

Solidarity or Objectivity: Rorty's Neo-Pragmatic View of Science and Its Ethical Implication

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Abstract

As a prominent representative and aggregator of Neo-Pragmatists, Richard Rorty carries on Pragmatists' rejection of the pursuit of certainty, objectivity, rationality and truth by traditional western philosophers since Plato. This paper traces Rorty's Neo-Pragmatic view of science to his anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism. Then, it points out that Rorty constructs his philosophical view of science as a single type of culture by denying the equivalence between science and truth. Rorty's view of natural science has its ethical implication in that he sees both scientific and moral progress not as a matter of getting closer to the True or the Objective or the Good or the Right, but as an increase in people's sympathy, sensitivity, and imaginative power, which enhances human sense of happiness, a chief concern of pragmatic philosophers. In the concluding part, the authors argue that through reducing objectivity to solidarity, Rorty takes both science and ethics as the source of suggestions about what to do with our lives. He initiates a new pragmatic perspective of ethics, sketching a moral blueprint of future human society

Key words: Rorty; Neo-Pragmatism; Science; Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatism developed in local America has been different from traditional philosophy since it gave up the pursuit of certainty, objectivity, rationality and truth. Pragmatists take morality and ethics as the beginning of their philosophical thinking, giving human well-being the first priority in philosophical consideration. Interacted with Analytic Philosophy, Pragmatism revived since the late 1970s. The glamorous and influential representative of Neo-pragmatism, Richard Rorty carries on the moral concerns from his hero John Dewey, taking the ethical practical issue of "How to live a happy life" in the present post-industrial society when science and technology is highly developed as the central consideration of philosophical thinking. Rorty's philosophical framework is ontologically anti-essentialism, and against foundationalism in terms of epistemology. On the basis of this framework of philosophy, which is quite untraditional and anti-metaphysical, Rorty develops his viewpoint on science¹. According to Rorty, science is rather "a" culture, equal to and no better than any other culture such as literature, music etc., than "the" culture which, as commonly believed in the intellectual history, closer to truth because of its objectivity and rationality. Through dissolving the differentiation between science and non-science, Rorty means to reset the aim as seeking solidarity of human beings among cultural communities, instead of the "hard facts" or reality. Rorty's attitude towards science implies a profound ethical meaning, which embodies his Neo-pragmatic moral aim – solidarity.

1. THE NEO-PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Against Essentialism

From the earliest time in Western philosophical history,

¹ Science in this paper refers specifically to natural science.

the unchanging and eternal essence has been a major philosophical issue. It is believed that under the cover of a variety of appearances, everything has its inhuman intrinsic essence. To find or get closer to this kind of inborn nature of the world, human beings, knowledge, or anything else has been the ultimate goal of philosophical thinking and practice.

Rorty is, with his analytical hero Wittgenstein and pragmatic hero Dewey, strongly opposite to any form of essentialism. In his articles "A world without substances or essences" and "Anti-essentialism and leftist literature", Rorty specifically clarified his anti-essentialist attitude in philosophy. For pragmatists like him, there is no such thing as a "non-relational feature of X", or "the intrinsic nature, the essence, of X" (Rorty, 1999, p.50), so the habit of distinguishing inner and outer, the core and the edge of X must be abandoned. The attempt to get rid of this differentiation is what Rorty names anti-essentialism.

As Rorty attributes the essence of philosophical questions to linguistic description, he denies the possibility of picking out an object from the rest of the universe. What we can say about an object is that some sentences of it are true. Of the various descriptions about an object, some of them are surely better than the others, but none of them is of the identity of its own essence. No description of an object is more objective, more accurate, or even closer to the innate nature of it. No description could help us out of language and into facts, or out of appearance and into reality (Rorty, 1999, p.56). This way, truth is no longer the correspondence between appearance and reality, but something better or something more useful.

Basically, for anti-essentialists like Rorty, "the Platonic quest, the attempt to get behind appearance to the intrinsic nature of reality, is hopeless" (Rorty, 1999, p.48). The pursuit of essentialism is an impasse, so philosophy is simply what Hegel says, to grasp the thoughts of one's era.

