

Knowing ourselves and recognizing others: reading Rorty's contribution to the epistemology of the self

Conhecimento de si e reconhecimento dos outros: uma leitura da contribuição de Rorty para a epistemologia do ego

Rosa M. Calcaterra*

Abstract: In this essay I place Rorty's narrative account of the self in the history of modern and contemporary philosophy. My thesis is that his rejection of both Cartesian introspectivism and psycho-biological reductionist explanations originally issues from an epistemology of the self which is in line with Hume's insights about the contingency of selfhood but, also, introduces a complex approach to the philosophical question about the relation between the aesthetic and rational realm. Moreover, I advance an anti-skeptical, dynamic and normative reading of Rorty's narrative model of the self, which relates to his understanding of irony—we can always doubt that our final vocabulary is the best one available—and of solidarity—conceived not only as an affective movement towards the other, but also as a logical condition for the functioning of human communication.

Keywords: Aesthetic. Logical normativity. Narrative model of self. Rorty.

Resumo: Neste ensaio, enquadro a narrativa de Rorty com relação ao ego na história das filosofias moderna e contemporânea. Minha tese é que sua rejeição tanto do introspectivismo cartesiano quanto das explicações reducionistas psico-biológicas nasce originalmente de uma epistemologia do ego que está alinhada aos insights de Hume sobre a contingência da individualidade, mas também, introduz uma abordagem complexa à questão filosófica sobre a relação entre os reinos estético e racional. Além disso, avanço em uma leitura anticética, dinâmica e normativa do modelo narrativo de Rorty do ego, a qual associa seu entendimento de ironia – nós podemos sempre duvidar que nosso vocabulário final é o melhor disponível – e de solidariedade – concebido não apenas como um movimento afetivo em direção ao outro, mas também, como uma condição lógica para o funcionamento da comunicação humana.

Palavras-chave: Estética. Modelo narrativo do ego. Normatividade lógica. Rorty.

Data de recebimento: 29/03/2020

Data de aceite: 19/04/2020

DOI: 10.23925/2316-5278.2020v21i1p25-33

* Professor of Università Roma Tre, Italy. Email: rosamaria.calcaterra@uniroma3.it.

Philosophy resembles space and time: it is hard to imagine what an 'end' to any of the three would look like.

Richard Rorty

1 Introductory remarks

The notes I am about to propose are intended to consider the contribution of Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism to the epistemology of the self, that is to say to the philosophical reflection on the factors, the possibilities and the limits of the cognitive experience of one's own subjectivity and therefore of one's own personal identity. As we know, this theme has a long and complex theoretical history, in modernity and contemporary thought. My aim is to sketch Rorty's position in the historical-theoretical development of this theme of which I can evidently only indicate some of the most significant moments. Let me also say that my comments are intended to promote an interpretative attitude that goes beyond the mere *vis polemica* that has long dominated the interventions on Rorty. Fortunately, there is now a prevalent tendency to deal with Rorty's work looking more to its thematic richness than just arguing with its most clamorous expressions. My presentation intends to promote such a constructive tendency, which is actually very alive in the 30th anniversary of his famous book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

The theme of subjectivity involves a network of concepts/questions: personal identity, self-awareness, knowledge of "other minds" or inter-individual recognition; and a number of conceptual pairs that go through our long history of ideas: internal/external, subjective/objective, essence/appearance, mind/language, individual/social, normative/descriptive, etc. This theme was very little addressed by the classics of pragmatism, with the exception of James and Mead,¹ but today it is a particularly urgent subject for reflection, for the well-known historical-cultural reasons that affect us closely: globalization, intercultural conflicts, ethical relativism, etc. Above all, in my opinion, it is a theme that indicates how ephemeral, shifting, if not even—for certain aspects—incongruous, the boundaries are that one tends to erect between different philosophical sectors, such as the theoretical-epistemological area and that of practical philosophy. As a schematic, it is worth pointing out the aspects on which my reading of the Rortyan position will be based:

1. The "narrative" conception of the self and its dependence on the anti-essentialism of both spiritualist and physicalist brands;
2. The "creative" conception of personal identity, that is to say the correlation between narrative capacity and self-creation activities;
3. The idea of the intersubjective destination of the self.

1 Important reconstructions of Peirce's conception of subjectivity are Colapietro (1989) and De Tienne (2005, p. 91-100). Regarding Mead, see Baggio (2016).

Overall, these aspects put forward a theoretical framework consisting mainly of four interconnected motives: a) *fallibility*; b) "*ironic liberalism*"; c) *historicist contingentism*; and finally, d) *non-reductive naturalism*.

