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In: Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński and Sami Pihlström (Eds.) (2019).
*Pragmatist Kant—Pragmatism, Kant, and Kantianism in the Twenty-first
Century* (pp. 235–250). Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 4. Helsinki: Nordic
Pragmatism Network.

ISSN-L 1799-3954

ISSN 1799-3954

ISBN 978-952-67497-3-0

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Nordic Pragmatism Network,
Helsinki 2019

www.nordprag.org

Rorty on Kant's Ethics

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1. Introduction

In this text, I will explain Richard Rorty's criticism of Immanuel Kant's ethics. I show first of all the main characteristics of Kant's ethics in contrast with the Natural Law ethics of Thomas of Aquinas since I am persuaded that Kant wrote his ethics in the rational spirit of Enlightenment. Secondly, I summarize the essence of Rorty's neopragmatism, which will serve as a basis for the interpretation of Rorty's ethics and his obvious criticism of Kant's moral philosophy. Rorty recognized clearly the unsolvable inner contradictions of Kant's ethics, which come from his special philosophical anthropology, and replaced it with a new pragmatist, evolutionary view of the human being, and this view forms the basis of his criticism.

It is beyond question that every ethics rests on particular presumptions, which we always can find in the general philosophy of the given author. On the one hand, this is the reason, why particular ethics is always a part of the author's philosophy, even in the case if it is not worked out in a special book. (This is the situation when somebody is "only" an ethicist.) On the other hand, that is, why I had to write seemingly long introductions to both Kant and Rorty. I am persuaded that it is necessary even in the case if a paper is written to professionals. Everybody knows, namely, that the same philosophies have very different interpretations, and this is the situation in Kant's and especially in Rorty's case. I need my particular interpretation of Kant's and Rorty's philosophy in general since these are my presumptions regarding the interpretation of their ethics, which are parts of these philosophies.

2. On Kant's ethics

As it is well-known, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) wanted to reconcile Rationalism and Empiricism in the period of his critical philosophy. In his three main critical works¹ and other books after 1781, Kant criticizes the three main human capacities: the pure reason (which commits the theoretical recognition within the a priori structure of the mind), the practical reason (which directs our will and creates a priori the norms of our moral action), and the power of judgment (which contains the aesthetic and the theological power of judgment). Kant's main aim is to set up the limits of these human capacities because he wants to direct philosophy to "the secure path of science" (Kant 1998 [1781], 110).

Within his moral philosophy, he aimed at the reconciliation of causality and freedom. Modern science explored more and more causal relationships in the phenomenal world, and Kant recognized the danger which threatened the territory of freedom. However, freedom is the inevitable basis of morals and religion, and that is why Kant relocated freedom into the noumenal world (*Ding an sich*). In his opinion, there is only recognition in the phenomenal world without action, and vice versa, in the noumenal world there is only action without recognition. On the other hand, he wanted to expand the territory of human autonomy as much as it is possible, and that is why he rejected every form of the *heteronomous moral philosophies* and had created an *autonomous, formal, and intentional ethics*. He regarded every moral philosophy as heteronomous, where the highest moral good or the highest moral command or law originated from outside and not from the moral agent. In this sense, every religious ethics is heteronomous in Kant's opinion, since God is not only directing the main happenings in the human world (as is the case in Greek mythology) or creating permanently the world (as St. Augustine believed), but God is also the highest moral value. It is the case in every form of the Christian moral philosophies, but Kant refused utilitarianism as well. Christian moral philosophies and utilitarianism need a little bit longer explanation because these moral philosophies belonged to Kant's knowledge and formed his presumptions when he wrote his ethical works. If we give a summary of Kant's ethics, we have to know, why he refused these moral philosophies, when he wanted to write not a heteronomous but autonomous ethics.

¹ Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790).

In the so-called *Divine Command Theory*, which is obviously a heteronomous ethics for Kant, human beings can become moral beings only if they follow God's command, which is written in the Bible and other religious scriptures or is conveyed to people by the priests. (I do not want to touch here the logical problems of this Divine Command Theory, but it is worth mentioning that already Plato's (427–347 BC) *Euthyphro* clarifies the essence of these problems.)

