Rorty on Religion and History

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Abstract: I shall prove my overall thesis that Rorty consistently enforces his politically saturated liberal ironic standpoint in the fields of religion and history from his *Contingency* book (1989). As a neopragmatist thinker he gives priority to politics in the sense of a liberal democracy over everything else. I shall analyze briefly his neo-pragmatist thoughts in general in the first part. This shows Rorty as a liberal ironist who regards almost everything as contingent, except democracy. In the second part I shall interpret his main views about religion in connection with his political thoughts. Finally, I shall show that history also belongs to the contingent social phenomena.

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Richard Rorty has been attacked almost from every direction. Not only the traditional pragmatists and other, analytic and non-analytic philosophers (e. g. Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Richard J. Berstein, Richard Shusterman, Charles Taylor, etc.), but also political philosophers (e. g. Eric M. Gander, Christopher Voparil, etc.) were unsatisfied with his intellectual standpoint. To prove the case it would be enough to refer to the special books where he responded to the critics,[1] but – as everybody knows – there are also several other critical papers and books about his philosophy. It is evident, however, that I cannot answer all the critics in such an article; this would be impossible even in a monograph. That is why I have chosen the opposite way. I give here – after a longer introduction – a positive, although sketchy, explication of his views in two fields (religion and history), to prove the general consistency of his views, and to respond to some of the charges in this way. In my paper I shall prove in my overall thesis that Rorty consistently enforces his politically saturated liberal ironic standpoint in the fields of religion and history from 1989, and as a neopragmatist thinker he gives priority to politics in the sense of a liberal democracy over everything else. Even philosophy as cultural politics serves this purpose. It follows from this that he did not want to create a detailed political philosophy, but the main motive of his philosophy is political. Rorty does not offer a systematic, but a logical and permanently developed interpretation of our present world on the basis of a knowledge he acquired and improved continuously by building bridges between the post-Darwinian American philosophy and the post-Nietzschean European philosophy.[2] All this does not mean that I do not have a critical stance to Rorty's philosophy, but I am persuaded that we have to reconstruct first as

[1] Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., ed., *Rorty and Pragmatism – The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. (Nashville-London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995); Robert B. Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2000).
[2] Cf. for example Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin Books, 1999), xix.

clearly as possible, what we want to criticize, and today I see more misinterpretation of Rorty, than thoroughly based critiques.

I Rorty's philosophy in general

As it is well-known, Richard Rorty had been an analytic thinker and only later, in the 1970s, became a neo-pragmatist philosopher. In contrast to the traditional foundational philosophers, Rorty hailed first Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and later Derrida as the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Refraining here from a thorough analysis of his philosophy, I should like only to emphasize that Rorty followed radically his own way and drew his conclusions from his views. From these consequences, I emphasize here only the five most important ones from the point of view of my topic:

a) Pragmatism, according to Rorty, is an anti-essentialist, historicist constructivism. Since we create both language and truth about the world, we should be constantly interested in reconstructing language to make it more useful and rewarding and to make the world we come in touch with more satisfying to our needs and desires.

b) As every pragmatist knows, Rorty is also a pan-relationist. He expounds in his article, *A World without Substances or Essences*,[1] that the gap between the so-called 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophies does not show too many signs of being bridged, although the best works being done in these two traditions overlap to an important extent. The quickest way of expressing this common knowledge is to say that philosophers as different as William James and Friedrich Nietzsche, Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida, Hilary Putnam and Bruno Latour, John Dewey and Michael Foucault – and Richard Rorty, of course – are anti-dualists. They are trying to replace the world pictures constructed with the aid of metaphysical dualisms inherited from the Greeks (essence and accident; substance and property; appearance and reality, etc.) with a picture of a flux of continually changing relations.

c) Rorty appropriates and explains as his own the standpoint that "everything is a social construction" and "all awareness is a linguistic affair".[2] Once we have said that all our awareness is under a description, and that descriptions are functions of social needs, then 'nature' and 'reality' can only be names of something unknowable – something like Kant's 'Thing-in-Itself.' From all of this, however, Rorty draws not only the conclusion that it is hopeless to get behind appearance to the intrinsic nature of reality, but he also claims that there is no such thing as the absolute intrinsic nature at all. The anti-essentialists, such as Rorty, cannot believe even that human reason would be a special faculty for penetrating through appearances to reality. As he wrote: "We anti-essentialists, of course, do not believe that there is such a faculty. Since nothing has an intrinsic nature, neither do human beings."[3]

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[1] Cf. ibid., 47.

[2] Rorty wants to show us the following: "Both (theories – A. Kremer) are ways of saying that we shall never be able to step outside of language, never be able grasp reality unmediated by a linguistic description. So both are ways of saying that we should be suspicious of the Greek distinction between appearance and reality, and that we should try to replace it with something like the distinction between 'less useful description of the world' and 'more useful description of the world'. To say that everything is a social construction is to say that our linguistic practices are so bound up with our other social practices that our descriptions of nature, as well as of ourselves, will always be a function of our social needs." (Ibid., 48.)

[3] Ibid., 63.

d) Let us inquire further into Rorty's truth theory! From Rorty's above mentioned views, it follows that he represents a kind of nominalism which goes together with the denial of the traditional representational epistemology, but he cannot be considered a solipsist philosopher. He does not deny the existence of the world:

"We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.
Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by describing activities of human beings – cannot."[1]

According to Rorty, truths, language, objects of inquiry, etc., are rather made than found; that is, we create them describing and re-describing ourselves, our society. In his opinion, the correspondence theory of truth is untenable, for truth as proportional is given only in language. It is a kind of coherence comprehension of truth:

"We pragmatists, who have been impressed by Peirce's criticism of Descartes, think that both skeptics and foundationalists are led astray by the picture of beliefs as attempts to represent reality, and by the associated idea that truth is a matter of correspondence to reality. So we become coherentists. But we coherentists remain divided about what, if anything, needs to be said about truth. I think that, once one has explicated the distinction between justification and truth by that between present and future justifiability, there is little more to be said."[2]

Rorty claims that pragmatists – both classical and 'neo-classical' – do not believe there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance–reality distinction with descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, they have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'. From all of this, it follows that:

"On this view, to say that a belief is, as far as we know, true, is to say that no alternative belief is, as far as we know, a better habit of acting. When we say that our ancestors believed, falsely, that the sun went around the earth, and that we believe, truly, that the earth goes round the sun, we are saying that we have a better tool than our ancestors did. Our ancestors might rejoin that their tool enabled them to believe in the literal truth of the Christian Scriptures, whereas ours does not. Our reply has to be, I think, that the benefits of modern astronomy and space travel outweigh the advantages of Christian fundamentalism. The argument between us and our medieval ancestors should not be about which of us has got the universe right. It should be about the point of holding views about the motion of heavenly bodies, the ends to be achieved by the use of certain tools. Confirming the truth of Scripture is one such aim, space travel is another.

