Rorty on Language and Social Practices

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Abstract

Richard Rorty wrote on many occasions that called *the linguistic turn* was an attempt to keep philosophy an armchair discipline. "The idea - he said - was to mark off a space for *a priori* knowledge into which neither sociology nor history nor art nor natural science could intrude". Linguistic analysis, in short, has become with the passing of time a sort of first philosophy, aimed at replacing metaphysics (which the founding fathers of logical positivism gave up for dead). Two opposite conceptions of language are at stake here. The first says that language is something *self-explanatory* which, in turn, explains everything else. This means postulating type A objects, i.e. *unexplained explainers* in terms of which type B objects - the *explananda* - can be accounted. The second conception claims, instead, that there is no actual distinction between type A and type B objects. All objects are on a par, but in a particular sense. Rorty resorts in fact to the Quinean-flavored simile of the net and its nodes.

Rorty's is an intelligent move. Since there is no longer ineffability and unavailability, all problems seem to be solved. Is this true? We have good motives to be suspicious because, after all, Immanuel Kant must have adopted that kind of model for *some* reason, and Ludwig Wittgenstein himself struggled with the old problem of the gap between reality itself and our representations of it. Rorty proclaims his faith in holism. In contrast to the assumption that there can be entities which are what they are totally independent of all relations between them, a Davidsonian (and also Quinean) holism claims that "all entities are merely nodes in a net of relations", which gives us a picture of the following kind: "No intrinsically simple objects, no pictures, and no language. For if analysis could not end with such objects, then whether a sentence has sense would depend upon whether another sentence were true - the sentence which specifies that two simpler objects making up a composite stand in the relevant compositional relationship".

The great issue at stake here is the relation between ontology and epistemology. Most interpreters would answer that such a distinction is untenable in Wittgenstein's thought, and in particular if we take into account the second phase of his philosophical parabola. But, notwithstanding this common opinion, we are confronted with a great problem, namely, that of determining what really is the reference framework about which Wittgenstein so often talks, and which is supposed to be shared by all human beings as such. He frequently says in his works that skepticism raises doubts when no

questions can be asked, while Monk correctly describes his endeavor in *On Certainty* as one aimed at showing "The point at which doubt becomes senseless".

The question to be asked is, obviously, the following: What does this mean? Wittgenstein is right when he says that some questions cannot be asked because they do not even make sense, but in my view we may interpret him in a way different from the traditional ones that have been thus far put forward. We may accept Wittgenstein's statement that the existence of the world, for instance, cannot meaningfully be questioned. But this means, in turn, that the linguistic games cannot go on forever. Sooner or later we run into a "hard rock" which is ultimately non-linguistic and whose existence is the original fact from which everything else stems, including language, linguistic games, conceptual schemes, social practices, etc. Everything, in sum, can be questioned, but *nature*. And when someone does question it, like the pupil mentioned in *On Certainty*, who will not let anything be explained to him by his teacher, for he continuously interrupts him with doubts concerning the existence of things, we are somehow forced to answer his questions as Wittgenstein's teacher does: "Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don't make sense at all".

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In a paper of his, Richard Rorty wrote that what Gustav Bergmann called *the linguistic turn* "was a rather desperate attempt to keep philosophy an armchair discipline. The idea was to mark off a space for *a priori* knowledge into which neither sociology nor history nor art nor natural science could intrude".[1] This, of course, would explain well enough why linguistic analysis has become with the passing of time a sort of first philosophy, aimed at replacing just that metaphysics which the founding fathers of logical positivism gave up for dead. Rorty then claims that what Ian Hacking has called "the death of meaning", i.e. the end of any attempt to make language a transcendental topic, cleared the way towards a more naturalistic way of conceiving language itself. Essentially - he says - we moved from Frege and the early Wittgenstein, who are the philosophers primarily responsible for holding the idea that language can be defined as "a clearly shared structure", to the second Wittgenstein (later on followed by Quine, Davidson and Rorty himself)[2] who instead gave up this idea.

To clarify the issue, I can thus claim that two opposite conceptions of language are at stake here. The first says that (i) language is something *self-explanatory* which, in turn, explains everything else. This means postulating type A objects, i.e. *unexplained explainers* like Platonic forms, Kantian categories, Russellian logical objects, in terms of which type B objects - the *explananda* - can be accounted. The second conception

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[1] R. Rorty, "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language", in C. Guignon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 337-357. The article originally appeared in Rorty's *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1990.

[2] As a matter of fact Rorty addresses Heidegger's thought too, but I will not take Heidegger into account in this paper.

claims, instead, that (ii) there is no actual distinction between type A and type B objects. All objects are on a par, but in a very special sense. Rorty resorts in fact to the Quinean-flavored simile of the net and its nodes.

