

Antipodean Philosophy: Mind, Society and the Absence of Minds

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ABSTRACT

Richard Rorty's philosophy of mind is the foundation for its neo-pragmatism thought. This may seem strange at first sight, however, when taking a closer look we can find the links between them. When Richard Rorty first writes *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he was not just establishing a justification for pragmatism and/or for the foundations of a new epistemology; in fact, Rorty was creating the foundations of thinking about the role of humanities in the construction of modern man. This means that Richard Rorty is delivering the conditions to think seriously about human consciousness, about human mind and, therefore, to think about the role of men (its implications in the development of) and society.

Keywords: Antipodean, Contemporary Culture, Mind, Rorty, Society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Some critics may think that Rorty's interest in the philosophy of mind it is just a thing chronologically determined and disconnected from his late works, but taking a closer look, it can be found the key conception in which social structures can be constructed, that is, through the explanation of how to understand the mind. It is not just a mere detail in Rorty's philosophy of mind, but it is in fact a way of thinking about the main problems of philosophy, and therefore, of the human condition, which ultimately means society. With that problems solved it would be possible to take a clear position: with the advent of neurosciences it will be no need for psychology.

As it is known, Richard Rorty based his writings on the works of Gilbert Ryle, which criticizes Descartes and dualism, and in Wittgenstein, Willfrid Sellars and Quine works on language and linguistic. In fact, according to Rorty, it was Descartes who leads to the main problem in philosophy: the "invention" of mind (Gallagher, 1985). The exercise made through the illustration of antipodeans gives him the possibility to clarify that mental concepts are no longer needed (eliminative materialism) and therefore to give significance of what means to have real consciousness. This allows him to establishing the bases of what has been called neo-pragmatism. This essay will try to deliver, considering Rorty's philosophy of mind and the ideas concerning democracy, a clear image about how one thing connects to another.

II. RORTY'S THOUGHT ABOUT THE MIND

Taking the heritage of Rorty's thought as a reflection, one can pose the uncomfortable question of whether the foundation of neopragmatism can be based on an objective conception of the mind, which seems to place, at the heart of its own philosophical project, an internal contradiction; or, in other words, how can the delicate conception of the mind produce a model for understanding reality, based, as is known, on the relevance that the self assumes and on its intersubjective use and the words that form the world?

In Rorty's philosophical thought, some perspectives are not as clear as one might suppose, and it can even be said that some of them are actually even more problematic than one might think; for instance, if considered from a pragmatic point of view, some of these notions can be a hypothesis as mesmerizing, as intriguing as having a physicalist agenda of consciousness – and therefore substantially consolidated in general scientific objectivity – and then calling absolutely into question determinant notions such as those of universal truth or epistemic objectivity.

So, considering some of these disturbing questions, in which sense can be said that a certain approach of philosophy of mind can be at the foundation of neo-pragmatism, since it seems to exist a central role for consciousness in his overall project? A short answer can be provided: any Rorty's attempt to deconstruct modern conceptions of mind is needed to justify is neopragmatism philosophical project.

Putting the question in another way: since the mind seems to be intrinsically the last refuge of essentialism – and this means to be aware of the philosophical tradition since Plato and Aristotle, passing

through Descartes and Kant and one should recall that Rorty says that its due to Descartes and to the “unfortunate bit of residual Aristotelianism” (Rorty, 1998, pp. 111-113) that we have such a view of mind – it was absolutely necessary to maintain his consistent thought to discredit such a notion once appealing to the idea that such is culturally constructed as any other, that is, in the web of beliefs.

James Tartaglia in an essay called “Rorty’s Philosophy of Consciousness” provides us with the same conception saying, that consciousness:

was an issue Rorty regularly returned to thereafter; it figures prominently in the final collection of his papers (...) This was not a lingering, nostalgic interest in the kind of debates he was once prominent within. Rather, his views on truth, metaphilosophy and consciousness were all intimately linked. Consciousness was a philosophical issue Rorty felt he needed to discredit, in order to pave the way to his views on truth and metaphilosophy. Those views became increasingly prominent in defending his position on consciousness, and in the end, there was just a unified package; but consciousness provided Rorty’s means of breaking into that hermeneutic circle (Tartaglia, 2020, p. 50).

In the second chapter of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), “Persons without minds”, Rorty claims the sufficiency of physical theories to account for everything for which psychological theories are supposed to account. This is what is called eliminative materialism – in short, the understanding that common people have of the mind (also can be called folk psychology) is false and that certain mental states in fact do not exist.