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[1] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4–5.
[2] Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics*, 5.

Another way of making this last point is to say that we pragmatists cannot make sense of the idea that we should pursue truth for its own sake. We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring about consensus on the ends to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behavior is not inquiry but simply wordplay. To argue for a certain theory about the microstructure of material bodies, or about the proper balance of powers between branches of government, is to argue about what we should do: how we should use the tools at our disposal in order to make technological, or political, progress. So, for pragmatists there is no sharp break between natural science and social science, nor between social science and politics, nor between politics, philosophy and literature. All areas of culture are parts of the same endeavor to make life better. There is no deep split between theory and practice, because on a pragmatist view all so-called 'theory' which is not wordplay is always already practice."[1]

I think it is clear that Rorty does not deny truth. He says lots of times that he can speak about truth but not in an absolute, Platonist sense. Rorty accepts the contextual and situational truth that is the narrative truth, "almost" in the same way as Gadamer does.

e) If we focus finally on language and selfhood, we have to analyze first of all Rorty's book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*,[2] where he claims that both language and selfhood are contingent. What is the broader framework of his statement? He would like to show in this book what happens if we give up the idea of a philosophical "single vision"; what happens if we do not want to combine the private and the public vocabulary?

According to his view, authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection – a self-created, autonomous, human life – can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort – the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel.

If we look at the possible reasons for his struggle, it is not only his conviction about the presence of this split, but also the intended defence of the individual and a philosophically clear justification of this impossible fusion at the level of theory. Nevertheless, Rorty is aware of the mutual relationships between the individual and society, which is shown here, and in other places, by the acceptance of practical combinations of the private and the public:

"We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.

There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us do that. The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, 'irrationalist', and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time – causing no harm to

[1] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xxv.

[2] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged. There are practical measures to be taken to accomplish this practical goal. But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange."[1]

As we can see, Rorty emphasizes the differences only on the theoretical level. We do not have to see continuity and unity in the discontinuous dimension of the socio-historical process. If we could bring ourselves to accept not only these two kinds of writers, but also language as tools, we should have much less theoretical contradiction and we could build a liberal democratic society much easier.

Language

The contingency of language means, on the one hand, that we can never "step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a meta-vocabulary which somehow takes account of all possible vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling".[2] On the other hand, language as an entity does not exist. It can be regarded as a mere abstraction. Language exists only in our socio-historically determined linguistic practice which is always manifested in different vocabularies, that is, in language-games in the Wittgensteinian sense. Vocabularies do not change according to conscious plans. It is rather a gradual trial-and-error creation process of a third vocabulary, when somebody realizes that two or more of our vocabularies are interfering with each other. For example:

"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 of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others."[3]

The creator of the new vocabulary is the "strong poet", rather than the scientist or philosopher in the traditional sense. Who is the "strong poet"? In Rorty's interpretation it does not refer only to the actual poets and writers, but, also, the other types of artists, great scientists who invent new descriptions of the world, political thinkers who changed the world through their actions and descriptions, that is, in a broad sense every creative human being. Not everybody will become a strong poet but the possibility is given for every human being, especially in a democratic society. The more liberal and democratic a society is, the more possibilities are given for one to become a strong poet. As Rorty says: "someone like Galileo, Yeats, or Hegel (a 'poet' in my wide sense of the term – the sense of 'one who makes things new')".[4]

It is worth mentioning that Rorty knows extremely well that the strong poet is only the paradigmatic figure of the most conscious self-creation. Interpreting the "strong poet" in the above mentioned broad Rortyan sense, we should not forget that he is aware of its limits:

"The strong poet's fear of death as the fear of incompletion is a function of the fact that no project of re-describing the world and the past, no project of self-creation through imposition on one's own idiosyncratic metaphoric, can avoid being marginal

[1] Ibid., xiv.
[2] Ibid., xvi.
[3] Ibid., 6.
[4] Ibid., 12–13.

and parasitic. Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was "all metaphor" would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble. For even if we agree that languages are not media of representation or expression, they will remain media of communication, tools for social interaction, ways of tying oneself up with other human beings."[1]

Thus, it is clear for him that even the strongest poet depends on others, and he/she also can re-describe, re-totalize his or her individuality, that is, the private, but only in the public framework.

Self

As Wittgenstein and Davidson have shown the contingency of language, in Rorty's opinion Nietzsche and Freud did the same regarding the self. On the basis of their thoughts Rorty rejects the traditional, metaphysically founded idea of a common human nature. He is an anti-dualist philosopher and cannot accept the mind-body distinction. In his opinion, our human life, that is our understanding-interpreting being, is always a linguistic one, and language is considered a human product. Our language-games, vocabularies and contextual truths are not found, but rather made. We, as finite and historical beings, are able to create only narratives, not only about the world, but also about our self.

"(But) if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that *languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences."[2]

According to Rorty, we create ourselves by telling our own stories, by re-describing our own narratives, but this story-telling is influenced very much by the contingent events of our life. Freud, rather than Nietzsche, showed us this contingent characteristic:

"If one considers chance to be unworthy of determining our fate, it is simply a relapse into the pious view of the Universe which Leonardo himself was on the way to overcoming when he wrote that the sun does not move… we are all too ready to forget that in fact everything to do with our life is chance, from our origin out of the meeting of spermatozoon and ovum onwards…. We all still show too little respect for Nature which (in the obscure words of Leonardo which recall Hamlet's lines) 'is full of countless causes ('ragioni') that never enter experience.'