1.2 Against Foundationalism

Ever since the year 1979, in which his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was published, Rorty has made it clear to the entire academic circle about his anti-foundational philosophical stance. Rorty declares to break with the traditional philosophical pursuit of the "First Principle" handed down from ancient Greek, encouraging the resist to the attraction of seeking the natural hierarchical order in human activities.

Western philosophers after Plato have been persevering with a solid base for the mansion of human knowledge, convinced that "there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness" (Bernstein, 1983, p.8). The matrix serves as a

scale or standard, or reference based on which knowledge is evaluated during the philosophical process.

Rorty's attitude towards the attempt to establish the framework for the human knowledge system is a complete rejection. As a radical anti-foundationalism, he suggests resisting the comfort or solace of determinacy brought by the objective foundation of knowledge by criticizing the fantasy of pursuing objective knowledge. He even advocates substituting the foundational epistemology for hermeneutics. Hermeneutics values more about the conversation between people, within or cross disciplines, by contrast to the traditional epistemological inquiry of generality and certainty.

In general, Rorty's philosophical stance is anti-traditional. He abandons the inquiry for essence and the foundation of knowledge since Plato, only to view western philosophy from an uncertain, ahistorical perspective rather than an objective, universal perspective. On this philosophical ground, Rorty develops his neo-pragmatic view of natural science. Natural science for him, does not seek rationality, objectivity or truth, rather, as a culture of many, it aims at the solidarity of communities and happy life of people.

2. THE NEO-PRAGMATIC VIEW OF SCIENCE

2.1 Science Does Not Equal to TRUTH

Essentialists and foundationalists have always been inquiring the objective and real TRUTH. In the medieval theological period, truth is God, whereas since the rational enlightenment, science gradually becomes the synonym of truth. The worship of science as truth reaches its peak fueled by logical positivism between the 1930s and the 1950s. Natural science is identified as the exemplar of objectivity and rationality, since it provides truth that is correspondent to reality. Even the successfulness of litterateurs, philosophers, and historians in the area of humanity and social society, have to be judged by the standard of science. As a postmodernist in the humanist camp, Rorty is strongly against scientism like this.

To Rorty's knowledge, science, the "paradigmatic human activity", was mistakenly beheld as superior to the other subjects for two of its distinctive features: One is the scientific method adopted during the scientific process; the other is its extraordinary relations with reality (1991, p.46). Rorty is not the first one to challenge the superiority of scientific method. As early as in the 1970s, anarchist Feyerabend propagandized his opposition to the methodology of natural science as the only rational, objective, and adoptable one to all the other subjects by putting forward his principle of "anything goes" (1993, p.19). Different from Feyerabend's radicalism in terms of scientific method, Rorty is nonetheless radical in his own

way. He accounts the success of natural science to the uses of helpful terminology, not the scientific methods, “the same banal and obvious methods all of us use in every human activity”. Take Galileo’s free fall experiment as an example, Rorty interprets Galileo’s success and Aristotle’s failure as that Galileo was using some terminology to help prove his good idea whilst Aristotle was not, so Aristotle had a less good idea. In this battle of science in history, Galileo, as Rorty sees it, “just lucked out” (1994). In this way, Rorty deconstructs the myth of science as supreme in its methodology, thus destabilizes the idea that scientific method may lead to an absolute conception of reality. Scientific realism, as is defined by van Fraassen, refers to “the view that the picture science gives us of the world is true, and that the entities postulated really exist” (1984). Rorty disproves the special relations between science and reality through his discussion about the existence of the best scientific explanation. He believes that, “postulating things you can’t see to explain things you can see seems no more specific to those activities normally called ‘science’ than in *modus ponens*.” (Rorty, 1991, p.53) No one, not even scientists, could build reliable connection between theoretical entities such as electrons or genes and the successful application of scientific theories or methods. Therefore, Rorty would rather dissolve than resolve the issue of realism versus anti-realism. So far, Rorty denies thoroughly the differentiation between natural science and other human activities, hence demolishes the identification of science as truth.

2.2 Science Is “a” Culture

When science is no longer viewed as the equivalence of truth, objectivity, rationality, it descends from the King of Culture’s throne to a single type of culture, which is no better than any of the others. Science as “a” culture, instead of “the” culture, has its merits, which according to Rorty, can be summarized as the following three points—the first is that science is helpful in foreseeing and controlling human activities; the second, scientists make contributes to human solidarity with their moral virtue; the third is that science of different types create new vocabulary based on which human beings recreate themselves. These three traits are praised for natural science, but not uniquely the advantages of it. Other cultures such as art, literature, politics etc. may possess some or all of these advantages as well.