If we want to avoid the self-referential problem constantly faced by those who postulate a distinction between type A and type B objects[3], then it is necessary - Rorty goes on - to change the whole picture. Since according to him "the Tractarian distinction between the available and effable world and the unavailable and ineffable substance of the world" is wrong (and - I would like to add - the Kantian distinction between the available and effable *phenomena* and the unavailable and ineffable *noumena* has serious shortcomings, too), all we have to do is to give up altogether the distinction.

Rorty's is a nice move indeed. Since there is no longer ineffability and unavailability, all problems seem to be solved. But... is this true? We have good motives to be suspicious here because, after all, Immanuel Kant must have adopted that kind of model for *some* reason, and Ludwig Wittgenstein himself struggled, up to the end of his life,[4] with the old problem of the gap between reality itself and our representations of it. Let us then check the Davidson-style solution that Rorty proposes.

At this point, in fact, Rorty proclaims his faith in holism. In contrast to the assumption that there can be entities which are what they are totally independent of all relations between them, a Davidsonian (and also Quinean) holism claims that "all entities are merely nodes in a net of relations", which gives us a picture of the following kind: "No intrinsically simple objects, no pictures, and no language. For if analysis could not end with such objects, then whether a sentence has sense would depend, *horribile dictu*, upon whether another sentence were true - the sentence which specifies that two simpler objects making up a composite stand in the relevant compositional relationship. But when one asks what would be so horrible about *that,* [the first] Wittgenstein has no obvious answer." [5]

So let us ask ourselves: *What* is so horrible about that, after all? In my view the "horribleness" of such a situation is due to the fact that, despite all the differences that Rorty finds between the first and the second Wittgenstein, and between himself and the orthodox analytic philosophy, even in his vision, our language becomes not only the arbiter of truth, but also the sole component of reality. And, by adopting that picture, we are back, once again, to the old idealist view that human beings cannot step out of their thought, the only difference being that "thought" must be replaced by "language".

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[3] This is Rorty's own formulation of the aforementioned referential problem: "If we claim that no entity is available which remains unrelated by a form of relationship which cannot hold between unaided type B entities, then we have problems about the availability of the type A entities we postulate to lend the necessary aid." (*Ibid.*, p. 342).

[4] See Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1969.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 343.

Obviously, this is not the interpretation that Rorty gives us of his own stance. In his opinion, he - together with other contemporary thinkers like Quine and Davidson - overcame the linguistic turn by adopting a sort of "conditions free" view of reality. "Availability - he claims - requires being related by something other than the relata themselves. We have opened up the question of why we ever thought that there was a problem about availability in the first place. We have thereby questioned the need for philosophy, insofar as philosophy is thought of as the study of conditions of availability." But can availability be so easily discarded? Rorty adds that we must turn to "naturalism", i.e. the view that anything might have been otherwise, that there can be no "conditionless conditions".

The solution that he proposes thus relies on the standard interpretation of the second Wittgenstein, who "dropped the idea of finding nonempirical conditions for the possibility of linguistic description." But what does the second Wittgenstein mean by *empirical*? This is by no means clear, despite the opinion of many interpreters of the Austrian philosopher's writings. Rorty goes on saying that "He [the later Wittgenstein] became reconciled to the idea that whether a sentence had sense did indeed depend upon whether another sentence was true - a sentence about the social practices of the people who used the marks and noises which were the components of the sentence". This is extremely interesting, but does it really reflect what the later Wittgenstein said?

The fact is that Wittgenstein's texts do not lend themselves to a clear and straightforward interpretation such as the one endorsed by Rorty. I would like to single out, in this respect, a beautiful passage drawn from *On Certainty*, [6] where Wittgenstein addresses the nature of our reference framework dealing with Moore's solution to the skeptical problem: "It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of my thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other (...) And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited (...) The truths which Moore says he knows, are such as, roughly speaking, all of us know, if he knows them".

Here we are, in my opinion, at the hard bottom of the later Wittgenstein's thought, a hard bottom which he reached just a few months before his death. What kind of sense can we make of Wittgenstein's remarks? An orthodox Wittgensteinian would most likely say that, in this context, our philosopher is dealing with the problem of the

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[6] L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, cit., 96-99, p. 15e.

relations among: (1) propositions, (ii) beliefs, and (iii) the framework within which we give grounds for our beliefs.[7] But let us explore instead an alternative path, without worrying too much about the faithfulness of our interpretation to Wittgenstein's texts and their orthodox gloss.