2 Hume's heritage

In the course of our philosophical tradition, the relationship between sensorial-affective factors, emphasized in Hume's perspective, and logical-rational factors typical of Cartesian rationalism, has always represented a pivotal point of the theories of subjectivity. Hume's and Descartes's models of subjectivity continue to feed, by continuity or contrast, the contemporary debate on the question of personal identity. Thus, for example, very influential philosophers, such as Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, recover the importance of the traditional notion of a "spiritual" substance on the ethical side of hermeneutics, while many other notable scholars, such as Derek Parfit or Patricia Churchland, propose a materialistic reductionism that tends to solve the entire field of human reality in terms of neurophysiological events. Moreover, there is an important tendency, also represented by some analytical philosophers (for example, Strawson, Kripke, and Wiggins) to underline the psycho-physical unity of the person and therefore, more or less explicitly, to read the discrepancy between the Humean and Cartesian paradigms in terms of an impracticable polarization of "feeling" and "thinking."

We have to point out that Rorty refuses adamantly the wide contemporary tendency toward a dissolution of our "interiority" into a physicalist conception of mind (mind = brain). At the same time, his approach to personal identity or selfhood shows many affinities with David Hume's naturalism, especially since the Scottish philosopher tried to use the notion of *sociality* in order to shift the approach to subjectivity from the ontological to a functional level. As is well known, Hume invokes the image of the theater as an illustration of his conception of mind as a "bundle of perceptions," the self as a "fictitious" entity, "[...] that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference." (HUME, [1740] 2009, p. 394). And the anti-Cartesian power of this picture can be easily caught in the famous passage on the mind as a theatre "[...] where several perceptions successively make their appearance." (HUME, [1740] 2009, p. 396).

Hume does not want to annihilate the problem of subjectivity: he considers the "fiction" of the self both epistemically and practically inevitable. For him, what matters is its genesis and role, in order to *claim back importance* for those aspects—*feelings, emotions, corporeality, sociality*—that rationalism tends to underestimate. Regarding the genesis of the self, Hume's solution is a huge break from the self-evidence that Descartes attributed to subjectivity: self—Hume says—is the fruit *of the work of memory*, the faculty that "alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of a succession of perceptions" and therefore it has to be considered as "the source of personal identity." In other words, "[...] memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production" (HUME, [1740] 2009, p. 408). Indeed, like other philosophers that try to dissolve the

substantiality of subjectivity, Hume has a hard time reconciling the negation of an ontological consistency to subjectivity with the actual presence of subjectivity within all the psychic and moral processes.²

Hume's intention to replace a metaphysical explanation of personal identity with the naturalistic description of its genesis and functioning has found its concreteness, especially in recent years, in the perspectives grounded on the indissoluble psychophysical unity of the subject. In this light, we can see the connection between the *self and the passions*: as Hume demonstrates when he analyzes *pride*, the mind-body wholeness that makes our self the primary object of passion or pride is *the passion par excellence*, the original impulse in terms of *our tendency to refer to ourselves*. But the "*passion for self*" does not grow by itself: it needs, in addition to natural impulse, other causes, such as "[...] some excellency in the character, in bodily accomplishments, in cloths, equipage or fortune" (HUME, [1740] 2009, p. 448). In a nutshell, *pride is a social passion that is constitutive of both individuals and communities*.

Like Hume, Daniel C. Dennett connects self to our bio-social functions but, unlike Hume, he also asserts their autonomy. To Dennett's eyes, our mechanisms of self-protection are the true source of the "*web of discourses*" we constantly weave in order to "present ourselves to the others and to ourselves;" since language is a self-feeding biological function, the identity we give to ourselves is the product and not the source of these "narrative sequences" or "the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are." Dennett defines *the self as a "center of narrative gravity,"* namely as an abstract, non-existent entity, postulated for biological and social purposes, which has the same advantages that the notion of "center of gravity" has in physics when we calculate gravity. (DENNETT, 2017, p. 13).

Richard Rorty shares with Hume the idea that sociality is the key point of an anti-essentialist conception of subjectivity; at the same time, he tends to overlook the biological level of Dennett's narrative model of the self. Rather, he focuses on the ethical-social side, where the concreteness of subjectivity is evoked by *the ethical value of solidarity*: to his mind, the traditional notion of a human essence has to be radically criticized through an acknowledgment of the linguistic, symbolic and mediated nature of our various experiences and, thus, also of our logical-semantic parameters. Rorty sees language as a *basic function of our individual and social behavior*, which clearly shows the *historical-cultural boundaries* of our thought and of philosophy itself, of our ethical and cognitive criteria as well as of the arguments that we employ for their support or critique.

2 "The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed" (HUME, 2009, p. 396). For a brief account of the difficulties in the Humean analysis of personal identity see Baier (1978, p. 237-248), and Penelhum (1976, p. 9-24).