By deconstruction the objectivity, truthfulness of natural science, Rorty attempts to “level down the natural sciences to an epistemological par with art, religion, and politics”, but not, as American pragmatism has always been hesitating about, “to raise the rest of culture to the epistemological level of natural sciences” (1991, p.63). He intends to construct a post-scientific world of multiple cultures, in which all the other cultures have equal discourse power as natural science does. Post-science culture exactly reflects Rorty’s historical and relativist

pursuit against the pursuit of absoluteness and certainty of universalism, and his endorsement to replace monoculture with diverse culture. What Rorty values are the confluence of scientific culture and human culture, which makes a constant approach to the ultimate goal of human solidarity and happiness?

In general, in Rorty’s view, natural science doesn’t have the supreme epistemic status. Established on the same solidary philosophical foundation, Rorty’s view of science and view of ethics are similar and comparable to each other. For instance, like Kuhn and Dewey, he sees scientific inquiry as working in much the same way as moral inquiry does. Rorty admits that it is more difficult to convince people of our moral view than of our scientific views (2007). That is probably because natural science provides “hard facts”, whereas morals are relatively more subjective. However, he “level(s) down” science (Posner, 1999, p.18), so that science will no longer power over ethics. For Rorty, contrary to the traditional belief that natural science aims at seeking truth, objectivity, correspondence or certainty, while ethics, goodness or general moral principle, science and ethics are both human discourses in which solidarity of the largest number of people could be reached. Science and ethics aim at the increase of people’s imaginative power and solidarity, which as Rorty strongly believes, may hence promote human sense of wellbeing.

3. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FROM THE VIEW OF SCIENCE

3.1 Morality Is Not Rationality—Cases of Scientists and Moral Philosophers as Better Moral Exemplars

Rorty agrees that scientists are better moral exemplars, and moral philosophers can make better moral decisions. However, he never accounts for the morality of scientists or moral philosophers to be more rational. As Rorty sees it, to be moral has nothing to do with the pursuit of rationality.

Scientists have frequently been conspicuous exemplars of certain moral virtues. Rorty believes the worship of scientists as models of morality and reason may date back to the 19thC, when the rhetoric of scientism confused the moral virtues with the intellectual virtue of rationality. In this kind of account, rationality refers to “the crucial link between humanity and the nonhuman”, or “our access to an ‘absolute conception of reality’, the means by which the world ‘guides’ us to a correct description of itself” (Rorty, 1991, p.61).

Rorty doesn’t approve this kind of rationality; instead, he differentiates the two meanings of rationality. Traditionally, to be rational is to be methodical, that is, “to have criteria for success laid down in advance” (Rorty,

1991, p.36). Based this definition, law, business, and science are good examples of rationality, but humanities are never, because judges, businessmen and scientist know in advance the criteria for the success of their activities while poets and painters are not sure of what kind of an aim they want to reach before they have finished the work. Therefore, Rorty sticks to the second meaning of rationality: sane or reasonable. In this sense, rationality means a set of moral virtues: “Tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force” (Rorty, 1991, p.37), with which a civilized society could develop.

For pragmatists, it’s simply a historical accident that people good at providing technology also serve as good examples of certain moral virtues, as is the fact that, in contemporary Russia and Poland, literary figures are the best examples of certain other moral value (Rorty, 1991, p.62). Scientists, with their virtue “of relying on persuasion rather than force, of respect for the opinions of colleagues”, of relatively incorruptibility, of patience and reason, “of curiosity and eagerness for new data and ideas” (Rorty, 1991, p.39), set good examples for human activity and contribute to the solidarity of human beings.

Scientists are moral exemplars. Then, how about the moral philosophers? Are they more experienced or correct in making difficult moral choices? Australian ethicist Peter Singer once expressed his belief that, moral philosophers are capable of providing soundly based moral theories, with which they are able to correct society’s moral intuitions. For him, “the philosopher’s training makes him more than ordinarily competent in assessing arguments and detecting fallacies, and he “has studied the nature of moral concepts, and the logic of moral argument.” (Singer, 1974) According to Singer, moral philosophers have a different but better source of moral knowledge than the public’s intuitions can provide.

