

RORTY ON KANT'S ETHICS

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 of Kant's ethics, through his own ethical views.

I.

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* (2nd edition) that **"I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith,"**¹ 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."**² 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.³) 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. We may not forget Kant's imperative, that we cannot take into account any of our emotions, desires or inclinations.

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

2 „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)

3 „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...“)

II.

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 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 economic 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.

Rorty not only casts off the existence of any metaphysical substance but, in connection with this, the correspondency-conception of truth, too. The truth is not found but made. He apprehends everything human as being socially constructed and sees all the significant interpretations of our world – with us within it – as a linguistic affair. (Cf. PSH 48.) We are unable to prove any ultimate, substantial reality, instead only our own, radically temporal and historical, therefore constantly changing the world can be described. All of the interpretations of our world are narratives, which can never be absolute and universal, only general. Our narratives, or in his words, our *vocabularies* are used by Rorty in a sense the late Wittgenstein meant under his language games, which implies at least three different levels of meaning, as it is widely known: a.) once, the language game literally; b.) second, the mode of life c.) third, culture. Rorty uses all three meanings and claims that we live in the age of narrative philosophy, where through the constant descriptions and redescriptions of our situations, plans, actions, etc. not only do we constitute ourselves, but our society, too. According to him, the main pillars of human life

(language, self, community) are contingent, the constitution of vocabularies are ever more dependent on our imagination, but this doesn't mean that the constitution of a new vocabulary is arbitrary. We must strive to secure the – at least relative – coherence of the coexistent *public* vocabularies (or at least try to prove their falsehoods, if it is possible), even if it does not sometimes lead to any achievement, because in another case they become dysfunctional, and our life cannot function. (This doesn't apply to *private* vocabularies, since *public* and *private* don't conform theoretically, only in practice. (Cf. CIS xiv.) Because of this, among others, Rorty is an advocate of a pragmatist coherence conception of truth.

III.

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 sets 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.⁴ I will emphasize some critical points, first and foremost based on his *Contingency* book and his paper "Ethics Without Principles" (cf. PSH 72-90.).

1) First Rorty refuses the foundationalist needs: on the one hand, because he regards them rationally impossible, and on the other hand, morally unnecessary. Impossible, since the absolute, metaphysical foundation – and Rorty thought of this obviously – is rationally unprovable, or in other words, it is exclusively the result of the decision of faith, a choice based on one's worldview, which is not philosophy anymore. Beside this, it is unnecessary from a moral point of view because while it is true that the absolute necessity of moral laws and duties could only be provided by metaphysical foundations, they are not needed in the cases of specific moral actions. To fight against real suffering, cruelty, and other moral injustice, it is sufficient to have the moral tradition of our own social and intellectual community and phronesis. This tradition, of course, is itself permanently in development and change, as it is contingent and relative due to its historical nature, and thus the sense of moral obligation is not a question of learning, but rather conditioning. SUMMARY: Rorty has refused not only the traditional, religious foundationalist needs but also Kant's "Reason" as universal "Reason," which made Kant's ethics a deontologist ethics.

2) Rorty also disregards, unlike Kant, universal moral laws and obligations. Rorty starts out from the differentiation between morality and prudence. Traditionally, this meant absolute, categorical obligations set against conditional, hypothetical obligations. However, pragmatists have reservations about the commitment to take anything as absolute, because they doubt that anything can be non-relational. (Cf. PSH 73.) Rorty reinterprets these differentiations to dispense with the notion of absolute, unconditional obligation. SUMMARY: In Rorty's opinion, everything is relational in the world. That is why he cannot accept Kant's universal and absolute moral laws and obligations.

3) Rorty refuses not only the foundationalist needs (because – in his view – they are rationally impossible and morally unnecessary⁵) but also the Kantian priority of reason to emotions. Rorty

4 Rorty has mentioned his predecessors in his writings: first of all J. Dewey, F. Nietzsche, L. Wittgenstein, M. Heidegger, H.-G. Gadamer and J. Derrida.

5 Cf. Krémer Sándor: „Arisztotelész neopragmatikus aktualitása, avagy beilleszthető-e Arisztotelész barátság fogalma Rorty etikájába?”. In: *Lábjegyzetek Platónhoz (4.): A barátság*, 291. o.

thinks of a real self with emotions and will as the agent of moral situations. According to his views, there is a self with a complex and changing personality, where „'selfhood' (except insofar as it has encased itself in a shell of routine) is in the process of making, and any self is capable of including within itself a number of inconsistent selves, of unharmonized dispositions.”⁶ Rorty prefers this kind of self to the Kantian „myth of the self as non-relational, as capable of existing independently of any concern for others, as a cold psychopath needing to be constrained to take account of other people's needs.” (PSH 77.) In harmony with this idea, Rorty replaced the unconditional moral obligation of Kant by the concept of prudence. According to Rorty, „moral obligation does not have a nature, or a source, different from tradition, habit, and custom. *Morality is simply a new controversial custom.*” (PSH 76.) In his opinion, the concept of 'moral obligation' becomes „increasingly less appropriate to the degree to which we identify with those whom we help: the degree to which we mention them when telling ourselves stories about who we are, the degree to which their story is also our story.” (PSH 79.) SUMMARY: Rorty has refused the priority of Reason to emotions, as Kant has thought of it.