Every one of us human beings corresponds to one of the countless experiments in which these 'ragioni' (causes) of nature force their way into experience."[3]

It seems to me that this brings us back to Heraclitus: *pantha rhei*, everything is changing, everything is in flux. The contingent, the discontinuous moments, are much more comprehensive in our life process than the continuous ones, more comprehensive than we are usually willing to recognize and accept. We try to assure some continuity of

[1] Ibid., 41.
[2] Ibid., 7.
[3] Ibid., 31.

our self only within this discontinuous framework, within this incomplete process of life. As Rorty says: "It cannot get completed, because there is nothing to complete, there is only a web of relations to be rewoven, a web which time lengthens every day."[1]

When Rorty gave an interview for Joshua Knobe in 1995, he revealed the background of his self concept saying that:

"I think that Davidson's approach to intentionality, meaning, belief, truth and so on goes together with Dennett's stuff about the intentional stance, and I think, once you see the intentional stance, the attribution of beliefs and desires to organisms or machines as a way of handling the organisms and machines and knowing what they will do next, it is very difficult to think of the self in the way in which what Dennett calls 'the picture of the Cartesian theater' requires you to think of the self. I think Dennett has a brilliant chapter in *Consciousness Explained* – Chapter 13 on 'The Self as Center of Narrative Gravity' – and I think that view of the self is nicely integrated with the rest of Dennett's system and thus *a fortiori* with Davidson's system."[2]

Daniel Dennett summarizes his views at the end of chapter 13 in this way:

"Now if you were a soul, a pearl of immaterial substance, we could 'explain' your potential immortality only by postulating it as an inexplicable property, an ineliminable *virtus dormitiva* of soul-stuff. And if you were a pearl of material substance, some spectacularly special group of atoms in your brain, your mortality would depend on the physical forces holding them together (we might ask the physicist what the 'half-life' of a self is). If you think of yourself as a center of narrative gravity, on the other hand, your existence depends on the persistence of that narrative (rather like the Thousands and One Arabian Nights, but all a single tale), which could theoretically survive indefinitely any switches of medium, be teleported as readily (in principle) as the evening news, and stored indefinitely as sheer information."[3]

It is worth mentioning that this Rorty–Dennett standpoint about the continuity of the self harmonizes fairly well with that of Gadamer's description in *Truth and Method*. Speaking about arts in the first chapter Gadamer says that: "we recognize that even the phenomenon of art imposes an ineluctable task on existence, namely to achieve that continuity of self-understanding which alone can support human existence…".[4]

Perhaps the best way to summarize most of Rorty's views is to use one of his short paragraphs from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that claims that the 'supporting-pillars' of our human existence, language, self and community are contingent in the sense that we do not rely on any absolute, metaphysical foundation:

"The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance."[5]

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[1] Ibid., 42–43.

[2] "A Talent for Bricolage. An Interview with Richard Rorty", interviewer: Joshua Knobe, conducted in January, 1995, http://pantheon.yale.edu/~jk762/rorty.html.

[3] Daniel C. Denett, *Consciousness Explained* (A Back Bay Book, 1991), 430.

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 96.

[5] Rorty, *Contingency*, 22.

II Rorty on religion

Rorty's relationship to religion is a very complex question, and here I shall emphasize only the political dimension of this relationship. It is important to underline that Rorty's view is *ab ovo* political regarding religion. It is because of two reasons. First of all, it is so, because it is obviously impossible to decide the so called ontological question, that is God's existence. Both theism and atheism can be considered a question of faith. "Neither those who affirm not those who deny the existence of God can plausibly claim that they have evidence for their views."[1] It follows from this, secondly, that Rorty used "atheism" as a rough synonym for "anticlericalism". He wrote in 2005 that "I now wish that I had used the latter term on the occasions when I have used the former to characterize my own view. For anticlericalism is a political view, not an epistemological or metaphysical one."[2] By accepting these arguments, we can understand why Rorty called himself rather "anticlerical", "religiously unmusical", "contemporary secularist" or "nonreligious".[3] This standpoint follows logically from his anti-metaphysical, anti-essentialist views. However, he is tolerant regarding religion in the public sphere, because he is a liberal ironic. It entails the use of the traditional liberal principle: "everything is allowed, what does not cause any harm to others". This principle harmonizes well with the basic utilitarian principle which is also accepted by Rorty. We can say with Mill, "that our right to happiness is limited only by others' rights not to have their own pursuits of happiness interfered with."[4]

It means that in the private sphere everybody can create and believe in any kind of vocabulary, even in religious vocabulary, but in the public sphere we have to insist on keeping the basic democratic framework. Rorty holds that from a liberal point of view, we have to limit the public conversation to premises held in common and it would exclude religion from the mix:

"Such exclusion, however, is at the heart of the Jeffersonian compromise. (...) Contemporary liberal philosophers think that we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty."[5]

The church was already separated from the state in the French Revolution (1789–1799) and in other bourgeoisie revolutions. It does not mean, of course, that this separation is a reality everywhere. People have to choose in every country between democracy and religion. Rorty, following Dewey, has chosen. In his opinion, if people really want to build a modern democracy, they have to vote for the priority of democracy not only to philosophy, but first of all to religion[6] and to other exclusive

[1] Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 33.
[2] Ibid., 33.
[3] Cf. ibid., 33 and 40.
[4] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* 154.
[5] Ibid., 170.
[6] See Barack Obama's detachment from his church's former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. – The role of the religious fundamentalists in the American political life is also problematic from a democratic point of view.

ideas and ideologies (e.g. Nazism, Bolshevism or even American exceptionalism[1]). They are simply not consistent with each other. As Rorty goes on to say that:

"I take the point of Rawls and Habermas, as of Dewey and Peirce, to be that the epistemology suitable for such a democracy is one in which the only test of a political proposal is its ability to gain assent from people who retain radically diverse ideas about the point and meaning of human life, about the path to private perfection. The more such consensus becomes the test of a belief, the less important is the belief's source."[2]

So when somebody complains that religious citizens are forced 'to restructure their arguments in purely secular terms before they can be presented', we should reply that restructuring the arguments in purely secular terms just means making reference to the source of the premises of the arguments, and that this omission seems a reasonable price for a religious liberty. This requirement is no harsher, and no more a demand for self-destruction, than the requirement that we atheists, when we present our arguments, should claim no authority for our premises save the assent we hope they will gain from our audience. We shall say, that religious believers' moral convictions are not more deeply interwoven with their self-identity than those of atheists with ours. The role of Enlightenment ideology in giving meaning to the lives of atheists was just as great as Christianity's role in giving meaning to their own life.[3]

In 2003 Rorty refined his standpoint that religion is a conversation stopper (1999), but he did not change essentially his anticlerical views. In his article, *Religion in the Public Square*[4] Rorty made a distinction between congregations of religious believers and the so called "ecclesiastical organizations". He emphasized that "only the latter are the target of secularists like myself".[5] Not going here into the detailed analysis of his chain of thoughts, I only underline that in Rorty's view of 2003 the law should not forbid someone from citing politically problematic biblical texts in support of a political position, but *custom* should forbid it.[6] Not as an anticlerical person, but as a citizen I have every right to give voice to my opinion. "If I think liberal democratic institutions are in danger from tax-exempt ecclesiastical institutions, I shall do well to warn my fellow-citizens against their insidious influence, just as I do when they are endangered by greedy corporations."[7]

Priority of politics to religion was not a question for Rorty even in 2005, when he summarized his opinion in this way:

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[1] "American exceptionalism" has been historically referred to as the belief that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its national credo, historical evolution, or distinctive political and religious institutions. The difference is often expressed in American circles as some categorical superiority, to which is usually attached some alleged proof, rationalization or explanation that may vary greatly depending on the historical period and the political context. However, the term can also be used in a negative sense by critics of American policies to refer to the wilful nationalistic disregard of faults committed by the American government.

