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**RORTY ON KANT'S ETHICS**

(abstract)

In my paper, I will show Rorty's criticism of Kant's ethics, and the philosophical background of Rorty's moral philosophy. In the first part of my paper, I will reconstruct the essence of Kant's ethics. If we want to recognize the novelty of Rorty's ethics, it is important to see, what is the main structure of the traditional, deontological moral philosophies, which is also incorporated in Kant's ethics. In the second part of my lecture, I will show Rorty's new philosophical views, which form the basis of his ethics. We have to take namely into account that an ethical theory is always embedded into a philosophical anthropology and ontology. In the third part, I will list the main points of Rorty's criticism, and show how close it is to the ethics of care.

As we know, the most important thing is in Kant's ethics, what is missing, and it is God. It is a secularized version of the Christian moral philosophy. In Kant's case, morality is identical with rationality. According to the traditional Christian ethics, every moral norm and principle are deducted from its ultimate basis, God. It is a deontological model of ethics since people believe that there is an Absolute, which is the highest moral good at the same time, and only this can lay the absolute foundation for morality. Although Kant says in the preface of the *Kritik of Pure Reason* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) that **"I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*,"**<sup>1</sup> it signifies only the result of his method of criticism. In his ethics, God is replaced by Reason, and God functions as a mere postulate. The categorical imperative is namely a synthetic, apriori proposition since it is created exclusively by the pure reason for the practical reason: **„Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."**<sup>2</sup> What is more, we can find the same importance of rationality in the case of moral situations. What should we do to become moral in moral situations? We have to test our subjective, individual maxims on the categorical imperative, which does not contain any particular moral value. (The fourth formulation of the categorical imperative is an exception in some sense.<sup>3</sup>) The categorical imperative determines only a relation between our maxims and a universal moral law, and we have to understand this relation and act for the sake of duty, which means the respect of the categorical imperative. If our action fulfills the categorical imperative only accidentally, then our action will only be *legal* but not *moral*. It means that we have to act absolutely in a rational way if we would like to become moral persons, that is we may not forget Kant's imperative, that we cannot take into account any of our emotions, desires or inclinations.

From the point of arriving in Chicago in 1946, Rorty, as a promising analytic philosopher tried to accomplish a philosophical "single vision" for long decades. "Single vision" is the idea of giving the

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„Ich musste das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen." (Kant: AA III, Kritik der reinen Vernunft ... , S.19.)

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„Der kategorische Imperativ, der überhaupt nur aussagt, was Verbindlichkeit sei, ist: handle nach einer Maxime, welche zugleich als ein allgemeines Gesetz gelten kann." (*Grundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785; *Metaphysics of Moral*, 1797)

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„Act in such a manner as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case and at all times as an end as well, never as a means only" („jederzeit zugleich als Zweck, niemals bloss als Mittel...")

ultimate description of the world's substantive structure, in which he strived to harmonize reality and justice, in other words, ontology, and ethics. But after spending forty years of thinking, writing and immense lecturing within the boundaries of analytic philosophy, Rorty gave up this hope. However, he did give up not only the idea of the single vision but also as a consequence, the whole idea of philosophical foundationalism, since he could not find a neutral, ultimate foundation for deciding which philosophical description of the world is better than the other.

Giving up the idea of the single vision, Rorty formulated the standpoint of the *liberal ironist*. Seeing the downfall of socialist regimes, he acknowledged that of the currently functioning societies, from a political and economical point of view, western liberal mass democracies can be considered the best. He broke off his family's Trotskyist influences and became a *liberal* (taking it in the American sense, which means *social democrat*). In his 1989 book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* he defines *liberal* with a phrase borrowed from Judith N. Shklar: „liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do.” (CIS xv.) On the other hand, Rorty also became an *ironist*, because he had read not only the classic works of traditional pragmatism and western philosophy but – among others – the works of Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida. Obviously not only did he learn from them that everything is radically temporal and historical, but – especially from Nietzsche, Freud and Derrida – that contingency has a much bigger role in our world than we believe. It implies that an *ironist* is a person who: „faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer to something beyond the reach of time and chance.” (CIS xv.) Consequently, after forty years of trying, Rorty gave up the Platonic experiment of unifying reality and justice in a single vision in this work. He abandoned his efforts to describe the world in a single, universal philosophical theory. He tried to demonstrate what intellectual life could be like if we could give up the dream of this single vision: “This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.” (CIS xv.) From all of this, Rorty also deduced the consequences for social theory. As we could see, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty brought forth the figure of the liberal ironist. Then, basically at the same time, in defense of the individual, constituted the prescriptive, rather than descriptive differentiation of *public-private*, laid out the historical goal of solidarity and stood up plainly for the modern liberal mass democracy.

It can be suspected from Rorty's philosophical view of the world that his ethical theory stands in contradiction with traditional ethics, which demands metaphysical foundations and set up universal obligations. Since these traditions determine not only our moral philosophical view of the world, but also our everyday thinking, I am undertaking an almost impossible mission, when I try to outline the ethics of Rorty, which is original, but not without precedents.<sup>4</sup> I will emphasize some critical points, first and foremost based on his *Contingency* book and his paper “Ethics Without Principles” (cf. PSH 72-90.).