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Rorty, Dewey, and Incommensurability

The purpose of my presentation is to reconsider the relationship between Dewey's classical pragmatism and Rorty's neo-pragmatism, and to do so from a perspective in which the notion of incommensurability is a central component. In what follows I'll focus mainly on two aspects. In the first two parts of my paper I concentrate on the Rorty-Dewey relation: I summarize the main points of Rorty's critique leveled against Dewey, and also the interrelations between the key ideas – among them the notion of incommensurability – along which Rorty departs from his intellectual hero; afterwards I contrast some consequences of Rorty's incommensurability thesis with the views of Dewey on three themes, namely, the types of communities they consider, the issue of moral progress, and their theory of education. Finally, in the closing part I approach the issue of incommensurability from a different angle, and try to formulate some critical points regarding Rorty's Whiggish way of appropriating Kuhn's notion of incommensurability.

I. Rorty, Dewey, and the Issue of Incommensurability

If we take a look at the three articles Rorty has explicitly devoted to the discussion of Dewey's work (1982a, 1982b, 1995), we find the following (more extensively: Nyíró 2010). Rorty wholeheartedly welcomes Dewey's approach of using "philosophy as an instrument for social change" (1982b, 74). He also welcomes his means to that end, namely, Dewey's therapeutic approach to traditional philosophy, necessitated by the fact that the latter's dualistic notions reflect social interests of the past, and as such, imply pseudo-problems for the present. The only really important critique Rorty levels against his intellectual hero is, however, that Dewey has made an explicit attempt at reconstructing metaphysics, namely, at constructing a metaphysics of experience and nature. The reason for critique according to him is that Dewey's non-dualistic, 'empirical metaphysics' goes beyond his therapeutic approach of pointing out the cultural genesis of traditional dualisms, and consists basically in the rather constructive attempt to find *continuities* between lower and higher processes – very reminiscent of his early project of panpsychism (from the 1880s). What Rorty finds objectionable, then, is not the very fact that Dewey tries to dissolve all kinds of metaphysical dualisms. What he rejects is rather the manner in which Dewey conceives it to be done, namely, the way along which he tries to merge such dualisms – among them that of Nature and Spirit – in the one and perpetual process of 'evolving,' acknowledging differences only in degree, throughout.

Rorty's decisive passage, which is also very instructive regarding his own project, is the following. If it is the notion of a perpetual process of growth and evolving – a kind of panpsychism – which is

„to bridge the gap between experience and nature, we begin to feel that something has gone wrong. For notions like »experience,« »consciousness,« and »thought« were originally invoked to *contrast* something that varied independently of nature with nature itself. The philosophically interesting sense – the only sense relevant to epistemology – of experience is one that goes back to *ta phainomena* rather than to *empeiria*, to a realm that might well be »out of touch« with nature because it could vary while nature remained the same and remain the same when nature varied. Much of Dewey's work was a desperate, futile attempt to get rid of the *phainomena* versus *ontōs onta*, appearance versus true reality, distinction, and to replace it with a distinction of degree between less organized and directed and more organized and directed *empeiria*” (Rorty, 1995: 6).

What Rorty misses above all in Dewey's conception, then, is some way of maintaining a *distinction between 'phainomena' and 'empeiria'*, that is, some sense of a *discontinuity* between the realm 'that might well be „out of touch” with nature' or reality, on the one hand, and the realm of nature or reality itself, on the other.

Regarding Rorty, two things must be observed here. First, there is in fact a basic distinction in his thought that corresponds to the mentioned discontinuity, and thereby entails a departure from Deweyan metaphysics, namely, Rorty's sharp differentiation between the realm of justification and that of causation. Second, Rorty is also eager to dissolve metaphysical dualisms, but he manages to do so in an utterly non-Deweyan manner, one which is to avoid every kind of metaphysics. The point I'd like to make is that these two aspects of Rorty's thought are not only correlated, but they are also intimately connected to a basic notion in his work, borrowed from Thomas Kuhn, namely, that of incommensurability. Now, the key for understanding the inferential relation between the idea of incommensurability among different sets of beliefs, on the one hand, and the distinction between the orders of causation and justification, on the other, is Rorty's adherence to anti-representationalism.

