises are neither the cause of the conversation nor the final purpose that the participants want to discover. They can think of this "pre-existence" as a platform where the "knowing subject" transforms along the road of self-knowledge. A conversation creates an artificial world of intentional structure; but in the conversation itself, there is no element that clearly shows intention. Rather, participants in a "language game" can pursue many different intentions. Thus, a conversation is just an empty shell that can be filled with endless possibilities. Conversation creates a contextual understanding of one act, from multiple perspectives. These leads to an intersubjectivity in a linguistic community towards a common understanding, while at the same time shaping the character of the individual.

This view received a lot of criticisms from contemporary philosophers such as Habermas and Nancy Fraser. Richard Bernstein named "transcendental pragmatism" for Habermas's theory of communication in which Habermas played an important role in the history of pragmatism. Apparently, Habermas did not agree with all of Rorty's arguments on the use of language. Edward Grippe mentions that Habermas pointed out the weakness in the Rorty's description of language with two issues: first, Rorty did not clearly separate the position of the participant and the observer in a communication model; even Rorty tried to erase this line by the assertion of the intersubjectivity of the participant and the observer when joining the stories of each other in the community of language; second, Rorty did not give any critical standards to evaluate and distinguish the language using for the useful actions and the language using for the understanding. Regarding the first argument, what Habermas disagrees with Rorty is what Rorty emphasizes in his view of the intersubjectivity that in a conversation between participants there is no room for isolation and separation from conversation content. As soon as a person participates in a conversation, that person's narrative is bound to engage in a relationship with the narratives of others so that a person can reach the interpretation and understanding of the story based on the premise of a common consensus about grammar and language structure. The "critical standards" that Habermas produces in the second argument is an example of an abandonment of an eternally fundamental metaphysics in which a reference system, not an external purpose of the language, is necessary for the identification and evaluation of an intentional language behavior. However, it is not that Rorty denies the role of cognitive standards, nor does Rorty make himself a nihilist, who does not admit any criteria. The "standard" in Rorty's theory is the continuity of re-description objects and thereby re-description the Self in its contingency. Although emphasizing the formation of new vocabulary in the change of language expression, Rorty does not claim that the cognitive subject has the ability to create the new vocabulary for himself outside the community of language. There are always linguistic premises with narrative structures passed down through generations in the community of language. Thus, Rorty used the concept of "re-description," while Eduardo Mendieta used the concept of "re-inscription" to talk about Rorty's point of view, and through this re-description, the cognitive subject is able to construct his new vocabulary; not because of his/her subjective will, but the changes in reality, as Rorty insists on the French Revolution. As a successor of Dewey, Rorty usually mentions that human cognitive process is guided, Arthur Fine wrote, "by intelligence, which continually looks ahead to the consequences of those choices and adjusts how criteria are applied, so as to further what look like the most promising results – insofar as one can tell." (Misak, 2007, p. 56)

Nancy Fraser, on the other hand, criticized Rorty for the political aspect of the community of language as a prerequisite for the formation of the Self. In her article "Why Overcoming Prejudice is Not Enough: A Rejoinder to Richard Rorty", Fraser points out that the ideological impacts and socio-political tendencies after the Vietnam War have led to a cultural revolution in which the emphasis of social priority on the minority or disadvantaged groups such as women and homosexuals have deepened the differences to the point of opposing each other. A Leftist proposal, according to Rorty, is the return to the pre-Vietnam War way with the economic development priority and the elimination of economic inequality, particularly in redistribution, rather than trying to deepen the cultural differences. Rorty's goal, in addition to fair redistribution, is to share the value of humanity to seek a solidarity among different groups. Rorty avoids two extremes in shaping the individual and the group in capitalist society, which is an extreme economic tendency in Karl Marx's view of the material production (characterized by the view of social being determines social consciousness), and the other tendency in Max Weber's idealism in which it exaggerates the power of religious consciousness (specifically, the Protestant ethic) to build a strong and just capitalist society. By combining both economic and human factors, Rorty believes that the confrontation and injustice of social groups can be solved by engaging in dialogue and seeking for the interpenetration in the unified humanity. Although agreeing with Rorty that "the identity model of recognition" (Fraser, 2000, p. 23) was no longer appropriate in identifying characteristics and intentions of individuals and groups in society, Fraser argues that redistribution is not a radical solution, not only that, the identification of the individual counts only on the identified characteristics of the group where the individual belongs has locked the individual in the characteristics of the group. In other words, Rorty seems to replace a fundamental metaphysical paradigm in thinking with a different metaphysics, the community of language. This, Fraser observes, avoids personal recognition as a complete entity that can connects and expresses itself to all elements of society. Individuals are not utterly dependent on the group identity but can itself recognize its characteristics by extending the space of activity to the whole society. However, Fraser's proposal relies too much on a force majeure premise, a diverse society of groups where individuals are free to choose the space that represents their identity and the group they see fit. This proposal is not feasible in a closed society, a uniform society, where individuals have no more than one choice group. Besides, all individuals can only characterize the individual identity in a particular group. Individuals, as cognitive entities, cannot exist outside the group. Even if the individual searches for the other group that he feels comfortable with, once he joins the group, he is forced to inherit an existing language and vocabulary of the group to re-describe his/her Self. That is, every choice comes with a price to pay, his/her story must be involved in the other person's accounts to form the intersubjectivity in the community of language to shape the identity.