Although St. Thomas of Aquinas (1225–1274) did not follow the Divine Command Theory because he saw its problematic train of thought, he created such a moral philosophy which was also a heteronomous ethics for Kant. The general view that the rightness of actions is something determined by nature itself rather than by the laws and customs of societies or the preferences of individuals is called *Natural Law Theory*. Moral principles are thus regarded as objective truths that can be discovered like things by reason and reflection. The Natural Law Theory originated in classical Greek and Roman philosophy and had immensely influenced the development of moral and political theories. The Natural Law Theory of Roman Catholicism was given its most influential formulation in the 13th century by St. Thomas of Aquinas. Contemporary versions of the theory are mostly elaborations and interpretations of Thomas' basic statement. Thomas stresses that humans possess a trait that no other creature does—*Reason*. Thus, the full development of human potentialities—the fulfillment of human purpose—requires that we follow the direction of the law of reason, as well as being subjected to the laws of material human nature. The development of reason is one of our ends as human beings, but we also rely upon reason to determine what our ends are and how we can achieve them. It is this function of reason that leads Thomas to identify reason as the source of the moral law. Thus, through the subtle application of reason, it should be possible to establish a body of moral principles and rules. These are the *doctrines of natural law*. Because natural law is founded on human nature which is regarded as unchangeable, Thomas regards natural law itself as *unchangeable*. Moreover, *it is seen as the same for all people, at all times, and in all societies*. Even those without knowledge of God can, through the operation of reason, recognize their natural obligations. For Thomas and Roman Catholicism, this view of natural law is just one aspect of a broader theological framework. The teleological organization of the universe is attributed to the planning of a creator. It says that goals or purposes are ordained by God. Furthermore, although natural law is discoverable in the universe, its ultimate source is

divine wisdom and God's eternal law. Everyone who is rational is capable of grasping natural law. But because passions and irrational inclinations may corrupt human nature and because some people lack the abilities or time to work out the demands of natural law, God also chose to reveal our duties to us in explicit ways. The major source of revelation, of course, is taken to be the Biblical scriptures. Natural law, scriptural revelation, the interpretation of the scriptures by the Church, Church tradition, and the teachings of the Church are regarded in Roman Catholicism as the sources of moral ideals and principles. By guiding one's life by them, one can develop the rational and moral part of one's nature and move towards the goal of achieving the sort of perfection that is suitable for humans. Nevertheless, Kant regarded the Natural Law Theory as a heteronomous moral philosophy.

What is more, in Kant's view, utilitarianism is also a heteronomous ethics, and he could not accept the empirical basis of utilitarianism since he was persuaded that in ethics we need universal laws, and we cannot create universal moral laws on the basis of experience. Classical utilitarianism can be summarized in three propositions. First, actions are to be judged right or wrong exclusively by virtue of their consequences. Right actions are, simply, those that have the best consequences. Second, in assessing consequences, the only thing that matters is the amount of happiness or unhappiness that is caused. Thus, right actions are those that produce the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness. This is the "principle of utility" or—as Bentham and Mill also called it—the "greatest happiness principle": "the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people". Third, in calculating the happiness or unhappiness that will be caused, no one's happiness is to be counted as more important than anyone else's. Each person's welfare is equally important. For utilitarianism, an action is right when it produces something intrinsically valuable (happiness). As we can see, for utilitarianism, the rightness of an action depends upon its consequences. That is why utilitarianism is a teleological (consequentialist) and heteronomous ethical theory. In stark contrast to this view is the ethical theory formulated by Kant in his books *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Metaphysics Morals* (1797). For Kant, utilitarianism is a heteronomous ethics because the consequences of an action are morally irrelevant. In Kant's opinion, an action is right when it is in accordance with a rule that satisfies a principle he calls the "categorical imperative". In his ethics, the important moments are the highest moral command (the "categorical im-

perative") and the intention of the moral agent. That is why his ethics can be regarded as a deontological and not a consequentialist ethics.