3 Personal identity, irony, and sociality

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*,³ the project of a therapeutic and edifying philosophy suggested in the second part of *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature*, is reformulated in terms of replacement of traditional notions of truth, rationality and moral duty with those of metaphor and self-creation, (CIS, p. 44) and the latter are presented as the core of the topic of personal identity. Nietzsche and Freud are indicated as the anchorages of a contingentist picture of subjectivity that implies both the creative power of language and the substitution of metaphysical generalizations with personal histories. More particularly, Rorty credits Nietzsche for conceiving the radical contingency of subjects and, at the same time, for recognizing the *right and duty* to self-creation, using the definition of the genius as a narrator of “never before told stories,” who turns the “it was” into the “thus I willed it” (CIS, p. 29). In Freud, instead, he finds a description of consciousness as a *weave of contingencies*, focused on the relevance of details and circumstances that cause the formation and development of personal identity. So,⁴ through the idea that language is a “tool for producing effects” rather than an accurate representation of external reality or our internal world, (CIS, p. 10ff.) the concepts of “metaphor” and “self-creation” form a narrative model of self-knowledge conceived as a *self-description* process that searches for an acknowledgment from the others.

The pivotal feature of Rorty's conception of linguistic contingency is the notion of a “final vocabulary,” a notion that is equally at the core of his ethnocentrism and his narrative model of subjectivity. Renouncing the idea of an intrinsic, universal and predetermined human nature, he affirms that each person is a “*web of beliefs*,” behaviors and desires that are the result of contingent factors, such as family and school education, cultural tradition and linguistic forms (CIS, p. 76ff.). The personal “*final vocabularies*” contain both public and private elements, therefore, the differences in vocabularies are both *intra-cultural*, that is referred to our personal histories, and *inter-cultural*, that is referred to our historical-social environment. Since the “final vocabularies” do not mirror the so-called objectivity of facts, being rather a logical-semantic complex that grounds our *self-descriptions*, there is no *a priori* criterion for establishing which one is “truer.” Nevertheless, we should not overlook *the importance of a critical use of our own language and, thus, the possibility of correcting or adjusting our final vocabularies*; in fact, what comes to the foreground is the *contingency*—namely the intrinsic *flexibility* or *plasticity*—of our logical-semantic criteria and of our “final vocabularies” within which these criteria acquire their own functioning. Therefore, Rorty suggests that the *ironic approach to the processes of self-realization* is the crucial element for the possible change of our “final vocabularies” (CIS, p. 73). And the interesting point is that Rorty links ironism and comparison with other people on the basis of the acknowledgment and the respect for those who use a different “final vocabulary” (CIS, p. 75 and p. 80).

Although Rorty seems to restrict irony to the private sphere, we cannot underestimate his suggestions about the consequences of ironism on social ethics.

3 Hereinafter referred to as CIS.

4 Cf. CIS, p. 30-40.

Beyond his critique of the old philosophical tendency to unify private and public spheres, there is a specific link between irony and solidarity that is a central element of his thought. More specifically, the topic of *sufferance and humiliation* comes to the fore together with the proposal to see in *solidarity an expression of liberal-democratic culture* rather than a consequence of a metaphysical definition of human beings (CIS, p. 91).

We can legitimately feel upset by these wordings, which are in fact so different from the usual rhetoric of solidarity. But it is interesting to note that his position firstly invites to consider that naturalism and constructivism are not necessarily opposed.⁵ In such a perspective, it is, in fact, important to realize that our *common vulnerability* to suffering and humiliation is a fully “natural condition,” but being able to acknowledge that as a valid argument for justifying solidarity is not at all simply natural or common: on the contrary, our vulnerability *is perceivable as such only when placed within the “space of reasons” and thus within the ethical space of what Rorty calls “human conversation.”* In this light, it is not an exaggeration to say that our vulnerability to suffering and humiliation is the only universal criterion we could accept.

4 The relation of feelings and reason

The ethical principle of solidarity and the hope for its improvement are results of Rorty’s meta-ethics that supplements classical anti-cognitivism with both a historicist and naturalist rejection of emotivism. In Rorty’s eyes, we cannot accept Emotivism unless we accept the old neo-positivistic distinction between feelings and reason.⁶ The ability to communicate with others, tolerance for cultural alterities, and overall solidarity, are the driving force of moral progress and the criterion for assessing other moral values. The originary terrain of these values is not the Kantian tribunal of reason, but the *growth of democratic societies*; therefore, their validity cannot be grounded on universal and necessary rational arguments; instead, they require a *justification* focused on the *effective advantages* deriving from choosing to practice these values rather than others.