One can show the interrelatedness of these conceptions along the following three claims. 1) Rorty's distinction between the orders of justification and causation is a necessary one for disclaiming representationalism, that is, for rejecting the idea that our beliefs, claims, discourses, or vocabularies – in short, our linguistic practices – should be justified by those instances of the world which they supposedly represent. The causation-justification distinction is a pregnant one (see Brandom 2000). In any case, it does *not* correspond to some metaphysical dualism, say, to that of Spirit and Nature – the notion that “the universe is made up of two kinds of things” is a “bad old metaphysical notion”, Rorty claims (1979: 351). Rather, this distinction gives voice to Rorty's thesis that although we stand amidst causal constrains of the environing world of things, our linguistic descriptions of those things cannot be justified by such causal effects. Causal and therefore non-normative constrains cannot justify our beliefs – only reasons can do that, due to the normative constrains inherent in them. In other words, insofar as the relation between our linguistic practices and the environing things of the world is strictly causal, it makes no sense to conceive that relation additionally in terms of representation. As Rorty claims, blurring “the distinction between the question What causes our beliefs? and the question What justifies our beliefs? [...] is essential for any representationalist theory of knowledge” (1995: 5).

2) Now, Rorty's anti-representationalism exacts him to give non-representational accounts of old metaphysical dualisms. And this is exactly what Rorty does, for example in a chapter of the *Mirror* devoted to the Spirit-Nature distinction, where he says: „Nature is whatever is so routine and familiar and manageable that we trust our own language implicitly. Spirit is whatever is so unfamiliar and unmanageable that we begin to wonder whether our »language« is »adequate« to it” (1979: 352). Again, the strategy of re-describing traditional dualisms in terms of familiarity does not amount to ascribing various properties to various metaphysical entities. It amounts to making a distinction between our linguistic practices in terms of the sufficiency or insufficiency, the pragmatic success or failure, of our familiar vocabularies in facing and coping with diverse phenomena.

3) Rorty's anti-representationalism – and thus, his adherence to the distinction between the order of causation and that of justification – goes hand in hand with his incommensurability thesis. For a representationalist theory of knowledge simply has no room for a tenable notion of incommensurability among different sets of justified beliefs, and in turn, true incommensurability of diverse sets of justified beliefs must preclude representationalism. It is so because representationalism assumes justification by what is represented – and thereby a common standard for commensuration.

II. Some Consequences of the Incommensurability Thesis Regarding the Rorty-Dewey Relation

If the argument sketched above holds good, then *the notion of incommensurability constitutes one of the main points along which Rorty departs from Dewey in a systematic sense*. This claim can be further strengthened by pointing out several consequences of the incommensurability thesis. Now, the

fact that the latter plays a central role in Rorty's overall philosophy is beyond doubt. In the *Mirror*, the idea of incommensurability is introduced in the form of contrasting "conversation" to "commensuration" – at the turning point of the book, where at stake is the overcoming of the epistemological paradigm of philosophy and culture as a whole. Discourses are „commensurable" whenever they are governed by a „set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached" (Rorty 1979: 316), and they are incommensurable whenever no such set of rules is available – one can give no algorithm for choice among them. The distinction between commensurable and incommensurable discourses corresponds to that between normal and abnormal discourses, and the studies of them are carried out by epistemology, and in turn, by hermeneutics. For „epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable – Rorty writes –, [whereas] hermeneutics is largely a struggle against this assumption" (1979: 316), it is a struggle which advocates incommensurability.

Our first observation is that these two types of discoursing correspond to *two different types of community*, one concerned with inquiry, aiming at rational agreement, and the other concerned with something which is more elementary, and existentially or pragmatically prior to the otherwise desirable interest in inquiry, that is, with peaceful coexistence, and in turn, edification. „Epistemology views the participants [of discussion] as united in [...] an *universitas* – a group united by mutual interests [and norms, one should add – M. Ny.] in achieving a common end – Rorty writes. Hermeneutics views them as united in [...] a *societas* – persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground" (1979: 318). From this perspective, the greatness of Dewey's „great community" – developed in *The Public and Its Problems* – resides not so much in an ideal of a cooperative community of inquiring citizens, but rather in a kind of pluralist society which is „a community of communities": a *societas* of a plurality of *universitas*, wherein neither a „common ground" nor even a mutual interest in arriving at a consensus can be taken for granted. (In my view, this development on Rorty's side seems to correspond to the present circumstances more than Dewey's account.)