The great issue at stake here is, in my view, the relation between ontology and epistemology. True, most interpreters would answer that such a distinction is untenable in Wittgenstein's thought, and in particular if we take into account the second phase of his philosophical parabola. But, notwithstanding this common opinion, I think we are confronted with a great problem, namely, that of determining what really is the reference framework about which Wittgenstein so often talks, and which is supposed to be shared by all human beings qua human beings. He frequently says in his works that skepticism raises doubts when no questions can be asked, while Monk correctly describes his endeavor in *On Certainty* as one aimed at showing "The point at which doubt becomes senseless".[8]

But how can language - now taken to be a set of social practices - guarantee us against skepticism? Wittgenstein at this point resorts to the notion of "language game", saying that there is no language game in which questions concerning the reality of the world can be asked. Wittgenstein is right in this respect, but *why* so? My claim is that we need to go a step further, gearing any linguistic game to something else (which, however, is not ontologically separated from the language game itself). If we take the expression "when no questions can be asked", are we challenging: (i) our scheme of reference, (ii) a reality as it is and could not be otherwise, or (iii) both, because they are just the same thing?

Let us go back to Wittgenstein's simile of the river-bed. At the beginning he makes a move which is purely linguistic, claiming that (*a*) some (empirical) propositions hardened and began to function as "channels" for (*b*) other (empirical as well) propositions that remain fluid. The purpose of both (*a*) and (*b*) type propositions is to furnish a world-picture that, however, might be part of a "mythology". Suppose that the hardened (*a*) type propositions are more or less the river-bed, while the fluid (*b*) type propositions are the waters which are supposed to flow *within* the river-bed. The border line is not so clearly defined, just as it happens with the river-bed and the waters, but in any event we can always trace some kind of distinction.

The (*a*) type propositions are thus similar to the bank of the river that consists of hard rock, while the (*b*) type propositions are like the waters that flow. Our referential framework consists essentially of (*a*) type propositions, whose validity is self-explanatory and are such that they are not touched by any skeptical doubt: to question

[7] See for instance R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1990, ch. 26, pp. 569-575.

[8] R. Monk, *Ibid.*, p. 578.

them, in fact, is tantamount to question our reference framework. Those (*a*) type propositions form what we may define as the *fundamental* language game, on which everything else rests. *And who* - we might ask - established this fundamental language game? Wittgenstein's answer would most likely be that language itself established it. But, this time, language is no more an abstract and Platonic structure shared by all members of mankind. It is, rather, a set of social practices that has no ultimate meaning beyond itself.

On this late Wittgensteinian picture Rorty relies to build his own picture, which is in turn much indebted to Quine's and Davidson's conceptions. However, it is clear that the Wittgensteinian picture does not work very well if we take it at its face value. A whole set of questions comes to mind: (1) Does this picture imply that nature is only a set of social practices, and that, furthermore, it is only socially constructed? (2) Do we build the laws of nature socially? (3) Do we construct the ultimate components of reality science is looking for socially? And (4) is the second Wittgenstein arbitrarily applying the notion of "social practice" to the whole of nature? Such a move seems to me totally unwarranted (although being no doubt fascinating from a purely philosophical point of view, as Rorty and other thinkers have shown). At this point we can see that, most likely, Rorty is wrong in dismissing the following intuition of the early Wittgenstein as it is contained in the *Tractatus*: "If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true. In that case we could not sketch out any picture of the world".[9]

Maybe Wittgenstein, especially in the *Tractatus*, used expressions like "substance of the world" in a rather deceptive way, but I take the basic preoccupation expressed in the aforementioned quotation as a completely justified one.

It is easy to verify that Rorty's view has at least one serious shortcoming. Take his picture of "reality" conceived of as a net formed by nodes whose existence is only given by their being in relation to each other. It is clear that (a) the nodes have sense *only* within the net, but it is by no means less clear that (b) the net has sense *only* in so far it is formed by single nodes. The absence of even one of these nodes would make the net just different from what it is. Rorty (along with Davidson) insists on the notion of "relation", as if this notion could explain everything. "Davidson's account of human linguistic behavior - Rorty claims - takes for granted, as the later Wittgenstein also did, that there are no linguistic entities which are intrinsically relationless." But - I claim - the ontological structure of reality is not given *only* by the relations between entities. Besides being related to one another, the nodes of the net must *be*: their natural existence is at least as important as their relatedness and, as a matter of fact, something must first exist in order to be related to something else. In other words, we could never make up a net from nothing: the net is bound to be made of some

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[9] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1961, 2.0211-2.0212.

stuff. And it is worth noticing that we have neither empirical nor philosophical reasons to deny that those nodes are precisely the ultimate constituents of reality which contemporary physicists are looking for.