Rorty poses a hypothetical scenario: as known, he considers the existence of an alien people, called the Antipodeans, who are exactly like us except that they do not have any psychological theories. Even though the Antipodeans act just like us, they have no psychological concepts to describe what is happening in their lives. The Rorty’s Antipodeans differ from us in two ways: they lack terms for minds and mental states, and, Antipodeans have precise understandings of neural states, to which they refer whenever we would refer to a mental state, like in the example of pain and c-fibers.

Rorty argues that no evidence will help us decide whether Antipodeans actually have mental states. Since the claim that they have minds is in principle unjustifiable, we should, says Rorty, suspect that there is something wrong with our own theories of minds. If the Antipodeans can get along without mental concepts, so should we.

The exercise made through the illustration of antipodeans gives him the possibility to clarify that mental concepts are no longer needed (eliminative materialism) and therefore to give the significance of what means to have real consciousness in the world. Of course, there are several objections to his point – it is well known the critique of Richard Bernstein of an “ingenious arguing” in Rorty’s text –, namely one conducted by Kenneth Gallagher (1985) saying that antipodeans would have ultimately the same problem as us since whenever they hurt themselves, they would judge that their c-fibers were presenting themselves in a special, private way, and therefore, leading to some discussion about the meaning of that special ways. This is, however, quite simple to understand: Rorty by establishing the premise that there is no need for a metaphysical conception of mind, is saying that there is no need to talk about mind in such terms. And why, it might be asked, because to talk about it, is just a way of talking about a subject; the different ways of conceptualizing consciousness, somehow, are alluding to her essentialist and intrinsic nature and resisting to an explanation such as provided by the antipodeans. Thus, it seems clear that the mind does not need any other explanation from the pragmatic point of view, as it was enough to say that a mind being intimate provides the necessary understanding since it belongs to the subject, not to some sort of abstract or metaphysical entity. Something curious stands out here: it seems that, in a way, Rorty is designing, albeit not explicitly, what David Chalmers (1995) would call the “new mysteriansm” (Castro, 2021).

In fact, Rorty is adapting a kind of Heideggerian vision of language: the main idea is that all the perceptions that people have of the world are made by themselves throughout the language. So, it may be said that Rorty does not want to repudiate truth but objective truth that undermines the horizons and conceptions of the world, and therefore, of society. In that sense, political views would always be a sort of monopoly representing theories implemented in people without minds, since scientific paradigms have already established what minds were, like the antipodeans on the other side of the galaxy. Thus, only a conception based on factual world can provide a turn. Thus, in what sense can one say that Rorty is making political theory? Christopher Voparil gives us five (5) points to consider, starting with what he called weak representationalism;

That is, a relation to the factual world where criteria other than accuracy of representation predominate; second, a primary role for the imagination and a value on novel perspectives; third, a self-consciously partial view of the world that makes no claim to objectivity; fourth, a transformative bent and orientation toward action; and fifth, a readiness to respond to perceived crises (Voparil, 2006, p. 41).

III. CONCLUSION

Using Rortyan ability to use irony and metaphors, underlying the importance of poetry and novels to comprehend life, it can be said that Rorty's antipodeans philosophy provides us with tools to understand our modern daily life. The scientific discourse is occupying more time and space in modern life, generating great shadows that extend from aesthetics to politics. The perfect scenario for any government is to have citizens without minds, to be like antipodeans. Thus, mind cannot be the major mirror of nature, since it has no meaning in life itself. In this sense, the words of Christopher Voparil provide us with the need for Rorty's political approach to find some clarity at the core of democratic societies (he says):

Reading Rorty as writing political theory helps free us from a paralyzing entanglement in questions of validity claims and the nature of discourse. It is not so much that this resolves these issues in any definitive way, but that, in a Rortyan spirit, it obviates the need to ask such questions. The benefit of this shift in approach is that it brings to the fore the political thrust of Rorty's writings. Rather than set of universal truths about politics or about ourselves, it allows us to see Rorty's texts as political interventions, as attempts to inspire, to nudge us out of a stance of spectatorship onto the terrain of political urgency and direct engagement. Understood as the province of crafted narratives and imaginative visions rather than truth and validity, the work of political theory involves deploying perspectives designed to spark change, not to illuminate truths (Voparil, 2006, p. 47).

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