On Rorty’s account, this source is what philosophers traditionally refer to as “reason”, which is generally taken for granted to have an authority that takes precedence over any alternative source. Rorty refutes the three ideas inferred from Singer’s viewpoint – First, the “notion of a moral theory based on something sounder than a set of moral intuitions”; Second, moral concepts have a special nature that the experts understand better than the vulgar; and Third, moral argument has a special logic that philosophical training enables one to appreciate. As Rorty puts it, to grasp the concept of morality is simply to know how to use the word. It’s hardly imaginable for a moral philosopher to be able to use concepts like “right”, “ought”, and “responsible” better than the laity does, through any special training. What’s more, it’s confusing that according to Singer’s standpoint, judges and social workers will be less familiar with the logic of moral argument than trained moral philosophers. Rorty’s understanding is that, moral philosophers are usually

widely read and imaginative. Widely read people often do better in making moral choices than people with little leaning and therefore little imagination (Rorty, 2007, pp.185-186).

It is obvious to see from Rorty’s argument that he agrees with Singer in that moral philosophers may make better moral choices than the ordinary people do, but the accounts diverge. Singer takes Kant more seriously, so in terms of making the right moral choices, he would like to resort to the separate source for moral principles, the essence, and reason. As an anti-Kantianist, Rorty doesn’t believe that moral principles have inherent nature, nor does he believe that the grand general principles of morality are more reliable than intuition. For him, specialists in moral philosophy do not “have better arguments or clearer thoughts than most”, but simply “have spent much time talking over some of the issues that trouble people faced with hard decisions about what to do”. They are “more imaginative”, not “more rational” (Rorty, 2007, pp.201-202).

3.2 Moral Progress Is the Increase of Sympathy, Sensitivity and Imaginative Power

Pragmatists like Rorty do not think of scientific inquiry, or any other inquiry, as aiming at truth, but at better justification ability. It is to better deal with doubts about what we are saying by supporting our previous viewpoints or making some new or different statements. Therefore, “scientific progress is a matter of integrating more and more data into a coherent web of belief” (Rorty, 1999, p.82), but not penetrating appearance until we reach reality. The data may be gained from our eyes, or come from microscopes or telescopes, or experiments, or even the existing facts.

Pragmatists do not take scientific progress as seeing the intrinsic nature of reality through the appearance, but as increasing the “ability to respond to the concerns of ever larger groups of people” (Rorty, 1999, p.81), who do scientific researches. Likewise, they see moral progress as being able to respond to the needs of an ever larger group of people.

In this way, Rorty disagrees with Kant in the following two standpoints concerning moral progress. The first is that moral progress is a matter of an increase in rational ability. Pragmatists like Rorty would have never encouraged the supremacy of rationality in any culture; instead, they hold that moral progress is a matter of making our sympathy wider and wider, but not a matter of rising above the sentimental and intuitive to the rational. Morality is something about action, not theories, so it is the best to consider moral progress as a matter of promoting our sensitivity to pain, consciousness, and responsiveness in real practice to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. If we change our focus from rationality, or truth, or anything of determinacy, to our ability to “make the little things that divide us seem

unimportant”, to become more and more sympathetic to larger groups of us, moral progress might be accelerated. The brilliance of moral virtues is exactly shown in these trivial matters. To some extent, taking Rorty's stance of moral progress might help to improve the medical ethics status in China. If the doctors could progress in morality by developing more sympathy and sensitivity to the physical illness, mental helplessness or even economic burden suffered by their patients, rather than becoming increasingly apathetic and indifferent to them because they are so accustomed to death and the imbalance of resource division, there may not be frequent medical disputes.