However, *Kant wanted to work out the maximum of the human autonomy*. In his opinion, if a woman decides to have an abortion and go through with it, it is possible to view the action as involving a rule. The woman can be thought of as endorsing a rule to the effect "Whenever I am in circumstances like these, then I shall have an abortion". Kant calls such a rule a "maxim". In his view, all reasoned and considered actions can be regarded as involving maxims. The maxims in such cases are personal or subjective, but they can be thought of as being candidates for moral rules. If they pass the test imposed by the categorical imperative, then we can say that such actions are right. Furthermore, in passing the test, the maxims cease to be merely personal and subjective. They gain the status of objective rules of morality that hold for everyone. Kant formulates the categorical imperative in this way: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1993, 30; 4:421). Kant calls the principle "categorical" to distinguish it from "hypothetical" imperatives. These tell us what to do if we want to bring about certain consequences—such as happiness. A categorical imperative prescribes what we ought to do without reference to any consequences. The principle is an "imperative" because it is a command. *That is why it is the highest form of the human autonomy since the categorical imperative is created by ourselves, that is we are really autonomous beings since we create the highest moral law for ourselves.*

The test imposed on maxims by the categorical imperative is one of generalization or "universalizability". The central idea of the test is that a moral maxim is one that can be generalized to apply to all cases of the same kind. That is, you must be willing to see your rule adopted as a maxim by everyone who is in a situation similar to yours. You must be willing to see your maxim universalized, even though it may turn out on some other occasion to work to your disadvantage. For a maxim to satisfy the categorical imperative, it is not necessary that we be agreeable in some psychological sense to see it made into a universal law. Rather, the test is one that requires us to avoid inconsistency or conflict in what we will as a universal rule. Utilitarianism identifies the good with happiness or pleasure and makes the production of happiness the supreme principle of morality. But for Kant happiness is at best a conditional or qualified good. In his view, there is only one thing that can be said to be good in itself: a good will. Will is what directs our actions and guides

our conduct. But what makes a will a “good will”? Kant’s answer is that a will becomes good when it acts purely for the sake of duty. We act for the sake of duty (or from duty) when we act on maxims that satisfy the categorical imperative. This means, then, that it is the motive force behind our actions—the character of our will—that determines their moral character. Morality does not rest on results—such as the production of happiness—but neither does it rest on our feelings, impulses, or inclinations. An action is right in moral sense, for Kant, only when it is done for the sake of duty.

If we summarize Kant’s ethics, we can say that the most important thing is in his ethics, what is missing, and it is God.² It is a secularized version of the Christian moral philosophy. In Kant’s case, morality is essentially identical with rationality. As we have already seen it, according to the traditional Christian ethics, every moral norm and principle is deducted (directly or indirectly) 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 *Critique of Pure Reason* that “Thus I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (Kant 1998 [1781], 117), it signifies only the result of his method of criticism. In his ethics, which is also a deontological ethics, God is replaced by Reason, and God functions as a mere postulate.³ Kant obviously wanted to reconcile the new results of the natural sciences in the 18th century with faith and moral freedom. The categorical imperative is (namely) a synthetic, a priori proposition since it is created exclusively for the practical reason by the pure reason:⁴ “Act only according to that

² God is basically a moral philosophical postulate in Kant’s ethics since human beings lost their intention to be moral at all if there was not any hope for the harmony of morality and happiness at least in the otherworld. Nevertheless, we have to recognize that God does not play any role in the practice of the moral agent, when (s)he tries to solve a moral problem. The moral agent has only to universalize his or her maxim and test it on the categorical imperative. It is a purely rational task, which does not need emotions, inclinations.

³ One might say “Kant argues that one has to believe in God in order to act according to the moral law”. However, to believe in God, if we think logically, is only a premise of acceptance of God as a postulate, to create (at least) an otherworldly harmony, reconciliation between virtue and happiness. We can use the categorical imperative without faith in God as well since it is a rational command, which is universal (“für jedes vernünftige Wesen”) by its rationality and not by the faith.