[2] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* 173.

[3] Cf. ibid., 173–174.

[4] Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square. A Reconsideration", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1 (2003): 141–149.

[5] Ibid., 141.

[6] Cf. ibid., 143.

[7] Ibid., 148.

"On our view, religion is unobjectionable as long as it is privatized – as long as ecclesiastical institutions do not attempt to rally the faithful behind political proposals and as long as believers and unbelievers agree to follow a policy of live and let live."[1]

III Rorty on history

After 1989 Rorty looked at society and history from a liberal ironist's point of view. It means that he regarded the main elements of the human process as a contingent. In the traditional metaphysical philosophy every social theory was built on some kind of metaphysical ontology or anthropology (Plato's ideas, Aristole's forms and different spheres of forms, Thomas of Aquinas's God and the eternal, spiritual human nature, etc.). This method does not have any sense in the light of the explained contingency of language and selfhood. Since this kind of metaphysical substances and human nature cannot be proved consistently, we cannot rely on them. It is not worth building theoretically any kind of social theory on such a problematic fundament. What can we do then? In the case of justification of any kind of social theory we can rely exclusively on our own understanding and interpretation of the self and the world. We can rely only on our narratives about ourselves and the world and not on some kind of eternal thing. Having drawn this conclusion, Rorty claims that we cannot speak about the historical laws of liberal communities' future. From all of this logically follows that Rorty considered not only the liberal community, but also society as a whole and history contingent.

As we have seen, Rorty held that western democracies are the best functioning societies, and in his *Contingency* book he wanted to describe a liberal utopia. When he was asked in an interview, what does this expression, "liberal utopia" mean, he alluded to John Rawls' book, *A Theory of Justice*:

"I mean the ordinary notion of equality of opportunity, what Rawls describes in his book, *A Theory of Justice*, the idea of a society in which the only reason for inequalities is that things would be even worse if they did not exist."[2]

Although Rorty chose western democracy from the existing social alternatives, since he held this one as the best, he had not only a Rawlsian, but first of all a Deweyan concept of democracy. We can claim this, among others, because he admired together with Dewey that Americans believe in the priority of democracy over philosophy. He wrote the next sentences in his article, *The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy*:

"For Dewey, communal and public disenchantment is the price we pay for individual and private spiritual liberation, the kind of liberation that Emerson thought characteristically American. Dewey was as well aware as Weber that there is a price to be paid, but he thought it well worth paying. He assumed that no good achieved by earlier societies would be worth recapturing if the price were a diminution in our ability to leave people alone, to let them try out their private visions of perfection in peace. He admired the American habit of giving democracy priority over philosophy..."[3]

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[1] Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 33.

[2] Eduardo Mendieta, ed., *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself. Interviews with Richard Rorty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 43.

[3] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 194.

Ana-Maria Călinescu, *Mauve Dandelions*, Tempera-gouache on black carboard (1000 × 707 mm.)

Rorty held that identified with democracy, justice and freedom are more important in a society than some kind of philosophical truth. He claimed the priority of democracy not only over metaphysical foundational philosophy but also over his own, self-created philosophy, in other words over every philosophy. His imagination regarding liberal utopia was an always changing, developing Freedom:

"More important, it would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process – an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth."[1]

Although Rorty has chosen one type of modern society, he claimed that it is contingent whether we can realize this liberal democratic vocabulary or not. That is why he called his liberal democracy "liberal utopia"! He wanted to promote also with his *Contingency* book the realization of this utopia, but he could not be sure of its future existence.

After all this we cannot hope that history will be described as some linear process to a final Truth, determined by necessary laws of the metaphysically structured world. Rorty's understanding of history is very similar to the Gadamerian interpretation. They both describe the semantic dimension of history, because this is, what we know and what really the human side of our life and history is. Rorty is not a solipsist philosopher.[2] As Gadamer speaks about the historically effected event (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) whose texture is given by traditions,[3] Rorty also accepts the real social processes, historical tendencies, and he is also aware of the important role of traditions. So, it is clear for both of them that we are not only social beings but also sensible natural creatures, but they assume that our human side is and will be much more important for our personal future and the future of mankind. Of course, they also have differences. Unlike Rorty, Gadamer attaches importance to experience and politically belongs to the conservative side. As it is well known, one of Rorty's main goals is to promote the realization of a liberal democracy, mostly with increasing the new type of solidarity and inclusiveness of our democracies.

If we look at the details, we have to remember that in Rorty's opinion everything in human life is a social construction and all awareness is a linguistic affair. Furthermore, we do not find but make truth, because truth dwells in sentences, and human languages are human creations. It follows from this that *history is a process which goes through the paradigm changes of our social vocabularies. The human side of history is a contingent change of our vocabularies. It means that the social transformation in Rorty's philosophy is mostly identical with the change of social vocabularies.* However, we must not forget that these vocabularies are not only meanings, but first of all forms of life. It also means that by creating a new vocabulary we also make, create new social phenomena. That is, we do not simply find, but we *make* new social problems and solutions; we create new forms of distribution of goods, new forms of justice, etc., when we create new social vocabularies.[4]

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[1] Rorty, *Contingency*, xvi.

[2] See e. g.: "To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states." (Rorty, *Contingency*, 5.)

[3] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Part II.