The second view of Kant rejected by Rorty is that moral progress is constantly getting a clear vision of our unconditional moral obligations. Kant helps us to get rid of the doctrine that morality is a matter of divine command, but unfortunately he maintains the concept of unconditional moral obligations, which Pragmatists would like to abandon. Just like their notion of science continually approximating to the inhuman “God's eye view”, foundationalists think that human social custom continually approaches to “the moral law” in periods of moral progress. In contrast to the Kantianists' presupposition of “the existence of something non-relational, something exempt from the vicissitudes of time and history, something unaffected by changing human interests and needs” (Rorty, 1999, p.82), Pragmatists hold a historical view of both science and moral progress. They discard the belief that in order to make moral progress, we need to gradually decrease the influence of prejudice and superstition, allowing us to clarify our unconditional moral obligations, just like their abandon of “discovering the intrinsic nature of physical reality”. In terms of morality, Pragmatists tend to replace Kantian idea of a Good Will, which seems relatively more essential and abstract, with the idea of maximally warm, sensitive and sympathetic human being, which seems more practical and easier to do.

For Rorty, the engine of moral progress is the ability to come up with new ideas with imagination, rather than the ability to get closer to unchanging essences (2006). To make it more specifically, imagination is taken as the cutting edge of cultural evolution, the power of which makes human future better off than the past. “Imagination is the source both of new scientific pictures of the physical universe and of new conceptions of possible communities.” (Rorty, 1999, p.87) In this respect, moral progress is the increase of imagination, with which we could create infinite possibilities of solidarity.

3.3 Morality as Solidarity

If it is on the level of individual morality that Rorty judges moral progress with the growth of sympathy and imaginative power, on the level of public morality, Rorty advocates seeking solidarity among the widest variety of human communities.

Over two hundred years ago, when Immanuel Kant asks the traditional philosophical question “What is Man”, he means to ask about something like “how does the human species differ from the other animals”. As Rorty rejects the pursuit of TRUTH in science, he objects to the pursuit of GOODNESS for ethics. Therefore, by contrast to this science, ontological and metaphysical Kantian question, Rorty asks the political or ethical question of “Who are we”. This question doesn't inquire moral universalism or objectivity; rather it encourages the expansion of human communities of morality, as well as the increase of solidarity between “we” and “all the other people”.

In terms of morality, Rorty's solidarity refers to the

ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, races, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of “us” (1989, p.192).

Rorty's solidarity can be explained with his comparison of making moral progress as sewing a huge, elaborate and multi-colored quilt, but not making clear of something true and deep. Rorty would like rather replace traditional metaphors of depth or height with metaphors of breadth and extent than probing into the issue of depth and height such as human essence, the universal etc. Pragmatists like Rorty wish to have the differences minimized, but not to overwhelm the differences with the strong. According to his metaphor of quilt, to solidarism is to minimize “the difference between Christian and Muslims in a particular village in Bosnia”, “the difference between blacks and whites in a particular town in Alabama”, “the difference between gays and straights in a particular Catholic congregation in Quebec”. The hope is to sew such different parties together with thousands of little stitches—to invoke thousands of little commonalities between members of the groups. Rorty has set an idealistic aim for solidary morality, i.e. “we have a moral obligation to feel a sense of solidarity with all other human beings” (1989, p.190).

In general, Rorty sees neither intellectual nor moral progress as a matter of getting in touch with something true, or good, or right. Moral progress is not about rationality, but an increase in one's sympathy, sensitivity to each other, and the greater role played by imaginative power. To be moral is to improve solidarity among an ever enlarging community of people, so there is no settled final vocabulary in Rorty's moral vision.

CONCLUSION

Based on thinking about, questioning and criticizing traditional philosophy, Rorty integrate science and ethics, both serve as the “source of suggestions about what to do with our lives” (Leiter, 2007). By viewing science and

morality as pursuing solidarity of human community through communication, rather than as the representative of objectivity or reality, Rorty advocates that we expand our sense of “us” to more and more people whom we instinctively classify as “they”, or even marginalized people, and that we respect the variety of culture related to our social practice, so as to expand our moral vision and achieve solidarity in the largest group of people. Therefore, Rorty obviously takes ethics, as well as human welfare, as the starting point of his philosophical thinking.

Rorty’s view of ethics, as he himself puts it, is ethics without principles. Just like his view of natural science, Rorty’s ethics is bound to be challenged as relativism. What’s more, his solidary morality is very grand and oversimplified. Its overemphasis on the factor of human emotion, especially the sympathy of the elites and the powerful to their inferior, neglects the proof of practice or feasibility. However, Rorty’s alternative ethical thoughts initiate a new pragmatic perspective, sketching a moral blueprint of future human society.

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