⁴ It would need a much longer explanation if I wanted to go into the details, but it is clear that the practical reason cannot be the “author” of the categorical imperative since in that case, Kant could not create autonomous ethics.

maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant 1993, 30; 4:421). 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.⁵) The categorical imperative determines only a relation between our maxims and a universal moral law, and we have to understand this relationship 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 also not forget Kant’s imperative, that we cannot take into account any of our emotions, desires, or inclinations.⁶

3. Rorty’s philosophy

From the moment of arriving in Chicago in 1946, Richard Rorty (1930–2007), 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 not only give up 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.

⁵ The fourth formulation of the categorical imperative contains namely a value: the human being: “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” (Kant 1993 [1785], 36; 4:429).

⁶ One might say that most Kant scholars seem to agree that a moral action may be based on an inclination (etc.), provided that it is in accordance with the categorical imperative. Yes, it is true, but it means that most of the emotions, inclinations, desires are excluded! Namely those, which are not in accordance with the categorical imperative. It means, generally speaking, that Kant did not take into account the moral agent’s emotional life in his ethics!

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*).⁷ 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" (Rorty 1989, 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" (Rorty 1989, 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" (Rorty

⁷ Therefore, according to his historical experiences and theoretical considerations, Rorty is an advocate of Western democracies: "People like me see nothing wrong with any of these—isms, nor with the political and moral heritage of the Enlightenment—with the least common denominator of Mill and Marx, Trotsky and Whitman, William James and Václav Havel. Typically, we Deweyans are sentimentally patriotic about America—willing to grant that it could slide into fascism at any time, but proud of its past and guardedly hopeful about its future. Most people on my side [...] have, in the light of the history of nationalized enterprises and central planning in central and eastern Europe, given up on socialism. *We are willing to grant that welfare state capitalism is the best we can hope for.* Most of us who were brought up Trotskyite now feel forced to admit that Lenin and Trotsky did more harm than good, and that Kerensky has gotten a bum rap for the past 70 years. But we see ourselves as still faithful to everything that was good in the socialist movement" (Rorty 1999, 17–8, emphasis added).

1989, 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, Rorty 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 correspondence-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. Rorty 1999, 48). We are unable to prove any ultimate, substantial reality; instead, only our own, radically temporal and historical, therefore constantly changing 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.) first, 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 even 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 sometimes does not 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. Rorty 1989, xiv) Because of this, among others, Rorty is an advocate of a pragmatist coherence-conception of truth.

According to Rorty, the course of history is also contingent, and the change of vocabulary is neither an act of will nor the result of argumentation. The finite and radically temporal, historical human being rather loses certain vocabularies and acquires others.⁸ The same thing happens

⁸ "Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result

in politics, too, since the advocates, promoters, and backers of Western democracies see it clearly by this point that ideological and political vocabularies change from time to time. If we want, however, to maintain democracy, we must hold on to certain principles and the institutions built on them, at least for the time of a historical experiment. However, it is not lucky to choose these main principles from moral values and basic moral principles because of two reasons. On the one hand, in most cases, these values stop functioning in the first serious social crisis. On the other hand, due to the insuperable gap between the generality of these values or basic principles and actual, individual actions and situations, the application of the earlier is always awkward. (Aristotle has already tried to eliminate this problem with the help of *phronesis* in the case of morals.) So it seems to be useful to build democracy rather on such procedural rules and structures of power, which *have already proved to be good in practice*, which, at least in Western democracies, are accepted by the majority of people on an *empirical basis*. These procedures, structures, and institutions will always be filled up with special political, ideological content by actual participants of the political, ideological arena.

Naturally, modern political mass democracies are far from being perfect. Several drawbacks have already been enumerated from the decline of the Spenglerian culture into civilization through the revolt of the masses described by Ortega to the culture industry of Adorno and the critique of the existing social order by Foucault and so on. However, it would be difficult to deny some of their extremely important positive features. First, it decreased suffering caused by nature and society in such degree, which will compensate for the remaining old and new social constraints (cf. Rorty 1989, 63). Second, it is the best social formation, because there isn't any other functioning better nowadays, and finally, it carries the possibilities of its own development within, which means that it can be even better in the future.