[4] Moreover "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

Traditional philosophers can say that it is a subjective, linguistic idealism, but it is not. Distinguishing between reality and the world, denying the correspondence theory of truth, and preferring the coherence comprehension of truth, etc. does not mean that vocabularies are arbitrary. We can understand the Rortyan vocabularies as the Wittgensteinian language games which can be interpreted on minimum three different levels: a) as a wordplay; b) as a form of life and c) as a culture. Rorty uses all these three meanings and claims that we live in the age of narrative philosophy, where, describing our situations, plans, actions, etc. we create not only ourselves, but also our society. As we have seen, according to Rorty, the main pillars of our life (language, self, liberal community, society as a whole, history) are contingent, but it does not mean that creating a new vocabulary is totally arbitrary. Our new vocabularies have to be in coherence with other ones if we cannot prove their falsehood, because without this coherence of vocabularies, our life could not function.[1]

An Interview with Richard Rorty

By Alexander Kremer,

Stanford, California, December 20, 2005

AK: Prof. Rorty, you had a recent dialogue with Gianni Vattimo which took place in December 2002 in Paris. At that time you accepted the idea that the so called "weak thought", which today is represented first of all by neo-pragmatism and philosophical hermeneutics, have a common thought that ontology is language. According to this common thought, our world is identical with the historical dialogue among people. However, I would like to ask you, what kind of differences do you see between neo-pragmatism and philosophical hermeneutics?

RR: I think that they have in common the view that philosophers do not have to worry about the relation between language and reality. They do not have to divide language into the bits that try to represent reality and the bits that do not. All they have to worry about is getting some language games to coexist peacefully with other language games. So philosophy becomes a matter of cultural politics, rather than metaphysics. I think of philosophical hermeneutics as helping us fuse horizons—a culture-political task. I think of pragmatism as saying that if you can fuse horizons between discourses and language-games then you do not have to worry about anything else. Your job as a philosopher is done.

AK: Regarding the future and the past could we say that perhaps philosophical hermeneutics deals with the past a little bit more than neo-pragmatism which emphasizes more the perspective of the future, as Heidegger did?

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

[1] Beside that Rorty speaks about some historical tendencies, but he knows that we cannot foresee the possible ends of the present tendencies and moreover we cannot foresee the future historical tendencies which do not yet exist today.

RR: Attention to the past may not be essential to hermeneutics as such, but it was certainly important to Gadamer. He thought that we lost a great deal when we lost touch with certain aspects of the Greek thought. Dewey thought that the further we could get from Greek thought the better. It is an obvious dissimilarity. But it should not obscure the fact that they were reacting against some of the same philosophical movements.

AK: You wrote an article about the Gadamerian sentence that "Being that can be understood is language". Do you think that Gadamer also denies reality, and he also thinks that our world is only language?

RR: No. I was just reiterating that that there is not a problem about the relationship between language and reality. The only problem is about the relationship between one language-game and another. I interpreted "Being that can be understood is language" to mean something like this: You can discuss the relation of some sentences to other sentences, or of beliefs to other beliefs, but you cannot discuss the relation between beliefs or sentences and non-beliefs and non-sentences. There is nothing interesting to be said about that relationship; there is nothing to be understood.

AK: What is the case regarding the non-verbal artworks? If we are searching the library, we cannot find a special book of yours, even a special article about arts, except literature of course. Do you claim that artworks can be interpreted only in the case when there is some linguistic mediation? Are these artworks not understandable or we cannot interpret them?

RR: We can discuss their effects upon us, in the way in which we can discuss the effects of the other non-linguistic entities upon us. But you cannot understand them in the way in which we can understand beliefs and sentences.

AK: Was this the reason that you did not write any special book or article about non-verbal artworks?

RR: I am not sure that this was the reason. I simply have little appreciation for art or music, and have never felt comfortable trying to talk about either.

AK: Let us go back to the dialogue with Gianni Vattimo. The main topic of this dialogue was the future of religion, and you had some differences with Vattimo regarding globalization. Vattimo perhaps believed a little bit more in Socialism than you. You have said that:

"I do not have any faith either in socialism or in capitalism. It seems to me that in the industrialized countries capitalism only became tolerable when the state's intervention created the welfare state and thereby brought the capitalists, to some extent, under democratic control. What we are seeing now is that, in the absence of a world government – in the absence of a global authority that could put global capitalism in the service of democracy – all the worst features of capitalism are reemerging. We should not have had economic globalization until we had a bureaucratic structure to regulate

global capitalism, in the way that some countries have been able to regulate it within their own borders. We have unfortunately been overtaken by events."

So, do you see also now that we have been overtaken by events? We cannot regulate the global processes?

RR: I cannot imagine how we could get cooperation between Europe, Russia, China and the US even on global warming, much less on global social justice. I think that politics has been overtaken by events: we have no idea either how to save ourselves from ecological disaster or how to equalize the life-chances of the children of the world.

AK: Do not you believe that the UN or some international institutions can, later perhaps, regulate the processes?

RR: That seems unrealistic. It is hard to lay out a plausible scenario in which the UN gradually accumulates more and more power, and acquires the ability to bring global social justice into being. I cannot imagine the transformation of the UN into a kind of supra-national government. It just will not happen.

AK: The corporations and the multinational companies will not give the power to the UN, it is clear.

RR: Neither will Russia or China!

AK: Could perhaps mankind learn something from a tragedy or something like this, or from some forms of natural catastrophes like hurricanes, earthquakes, and similar things could make people aware of the importance of the UN and such types of institutions?

RR: I think if the atomic bomb did not teach us that we need to get beyond the era of nation-states, nothing can. The need for a strong supranational organization was apparent in 1945, but it did not come to pass.

AK: Oh, really!? It is a really pessimistic view.

RR: I think that the period of the greatest public support for the UN around the world was right after Hiroshima. The UN captured people's imagination; it seemed the only way of avoiding a nuclear holocaust. But then, as the cold war made nuclear disarmament seem less and less likely, there was less and less hope that the UN would ever be able to do anything. That is what I meant by saying that if the bomb could not scare humanity into transcending the nation-state, it is unlikely that anything else will.

AK: What about terrorism? It seems to me that something has changed with 9/11. This is a very snaky enemy, and one country, one government cannot fight really effectively against terrorism. I know that lots of people do not agree with the American president regarding the Iraq war, but here is some common work, some "common enterprise", and perhaps these common enterprises could make people aware of the importance of the UN and such type of common global projects! What do you think?

RR: I do not think that anybody expects the UN to do anything about terrorism. Certainly there will be cooperation between governments, and particularly between intelligence services. But that cooperation will take place in secret. It is not something whose nature and functioning is likely to be debated in the UN.

AK: How do you see the role of the corporations? If we assume that corporations won't give their power to governments or to common international institutions, we can conclude only very pessimistic views from these premises. So, if we look at the world of corporations, we can see that they have much more power than lots of governments, and it is pretty difficult to believe that they will even share their power to get some more democratic societies in the world. Is the situation really this bad according to your views?