I think that Rorty's account, although intriguing from the philosophical point of view, is too limited: it dissolves reality within a concept of "social practice" that is too broad and loose to explain anything. Rorty might obviously answer that we do not need explanations because there is nothing to be explained, but this vision is hardly tenable. The second Wittgenstein, whom he considers as his mentor, never claimed that there is nothing to be explained. Maybe he said that we *cannot* explain everything we wish to, but this is a completely different story.

As Rorty himself recognizes, his account of reality is much indebted not only to the later Wittgenstein, but also to Donald Davidson's refusal to distinguish between conceptual schemes and their contents, a move which ultimately led Davidson to abandon the notion of "conceptual scheme" altogether. I believe that Davidson's refusal is - to a certain extent - justified, although my reasons for claiming this are certainly different from the ones he puts forward. Let us summarize the situation in a quite sketchy manner.

If (1) we *qua* human beings are just part of nature, then (2) our conceptual schemes are a part of nature, too. We cannot introduce a wedge between ourselves and nature, otherwise we are bound to repeat the Kantian move of assuming a priori factors that cannot be accounted for from a naturalistic point of view. It follows, then, that (3) there are no a priori elements in our mind, where by a priori elements I mean some unexplained factors which would allow human beings - and *only* them - to play a creative role in the construction of nature itself. The best thing to do, at this point, is (4) to conceive of our conceptual schemes as physical processes that reflect reality to some extent. And (5) this means, in turn, that our image of reality is not something separate and independent of reality itself; therefore, there is a continuum between our conceptual scheme and reality, in the sense that our conceptual scheme is just one of the forms through which reality happens to be. It follows (6) that the debates realism/anti-realism, and idealism/materialism, as they usually take place in philosophy, even up to the present, make little sense. In fact we are just part of a *complex physical* process, and there is no discontinuity between nature and our mind which is also a part of it. But (7) at this point the Kantian distinction between "phenomena" and "noumena" makes little sense, too. Since there is only one nature, we are also bound to admit that there is only one ontology. Then (8) Davidson's denial of the distinction scheme-content is vindicated.

The question to be asked is, obviously, the following: What does this mean? Notice that my previous considerations by no means imply an endorsement of a Davidsonian

stance: what I am saying is that thought, language, and mind are just parte of one "thing", and this thing I call *nature*. So Wittgenstein is right when he says that some questions cannot be asked because they do not even make sense, but in my view we may interpret him in a way different from the traditional ones that have been thus far put forward.[10] We may accept Wittgenstein's statement that the existence of the world, for instance, cannot meaningfully be questioned. But this means, in turn, that the linguistic games cannot go on forever. Sooner or later we run into a "hard rock" which is ultimately non-linguistic and whose existence is the original fact from which everything else stems, including language, linguistic games, conceptual schemes, social practices, and whatever one wants to name. Everything, in sum, can be questioned, but *nature*. And when someone does question it, like the pupil mentioned in *On Certainty*,[11] who will not let anything be explained to him by his teacher, for he continuously interrupts him with doubts concerning the existence of things, we are somehow forced to answer his questions as Wittgenstein's teacher does: "Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don't make sense at all".

Obviously, I am aware of the fact that neither the orthodox Wittgensteinians nor Rorty are likely to accept what I said thus far. But it should also be clear that my unfaithfulness to the orthodox gloss of Wittgenstein's texts is here far less important than the basic point I want to make. And this basic point may be summarized as follows. In order for a picture of the world to exist, there must be something to be pictured, and in order for a reference framework to exist, there must be something this framework matches. Otherwise, we are - as Rorty claims - somehow suspended in a void in which the fact that a sentence has sense depends upon whether another sentence is true, and this other sentence is only about "the social practices of the people who use the marks and the noises which are the components of the sentence." It seems to me that this is just an elegant attempt to skip philosophical problems which arise spontaneously in any kind of social practice, and it is on such attempt, in fact, that Rorty bases his popular thesis of the alleged "end of philosophy".

But things, of course, cannot be that simple. Today we see that many metaphysical issues with which most philosophers no longer cope with are, instead, taken up by scientists. They often express their astonishment when realizing to what extent contemporary philosophy has become "minimalistic", in the sense of being concerned only with small and technical details regarding linguistic usage.[12] Is it Wittgenstein's fault, as the physicist Stephen Hawking has suggested? The answer is "yes" if we stick to Richard Rorty's interpretation of Wittgenstein. The answer is instead "no", if we are bold enough to overcome the orthodox gloss.

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[10] Notice that, in this context, I do not mean to be "faithful" to any particular interpretation of Wittgenstein's thought.

[11] L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, cit., 310, p. 40e.

[12] The examples are rather numerous. Here I will quote only two books: S. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time. From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Bantam Books, New York, 1988; and S. Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1992.

Bibliography

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