Rorty’s typical invitation to privilege justificatory argumentation over the anxiety of a search for a universal foundation of knowledge has consequences on an ethical level.⁷ At this level, in fact, we find an attempt to gather the complexity of interpersonal and intercultural communicative relationships into an approach to self-knowledge that privileges the *intertwining of ironism and solidarity*. Most importantly, his naturalistic perspective suggests an idea of solidarity that does not correspond to a mere feeling of closeness to other people, but rather calls up the vital blending of the *affective* with the *logical-argumentative* sphere, thanks to which solidarity can be directed onto the social path of values, aims and common practices. On that topic, Rorty’s narrative model of personal identity could be

5 See CIS, chap. 2.

6 On the topic of post-Kantian and Positivistic oppositions of that kind see RORTY, 1990, p. 113-125.

7 Cf. RORTY, 2000, p. 36-38.

fruitfully connected with Davidson's re-evaluation of Quine's "charity principle" as a *condition sine qua non* of ordinary communication.⁸

In distinction from Quine, who considered the "charity principle" a rule for the translation of remote languages, Davidson sees in this principle the *condition sine qua non* of our ordinary communication. This perspective corroborates ironism in interpersonal and intercultural dialogue, without surrendering to an ethically trivial and rhetorical do-goodism. Davidson's "principle of charity," indeed, cannot be mistaken for a simple feeling of closeness to other people or an invitation to an aesthetic compliance; it refers to the universality of the attitude to organize coherently our relationships with things and people through a system of beliefs that, at least in principle, aims to be intersubjectively sharable.

In Rorty's philosophy, communication, argumentative practices, and finally the *dialogical model* of human relationships play a pivotal role, a role that is indeed also at the core of his approach to the issue of the self. This point of view reminds closely Charles S. Peirce's assertion of the dialogical structure of the self or his so-called "*tuism*." For the moment, to explore the implicit suggestions of Rorty's approach to the dialogical component of selfhood, it may be useful to consider Gadamer's idea of "dialogue" with texts or traditions of the past (GADAMER, 1972, p. 350ff.). Such an idea becomes in fact questionable when we are dealing with dialogue between real and living subjects, because in this case, we find a tangible interference of cognitive and psychological/affective factors, which often force us to admit—as perhaps happens daily to each one of us—that the idea of dialogue with others risks being a mere *petitio principii*. However, what really matters in this respect is the possibility of *sharing the idea of communication as dialogue*. This possibility certainly has to do with the individual psychological apparatus. More precisely, it requires two interrelated conditions: on the one hand, the disposition to *perceive oneself as being always subject to the possibility of error*, therefore, to effectively suspect one's own points of reference, that is, *to run the existential risk of doubt*; on the other hand, it requires an inclination to *perceive the testimony of others as something that deserves to be considered*, if only because it can help to identify one's own idiosyncrasies and recognize them as such, rather than considering the testimony of others as an impending threat to personal balances—more or less hard-won. Indeed, one could say that these requirements are nothing but *aesthetic qualities*, which human individuals may or may not have. However, and I will be happy to return on this during the Q&A (questions and answers) time, this does not mean that we need to separate dialogue from the *uncertain field of feeling*, in order to elevate it into the *presumed "higher" and "safer" sphere of reason* as separated from sentiment. The aesthetic level of subjectivity is indeed situated beyond the simple natural predispositions of people or it is placed at the limit between psychological and cultural individuality, where the *co-working* of affections and logical-semantic representations makes the division of aesthetics from rationality very difficult. I am referring to those subjective forms of feeling that can be identified as the subjective mirroring of a whole of socio-cultural aesthetic attitudes and practices, which can reinforce or weaken certain psychological or individual tendencies, just because they

8 Quine (1960, chap. 2). Davidson's theory of interpretation is contained in the essays collected in Davidson (1984).

activate a cognitive and affective process that gradually induces individuals to assess the validity of those practices and attitudes, and then to include them or not in their own intellectual and behavioral horizon.⁹ Rorty's conversational and dialogic perspective can be seen in this light, where it recalls the progression of modern democracy toward a juridical endorsement of the respect for the differences among humans, defending the principle of "cultural pluralism."

We can agree with Rorty that *literary* works, with their "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation," increase human solidarity more than many philosophical treatises; nevertheless, the idea that "there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity" has to be subjectively accepted into our own experience. Once we do so, we will be committed to meditate constructively on his assertion that solidarity is not based on the awareness of a central self, a human essence, but on

[...] *the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, 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'* (CIS, p. 192, *our emphasis*).

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9 On this topic see Mead (1934) and the recovering of his thought in Honneth (1994, 2003). About the connections between them see Nieddu (2003, p. 123-146).

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