RR: Yes, I am very pessimistic. But I would prefer to speak of the rich, rather than of the corporations. The richest people in China are doing exactly the same sorts of things as the people who finance the Republican Party in the US. To attribute all power to the corporations is to ignore the role of, for example, the rich warlords of Burma and the oligarchs of Latin America.

AK: So, we have a very pessimistic view regarding this question. How do you see the future of religion within the framework of globalization? By the way, do you see globalization as a historical tendency of mankind or just a contingent event?

RR: I see the renewed importance of religion to politics as a matter of various contingent, unrelated, events. Tyrannical Arab governments together with the Palestinian-Israeli impasse, has given Islamic fundamentalism a new lease on life. The Islamic Enlightenment has been postponed. Given the world's dependence on Middle East oil, that is potentially disastrous. That is one contingency. Another is the rise of the religious right in the US, a phenomenon I do not understand. I do not know why Americans unlike Europeans, are getting more and more religious instead of less and less. But the alliance between the corporations and the televangelists is also potentially disastrous. Yet I do not think that the new political role of Islam or the new political role of fundamentalist Christianity in the U.S., are manifestations of a world-historical trend. They are unrelated contingencies.

AK: Is it not possible that the economical and political crisis is one of the causes, one of the main causes perhaps that the so called fundamentalist won more power in the US than earlier?

RR: I do not think so. When we had our big economic crisis in the late 1920s, Americans did not get more religious. Instead they joined trade unions, and looked to government for secular solutions to their problems. The Great Depression led to leftist political activity rather than religious conversion. We have not been in an economic crisis during the last twenty years, but in those years religion has suddenly become a political force. I do not know why.

AK: Perhaps the Socialist movement was much stronger during this big economic crisis between 1929 and 1932. Beside that the global situation is also very different now, because we do not have two super-powers, only one, the US, and perhaps people do not believe in trade unions so much as they believed that time, when Socialism was a pretty strong movement, especially in the Central-European countries, because of the Soviet Union. What do you think?

RR: Well, the New Deal in the U.S. encouraged the rise of trade unionism, which resulted in the unions acquiring political power. The same thing occurred between 1929 and 1945 in Britain, resulting in the British Labour Party coming to power after World War II. The power of the labour unions has greatly diminished in both the US and Britain, and I am not sure why. The things that the rich people in America are doing to the poor are appalling. But the poor, instead of organizing and protesting, are turning to God. I do not think that an explanation can be found in the failure of Communism in the Soviet Union and Central Europe. State ownership of the means of production was never an aim of the US labour movement.

AK: I think you are right, but if I look at our small country, Hungary, I see that the number of religious people, the number of believers always increased, when some economic or political crises took place in the country. I think that in the 1960s the situation became a little bit better in Hungary than it was earlier, and after the so-called change of regime, that took place in 1989, the situation became a little bit better again, and in these cases the number of religious people decreased. There are of course lots of private religions, lots of sects and so on, but there is always a wave in Hungary: if people live better they do not turn to God, they just try to regulate their own life a little bit better. I can accept the idea that the social-democratic ideals are still alive, but the fall of the Soviet Union perhaps was understood also as the fall of the socialist idea. Is it not possible?

RR: I think the situation is different in formerly Communist countries and in Western Europe and the US. In the latter, social democracy and socialism have always been treated as two very different things – the one good and the other bad.

AK: I saw the same in Italy. The Communist part got in trouble, when the Soviet Union fell, and the people turned to the Socialist party and they did not want to become members of the Communist party any more. Something similar happened perhaps in France with the Communist party. In Hungary the social-democratic ideals and values became much stronger, and these are really alive also today, but the Socialist and especially the Communist values cannot have any impact on the people.

So, the religious movement is getting stronger and stronger here in the US?

RR: It has become stronger by successfully demonizing the liberals – the people who still believe in the welfare state. The right-wing TV and radio stations say that all the troubles of our country are caused by the liberals. The liberals do not believe in God, they are too tolerant of homosexuality and of abortion, they are in favour of wasteful government spending, etc. The rich have decided that the best way to maintain their

power is to ally themselves with the fundamentalist preachers, and to suggest to the poor that the liberals are immoral as well as unwise.

AK: This is the American situation of religion, but how do you see the situation of religion world-wide? Is it similar?

RR: I do not think one can generalize world-wide. If somebody can, I am not the person to do it.

AK: So, here in the US we cannot see the disappearance of religion. You mentioned in one of your articles, *Anticlericalism and Atheism* (2002), in a footnote, "we anti-clericalists who are also leftists in politics have a further reason for hoping that institutionalized religion will eventually disappear", and you have quoted John Dewey about the danger of other-worldliness. Do you think that this event, that church will perhaps disappear?

RR: I do not think it will disappear, but it would be a good thing if it did. The more confidence human beings have in their ability to shape their own future, the less other-worldly they become. The more they lose confidence to shape society, the more they will turn to God.

AK: So, we have to build a more democratic society and we shall see what shall happen with such institutions as religion and similar social phenomena.

RR: Well, in the last two hundred years Western culture has become more and more secular, just as governments have become more and more democratic.

AK: Can we speak about a tendency of secularization?

RR: Yes, I think so. Certainly if you can compare the role of religion in Western Europe in 1800 and 2000, there are vast changes. America was more secular from its very beginnings. Religious tolerance was built into American institutions.

AK: I think this is one of the main features of history that nobody knows the future. We are finite and historical beings, if we accept the Heideggerian and Gadamerian bottom lines. Of course, neither the representatives of philosophical hermeneutics nor the neo-pragmatists believe in metaphysical systems.

RR: The unpredictability of the future is illustrated by the fact that distinctions like social-democrat versus conservative and secular versus religious do not work very well in China. These are Western distinctions. In 50 years China will be a great super-power, and will make most of the world-historical decisions. We Westerners do not know enough about China to have any idea of what the result of the shift of hegemony from the US to China will mean. With the rise of Asia, the future of humanity has become much less predictable.

AK: You have made an interesting point about the cultural mission of European civilization in the dialogue with Vattimo. Perhaps the philosophers, the thinkers of this European civilization cannot have a dialogue with the Islam thinkers, but perhaps they should do it at a point? What do you think?

RR: I doubt this. Talking about a dialogue with Islamic ayatollahs is like talking about a dialogue between modern Europeans and 15th century Christian theologians. It is hard to imagine how they would find common ground.