One should also observe that *the adherence to the notion of incommensurability is primarily of moral significance* for Rorty. While the Deweyan notions of evolving and growth suggest only continual alteration, Rorty wants to maintain the possibility of qualitative identity change, made possible by the "hermeneutic" or abnormal forms of conversation. For it is discourse between incommensurable stances which can, if at all, edify: "edifying discourse is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness" (Rorty 1979: 360). The difference between the two thinkers on this point seems to be, then, the difference between emphasizing *change in degree*, due to intelligent reconstruction of our practices, and in turn, emphasizing the possibility of *change of identity*, via creating or choosing a new "final vocabulary" and thereby a new self. (It is this moral motive of Rorty which finds his ally in Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic experience and *Bildung*.)

Rorty's reliance on the incommensurability thesis also leads him to some important differences regarding the theory of education, when compared to that of Dewey. In his *Democracy and Education*, Dewey "connects the growth of democracy with the development of the experimental method in the sciences, evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences, and the industrial reorganization, and points out the change in [...] education indicated by these developments" (1985: 3). From these achievements he extracts the notions central to his educational philosophy, namely, experimentalism, growth, and reconstruction. He says, for example: „Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself" (1985: 59). „The idea of education advanced [...] is formally summed up in the idea of continuous reconstruction of experience [...]" (1985: 86). Now, compared to Dewey's perhaps somewhat one-sided emphasis on the continuity of organic interaction, and growth in the sense of intelligent reconstruction of experience – the importance of which is nowhere called into doubt by Rorty –, in his educational writings Rorty puts forward the difference between two tasks of education which do not stand in such a continuity, but rather, mostly clash with one another, namely, socialization and individualization. It should be realized – he warns –, that „education is not a continuous process from age 5 to age 22. [...] the word 'education' covers two entirely distinct, and equally necessary, processes – socialization and individualization" (1999: 117).

Although Dewey was obviously well aware of these aspects of education, the very fact that he described the process and the end of education *in terms of* growth, formation of habits, perpetual reconstruction, etc., seems already to imply that it is the aspect of socialization, rather than that of individualization – in the radical sense, as Rorty has it in view –, that concerned him more.

What all these suggest is that *the Rorty–Dewey relation should be reconsidered*. For it may well be the case that the two philosophers address *different levels* of the problems, where these levels do not at all exclude one another, but rather, the second one emerges beyond, or on the top of the first, and in that sense presupposes *and* includes it. Regarding the relation between epistemology and hermeneutics Rorty acknowledges, indeed, that „the two do not compete, but rather help each other out” (1979: 346). If so, then the possibility of approaching Dewey’s and Rorty’s work as being complementary to, rather than exclusive of, one another, should be considered.

III. Rorty’s Whiggish Way of Appropriating Kuhn’s Notion of Incommensurability

In this closing part of my presentation I’d like to investigate the manner in which Rorty makes use of Kuhn’s idea of incommensurability. For as we saw it, Rorty generalizes the Kuhnian distinction between normal and revolutionary sciences of nature and claims that any inquiry or discourse can in principle be commensurable or incommensurable. What I’d like to show is, however, that Rorty’s way of appropriating Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability is not without peculiar consequences.

As it has been pointed out (Tartaglia 2007: 156), Kuhn’s incommensurability thesis had originally been based on an experience of his, namely that of a *Gestalt-switch* (comparable to the experience of the “rabbit-duck” illusion) he went through while studying Aristotelian physics. Such a change of vision involves not only “being in different worlds” (in the sense of approaching the things in the world from radically different, indeed, incommensurable “conceptual schemes”), but also “seeing different things.” In the *Mirror*, however, Rorty wants to do away with Kuhn’s “idealist-sounding claims” (1979: 324), and basically dismisses the Kuhnian notion of *Gestalt-switch*. He does so by refusing Kuhn’s notion of “seeing different things,” and by claiming relevance for a – historically! – “neutral language” in describing the things of the world, namely, the “language” of sensory stimulation: “the results of looking can always be phrased in terms acceptable to both sides” – Rorty claims (1979: 324).