Language Cannot Precede Its Existence

Rorty finds similarities between the younger Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein regarding one's denial and escape from the contingency of existence in which they are involved. In "Being and Time", Heidegger denies the traditional way of thinking that structuralizes philosophy as "theoria"[2] (Rorty, 1991, p. 50) in which the gap between consciousness and existence is created among the "knowing subject", time, and contingency. From Heidegger's

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[2] Theoria (θεωρία), a Greek word, means watching, observing from afar. In terms of etymology, it is the root of the word "theory."

standpoint, the Self cannot exist as a meaningful and cognitive entity if it separates itself from its existential time and social practices.

> What the younger Heidegger tells us about the sociohistorical situation of Desein is just what the older Wittgenstein tells us about the situation in regard to language – that when we try to transcend it by turning metaphysical we become self-deceptive, inauthentic. (Rorty, 1991, p. 51)

Philosophy, from this viewpoint, has become a sort of therapy for self-awareness that moves toward self-knowledge instead of the provider of a theory of truth formed by the Cartesian – Kantian epistemological tradition. The limitation of traditional philosophy is its failure to depart from changeable "actualities" to reach "possibility," eliminating the transformation of time and socio-historical practices. This escape process is the way a cognitive entity discovers the truth in which a correct proposition is also the correct understanding of truth.

Why is there a problem with this view? Rorty mentions that linguistic philosophers like younger Wittgenstein in the early twentieth-century tried to avoid relativity, changeability, and unpredictability of historical processes by referring to language and creating "a priori conditions" as a means of discovering the inevitable truth. However, this creation is caught in the contradiction that if language can create conditions for the possibility seeking process, it cannot set up conditions for the possibility of itself. In this case, language only has meaning when it can exist outside the conditions created by language. Language has no meaning outside of the language itself or its creation in the sociohistorical context. A single concept has circumstantial meaning and after its slice of time, can be described and understood by others in various ways. Therefore, language cannot provide any priories for its existence except the description of a particular fact and the re-description afterward.

By using the concept *"aletheia,"* Heidegger defines the truth as an open, unconcealed disclosure. In the arts and sciences, truth is acknowledged as a language event. "To raise the question of aletheia, of disclosure as such, is not the same as raising the question of truth. For this reason, it was inadequate and misleading to call aletheia in the sense of opening, truth." (Heidegger, 1972, p. 70).[3]

Language is not merely a tool to interpret the human mind. In this framework, the human assumes a central place of being, even a contrast to language. When participants join a language game, they must accept a language system they did not create. Rather, it is a heritage of history and community that is used to re-create the Self, even when words are not exchanged. Language and the "knowing subject" are harmonious organic entity involving socio-historical practices that open a field of living like Heidegger's assertion that poetry could overcome simple communication towards "opening a realm of life function". Unlike the logical arguments depicting the stable causal relationship as true or false, poet create an open, undefined space, and unanswered spot through which individuals are free to create truth rather than simply finding the truth. Heidegger also objected to conventional notions that classify language as a tool of communication. A dimension of the existence of human life, "Language is the house of being" (Heidegger, *Letter on "Humanism"),*[4] work of art that opens a realm of life where human creates truth.

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[3] Cited in Nikolas Kompridis, "Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future",2006, p. 188.
[4] Translated by Frank A. Capuzzi, p.254.

The question is why traditional metaphysics from a Platonic – Cartesian – Kantian viewpoint, are entirely consistent with a standardized form of the world that determines the meaning and purpose of "actualities?" This complete loyalty can be explained by applying the correct description of language to reality; that if language can describe the facts and conditions for its application, "other conditions" would be necessary to analyze the statement that accurately describes language to get a correct description. Therefore, it is necessary of an ontology of the world that the meaning of language can be identified. In other words, if there is no such thing as ontology, a meaningful proposition must depend on a correct proposition in which immutability and infallibility cannot be denied. Apparently, we, "the knowing subject", cannot simple handedly create the reference that we can use to describe the world. So, the conditions to the description are indescribable.

Rorty disagrees and asks why the world cannot have its own purpose. Why does language need something outside of its "knowability," "describability," and "experienceability?" Language exists in the limitation of conditions, and its meaning depends on the socio-historical practices it describes. He mentions that even when we talk about God, we only discuss His features, powers, characteristics, and salvation. When we talk about the truth, we refer only to the possibility of it. All are "justification" and nothing more. "[…] the present-at-hand was only available in the context of pre-existent relations with the ready-to-hand, that social practice was the presupposition of the demand for exactness and for answer that could be given once and for all." (Rorty, 1991, p.60)

An object can be seen and used from many perspectives depending on which context the object belongs. The features and meaning of an object, in relation to the "knowing subject," are not identified as non-empirical and unchangeable conditions.

The meaning, features, and purpose of an object depends on the context of its framework. In a different context, that same object could have very different meaning, characteristics, and purpose. This network of projected purposes is the system of social practices that can be opened forever as interrupted slices in a continuous flow of contingency.

Conclusion

The human being never fully possessed or mastered the whole language. We cannot set the system of conditions for language by ourselves, but must rely on language. It is overcoming the understanding of language as a simple communication tool; we can expand the amplitude of the relationship with the world only by recognizing that language is not a spare in a simple technical world that is "the house of being," a new realm of the living.

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Corresponding Author: Do Kien Trung
Contact email: dokientrung@ueh.edu.vn