AK: Yes. However you mentioned that we cannot use Western European terms and categories regarding Chinese development and perhaps regarding Islamic development, too. On the other hand, it is obviously not the best way to force them toward democracy with an army. If we do not accept this military way of forcing people and nations toward democracy, then we perhaps have to start a dialogue with Chinese and Islamic thinkers, or it will not work. What do you think?

RR: I do not think either army or dialogue will work. We do not know what the dialogue would look like. I mean, how many people are there in Europe or in America who know enough Chinese to have any grasp of the terms in which Chinese intellectuals and politicians think?

AK: Yes, but as our world becomes smaller and smaller, we are perhaps forced by these tendencies (secularization, globalization and other economic and political tendencies, etc.) to know, to learn much more about other cultures!?

RR: But they are trapped in stages of history that the West has surpassed. They are only beginning to liberate women; they are only beginning to acquire the concept of citizenship, etc. We cannot help thinking of them as backward. We cannot take seriously the suggestion that their culture is on a par with our own.

AK: Cannot we help them to make their own Enlightenment?

RR: That is, what we have been trying to do for a century, ever since we started educating people from the Middle East and the Far East in Western universities. We created a cadre of people in those countries who wanted their homelands to become more democratic, to educate women, etc. But now, the terms have changed, because these parts of the world are going to have more power than the West does. That alters the terms of a possible dialogue.

AK: It means that the dialogue would be pretty difficult, if not impossible, according to your views, with the religious people, especially with the religious fundamentalists, and that is why we just have to do, what we did until now. That is to educate people from the Far East and the Middle East, and perhaps they will promote their own social development? Would this be the solution?

RR: I have no better idea. The problem I see with dialogue is that I have never seen a good example of it, only ritual exchanges of well-meaning platitudes. I have never

heard a Western thinker specify just what it is that the West has to learn from non-Western cultures.

AK: Perhaps the people, who are studying Buddhism, Shintoism and other Far Eastern religions do so; of course, they are religious thinkers, but they emphasize some of the features of these Far Eastern religions and philosophies. Perhaps the Western world became a little bit intolerant regarding the poverty, regarding the people of the Third World, regarding the problems of the Third World countries. Because we live here in the US and in Europe within very pleasant circumstances, and I think we cannot even imagine, how people live there. That is why this is one of the reasons, that it is pretty difficult to understand them, but the media and these religious thinkers, the new sects perhaps can show something, can emphasize something, and not only the negative but also the positive features. Do not you see any positive features in these Far Eastern religions and philosophies?

RR: What is positive about poverty?

AK: I mean in Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism! Is there not anything we could learn from them?

RR: I keep going to East–West philosophy conferences; I have spent a month in China; I have visited Chinese universities; I have just finished writing 10 000 words or so about Pragmatism and Confucianism. I still have not seen any real dialogue. I do not even have any sense of what a successful dialogue would look like. It seems to me that when you get off the abstract level and try to get down to concrete questions, like "what kind of government might China have in the future?, what kind of government might Indonesia have in the future?, what kind of institutions they will have?", all the Westerners have to say is "Well, they should become more Western". All the non-Westerners say is "The West did not turn out very well; maybe we can do better". But nobody ever has any concrete suggestions about how to do better. Unless you can suggest a concrete political alternative, all the discussion about Confucian ways of life, Buddhist ways of life, and Christian ways of life does not do much good. There is not such a thing as Christian politics. There are just various uses of Christianity by the left and by the right. I suspect that there is no such thing as Buddhist politics or Confucian politics either. There is just the invocation of Confucian or Buddhist pieties by the left and by the right.

AK: So, according to your opinion, the future is first of all in the hands of the politicians, and…

RR: I would say the rich.

AK: Yes, in the hands of the rich, and it means that, if they do not want to change the future of the mankind, it will not be changed…
RR: …and they do not.

AK: How, do you see the role of the science? It is clear, of course, that first of all the rich rule the world, because they can influence both politicians and the most important political decisions in the world, but the development of sciences is also in the hand of the rich people?

RR: Yes, pretty much. They make most of the decisions about the directions of scientific and technological progress.

AK: I think of such things as the internet, for example. Perhaps we cannot deny that the internet has made the public life much broader and more transparent.

RR: I do not see that it made public life more transparent.

AK: Why?

RR: The government is still as good as keeping everything secret as it was.

AK: If somebody puts something on the internet, it is pretty difficult to deny it after that.

RR: Oh sure, they can deny it! The situation is the same as in the 50s. I do not see that the difference between the newspapers and the internet is making a big difference.

AK: Perhaps poor people also have much more sources to know more about the world, and perhaps it is not too easy to keep something secret!?

RR: I do not agree. So much of the operation of the American government is secret that it is very difficult for citizens to have a clear idea of what their government is doing. I just do not think that is likely to change. You can circulate rumours on the internet, but that does not mean that people know what to believe.

AK: What if a journalist or somebody, who earlier worked for the government launches some secrets on the internet, then in a democratic country like the US perhaps some suits also must be started. No? So, perhaps in this way, or if more and more people agree with a standpoint that can be found on the internet, then perhaps there will be a social motion, social movement. What do you think?

RR: Maybe, but all I can say is that in recent years all the breakthroughs or revelations of US governments have come from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* – the same places they have always came from.

AK: I see. So, it is a very pessimistic view-point, I would say, regarding globalization and regarding the future of the mankind. How do you see the basis of such premises, the moral development of society? Can we speak about moral development at all?

RR: I think we know what we mean when we speak of political development, but moral development is a pretty vague idea.

AK: So, such movements like the feminist movement, the gay-rights movement and such type of things cannot be counted as parts of a moral development?

RR: I would certainly say that the women's movement and the gay-rights movement have brought about moral progress. But to many people it looks like moral regress.

AK: Beside that we do not have slavery as a social institution. I know that we still have slaves, but not the social institution.

RR: I think that in the US things have gotten much better for white people, for women, and for homosexuals—but not much better for the poor. To really make moral progress, we should have to narrow the gulf between the rich and the poor. In the US, being a middle class woman or a middle class homosexual is much easier than it was fifty years ago, but being a poor woman or a poor homosexual is pretty much the same.

AK: Perhaps the rise of the welfare society will decrease a little bit the number of the poor people?

RR: It did in America until about 1973. Between 1933 and 1973 there was a period of levelling, but during the last thirty years the gap between the rich and the poor has steadily widened. It gets worse every year.

AK: But perhaps in this field we also cannot generalize. Perhaps it is true regarding the US, but perhaps this thing is changing also region by region, country by country.