Here our question is whether or not something important is lost in Rorty’s appropriation of Kuhn? For it seems to be the case that by the gesture of generalization Rorty also *generalizes something which is peculiar to the sciences of nature*, namely the fact that – at least regarding their success in predicting and controlling their subject-matter – their *historical progress* is undeniable. And again, by that move Rorty also seems to eliminate Kuhn’s implicit notion of irreducibly radical „otherness” (involved in that of a *Gestalt-switch*). When Rorty takes it as Kuhn’s claim “that no algorithm was possible save a *post factum* and Whiggish one”, and *regrets* that such a claim “was, however, obscured by Kuhn’s own »idealistic«-sounding addenda” (1979: 324), he takes side with *Whiggish enterprises in commensuration*. But one must be alert to the fact that the possibility of Whiggish narratives arises precisely when the notion of a radical „otherness” (rabbit?, duck?) vanishes. From Kuhn’s notion of historical incommensurability Rorty draws the conclusion that “objectivity” is always a matter of intersubjective justification and agreement. However, to the extent that he defends a Whiggish enterprise in historical commensuration, he manages to do away with Kuhn’s sense of historicity.

Rorty’s term for giving expression to the overall historicity of ours is that of ethnocentrism (sometimes also called by him “anti-anti-ethnocentrism”). By these latter terms he wants to refer to both: “ethnocentrism as an inescapable condition – roughly synonymous with »human finitude«, and also „»ethnocentrism« [as] loyalty to the sociopolitical culture of [...] »the rich North Atlantic democracies«” (1991: 15). The fact that these two senses of ethnocentrism *do not* coincide with one another may have significant consequences regarding the nature of conversation one may conduct – and that also concerns the notion of “hermeneutics” Rorty entertains. “We must be hermeneutical

where we do not understand what is happening but are honest enough to admit it, rather than being *blatantly* »Whiggish« about it,” Rorty writes (1979: 32). Here he speaks about being “*blatantly* Whiggish”, for “being Whiggish” is an inevitable condition of every incommensurable discourse, indeed, meaning nothing more than that one is compelled to proceed from his own normal discourse’s point of view, that is, one “takes some norm for granted” (1979: 321). A historical account is “Whiggish” when it is “constructed [...] on the basis of the vocabulary or assumptions of the winning side” (1979: 324). In a sense, then, every historiography is inevitably “Whiggish,” insofar as it is constructed in the present, written by the alive. And Rorty adds, right away, that although hermeneutics is inevitably Whiggish, “insofar as it proceeds nonreductively and in the hope of picking up a new angle on things, it can transcend its own Whiggishness” (1979: 320-21). This is correct enough, and it must be emphasized that Rorty, for the most part – and at least in his more philosophical (and less political) considerations – advocates a kind of openness toward the conversational partner. Yet, the question remains, *in what degree, and – more exactly – in what sense, is historiography and hermeneutics inevitably Whiggish?*

The term “Whiggish” also appears in Rorty’s essay titled “The historiography of philosophy: four genres” (1998: 50). There he speaks about “conversations between ourselves [...] and the mighty dead,” and the reason he gives for the need of such an imaginative conversation is that

“we would like to be able to see the history of our race as a long conversational interchange. We want to be able to see it that way in order to assure ourselves that there has been rational progress in the course of recorded history – that we differ from our ancestors on grounds which our ancestors could be led to accept. The need for reassurance on this point is as great as the need for self-awareness” [the latter being the result of mere “historical knowledge” which “helps us to recognize [...] different forms of intellectual life than ours”] (1998: 51).

This kind of “reassurance” is also mirrored in an other description Rorty gives about the term “Whiggish”, according to which it “refers to a kind of historiography which tries to show how desirable it has been that the party – the standpoint of whom we tend to accept – was in fact victorious in the past” (in Rorty’s letter to the Hungarian translator, István M. Fehér). But such a Whiggishness doesn’t seem to aim at the above mentioned “transcending its own Whiggishness,” at all. Rather the contrary. It aims at an enterprise in commensuration constructed from the point of view of a self-assured consciousness of superiority. To that extent, we may be justified in making a distinction between a weak and a strong senses of Whiggish narratives. In its weak form – i.e. “proceeding from norms taken so far for granted, and at the same time being open to putting those norms to test in dialogue” – it is a condition of every historically situated conversation, and as such it corresponds to the first sense of ethnocentrism which gives voice to “human finitude”. In its strong form, however – where Whiggish narratives take the form of an self-assured retrospective account not at all open to putting its norms to test –, it *may sometimes* correspond to the second sense of ethnocentrism, to the “loyalty to the sociopolitical culture of [...] »the rich North Atlantic democracies«.” The question is, to what extent can such a self-assured loyalty be obviously justified? For “»Whiggish« accounts [which] draw on our better knowledge” – as Rorty says (1998: 56) – do not seem to suffice when real conversation is at stake.

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