Rorty defined his standpoint in the dimension of political philosophy as a sort of middle ground between the views of Habermas and Foucault. He refused to accept Habermas' belief that democratic institutions need philosophical foundations. At the same time, in contradiction with Foucault, he believed in the possibility of some forms of ideal, democratic, social systems of institutions (cf. Rorty 1988). This, at the same time, means

of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others" (Rorty 1989, 6).

that not everything is contingent for Rorty! He applies irony to almost everything, except one thing: *democracy*.

4. Rorty's ethics and his criticism on Kant's ethics

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 predecessors.⁹ I will emphasize some critical points, which are first and foremost based on his *Contingency* book and his paper "Ethics Without Principles" (cf. Rorty 1999, 72–90).

First of all, 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. Besides 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 foundations¹⁰ 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. It means that Rorty has refused not only the traditional, religious foundationalist needs but also Kant's "Reason" as universal "Reason", which made Kant's ethics a de-

⁹ Rorty has mentioned his main predecessors in many of his writings: first of all Dewey, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Sartre, Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida.

¹⁰ Some philosophers might say that incremental inquiry or social debates can also function as bases of the absoluteness or the unconditionality. However, we can always raise the question that: "Is the so-called 'incremental inquiry or social debates' are not historical and social (as the second expression already says that)!" If something is social and historical, then it cannot be absolute in the sense of "unconditional". The social and historical phenomena (as their name says!) are always determined by the particular social and historical circumstances.

ontologist ethics. I have to remark here that Rorty naturally also uses a notion of reason, but a qualitatively different notion of reason! Kant uses “the Reason,” and Rorty uses “the reason.” Kant uses a universal notion of “Reason”, which is supra-historical, and Rorty’s notion of reason is always a particular, socially and historically determined reason. (See the quote from Rorty below!)

Rorty also *disregards*, unlike Kant, *universal, unconditional 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. Rorty 1999, 73). Rorty reinterprets these differentiations to dispense with the notion of absolute, unconditional obligation. In Rorty’s opinion, we can say, everything is relational in the world. Rorty was namely a panrelationist, which means that in his “ontology” (he refused the necessity to work out a separate ontology, but every philosopher has some sort of latent ontology in general) everything is relational. It follows obviously from this standpoint that he cannot accept Kant’s unconditional moral laws. Moral laws are also conditional and relational since those laws are socially and historically determined. That is why he cannot accept Kant’s universal and absolute moral laws and obligations.

Rorty *refuses* not only the *foundationalist needs* (because—in his view—they are rationally impossible and morally unnecessary; cf. Krémer 2005, 291) but also *the Kantian priority of reason to emotions*. Rorty 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”.¹¹ 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” (Rorty 1999, 77). (As I mentioned above, if Kant rejected the acceptance of those concerns and emotions that are not in accordance with the categorical imperative, it means that he rejected most of the normal human emotions. It means, generally speaking, that Kant did not take

¹¹ Be aware that Rorty here quotes Dewey! (Rorty 1999, 77–78.)

into account the moral agent’s emotional life in his ethics!) 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*” (ibid., 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” (ibid., 79). It is clear that Rorty has refused the priority of *Reason* to emotions, as Kant has thought of it.

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” (that is absolutely not akin to Kant’s reason, as I mentioned it above) 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.

Rorty 2007, 52–3

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. Conclusion

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 stitches—to invoke a thousand little commonalities between their members, rather than specify one great big one, their common humanity” (Rorty 1999, 86-7). It means that in Rorty’s opinion 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” (Rorty 1989, 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. *ibid.*).

It is also worth mentioning here that the admittedly social-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” (*ibid.*, xv–xvi).

Therefore Rorty outlined in his book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 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” (*ibid.*, 1989, 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 these contingencies, however, are 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” (ibid., 189, emphasis added).

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” (ibid., 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” (ibid., 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” (ibid., 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’” (ibid., 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. ibid., 192). The ethnocentrism of liberal ironists is such, “which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an ever larger and more variegated *ethnos*” (ibid., 198), because this “we” is made up of people who were raised to doubt ethnocentrism (cf. ibid.).

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 enough self-doubt (cf. ibid.). 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 institu-

tional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives” (ibid.). 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.

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