RR: Maybe. My pessimistic hunch is that on a global scale the movement of jobs from Europe and America to Asia and Latin-America is going to increase the gap between the rich and the poor.

AK: So, in your opinion, it is not only a phenomenon within the US, but it is a world-wide phenomenon, a tension between the Western World and the Third World?

RR: Yes. All the cheap labour is outside of the West. With modern technology you can use foreign labour just as easily as native labour.

AK: Finally, I should like to ask you about the role of philosophy. As we know, according to your neo-pragmatic views the philosopher should work, act rather as an engineer or as a lawyer than as a sage in the earlier times. Does philosophy have any future at all?

RR: I do not think that philosophy is ever going to be a very important part of the culture. Two centuries ago, in the West, it was more important. In those days, people were still asking themselves "Science or Religion?". They turned to philosophers for answers. Nowadays, I think, people do not see any great tension between science and religion. We can have a kind of religious faith that does not have any particular metaphysical or even political implications. So the questions philosophers discuss have become of less interest to the public than they were in the eighteenth century.

AK: You mentioned somewhere that perhaps philosophers could make the compromises between the different vocabularies, the vocabularies of the past and the present needs.

RR: I think all intellectuals do that, not just philosophers. Intellectuals help with what Gadamer thought of as fusing horizons by writing historical treatises and novels, as well as my doing philosophy. Philosophers do not have a special cultural task. They are just intellectuals who have read certain books—e.g., Kant's *Critiques*—that most other intellectuals have not read.

AK: However, intellectuals are so specialized, and perhaps one of the tasks of philosophy since its Greek beginnings, was to harmonize this different lifestyles within society, to make some compromises within society on the intellectual level. Do you think that we absolutely have lost this type of task or the philosophers never had this type of task?

RR: Certainly they have had this task. Take Kant. He tried to find some sort of synthesis of Newtonian science, the ideals of the French Revolution, and Christian morality. He was pretty successful. Dewey tried to do that same kind of thing. But we find such attempts at synthesis being attempted by historians and novelists as well. Poets, journalists, economists, political scientists all collaborate in trying to reconcile the new with the old—to fuse the horizons of the present with those of the past. We philosophers have no special skills that make us better at fusing horizons than other people.

AK: Does it mean that this special profession, I mean philosophy, can also vanish from society?

RR: Contemporary Anglophone analytic philosophy is a special case, because it has lost touch with the history of philosophy, as well as with the larger culture. But if we forget about analytic philosophy, we can think of philosophy as a branch of intellectual history. We are the people who are telling stories about Parmenides, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel and so on. That is the only thing we do that nobody else does.

AK: Yes, but do you believe that to tell these types of stories will be useful also in the future?

RR: Yes, it will be useful. As long as people are interested in the past, there will be philosophers and philosophy departments.

AK: Can you imagine a type of society where people are not interested in the past?

RR: I think that could only happen in a totalitarian society. In a free society people always be curious about how earlier people solved their problems.

AK: I think that not only Tacitus wrote that "Historia est magistra vitae", but also the German Idealists said, especially Hegel, who represented a very radical historicism, that

we cannot really plan and see the future if we do not know our past. Of course the World Spirit determines his view first of all, but I think, what we can learn from Hegel is his radical historicism.

RR: Yes.

AK: From this point of view perhaps people will need in the free societies some philosophers.

RR: Well, they will need a sense of the past, and that means that they will need people who have read and understood old philosophy books.

AK: Can we really cut off ourselves from the past?

RR: We can if we try, but it is not a good idea.

AK: It is much better if we try to learn from the past. When we are planning the future, how much are we influenced by the past, according to your views? Could you agree with Gadamer in this question, because he says that the historically effected event pretty much determines us?

RR: Well, I think we just do not know to what extent we can become different from the past until we try. The rate of changes has speeded up enormously in the last 200 years. We in the West have been changing faster than anybody imagined that we could change.

AK: We cannot predict the future. How do you think the speed of the change will change the basic structure of the human historicality?

RR: No, I do not think so. However, I would insist on the fact that we are the children of a particular time and place. Our descendants may live in a world in which parts of the past that are meaningful to us mean nothing to them. They may forget about the Greeks, or forget about Christianity. They might be better off it they did. Maybe China would be better off if the Chinese just forgot about Confucianism.

AK: Does it mean that we can get some autonomy from the past. Can we say that it is just an intentional autonomy, or we can get also another type of autonomy from the past? Intentional autonomy, that is we just do not pick up some traditions; can we do it at all, or we are really influenced by traditions and we are just not aware of this influence, as Gadamer says?

RR: Intellectuals are aware of traditions. Most other people are not. I do not think that we are in the grip of the past any more than children are in the grip of their parents. They would not be what they are, if they had different parents; we would not be what we are, if we had a different past. However, some children are more liberated than other children. Some generations break away from the preceding generations more successfully than others.

AK: What are the reasons for these differences according to your opinion? Does it depend only on the circumstances, on the genetic heritage, or on traditions?

RR: I do not think that anybody knows the reason for that. Some kids break with their parents and go off on their own, and some do not. Some societies develop quickly. Some societies develop slowly. I do not think we can have a general theory about it.

AK: Could we not say that Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics, from some point of view, seems to be such a general theory about the role of traditions?

RR: I do not think of it as a general theory of historical change. It does not have the pretensions of Hegel's or Marx's narratives. I admire Gadamer's criticism of various philosophical positions, but I do not think he has given historians better tools to work with.

AK: Perhaps the notion of the process of the historically effected event, which is a summary of very diverse traditions, could be regarded as such a "new instrument"?

RR: I guess I do not see what that notion adds to what we learned from Hegel.

AK: Do you think that those two theories are not only similar, but they are almost the same?

RR: Well, I do not think that Gadamer has given us anything that Hegel would not be able to do for us.

AK: Gadamer perhaps denied the metaphysical part of the Hegelian view?

RR: Yes. He got rid of the useless stuff in Hegel and kept the historicism.

AK: He took the idea of the *Seinsgeschick* from the late Heidegger and the *hermeneutics of facticity* from the early Heidegger, from the 20s, and perhaps this notion of the process of the historically effected events is a harmony, a summary of these notions!?

RR: Yes. Gadamer has some nice essays on Hegel and Heidegger. He is a good commentator on both thinkers. But I am not sure he added anything to them.

AK: In your opinion he did not give us any new instrument to get closer to a really democratic and liberal society?

RR: He was not much interested in democratic liberalism, I think.

AK: Thank you very much Professor Rorty!