4) Rorty's view is the same on **justice**, which can be seen already in the title of an article in 1997: “Justice as Larger Loyalty.” If there is no absolute primacy of reason over emotion, and if the moral obligation itself is just a new social custom, then justice cannot be other than loyalty to a larger community. Rorty accepts the distinction of Michael Walzer who was influenced by, among others, Charles Taylor, between *thick* (i.e., based on traditions, habits, and community practice) and *thin* (i.e., based on theory) *morality*, and developed a new concept of “rationality” based on this interpretation:

“If by rationality we mean simply the sort of activity that Walzer thinks of as a thinning-out process – the sort that, with luck, achieves the formulation and utilization of an overlapping consensus – then the idea that justice has a different source than loyalty no longer seems plausible.

For, on this account of rationality, being rational and acquiring a larger loyalty are two descriptions of the same activity. This is because *any* unforced agreement between individuals and groups about what to do creates a form of community, and will, with luck, be the initial stage in expanding the circles of those whom each party to the agreement had previously taken to be ‘people like ourselves.’ The opposition between rational argument and fellow-feeling thus begins to dissolve.”⁷

This new approach of Rorty – making use of Rawls's overlapping consensus – apparently not only allows the possibility of interpreting justice as larger loyalty but also offers a solution to the paradox of justice. It happens in so far as – under the concrete circumstances which are accepted by concrete people of different communities after public political debates – it allows the judgment of the unequal with unequal standards.

5) What does Rorty propose, instead of traditional ethics? Rorty sees it more appropriate to keep a constant reinterpretation of our moral situations that is to keep re-describing them again and again, continuously improving our moral sense in this way. This also leads to a new interpretation of **moral progress**: “Pragmatists think of moral progress as more like sewing together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt, than like getting a clearer vision of something true and deep.” Since “there is no subtle human essence,” they do not want “to rise above the particular in order to grasp the universal. Rather, they hope to minimize one difference at a time – the difference between Christians and Muslims in a particular village in Bosnia, the difference between blacks and whites in a particular town in Alabama,” and the like. “The hope is to sew such groups together with a thousand little

6 Rorty quotes here Dewey – A. K.

7 Rorty 2001, 233.

stitches – to invoke a thousand little commonalities between their members, rather than specify one great big one, their common humanity.” (PSH 86-87.) SUMMARY: According to Rorty, moral progress does exist, but it is not an increased form of rationality, but rather an increased sensitivity to the other people’s suffering. In Rorty’s opinion, the moral progress means in this type of definition that “this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity.” (CIS 192.) The modern intellectual’s main contribution to this moral progress was much more to create detailed descriptions of the variants of actual suffering and humiliation (in, e.g., novels and ethnographies) rather than to create philosophical or religious papers and books. (Cf. CIS 192.)

6) Last but not least, it is worth mentioning here that the admitted socially wide endeavor of Rorty’s ethics is to promote an – already mentioned – realization of a liberal democracy. „One of my aims in this book – he writes in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* – is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal. A postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable.” (CIS xv-xvi.)

Therefore Rorty outlined in his book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) the characteristics of the liberal ironist. She is liberal in the sense that “liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do,” and ironist, if she „faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires.” (CIS xv.) Consequently, for the liberal ironist, there are no eternal, unchanging supra-historical substances, nothing possesses an eternal, metaphysical intrinsic core, an unchanging inner nature. To the liberal ironist, the main columns of our life are also contingent: our language, our self, and our community. All this contingency, however, is not followed by the nihilism of total relativism! Since Rorty emphasizes that “a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance.” (CIS 189.)

However, from the denial of any eternal, supra-historical substances and intrinsic essences of nature, it follows that Rorty cannot accept the traditional form of **solidarity** either. But „hostility to a particular historically conditioned and possibly transient form of solidarity is not hostility to solidarity as such.” (CIS xv.) He doesn’t see the basis of solidarity and human compassion in previously hidden depths, nor in some eternal, unchanging, essential humanity, but he regards it rather as a goal to be achieved. “Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.” (CIS xvi.)

Rorty, therefore, formulates solidarity as an ultimate goal, which can be found on the horizon of our world interpretation: “we have a moral obligation to feel a sense of solidarity with all other human beings.” (CIS 190.) However, he knows at the same time that identification with mankind, with every rational being (Kant!), is impossible in our practical life. We are only able to urge the expansion of our “we-intention”: “we try to extend our sense of „we” to people whom we have previously thought of as „they.”” (CIS 192.) This claim, characteristic of liberals – people who are more afraid of being cruel than of anything else – rests on nothing else and deeper than the historical contingencies, which has led to the present, developed and secularized Western democracies. (Cf. CIS 192.) The ethnocentrism of liberal ironists is such, “which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an ever larger and more variegated *ethnos*” (CIS 198.), because this “we” is made up of people who were raised to doubt ethnocentrism. (Cf. CIS 198.)

It means that Rorty deliberately distinguishes solidarity defined as identification with mankind as such, and solidarity as skepticism towards ourselves. It is skepticism regarding that we, the people of

democratic countries, have self-doubt enough. (Cf. CIS 198.) Rorty speaks about “the self-doubt which has gradually, over the last few centuries, been inculcated into inhabitants of the democratic states – doubt about their own sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives.” (CIS 198.) Solidarity as identification is impossible – it is the invention of philosophers, a clumsy attempt to secularize the idea of becoming one with God. The expansion of our “we-intention,” our solidarity, initiating from our skepticism is possible, a thing we only need to do. But, it is not a process of discursive learning! We can gradually lose the habit of using the old words connected to traditional solidarity and gradually acquire the habit of new solidarity created by our imagination.